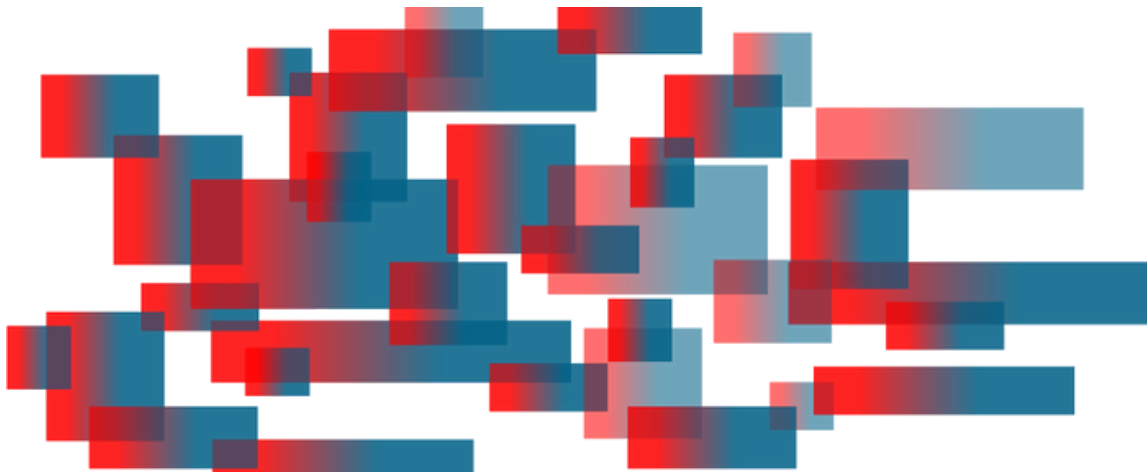


Harassment of Fact-checking Media Outlets in Europe



Preliminary Survey Results



International
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About the Survey

Faktograf, a Croatian fact-checking outlet, in cooperation with Tijana Cvjetičanin from the Zašto ne association, conducted a pioneering survey in Europe to explore the impact of harassment and disinformation targeting fact-checking organisations. The survey is a part of the **Decoding Disinformation Playbook project** led by the International Press Institute (IPI), in partnership with Faktograf and the German daily TAZ.

The purpose of the study was to document the experiences of fact-checking organisations and outlets with harassment, focusing particularly on coordinated campaigns against journalists and fact-checkers and their role in European disinformation trends. The survey collected overall experience with harassment as well as the descriptions of significant cases of harassment of fact-checkers in Europe.

A total of 41 out of the 68 verified signatories of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) Code of Principles in Europe – including all members of the SEE Check network – took part in the survey. During the research period, the European Fact-Checking Standards Network (EFCSN) was being established and almost all participants of the survey were a part of that process.

The final results and a full report will be published in May and presented at the **IPI 2023 World Congress in Vienna**.

DISCLAIMER

The Decoding Disinformation Playbook project is funded by the European Media and Information Fund.

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Overall statistics about the respondents / fact-checking outlets

41 fact-checking outlets run by 40 organizations from 28 countries participated in the survey. Most of the respondents (21) are located in the region of Southern Europe, eight are located in North and Western Europe respectively, and four are located in the region of Eastern Europe.

Most of the fact-checking outlets (63%) started working between the years 2016 and 2019. Only two outlets were registered before 2010 (both in 2009) and only one in 2021.

About half of the outlets (21) have 10 employees or less, and only 1 has more than 50 people. **Fact-checking newsrooms are, on average, composed of 57% women and 43% men.**

The large majority of respondents (38 outlets) fact-check social media content, 32 outlets fact-check claims stated by elected officials, 31 fact-check claims published in the media and 27 outlets fact-check claims from public figures other than officials. More than half of the respondents (21) answered that they fact-check claims from all four types of sources.

The large majority of the respondents (32 fact-checking outlets) are a part of the **Meta company's Third Party Fact-checking Program**, which enables them to rate fact-checked content on Facebook and Instagram. Out of those 32, there are 3 fact-checking outlets that said they are also included in other similar programs with tech companies. Only one outlet has a partnership of a similar kind that is not with Meta, and 7 respondents said that they are not a part of any such program.

Experiences with harassment

90% of respondents experienced harassment from political or other relevant actors. Only four fact-checking outlets (10%) responded that they had never experienced any form of harassment by either a political actor or any other relevant actor. More than half of the survey respondents have experienced repeated harassment varying from attacks that have happened "a few times altogether" to "a few times per year".

85% of the fact-checking outlets reported attacks from public figures who are not directly involved in politics but are engaged in political and social issues such as media pundits, analysts, activists or leaders of groups or movements. 29% (12) of the respondents experience very frequent harassment from other relevant actors, on a monthly or weekly basis.

