



**Justice for Journalists**

Foundation for International  
Investigations of Crime against Media

# **ATTACKS ON JOURNALISTS, BLOGGERS AND MEDIA WORKERS IN ARMENIA, GEORGIA AND MOLDOVA**

**2017-2019**





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# AUTHORS OF THE REPORT

- **Armenia:** [The Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression \(CPFE\)](#)

Non-profit journalistic non-governmental organisation. It was officially registered on 16 January 2003. Throughout its existence the organisation implemented more than 40 projects. The Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression is a member of the Armenian National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum and has actively taken part in the activities of the Forum.

The main direction of the CPFE activity is the monitoring of the free speech situation in Armenia, detection of and responding to the violations of the rights of journalists and the media, as well as drafting and publication of periodic reports on the basis of the above data. The CPFE also takes practical steps to protect the rights of the media and their representatives, including before courts. An important area of the Committee's activities is the improvement of the media-related legislation. With a view to this, the CPFE drafts new legislation and amendment packages and submits them to the parliament.

- **Georgia:** **Oleg Panfilov**

Georgian journalist, commentator and writer. Author of 52 books and of more than one hundred TV programmes about Georgia. He has won various international prizes and is a Cavalier of Georgia's Order of Honour. In the 1990s, he headed the Moscow bureau of the Committee to Protect Journalists (1992-1993), and was in charge, from 1994 to 1999, of the monitoring service of the Glasnost Defence Foundation in Moscow, before setting up the Centre for Journalism in Extreme Situations (Moscow) of which he was director from 2000 to 2010.

- **Moldova:** [Association of Independent Press \(API\)](#)

One of the most important Moldovan non-governmental organizations providing assistance to independent media. API was founded in 1997 by the representatives of the first local independent newspapers.

API promotes press freedom and highly appreciated for its media campaigns in various public interest sectors, advocacy activities for mass-media development, defense of the freedom of expression, access to information, promotion of journalistic self-regulation, etc. API's slogan is: "For a professional, objective and strong press".

Since 2015, API and three other media NGOs organize yearly [Mass-media Forum in Republic of Moldova](#), for discussion the problems and challenges faced by the journalistic community and draft a Roadmap for media development in Moldova.

- **Photographers**

"Photolure" News Agency (Armenia), Oleg Panfilov (Georgia) , Andrei Mardar (Moldova).



# Justice for Journalists

## Foundation for International Investigations of Crime against Media



Justice for Journalists Foundation (JFJ) is a London-based non-governmental organization. The foundation was created in August 2018 by Mikhail Khodorkovsky, founder of the Open Russia pro-democracy movement, an Amnesty International-recognised prisoner of conscience, and Putin's most prominent critic, together with his former business partner, philanthropist and member of the Free Russia Forum's standing committee Leonid Nevzlin.

JFJ funds journalistic investigations into violent crimes against media workers and helps professional and citizen journalists to mitigate their risks.

Our mission is to facilitate journalists' access to existing resources and make them relevant to the specifics of each region. We believe security is the essential basis for work in the media. We help journalists acquire the skills and knowledge to address their professional challenges.

JFJ's activity consists of three main components:

- ▶ Grants for investigating violent crimes against media workers;
- ▶ Risk mapping via monitoring, analysing and publicising attacks against media workers;
- ▶ Risk management and prevention by organising security and safety trainings for non-English speaking media workers in our Orkhan Dzhemal Media Safety Academy.

JFJ cooperates with international media workers and press freedom activists, human rights and educational organisations, and think-tanks on media security issues and investigations into crimes against journalists.



## INTRODUCTION

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The present research is part of an extensive study on attacks perpetrated against journalists, bloggers and media workers that covers 12 post-Soviet countries. This part of the study is devoted to Armenia, Georgia and Moldova.

The research has been jointly carried out by the Justice for Journalists Foundation and partners from those countries.

## METHODOLOGY

The study is based on data collected by content analysis of open sources in Russian, English and the relevant state language. Lists of the main sources are given in Appendices 2-4. Expert interviews with journalists were also used in compiling the report.

Based on further analysis of **694 attacks** perpetrated against professional and citizen journalists, bloggers and other media workers, three main types of attack were identified:

1. Assaults that endanger life, health and liberty (physical).
2. Non-physical and/or cyber-attacks and threats.
3. Attacks via judicial or economic means.

Each of the categories of attack shown can be further divided into subcategories, a complete list of which is given in **Appendix One**.

## PRINCIPAL TRENDS

The combined population of the three countries investigated is over 10 million. According to “[Reporters without borders](#)” annual World Press Freedom Index, these countries rank in the top 100 of the 180 states analysed in 2020. Moldova ranked 91st, Armenia 61st and Georgia 60th. It is important to note that no media worker lost their lives in the three years investigated.

	Population	Number of attacks 2017-2019	Attacks per 100,000
Armenia	2 963 243	381	12.86
Georgia	3 989 167	154	3.84
Moldova	4 033 963	159	3.94

Source for population statistics: [www.worldometers.info](http://www.worldometers.info)

So that the comparison of the numbers of incidents in these countries is accurate, it is appropriate to compare not in absolute means, but relative, as attacks per 100 thousand people.

The relatively high indicator of attacks in Armenia is explained primarily by the well-functioning system of monitoring journalistic rights’ violations in the country. The number of documented attacks per 100 thousand people in Georgia and Moldova is relatively small, but the attacks are generally of a more aggressive and unlawful character. While in Armenia the main method of resolving conflicts with journalists was legal action, in Georgia physical attacks prevail, and in Moldova, this is true of non-physical and/or cyber attacks and threats. The number of legal cases against media workers in the latter two countries is comparatively low.

In Armenia, an increase in the number and character of attacks against media workers coincided with political crises: the National Assembly elections in 2017 and Velvet Revolution in 2018. In the post-revolutionary period the number of attacks against journalists suddenly dropped – fights moved from the streets to the courts. In 2019, there were only six physical attacks compared to 57 over the previous two years, although the number of legal cases against journalists and media organisations increased fourfold. Nearly all of these cases concerned defamation and libel in published media work, and in 70% of incidents cases were not brought by authorities, but by ordinary citizens from various sectors of society.



Over the last 11 years, there have been no documented murders or attempted murders of journalists in Georgia. However, the number of physical attacks on media workers in 2019 increased 13-fold compared to 2017. In 51 of the 64 cases journalists suffered from the actions of the police or the special forces (MIA), mostly from their dispersion of protests. The number of attacks in other categories also increased. Notably, all 48 cases of attack via judicial or economic means recorded in the country over the three years were from authorities. Analysts link the almost fivefold increase in attacks on media workers with the surge of political activity in society, the impending 2020 parliamentary elections, and the willingness of the Georgian government to repress opposition sentiment.

In Moldova, the vast majority of attacks against media workers occur outside a legal framework. These most commonly take the form of non-physical and/or cyber attacks and threats, primarily the illegal obstruction of journalistic activity, unauthorised surveillance, harassment, and cyber and on-line threats, including death threats. However, the situation with physical attacks is also worsening; in June 2019, during a political standoff in the country, 16 media workers suffered while reporting on political events and protests in the capital. In 60% of cases, the source of all types of attacks/threats against media workers was central or local/regional government bodies, officials, police officers, and state security organisations.

## THE RELEVANCE OF THIS RESEARCH

For a fuller understanding of the processes that post-Soviet governments go through, it is important to monitor the level of press freedom in countries, whose populations have chosen democratic paths for development. The analysis of attacks on media workers in Armenia, Georgia and Moldova demonstrate a direct link between the development of civic institutions and the safety of journalistic work.

In an atmosphere of active political confrontation conflicts between different social forces are often resolved on the streets. Journalists covering the protest actions risk to be physically assaulted by the police and other representatives of government bodies.

In a more stable environment, methods of pressure come to the fore, including harassment, surveillance, illegal obstruction of journalistic work, including through financial or legal mechanisms. In the context of outdated legislative mechanisms and a lack of confidence in the courts, coercion and aggression against media workers becomes the main method of solving situations of conflict, used by authorities as well as ordinary citizens.

The Justice for Journalists Foundation, together with its partners and experts, carries out weekly monitoring of attacks against media workers in all post-Soviet countries excluding the Baltic states, the results of which are published on the Media Risk Map in both [Russian](#) and [English](#). The available data covers the period from 2017 onwards.

On March, 25 Justice for Journalists Foundation (JFJ) and Index on Censorship announced a joint global initiative to monitor attacks and violations against the media, specific to the current coronavirus-related crisis. Media freedom violations will be catalogued with a map hosted in [Index's current website](#) and on the Justice for Journalists Media Risk Map.

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# ATTACKS ON JOURNALISTS, BLOGGERS AND MEDIA WORKERS

# ARMENIA



Photo: "Photolure" News Agency



# 1/ MAIN FINDINGS

During the course of the investigation, 381 cases of assaults and intimidation against professional media workers, citizen journalists, civil activists and editorials of traditional and online media in Armenia were uncovered. The data for this investigation was gathered through the content analysis of open sources in Russian, Armenian and English languages. For a list of main sources, see **Appendix Two**.

1. The number of media rights' violations between 2017 and 2019 correlated to spikes in political and social tension in Armenia, above all during the Velvet Revolution (April-May 2018).
2. There were frequent assaults on journalists in 2017, especially during elections to Armenia's National Assembly and the Council of Elders in the capital Yerevan, and in the following year as they covered the events of the Velvet Revolution. Since then the number of recorded acts of violence against journalists has sharply declined.
3. In 2019, journalists and the media were most commonly intimidated and harassed through the courts: the number of claims filed against journalists and the media was four times that in 2017. Almost all these cases concerned defamation and libel in media publications.
4. Members of the public were two and a half times more likely to bring such a case against a journalist or a media outlet than the authorities.
5. In 2019, attacks of a non-physical kind against media workers in Armenia were a third lower than in 2017.

We make no claim for the absolute accuracy of the statistics presented here. As is well known, when media workers encounter attempts to hinder and obstruct their professional activities, they often do not report such incidents. They ignore threats or prefer to resolve the problems and overcome unlawful restrictions by themselves. The total number of attacks on journalists and the media, therefore, is much higher than the recorded incidents.

Nevertheless, the information gathered enables us to form an impression of the overall trends with regard to the violation of the media rights in Armenia.

# 2/ MASS MEDIA IN ARMENIA

The law "On the Mass Media" does not require the media to register and, therefore, there are no official figures about the number of media outlets in Armenia.