78% of fact-checking organizations reported being targeted by political actors, half of which were MP's in the opposition party, or members of an opposition party that does not have a representation in the Parliament. 12% (5) of respondents experience harassment by political actors very frequently, on a monthly or weekly basis.

Overall, harassment from public figures who are not directly involved in politics is somewhat more frequent than that coming from political actors.

When the results are grouped into regions, it is seen that **cases of harassment happen somewhat more frequently in the region of Southern Europe, both when it comes to political actors and other relevant actors.** Given that South Europe is the location of as many respondents as all three other regions together, the comparison was drawn between SE and other regions combined.

The most noticeable difference is present in the answers regarding harassment from political actors, which fact-checkers from the SE region experience much more frequently than in other European regions. Only 5% of SE fact-checkers said that they had never experienced harassment from political actors, compared to 40% of respondents from other regions. The most intense harassment, happening on almost a weekly basis, is virtually not existent in other regions, while 10% of SE fact-checkers said they did experience it.

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When it comes to harassment from other relevant actors, the experiences are not as distant, but there are still noticeable differences in the percentage of respondents from the SE region who say that they have never experienced harassment, compared to other regions (9% in the SE and 20% in other regions), and in the percentage of respondents who experience frequent harassment that happens almost monthly (29% in the SE region and 15% in other regions).

Most of the respondents (18 out of 32 that had answered the question) **said that attacks have increased since they joined a fact-checking partnership with Meta or other big tech platforms.** Some added that, while the increase had been “substantial”, it was possibly not related just to the program, but also to circumstances like democratic backsliding in the country (where the attacks had been coming from the ruling majority), or the outlet itself becoming more prominent and relevant. Three respondents noted that it is hard to estimate whether an increase has occurred because they have been included in Meta’s program very early on, so they had no basis for comparison.

Most of the respondents (23 of 32 that had answered this question) **stated that the frequency of harassment experienced by fact-checkers increased due to the Covid-19 pandemic.** The election period is also a factor that influences the frequency of harassment, based on the experience of about 56% of respondents, while about 22% also marked armed conflict – specifically, the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine – as a factor that influenced the frequency of attacks they encounter because of their work.

Perpetrators

As mentioned, 90% of respondents experienced harassment from political or other relevant actors. Only four fact-checking outlets (10%) responded that they had never experienced any form of harassment by either a political actor or any other relevant actor.

Among political actors, the fact-checkers reported that they are somewhat more often attacked by political actors coming from opposition parties in their countries. 48,5% have had that experience with an opposition MP, 36,4% with a member of an opposition party who doesn't have a seat in the parliament, and 39,4% with a member of a non-parliamentary party.

Members of the parliamentary majority targeted fact-checkers in 13 cases (39,4%), while members of the government and members of the ruling party who don't have a seat in the parliament targeted fact-checkers in 8 cases (24,2%) each.

Five fact-checkers have experienced harassment from political actors in top positions of the government, including a head of state (3 respondents), head of government (1) and head of parliament (1). Out of the five, four come from SEE countries. Georgia is the only country outside of the region where a respondent has experienced this type of harassment. Serbia is the only country where two separate outlets have been targeted by the head of state.

More than a third of the respondents have experienced attacks from actors coming from both the government and opposition parties. There are 3 fact-checkers (9%) who have been targeted by a member of the European Parliament from their country.

When it comes to other relevant actors who targeted fact-checkers (public figures not directly involved in politics, but engaged with political and social issues), **more than half of the respondents (28) selected media personalities, pundits and commentators as those who have committed or incited harassment against them.** In 14 cases, harassment came from public figures who advocated for some social or political causes.

Three fact checkers added that they were harassed by other media (journalists, editors, bloggers, owners of channels that publish disinformation). All three come from the SEE region.

Channels of harassment

Most of the fact-checkers have been harassed through multiple communication channels. Out of the 36 respondents that answered the question, 30 have experienced harassment on three or more channels.

The majority of harassment happens online, predominantly on social networks: 32 out of 36 respondents have been attacked on social media profiles, pages or channels owned by the attacker. The second most frequent channel of harassment are online portals and websites (29). 25 respondents have received attacks on their own social media pages and 22 through direct written communication (emails, messages).

Verbal communication through phone calls happens considerably less frequently, as is the case with in-person contact.

Broadcast media (TV and radio) are slightly more used (12 cases) to harass fact-checkers than print media (10) and only three of the respondents have been targeted on press conferences of political or other relevant actors. One respondent has experienced public protests organized in front of their premises.

Types of harassment

More than three quarters of the respondents' (36) experience harassment online and most commonly as verbal attacks on social media, which are experienced by 30 respondents. Verbal attacks in online media are also fairly common, for 23 of fact-checking outlets experiencing online harassment.

An alarmingly high number of respondents (25) has experienced harassment campaigns which include prolonged and/or coordinated behaviour like stalking, organized reporting, hate speech, "doxing"* and similar.