Data about broadcasting licenses show that two public TV channels operate in Armenia; a further 18 private TV companies, broadcasting to the whole country and to the capital, are based in Yerevan. Among these companies are those that retranslate the programmes of foreign TV channels: "RTR-Planeta", "Culture" and "Channel One" broadcasting in Russia; the international "Mir" channel; and the US "CNN" channel. Of the five private Armenian channels broadcasting to the entire country the most popular are Armenia and Shant. Regional TV companies are based in nine of the country's ten regions. In addition, there are a further ten local companies in various regions that continue to rely on analogue signals, having been left out of the transition to digital broadcasting as a result of the short-sighted policies of the authorities.

There are 23 radio companies operating in Armenia. Three broadcast on channels run by the Public Radio Service, 18 function as private companies, and two are transmitted on the basis of international agreements. Of the 18 private companies three broadcast to the whole country, 13 are limited to the capital and two function at the regional level.

According to data obtained from a number of press distribution agencies about 20 newspapers, each with a circulation of up to 5,000 copies, appear between once and five times a week. Up to ten magazines exist, thanks to subsidies from their sponsors.

The online media market, meanwhile, is developing very rapidly. There are hundreds of news portals and internet publications but, according to Alexa Rank, only 45-50 of them make a significant contribution to the information landscape. The remainder hardly produce any original material, reprinting publications from better-known multi-media platforms and often infringing copyright as they do so.

A poll conducted by the Region research centre asked Armenia's population what they regarded as their main source of information: 66% replied social media; 54% said television; 51% answered online media; and only 5% and 1%, respectively, named radio and newspapers.

Armenia ranks 61st place among 180 countries in the annual [World Press Freedom Index](#) of "Reporters without borders" for 2020.

## 3/ AN OVERALL ANALYSIS OF ATTACKS

Figure 1: Attacks on journalists, bloggers and media workers in Armenia: 2017-2019

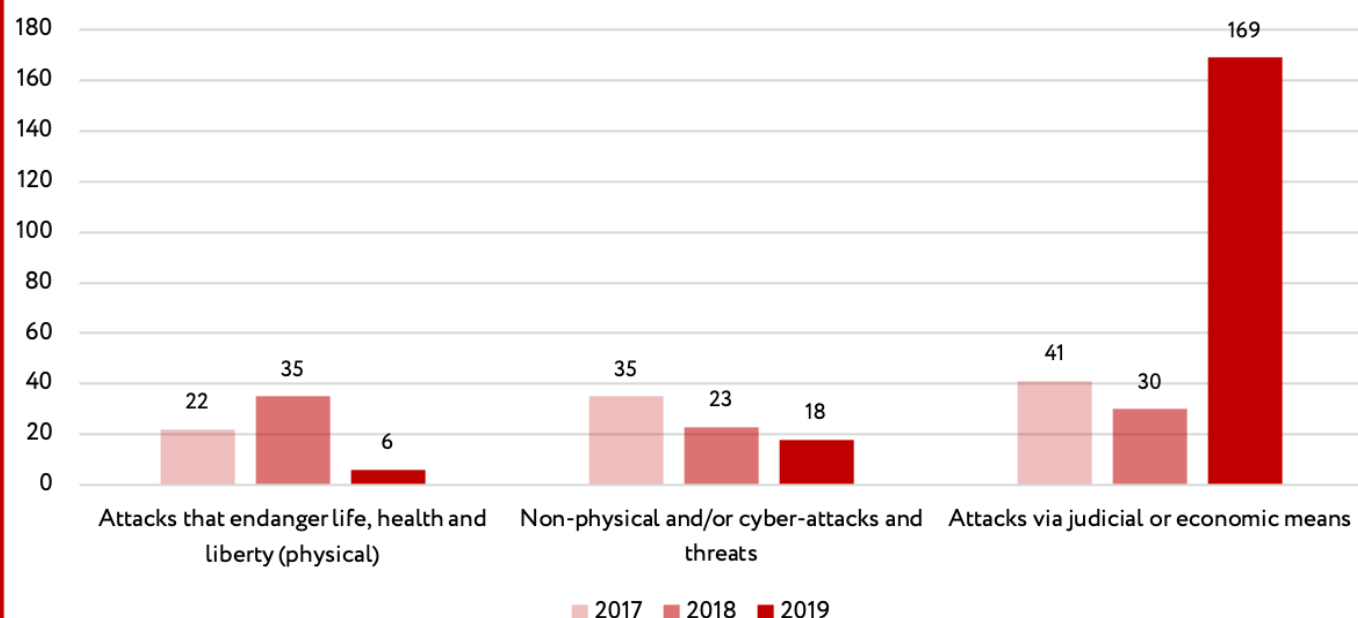


Figure 1 depicts the data for each of the three main types of attack in 2017-2019. It was a period of serious ordeals for journalists and the media. The general and municipal elections held in 2017 were planned to ensure that Serge Sargsyan and his Republican Party remained in power. The Sargsyan government abused its control of the administration and attempted to bribe voters. The independent media actively opposed these measures: journalists exposed the money distribution in the campaign headquarters of ruling party candidates and the ways in which the government was abusing its powers to gain the support of voters.

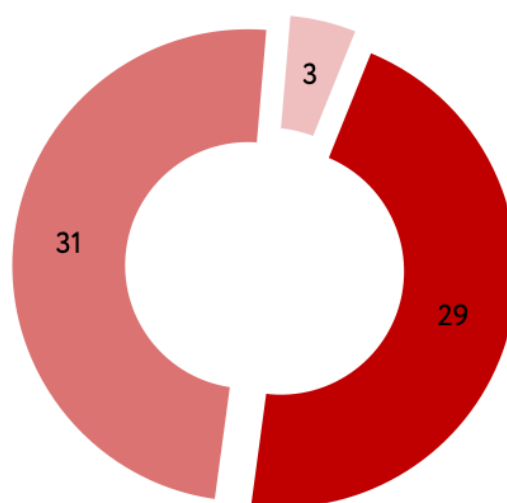
As a result, violence and various forms of harassment and intimidation were used against media workers, including threats and the unlawful obstruction of their professional activities. Claims were also filed in the courts against journalists, accusing them of defamation and libel.

During the Velvet Revolution in 2018 all three types of attack were used against media workers. Twenty-three of the 35 recorded acts of violence against journalists that year occurred when they were covering the events of the Velvet Revolution in April and May.

In 2019, the fierce political struggle between the former regime and the new government moved to social media and conventional media outlets. As a consequence, there was an increasing polarisation of the media and the great majority began to ignore the public interest and serve only the interests of their political sponsors and patrons. The use of hate-speech, fake news, manipulation, defamation and libel became widespread in public discussion. The result was an unprecedented number of court cases against journalists and media outlets (see Section 6: Attacks Using Judicial or Economic Means). Between 2017 and 2019 the number of attacks using judicial means more than quadrupled.

## 4/ ASSAULTS ENDANGERING LIFE, HEALTH AND LIBERTY

Figure 2: Attacks that endanger life, health and liberty (physical) (2017-2019)



■ Authorities ■ Non-authorities ■ Unknown sources



Figure 2 shows the number of physical attacks on media workers in 2017-2019, made by the authorities, not by authorities and by unidentified assailants.

Acts of violence against Armenian journalists became widespread during the 2017 elections and reached a peak at the height of the protests leading up to the Velvet Revolution. Of 22 recorded assaults on journalists in 2017 eleven occurred when they were covering the election campaigns and the elections to the National Assembly and the Council of Elders in Yerevan. Seven of those 22 attacks were carried out by the authorities.

- ▶ On 2 April 2017, the day of the parliamentary elections, Sisak Gabrielyan, a “Radio Liberty” correspondent, and Shogik Galstyan of the “Ararat News” website exposed the bribes being handed to voters by the campaign team of a ruling party candidate. The reporters were roughed up, their phones were taken, Gabrielyan was injured and a woman voter pulled Galstyan by her hair.
- ▶ In March 2017, the police obstructed the work of a news team from the A1+ TV company when they were making a live broadcast on the street. They twisted the arms of cameramen Sevak Mesropyan and prevented him from filming and then grabbed him and reporter Robert Anananyan by the throat.

Of the 35 recorded acts of violence against journalists and cameramen in 2018, 26 took place during the days of the Velvet Revolution and in 20 of these cases, the police were the source of the violence. In the remaining cases, journalists were attacked by civilians (some in masks) and it was later discovered that these were the hired thugs of businessmen with close ties to the regime.

- ▶ In April 2018, Alina Sargsyan, a reporter for the CivilNet news website, was beaten by a policeman when she was filming the arrest of protestors.
- ▶ In April 2019, a masked policeman attacked Naira Bulgadaryan, a “Radio Liberty” journalist, on The Square of the Republic in Yerevan. He struck her arm, knocked the camera out of her hands and refused to let her continue filming. The live recording showed how the police ran to confront Bulgadaryan and her camera fell to the ground. During its preliminary investigation of the resulting criminal case, the Investigative Committee decided that Naira Bulgadaryan would be treated as a victim.
- ▶ A group in civilian clothing wearing masks attacked Vruir Tadevosyan, a producer for the “Public Service Radio”, during filming of the protests. They grabbed his tablet and mobile phone, beat him with clubs and trashed his car. A criminal investigation was launched, but a year later it was closed “for lack of sufficient evidence” and no one was prosecuted.

After the success of the Velvet Revolution and the ending of the protests, the number of physical attacks on journalists declined markedly. In 2019 there were only six such assaults and not one of them was linked to the police or the authorities.

- ▶ In December 2019, several dozen inhabitants of Ovtashen village (Ararat Region) attacked a film crew from the “Kentron TV” company, raining blows on journalist Artur Akopyan and cameraman Simik Maiilyan and damaging their camera. The crew managed to save part of the film of the incident, thereby confirming that the attack took place.
- ▶ In March 2019, during an interview with the “Hraparak” newspaper, TV presenter Hamlet Ghushchyan revealed that he had been abducted earlier this year. According to him, people employed by a certain businessman had “kidnapped him during the night ... and put a pistol to his forehead.”

# 5/ NON-PHYSICAL AND/OR CYBER ATTACKS AND THREATS

Figure 3: Non-physical and/or cyber-attacks and threats

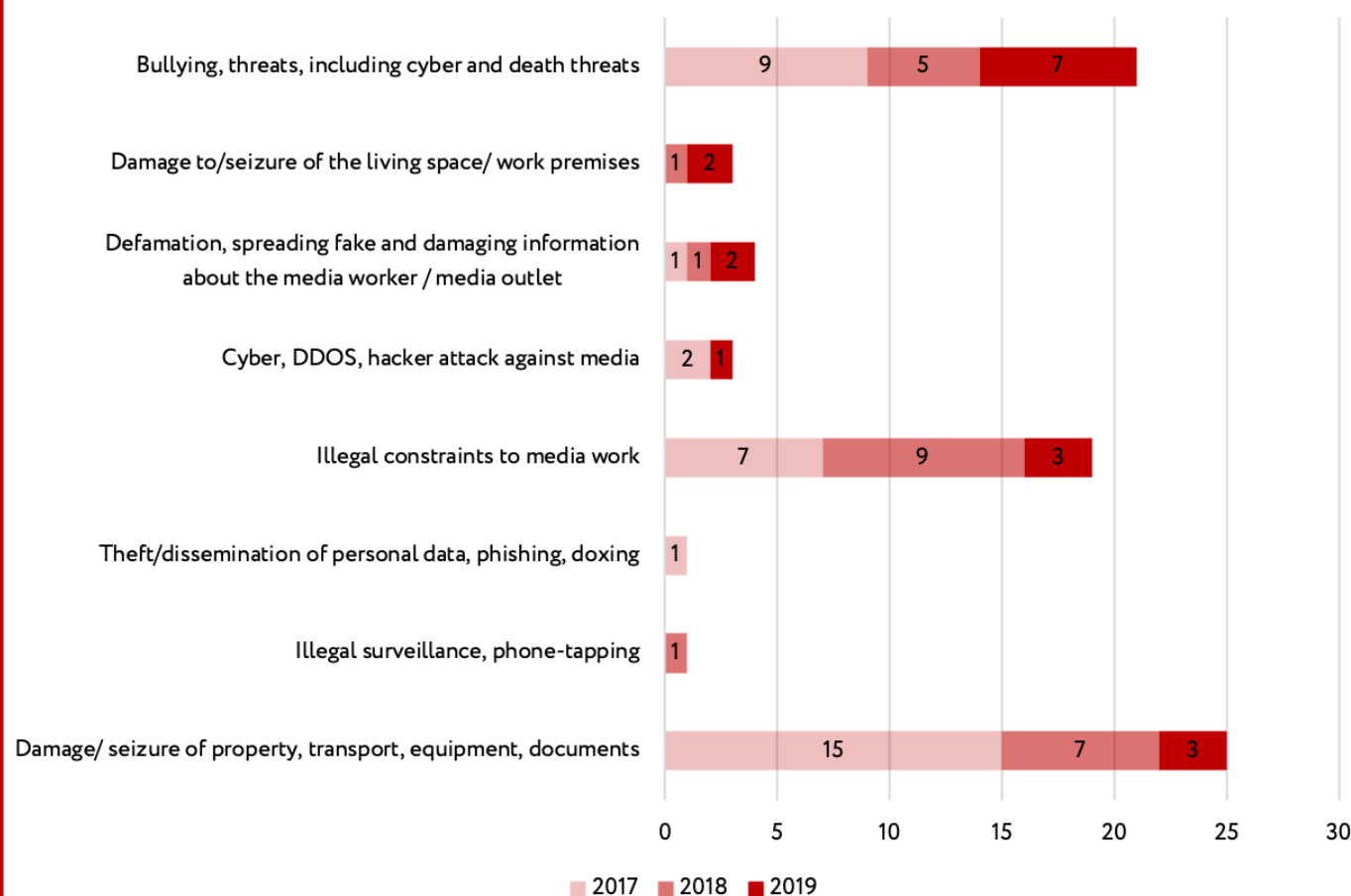


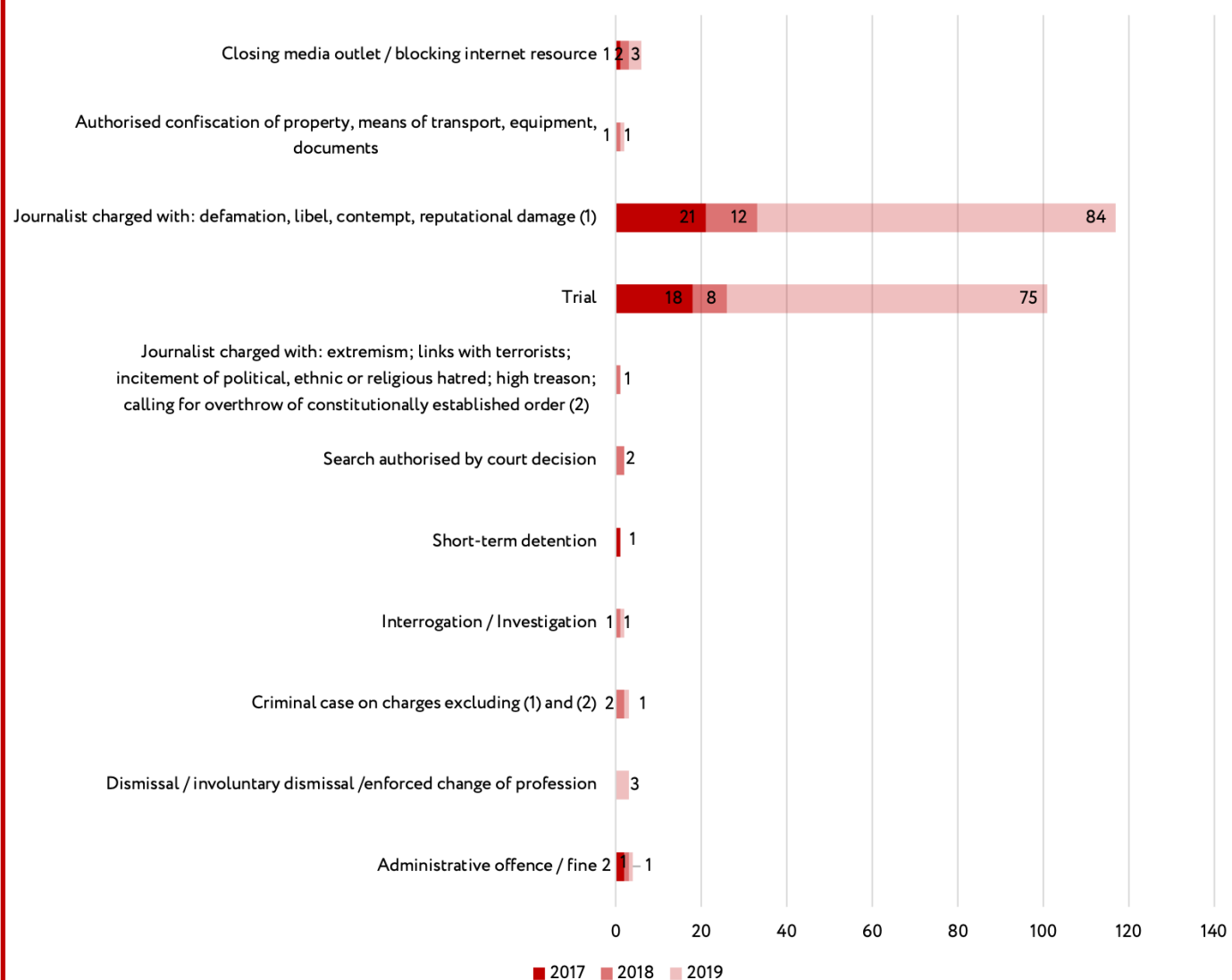
Figure 3 shows the distribution of the main recorded non-physical attacks and threats in 2017-2019. Between 2017 and 2019 attacks in this category halved, from 35 to 18.

The three most common forms of indirect attack on media workers in Armenia were: damage to (or confiscation of) property, vehicles, equipment or documents; harassment, intimidation, and threats of violence or death, including cyberthreats; and unlawful obstruction of the professional activities of journalists.

- In April 2017, on the day of the parliamentary elections, the “Aravot” news website was subjected to DDoS attacks that led to a major disruption of its service.
- In January 2018, the editors of the “Medialab” news website received serious threats from a Facebook user. He hinted that they might suffer the same fate as the French magazine “Charlie Hebdo”, which suffered a terrorist attack in January 2015.
- In May 2019, the office vehicle of the “Syunyants Yerkir” newspaper was torched in Kapane. Samvel Alexanyan, the paper’s editor, believes the motivation behind the attack was revenge.

# 6/ ATTACKS VIA JUDICIAL OR ECONOMIC MEANS

Figure 4: Attacks via judicial or economic means



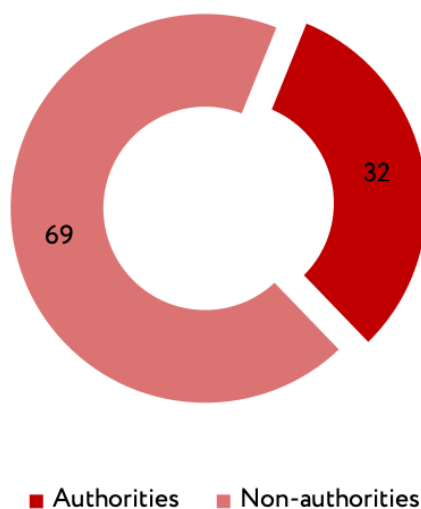
As attacks of a physical or non-physical character declined in 2019 there was a sharp increase in the number of cases brought against Armenian journalists and the media for libel, defamation and damage to reputation: they rose from 21 in 2017 to 84 in 2019. In 2019, investigations and juridical hearings started into 85 cases, which is two and half times as many as in two previous years combined.

During the period under consideration, it is noteworthy that almost 70% of the cases brought against journalists and the media were not initiated by the authorities but by ordinary citizens, representing various sections of the population (Figure 5).

- In October 2017, Versandik Akopyan, a former deputy of the National Assembly and owner of the Yerevan sparkling wines factory, filed a claim with the court against the editors of the “Zhogovurd” newspaper, demanding that what he considered libellous statements on the “Armlur” news web-site, of which “Zhogovurd” were the trustees, be withdrawn.



Figure 5: Court cases against journalist and media trials  
(2017-2019)



- ▶ In June 2018, Samvel Harutyunyan the head of the State Committee for Science under the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Armenia appealed to the Yerevan City Court of General Jurisdiction against Daniel Ioannisyan, programme coordinator of the “Union of Informed Citizens”. Harutyunyan demanded a compensation of 2 million drams for reputational damage.
- ▶ In May 2019, Andrei Gukasyan, governor of the Lori Region, filed a claim against Karina Vanesyan, a journalist with the “MIG TV” company, demanding that she apologise for defaming him.

There are two reasons why there has been a fourfold increase in the number of court cases against media workers over the past three years. One, since libel and defamation were decriminalised in 2010, many have regarded Article 1087.1 of the Civil Code as an easy way to settle accounts with inconvenient media and their staff: the article envisages responsibility for this administrative offence and the award of material compensation. Two, as already noted, after the revolution, the acute political fight between the former regime and the new administration has shifted from the streets to the media. Hate-speech, fake news, insults and libel became widespread in publications and broadcasts. Those named in such articles and programmes have turned to the courts with increasing frequency to defend their honour and dignity.

**ATTACKS ON JOURNALISTS, BLOGGERS  
AND MEDIA WORKERS**

# **GEORGIA**

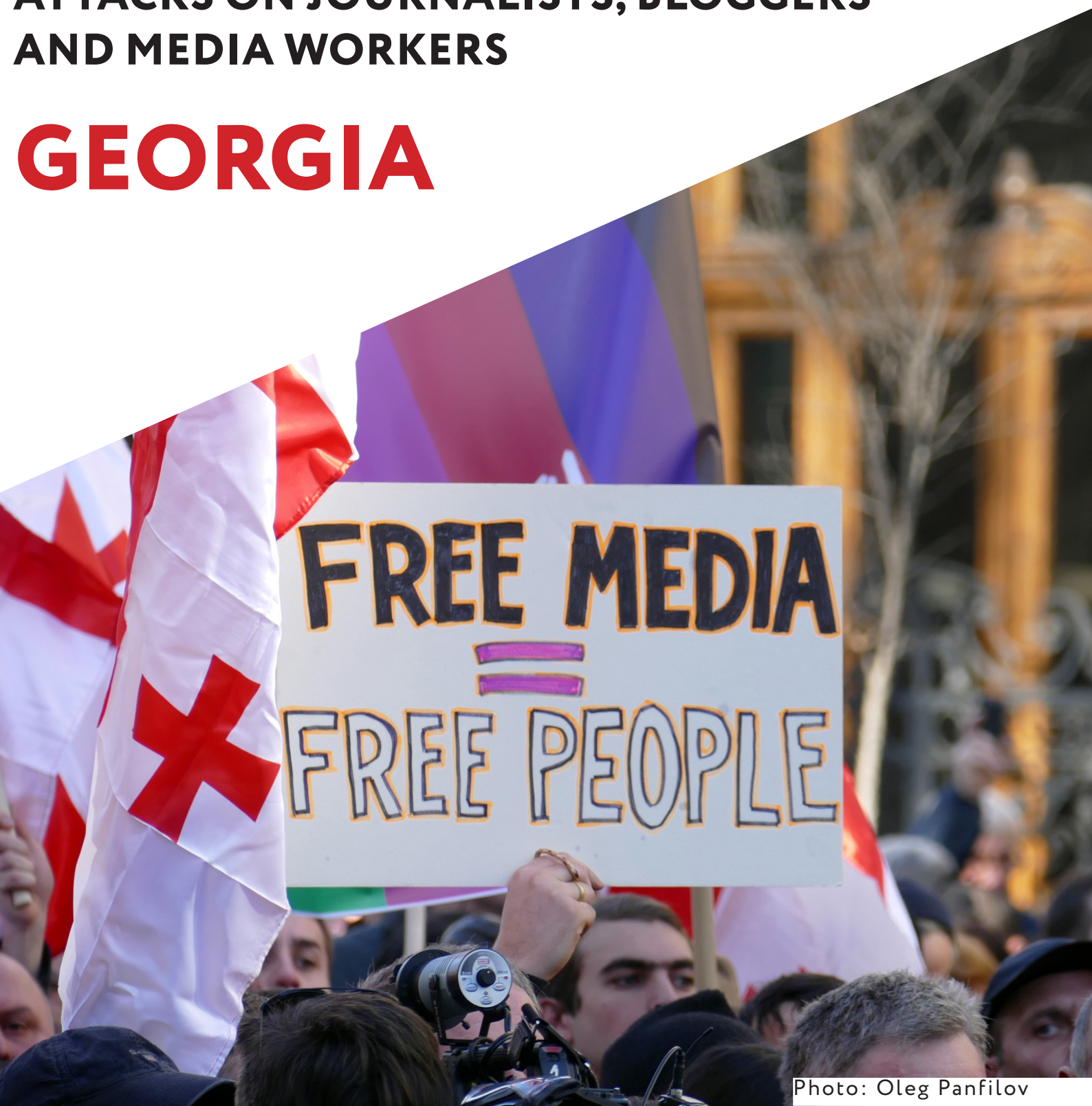


Photo: Oleg Panfilov

# 1/ MAIN FINDINGS

**D**uring the course of the research, 154 cases of assaults and intimidations against professional media workers, citizen journalists, civil activists and editorial of traditional and online media in Georgia were studied. The data for this research was gathered through the content analysis of open sources in Georgian, Russian and English languages. For a list of the main sources, see **Appendix Three**.

1. During the past 11 years, not a single murder of a journalist has been recorded in Georgia. After the Russo-Georgian War of 2008 there have been no incidents that might be interpreted as attempted assassination of a media worker. Attacks on journalists in the performance of their professional duties have been frequent, however, as have instances of obstruction.
2. A few years ago, no more than 10-15 cases of pressure exerted on journalists were recorded each year. Since then there has been the great increase in the pressure exerted on the media by government bodies and organisations. This is linked to political activity in society and the desire of the Georgian authorities to suppress a mood of opposition and restrict the political activism of parties and movements.
3. A distinctive feature of the Georgian media landscape is that only 26 of the 154 recorded incidents took place outside the capital; a further 12 were recorded in other countries; while the remaining 116 all occurred in Tbilisi. Among other regions within the country the most incidents were recorded in Adjara, Imereti and Samegrelo.
4. In 12 cases the rights of Georgian media workers were infringed outside the country: ten in Ukraine and two in Turkey. An incident with Turkish border guards was settled. In Ukraine the deportation of Georgian journalists and refusal to allow them entry to the country were all linked with the situation surrounding former Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili, who was governor of the Odessa Region from May 2015 to November 2016. Not one of these incidents was challenged or examined in court.
5. Cyber-crimes, including attacks on websites, have not reached worrying levels in Georgia. However, the present regime has begun to use fake websites and social media accounts in order to influence public opinion.

# 2/ MASS MEDIA IN GEORGIA

**G**eorgia is the only post-Soviet country (apart from the Baltic States) where the obligations of the State in respect of freedom of speech are inscribed in the Constitution. Article 24 reads: "Neither the State nor individual persons have the right to monopolise the mass media or the means of disseminating information". As a consequence, there are no State-run media in Georgia, apart from the parliamentary magazine. The country's Criminal Code likewise does not permit the harassment or persecution of journalists for their professional activities.

Neither is there a State agency in Georgia to exercise oversight over the media or enforce their regulation; the country has no institution that provides accreditation of foreign journalists. The registration of media outlet is no different than that of a business and the procedures takes a few minutes. Preferential rates are offered to aid the development of the media industry and, in the case of low profitability taxes may be waived.



It is impossible, as a consequence, to state exactly how many newspapers and magazines are published in Georgia. In recent years more than 150 newspapers and magazines have been on sale in Tbilisi. The majority of them, however, did not survive the competition and ceased publication. Outside the capital a further 50 print media were published in the past, but most of them have closed or continue in the form of news websites.

Georgia's National Commission for Communications offers more precise information about the work of television companies and radio stations. In 2018, 57 radio stations and 102 TV channels submitted applications for bandwidth. The number of websites in the country cannot be stated since they are not required to be registered.

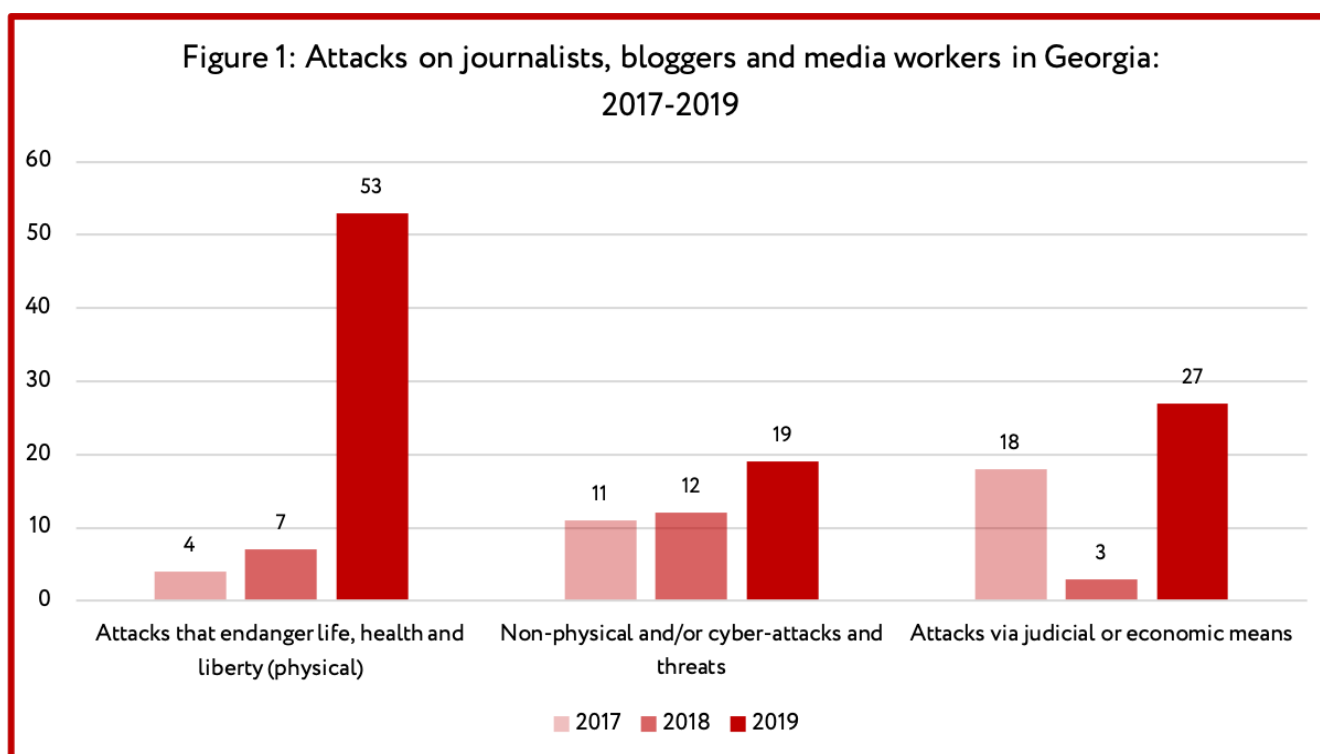
There is no State-run television in Georgia. Only "Channel One", the former State channel in Soviet times, receives funding from the State.

A December 2019 poll by the [National Democratic Institute](#) found that various TV channels enjoyed the following public rating: "Imedi" – 30%; "Mtavari Arkhi" -18%; "Rustavi-2" – 12%; and "TV Pirveli" – 5%. The remaining 90+ channels enjoyed a rating of less than 3%, many of them, less than 1%. Among foreign broadcasters the TV channels of neighbouring Azerbaijan (3%) and Armenia (1%) were the most popular.

Georgia ranked 60th out of 180 in the annual [World Press Freedom Index](#) of "Reporters without borders" in 2020.

## 3/ AN OVERALL ANALYSIS OF ATTACKS

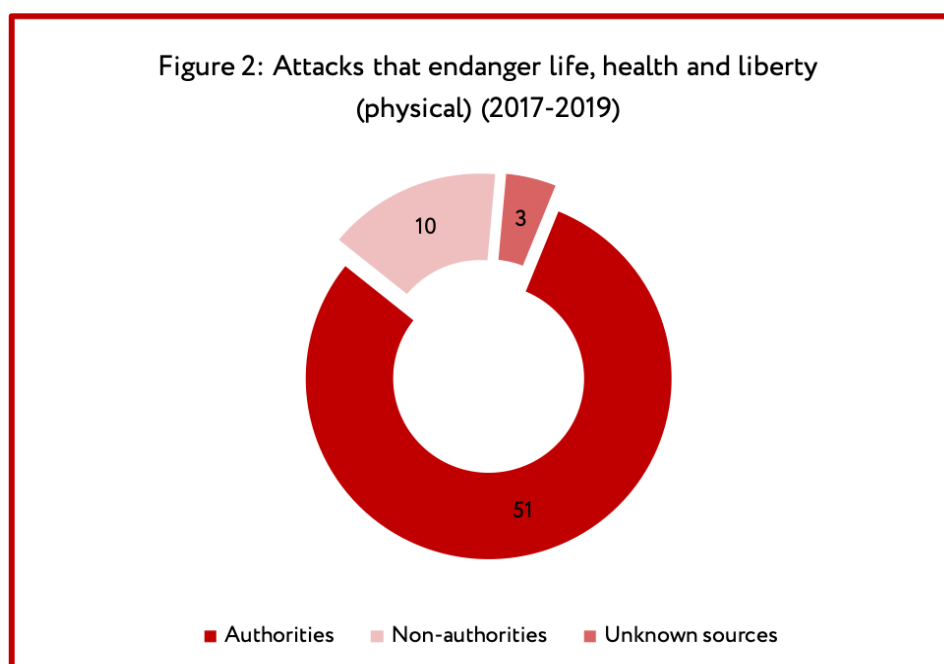
Figure 1 offers an analysis of attacks and pressure on journalists, bloggers and media workers between January 2017 and December 2019. Since 2017 the numbers of incidents in all three categories has increased, although in 2018 there was a considerable drop in attacks via judicial or economic means. The greatest increase has been in the category of physical attacks. In 2019, moreover, 46 of the 53 recorded instances were of police violence against journalists.



The growing aggression against journalists by the authorities may be explained, in part, by the increasing political activity of parties and of society as a whole. 2019 was the last year before parliamentary elections held in October 2020. Opinion polls by the International Republican Institute and the National Democratic Institute in mid-2019 indicated a drop in support for the ruling “Georgian Dream” party, which seemed unlikely to regain the parliamentary majority it won in 2012 and, again, in 2016. In order to retain its influence over voters “Georgian Dream” began to harass popular, pro-opposition TV channels.

The increasing pressure on journalists is a worrying sign. The authorities have attempted to intimidate the media using judicial and economic measures, and the direct application of violence.

## 4/ ATTACKS THAT ENDANGER LIFE, HEALTH AND LIBERTY (PHYSICAL)



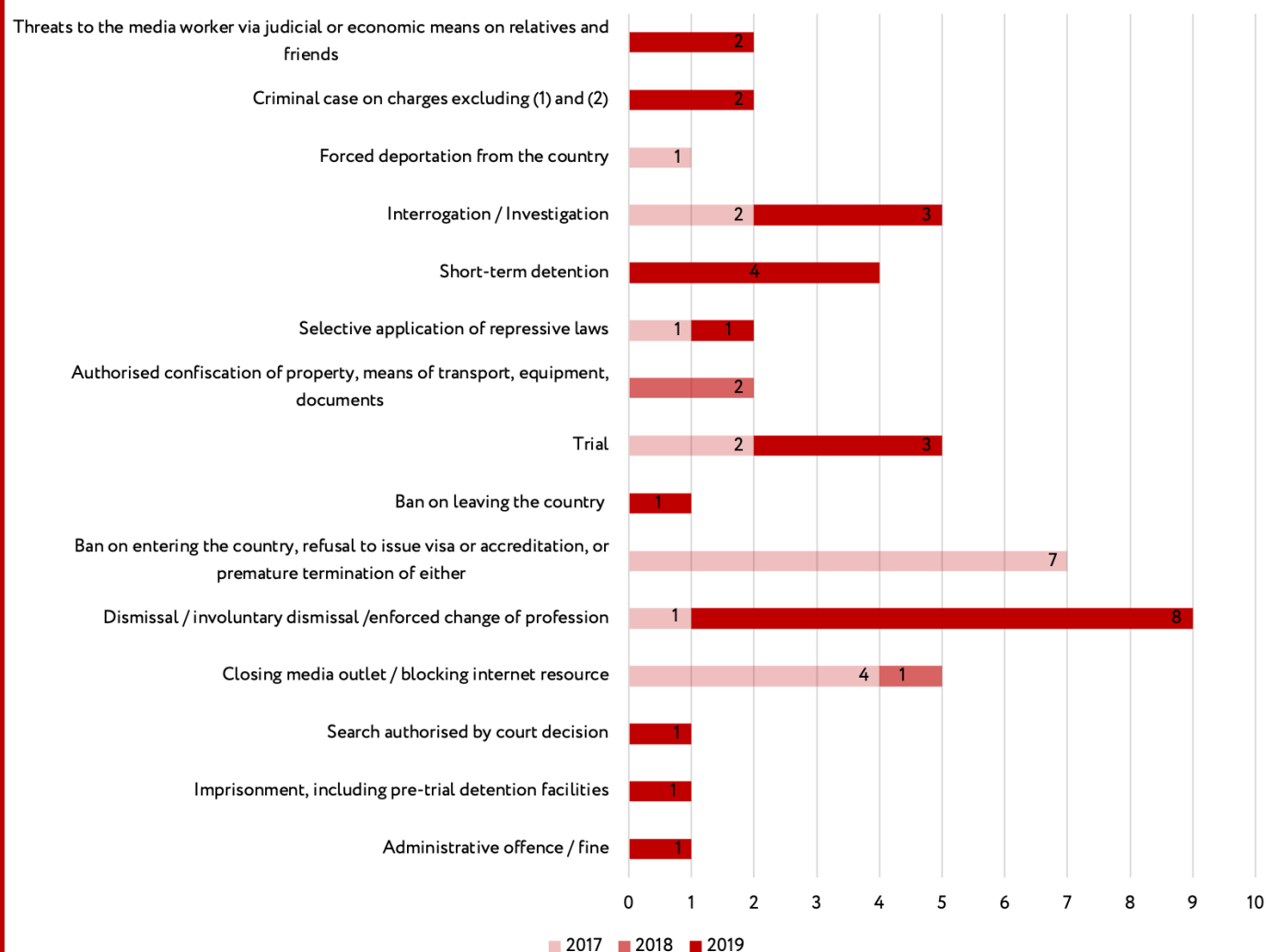
Physical violence against journalists may be divided in two, between **[1]** attacks by people not directly linked with the present regime: for example, private security guards or ideological supporters of the current administration; and **[2]** targeted attacks by the police on journalists who are carrying out their professional duties.

- On the evening of 21 June 2019, no less than 39 reporters, TV cameramen and women and other media personnel were injured when the special forces of the Georgian Ministry of Internal Affairs were deployed to break up a demonstration. Tear gas and rubber bullets, including banned ones, were used to disperse the protestors.
- In January 2017, during its siege of the “Rustavi-2” TV company the pro-regime and pro-Russian organisation Georgian March attacked Nika (Nikoloz) Gvaramiya, the company’s general director, and other journalists.
- On 21 June 2019 police detained and beat Niko Muhigulashvili, a “Channel One” journalist, and seized and broke the camera of a cameraman from the same TV channel.
- The only case of kidnapping involved independent Azerbaijani journalist Afgan Muhtarli on 29 May 2017. Judging by the statements of human rights organisations, Georgian special services assisted their Azerbaijani counterparts in his abduction.

All remaining physical attacks (22) on journalists occurred when they were performing their professional duties or were linked to their work.

# 5/ ATTACKS VIA JUDICIAL OR ECONOMIC MEANS

Figure 3: Attacks via judicial or economic means



All the 48 recorded incidents of this kind between January 2017 and December 2019 were instigated by the regime or its representatives.

Over the period under consideration the most common types of pressure and harassment were:

- Dismissal / involuntary dismissal / enforced change of profession

One case was recorded in 2017 and a further eight in 2019. Six were linked to a change in editorial staff at the “Rustavi-2” TV company; the remaining three with a change in the management of the “Adjara TV” channel in April 2019.

- Ban on entering the country, refusal to issue visa or accreditation, or premature termination of either

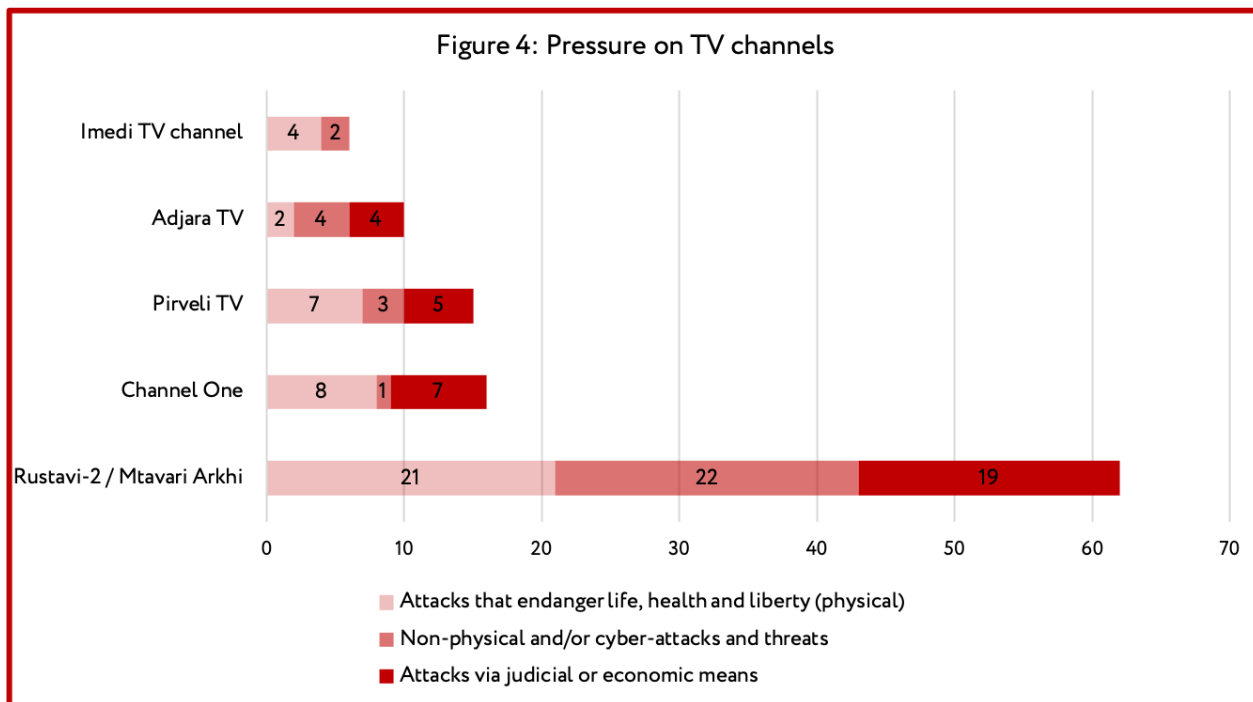
In 2017 an application by Georgian journalists to enter Ukraine was turned down.

- Short-term detentions by the police

In 2019, journalists were detained four times by the Georgian police who used violence against them.



# 6/ PRESSURE ON MEDIA OUTLETS



Before September 2019, according to ratings, there were two principal TV channels in Georgia. Imedi is favoured by “Georgian Dream”, the ruling party; “Rustavi-2” had the support of the opposition. Between them they were watched by 72-76% of the population.

As the 2020 parliamentary elections approach, the current regime launched several attacks on “Rustavi-2”. Not only were journalists the victims of physical attacks, but judicial pressure was also brought to bear through the selective application of the law. The ruling party successfully secured a change in the ownership of “Rustavi-2” after which channel’s coverage was shifted away from criticism of the regime to a more neutral reporting of events. Journalists who left “Rustavi-2” thereafter created a new channel “Mtavari Arkhi”, which began broadcasting on 9 September 2019.

Other popular TV channels such as “Pirveli TV” were also harassed by the authorities, which successfully secured a change in the management of “Adjara TV”, the public television company of the Adjara Autonomous Region.

Graph 4 shows the level of pressure exerted on Georgia’s popular TV channels. The privileged position of the pro-regime “Imedi” TV channel is immediately evident. The highest level of police violence against TV journalists was registered during the dispersal of the protest rally on 21 June 2019.

# ATTACKS ON JOURNALISTS, BLOGGERS AND MEDIA WORKERS

## MOLDOVA



Photo: Andrei Mardar

# 1/ MAIN FINDINGS

During the course of the investigation, 159 cases of assaults and intimidation against professional media workers, citizen journalists, civil activists and editorials of traditional and online media in Moldova were uncovered. The data for this investigation was gathered through the content analysis of open sources in Russian, Romanian and English languages. Expert interviews with journalists were also used in compiling the report. For a list of main sources, see **Appendix Four**.

1. The greatest number of physical attacks that endanger life, liberty and health against media workers (16) were registered in 2019, moreover twelve of those incidents occurred on 8-9 June 2019 when Moldova faced a political crisis.
2. The local and regional authorities, including State and municipal officials, politicians, civil servants and those elected at the local level are the main source of violence, harassment and intimidation of media workers.
3. There is a direct correlation between political events, increasing levels of public protest, and the number of attacks or threats against media workers. Recent political crises in Moldova in August 2018 and June 2019 proved most dangerous for journalists carrying out their professional duties (especially 26 August 2018 and 8-9 June 2019).
4. The most common forms of intimidation and harassment of media workers during this period, however, took the form of non-physical and/or cyber-attacks and threats.
5. The most widespread form of intimidation was the unlawful obstruction of journalistic activities; the slandering of media workers to discredit them on the internet or by other means; and surveillance, phone-tapping, etc. to frighten journalists.

Some types of attack and threat do not become widely known and are not reflected in the media. Many journalists consider that online abuse and non-physical threats are an inevitable part of their everyday professional activities and do not report them.

## 2/ MASS MEDIA IN MOLDOVA

In the annual [World Press Freedom Index](#) of “Reporters without borders” for 2020, Moldova ranked 91st out of 180 countries. Six years earlier it was placed significantly higher, in 55th position.

By the end of 2019 there were 60 TV channels and 55 radio stations in Moldova, according to the [State broadcasting regulator](#) (the Audiovisual council of the Republic of Moldova). The country’s [National Statistical Bureau](#) counted 126 newspapers in 2018, with an annual circulation of 40 million copies, and 205 magazines and other periodical publications with a total annual circulation of 1.5 million copies. There is no official information about the number of websites and portals providing Moldova with news.

A poll, conducted in December 2019 by the [Barometer of Public Opinion](#), indicated that television (49%) and the internet (34%) were regarded as the most authoritative sources of information in Moldova. Radio came a poor third with only 5% and the remaining media outlets were considered even less important. Overall, 60% of respondents expressed confidence in the media accessible in Moldova.

Between 2015 and summer 2019 the media holdings of Vladimir Plahotniuc, former chairman of the Democratic Party of Moldova, dominated the media market. The Democratic Party ruled the country,

on its own or in coalition with other political parties until June 2019. Plahotniuc's media empire, according to a variety of sources, then owned 8-11 of the country's TV channels and radio stations and numerous websites and portals. When the Democratic Party lost the election in June 2019, the influence of Plahotniuc's media holdings also declined; the media group affiliated with the Socialist Party and controlled by the country's president Igor Dodon grew much stronger.

A considerable proportion of media outlets belong to politicians, directly or through their placemen, and the editorial policy of these outlets depends on the political and business interests of their owners. The advertising market in Moldova is also controlled by business groups affiliated to the regime. These political and economic interests explain the instability of the independent media within the country. Their advertising revenues are small and unpredictable, forcing them to rely on grants for their survival.

Local and foreign experts identify the main problems facing the media in Moldova as the concentration of ownership and the lack of editorial independence.

## 3/ AN OVERALL ANALYSIS OF ATTACKS

Figure 1: Attacks on journalists and media workers in Moldova:  
2017-2019

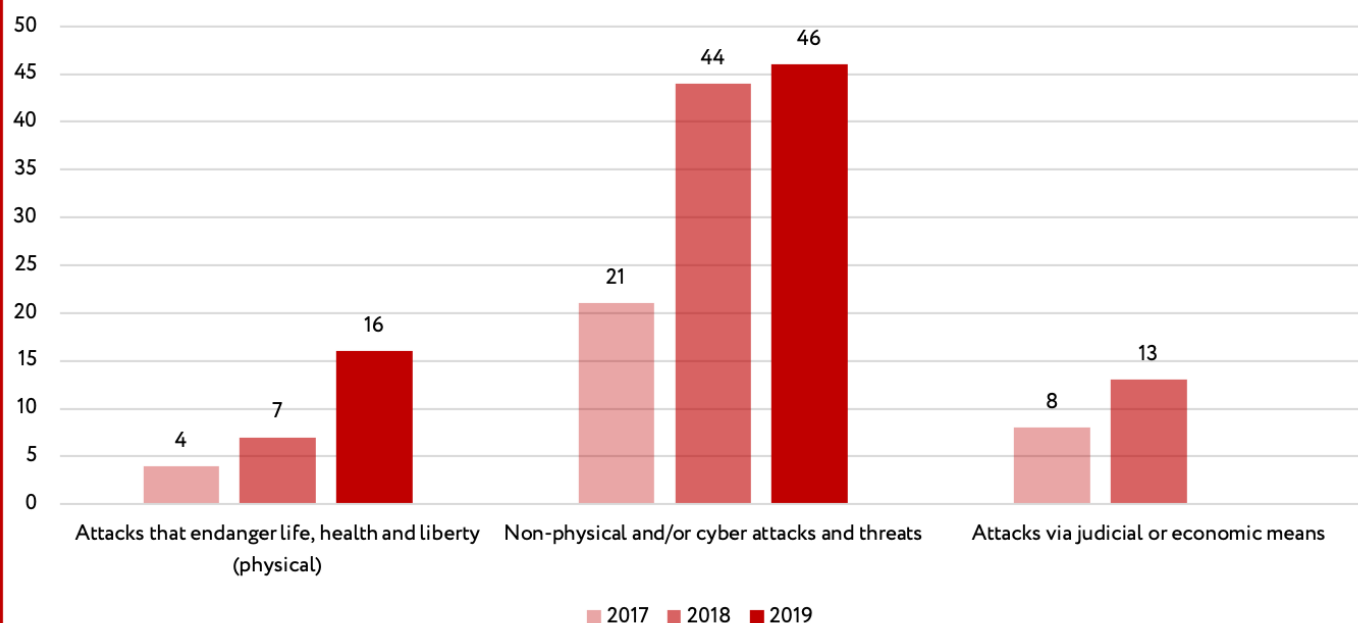




Figure 1 presents data for the three main types of violence, harassment and intimidation suffered by media workers in Moldova between January 2017 and December 2019. During those three years there were a total of 159 attacks and threats and the number almost doubled during that period.

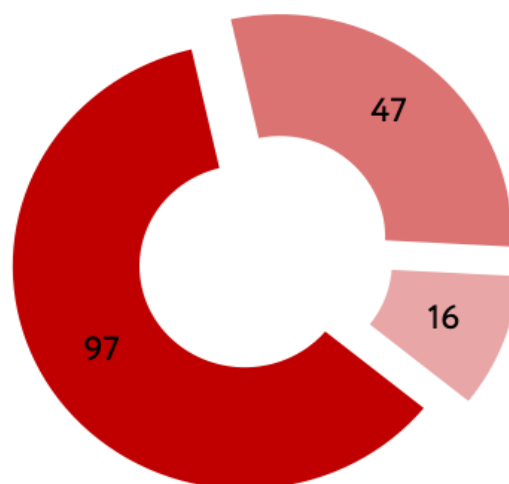
To intimidate journalists and editorial offices who raised awkward questions non-violent attacks and threats were most frequently used. Those included defamation; bullying, threats, including cyber and death threats; attacks on social media and the cloning of their websites.

Most physical attacks on media workers in 2019 occurred in June when no less than 16 acts of violence were recorded against journalists covering political events and protests in Chisinau, the capital.

In 60% of cases, the attacks and threats against media workers came from State officials, others holding public office at the national or local level, the police, state and private security services. They obstructed journalists in the performance of their professional duties and, in some cases, resorted to violence (Figure 2). In 10% of incidents it was not possible to establish who was behind the threat, but in other cases there is evidence that politicians or State officials ordered attacks on media workers.

During this period, the most frequently attacked media outlets were “Ziarul de Gardă” newspaper (29 incidents), “Jurnal TV” (19 incidents) and “TV8” (18 incidents).

**Figure 2: Sources of attacks/threats (2017-2019)**



■ Authorities ■ Non-authorities ■ Unknown sources

# 4/

## ATTACKS THAT ENDANGER LIFE, HEALTH AND LIBERTY (PHYSICAL)

The number of assaults on media workers in Moldova quadrupled over the period in question, rising from four incidents in 2017 to 16 incidents in 2019. For the most part, journalists did not suffer life-threatening attacks and beatings. One case, however, was considered attempted murder.

- ▶ In February 2019, BTV cameraman Eugen Gumeniuk was filming a mayoral election campaign merchandise placed on the town hall. He was almost knocked over by the vehicle of the ruling Democratic Party candidate. Film footage clearly showed how the car drove towards the cameraman and tried to run him down.

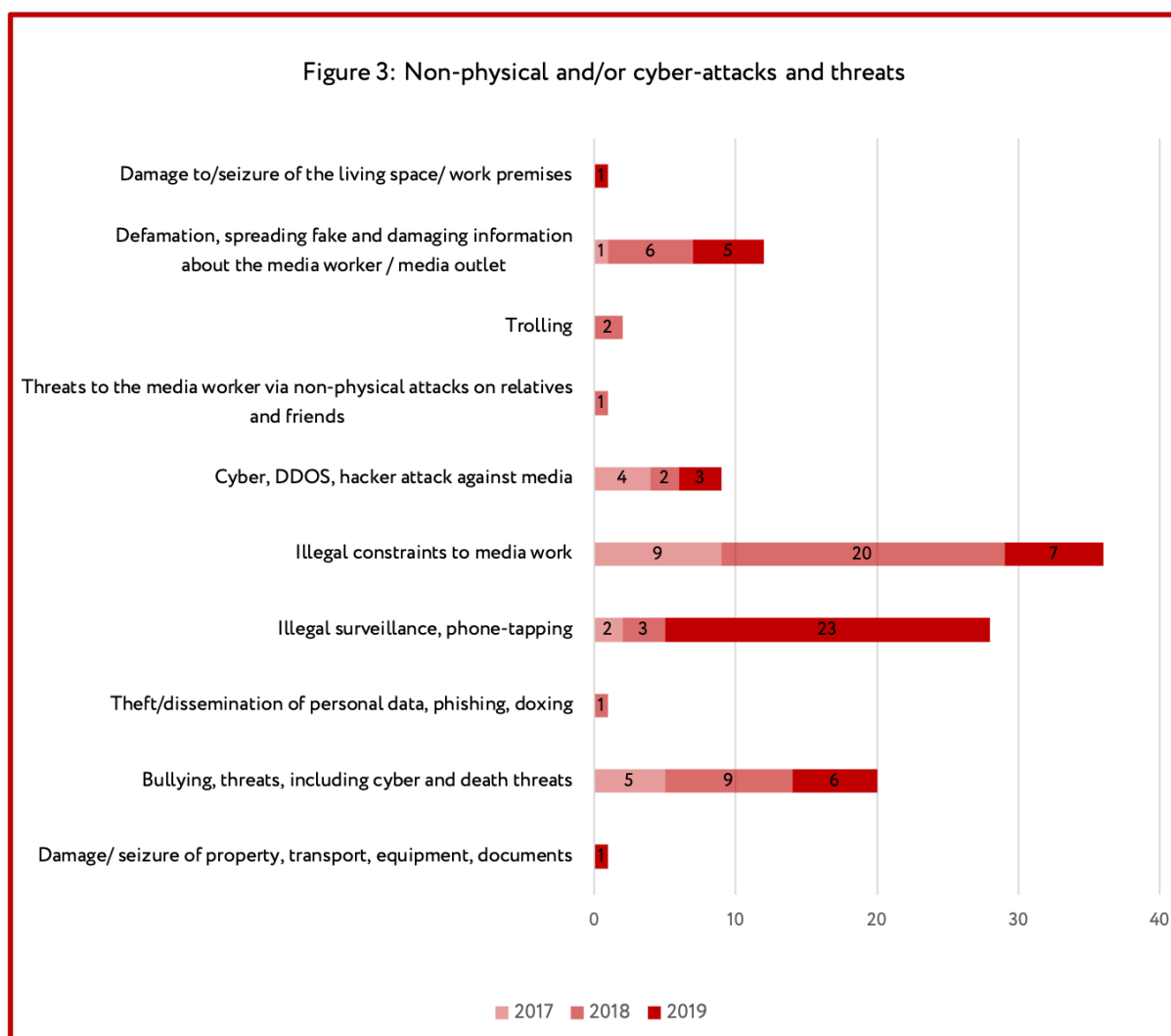
On August 26, 2018, when protests against the ruling Democratic Party were held in Chisinau, several cases of physical attacks against journalists were recorded:

- ▶ Radio “Free Europe” reporters Niku Gushan and Tatyana Yatsko and Unimedia.info journalist Aurika Rusnak-Jardan were pushed by the bodyguards of the Shore party leaders when they tried to conduct interviews.

In June 2019 during the political crisis, when the Democratic Party organised pickets outside a number of government buildings, journalists were subjected to numerous attacks, both by the authorities and the protestors. The following incidents were among those recorded:

- ▶ Protestors attacked a news team from “TV8” – reporter Sergiu Niculita, cameraman Oleg Kozlov and journalist Daniela Cutu – damaging their equipment and drenching Daniela with water.
- ▶ Michaela Dikusa, a journalist working for the Unimedia.info portal, was assaulted by State security staff when she tried to put questions to leaders of the Democratic Party.
- ▶ Bodyguards of Vlad Plahotniuc attacked Aliona Ciurca, a reporter for the “Ziarul de Garda” newspaper.
- ▶ When Ecaterina Alexandr, also of “Ziraul de Garda”, tried to take a picture a woman protestor seized her camera and struck the lens.

# 5/ NON-PHYSICAL AND/OR CYBER ATTACKS AND THREATS



The most widespread form of pressure exerted on journalists in Moldova, making up 60% of all recorded incidents, are non-physical and/or cyber attacks and threats. The leading forms of activity in this category (see Figure 3) are: the illegal constraints to media work; illegal surveillance, phone-tapping; and bullying, harassment, including cyber and death threats.

Certain media outlets have been singled out for such treatment: over three years the “Ziarul de Garda” newspaper was targeted in no less than 19 incidents, “TV8” no less than 13 incidents, and “Jurnal TV” no less than 12 incidents.

- In 2017, the Action and Solidarity Party restricted the access of a team from “Prime TV” to its congress, alleging that the TV channel was broadcasting distorted information.
- In 2017, President Dodon banned journalist Konstantin Grigoritsa from his gatherings.
- In 2018, the ruling Democratic Party banned journalists from “TV8” and “Jurnal TV” from its weekly press briefings because it did not like the editorial policy of the two TV channels.
- The same two TV channels and journalists for “Ziarul de Garda” newspaper were repeatedly banned from taking part in press conferences and other gatherings organised by the Șor Party.
- In 2019, journalist Vadim Ungureanu was denied access to the events held by the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

Unlawful surveillance of media workers and tapping their telephone conversations, primarily for the purpose of intimidation, is the second most widely adopted measure.

- ▶ In June 2019 the “Rise Moldova” portal published an investigation into the illegal phone-tapping of the conversations of a number of politicians, activists and journalists.
- ▶ In November 2019, the chairman of the parliamentary commission for National Security, Defence and Public Order published a list of individuals, including many media workers, whose phones had been unlawfully tapped.

The largest number of coordinated cyber-campaigns to smear and intimidate influential journalists were recorded in 2018. Often these attacks and threats were instigated by politicians annoyed by what journalists had written. Among the victims were Natalia Morari (“TV8”), Alina Radu (“Ziarul de Garda”), Cornelia Cozonac and Mariana Colun (Anticoruptie.md), Lyuba Shevchuk (“Rise Moldova”) and journalists writing for the Nokta.md and Nordnews.md portals.

- ▶ In July 2018, Ilan Șor, mayor of the Orhei municipality and leader of the Șor Party, posted a video on social media that insulted journalists and contained threats to their life and health.
- ▶ In December 2018, parliamentary deputy Oleg Savva posted obscene and insulting words on social media to attack Mariana Colun, investigative journalist for the anticoruptie.md portal.

Between 2017 and 2019, several online media outlets were subjected either to DDoS attacks or were cloned through the creation of sites with similar titles but phoney content. The Zdg.md, Deschide.md, Stopfals.md, Reporterdegarda.md and Newsmaker.md websites were all cloned.

## 6/ ATTACKS VIA JUDICIAL OR ECONOMIC MEANS

Over the three years there were only 21 cases, or 13% of the total (see Figure 4) when judicial and economic pressure was used to influence journalists and their work.

Such measures are hardly employed in Moldova against media workers. Just a few incidents can be listed:

- ▶ In May 2017, criminal proceedings were instituted against journalist and activist Nicolae Josan after he got in a fight with another journalist.
- ▶ In October 2017, Nadezhda Bondarenko, editor of “Pravda Pridnevstrovya”, a newspaper published in the Trans-Dniester region, was fined for libel after she reported an accident involving a female relative of an official from the unrecognised Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (Transnistria).
- ▶ In May 2018, a driver was arrested, transporting a print-run of the weekly “Cuvantul” newspaper from the town of Rezina. He was charged with an administrative offence.
- ▶ In August 2018, charges were brought against journalist Victor Sofroni after the information he passed to the police proved to be false.
- ▶ On 5 November 2018 journalist Vadim Ungureanu was given a three-year suspended sentence and fined 70,000 lei after being convicted of “active corruption”.

On three occasions during this period journalists were dismissed or made to resign:

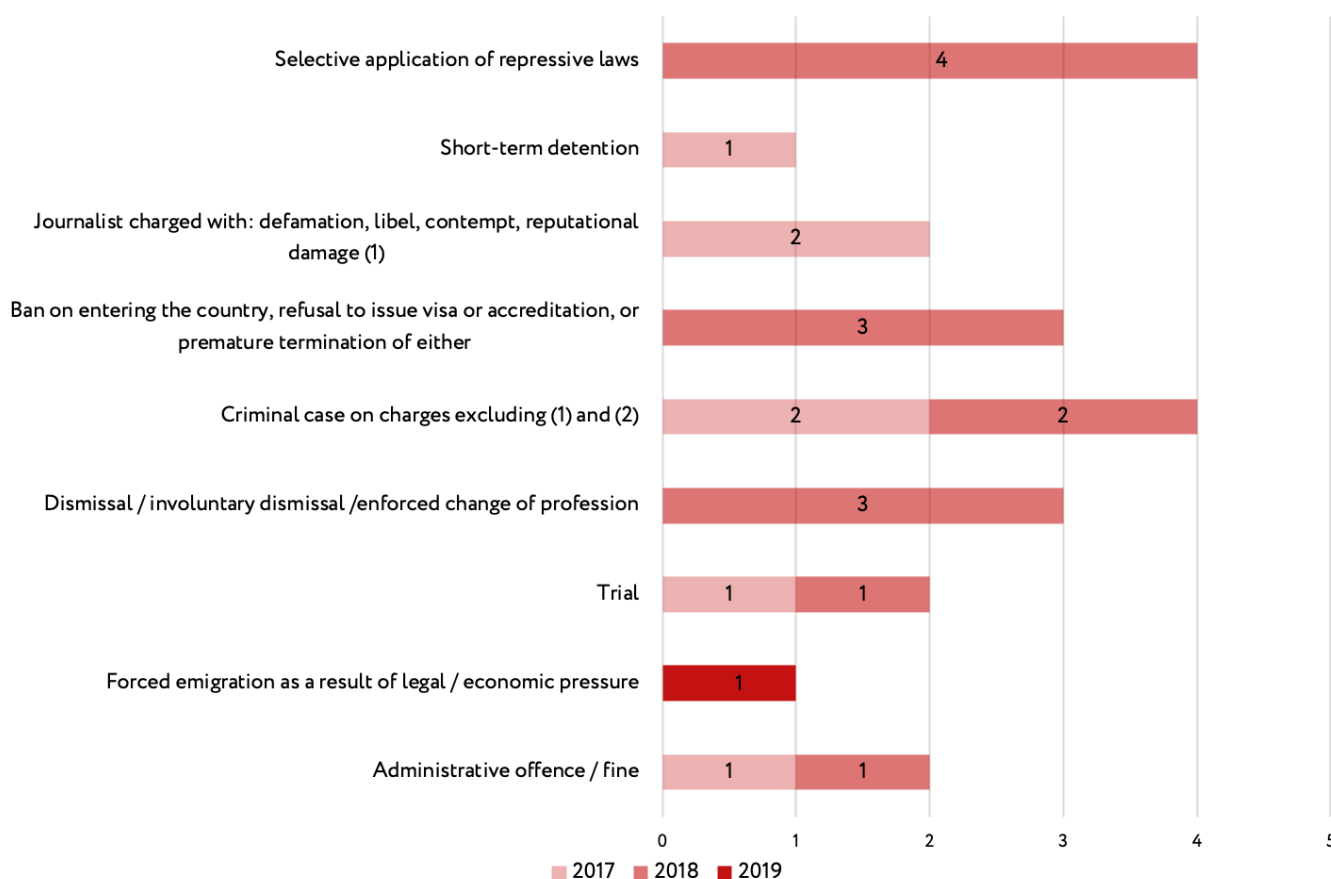
- ▶ In June 2018, journalist Dumitru Pelin was forced to give up his job with “TV Nord” after he posted his video of a protest rally on one of the news portals.



- In October 2018, Alina Panko, news presenter on the “10TV” channel, was dismissed for broadcasting news about am MEP’s statement directed at the Moldovan government, after it handed over seven teachers of Turkish origin to the Turkish authorities. Despite an order from the channel’s management not to broadcast the certain news the editorial team went ahead and reported it in a live broadcast.
- In October 2018, all the staff of “10TV” resigned in solidarity with Alina Panko. For the previous two weeks, presenter Anatol Ursu explained, the channel’s management had instructed the journalists what to write on certain subjects, but they had ignored these recommendations.

On several occasions foreign journalists were banned from entering the country, particularly those from the Russian Federation. A full list of the incidents is available on the Media Risk Map on the JFJ website.

**Figure 4: Attacks via judicial or economic means**



## APPENDIX ONE: ATTACK TYPES, IDENTIFIED BY JFJ FOUNDATION

### Physical attacks and threats to life, liberty and health

- Attack / beating / injury / torture not resulting in death
- Attack / beating / injury / torture resulting in death
- Attempted murder
- Captivity / hostage-taking / kidnapping, illegal deprivation of liberty
- Death while in captivity / prison, or as a consequence of captivity / imprisonment
- Disappearance
- Fatal accident
- Forced psychiatric treatment not resulting in death
- Forced psychiatric treatment resulting in death
- Murder
- Non-fatal accident
- Sexual harassment
- Sexual violence
- Sudden unexplained death
- Suicide
- Suicide attempt
- Threats to the media worker via physical attacks on relatives and friends
- Unlawful military conscription

### Non-physical and/or cyber attacks and threats

- Bullying, threats, including cyber and death threats
- Cyber, DDOS, hacker attack against media
- Damage to/seizure of the living space/ work premises
- Damage/ seizure of property, transport, equipment, documents
- Defamation, spreading fake and damaging information about the media worker / media outlet
- Hacking into e-mail and/or social media accounts/computer, smartphone
- Illegal constraints to media work
- Illegal surveillance, phone-tapping
- Pressure/threats to the source, including death threats
- Theft/dissemination of personal data, phishing, doxing
- Threats to the media worker via non-physical attacks on relatives and friends
- Trolling

### Attacks via judicial or economic means

- Administrative offence / fine
- Authorised confiscation of property, means of transport, equipment, documents
- Authorised surveillance and phone-tapping
- Authorised travel ban (movement inside a country or specific region / town)
- Ban on entering the country, refusal to issue visa or accreditation, or premature termination of either
- Ban on journalistic activity
- Ban on leaving the country
- Bank account seizure
- Closing media outlet / blocking internet resource
- Criminal case on charges excluding (1) and (2)
- Dismissal / involuntary dismissal / enforced change of profession
- Forced deportation from the country
- Forced emigration as a result of legal / economic pressure
- House arrest
- Imprisonment, including pre-trial detention facilities
- Interrogation / Investigation
- Journalist charged with: defamation, libel, contempt, reputational damage (1)
- Journalist charged with: extremism; links with terrorists;
- incitement of political, ethnic or religious hatred; high treason;
- calling for overthrow of constitutionally established order (2)
- Search authorised by court decision
- Selective application of repressive laws
- Short-term detention
- Suspended sentence
- Threats to the media worker via judicial or economic means on relatives and friends
- Trial
- Unauthorised search of individual and/or residence
- Unauthorised travel ban (inside country, region or town)

## APPENDIX 2: OPEN SOURCES USED FOR THE REPORT (ARMENIA)

- **Committee to protect freedom of expression** – a non-profit journalistic non-governmental organisation.
- **Yerevan Press Club** – a non-profit, non-governmental organization that unites journalists, publishers, media leaders and experts, irrespective of their political ideas.
- **Media Initiatives Center** – an NGO that supports freedom of expression, as well as establishment and development of independent media. It is involved in the improvement of media legislation and the protection of journalists' rights.
- **Hetq.am** – an investigative journalists NGO. Hetq Online has been published in Yerevan since 2001 by the Association of Investigative Journalists NGO.
- **Freedom House** – founded on the core conviction that freedom flourishes in democratic nations where governments are accountable to their people; the rule of law prevails; and freedoms of expression, association, and belief, as well as respect for the rights of women, minorities and historically marginalized groups, are guaranteed.
- **Reporters Without Borders** – an international non-profit and non-governmental organization that safeguards the right to freedom of information.
- **The Committee to Protect Journalists** – an American independent non-profit, non-governmental organization, based in New York City, New York with correspondents around the world. CPJ promotes press freedom and defends the rights of journalists.
- **DataLex.am** – database of the judicial system of Armenia.
- **“Region” research center** – an NGO, researching regional issues of the South Caucasus region including media activity.
- **Armtimes.com** – daily newspaper.
- **Factor.am** – Armenian multimedia news portal.
- **Radio “Azatutyun”** – Armenian service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

## APPENDIX 3: OPEN SOURCES USED FOR THE REPORT (GEORGIA)

- **Civil.ge** – information and analysis by Georgia’s UN Association (in Georgian, Russian and English).
- **Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics** – an NGO studying ethical aspects of the work of the media and journalists in Georgia (in Georgian and English).
- **GHN** – information and analysis of events in Georgia and the world (in Georgian, English and Russian).
- **IPN** – news about events in Georgia (in Georgian, English and Russian).
- **Media.ge** – information and analysis by the “Internews-Georgia” organisation (in Georgian, Russian and English).
- **Adjara TV** – website of Adjara’s Public Broadcasting TV channel.
- **Batumelebi** – Adjara newspaper & website.
- **Channel One** – news website of Public Broadcasting TV channel (in Georgian and Russian).
- **Formula TV** – TV news channel.
- **Mtavari Arkhi** – Georgian TV channel favoured by opposition.
- **Netgazeti** – information and analysis about events in Georgia.
- **News Report** – news about events in Georgia.
- **on.ge** – information about events in Georgia and the Caucasus.
- **Radio Pirveli** – radio-station website.
- **Radio Tavisupleba** – website of Radio Liberty’s Georgian service.
- **Tabula** – news and analysis of politics and the economy in Georgia.
- **Caucasian Echo** – broadcasting project of Radio Liberty’s Georgian Service.
- **Caucasian Knot** – news & analysis of events in the Caucasus.
- **Details.net** – portal covering events in Georgia and the surrounding region.
- **Georgia Online** – information agency covering events in Georgia.
- **Novosti Gruziya** – news about Georgia.
- **Sova** – online magazine about politics, economy and life in Georgia.



## APPENDIX 3: OPEN SOURCES USED FOR THE REPORT (MOLDOVA)

- [The State of the Press in Moldova, 2017](#)
- [The State of the Press in Moldova, 2018](#)
- [The State of the Press in Moldova, 2019](#)
- [Monitoring attacks on NGOs in Moldova, September 2016 to December 2017](#)
- [Monitoring attacks on NGOs in Moldova, 2018](#)
- **Ziarul de Gardă** – online and print newspaper.
- **Jurnal.md** – TV channel.
- **Unimedia.info** – news website.
- **1news** – news agency.
- **Agora.md** – news agency.
- **Publica.md** – news website.
- **RISE Moldova** – an NGO, which supports investigative journalists and activist of Moldova and Romania.
- **Nokta.md** – online news portal.
- **nordnews.md** – news website.
- **Блокнот** – news website.
- **anricorupte.md** – online platform revealing corruption in Moldova on various levels.
- **TV8** – TV channel.
- **NewsMaker** – independent online news agency.