Five respondents have also experienced attempts of hacking or other attacks on their digital assets. Three respondents have experienced sexual harassment online that was related to the fact-checking work that they do.

When asked if any of those attacks translated into offline harassment, 32 out of 38 respondents who answered this question responded negatively. The remaining 6 respondents (15%) had mostly experienced stalking, either at the place of work or even their private address, three have experienced attacks on their property and one respondent has experienced physical violence against a staff member.

Only three respondents who said that they were never exposed to some form of online harassment, stated that they experienced some form of offline harassment or attacks (physical violence, stalking, attacks on property, respectively).

*"Doxing" is a term that refers to publishing online personal information without the person's consent and with malicious intent. This includes identifying information (home address, phone number and similar) that can make a person vulnerable to unwanted encounters, put them at risk or in danger, and/or make them feel that their safety is jeopardized.

Institutional environment and legal proceedings

The survey shows that fact-checkers tend not to report the harassment they experience to the authorities, even when it manifests as acts that fall under criminal codes in the countries where they work. Out of the 35 respondents who had experienced harassment, 24 (69%) either don't report criminal harassment to the police or do so rarely. Only 17% percent has a habit of regularly reporting these types of attacks to the authorities.

Asked about the reasons for not reporting threats or similar behaviour to the police, about a half of the respondents expressed low confidence that the report would have any consequences (i.e. that the police would react to the report), while some of them felt that the police itself was not credible enough, or that reporting harassment would make things worse. Some of the respondents also noted that they don't have enough time to report all the threats they receive, as they happen on a weekly basis. They keep records of all threats, but report only the most violent ones (some have specified that they only report death or rape threats).

Asked about the experience they had when they did report violent or other threats, out of the 23 respondents that answered the question, just one described any specific legal outcome of the report - "small monetary penalties" that are occasionally imposed on harassers if they are reported. Most of the answers indicate that the police either openly say that they can't do anything, or say that they will investigate with little or no follow up. If investigations are started at all, they either end abruptly, or "take very long time, with very limited progress or outcome".

Some respondents noted that the police did act professionally, or that the prosecutor opened an investigation regarding the threat, but even in those cases there were no legal consequences for the harassers. Such cases either get "stuck" in court, or never even reach it.

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Additionally, some fact-checkers note that they have been actively discouraged from reporting harassment at times when it was happening most intensely, or that the process itself was too burdensome for them (takes too much time, requires large amount of evidence they need to provide, requires the existence of a specific threat to a single person or, in some cases, the police says it cannot react until "an actual crime" takes place).

Overall, it can be concluded that the legal framework for preventing or addressing harassment is inadequate in most of the countries where the respondents operate and that there is either no institutional awareness or no will to address the harassment of journalists, specifically fact-checkers.

When it comes to the civil procedures, fact-checking outlets rarely sue their attackers despite receiving an intense stream of threats and other types of harassment which often contain libel or slander. Out of the 30 respondents who answered this question, 22 said that they never sued anyone, three have won (with two managing to also receive compensation in court), one lost the lawsuit, and four cases are still in court.

On the other hand, 14 respondents have had the experience of being sued, more often by public figures who are not political actors. **Among the 10 respondents who have been sued more than once, there are several extreme cases that have faced severe legal harassment, mostly from people or organizations whose claims they have fact-checked.** One respondent has been sued more than a dozen times, one 9 times, one 7 times and several between 3 and 5 times. In the majority of cases, these lawsuits are still pending, so the outcomes are still unknown. Where the court decisions have been reached, they were almost always in favour of the fact-checkers who were sued, lest for one case where the court decided that the article published by the respondent contained "misleading wording", not disputing the accuracy of the fact-check itself.

Among the 20 respondents who answered that they have never been sued, four have noted that they have, however, repeatedly been threatened with lawsuits, but the threats were not carried out.

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These statistics stand in stark contrast with the fact that fact-checkers are continuously accused of “suppressing freedom of speech and imposing censorship”.

In the survey, 30 respondents answered that they have been accused of censorship, stifling freedom of speech, or both. In reality, it is them who are subjected to attempts of silencing or intimidation, including through legal means.

Additionally, fact-checking outlets seem to receive little or no support from the media communities in their countries. In cases where the harassment against them was public knowledge, the majority of the respondents who answered the question said that they haven't received public support from professional journalist associations or similar bodies (19 out of 33), or that other media do not report on harassment they experience (20 out of 32).

Legal initiatives to ban or in some other ways suppress fact-checking in their countries were recorded in four countries (Croatia, Kosovo, Poland and Spain), in the forms of announcements or drafts of laws that would have such an effect, or petitions started by the political actors who have publicly shown hostility towards fact-checking. In two more countries, Georgia and Italy, hints of similar intentions were recorded from political actors, but without explicit statements or calls to action.

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GLOSSARY

The survey defined the key terms in the following way:

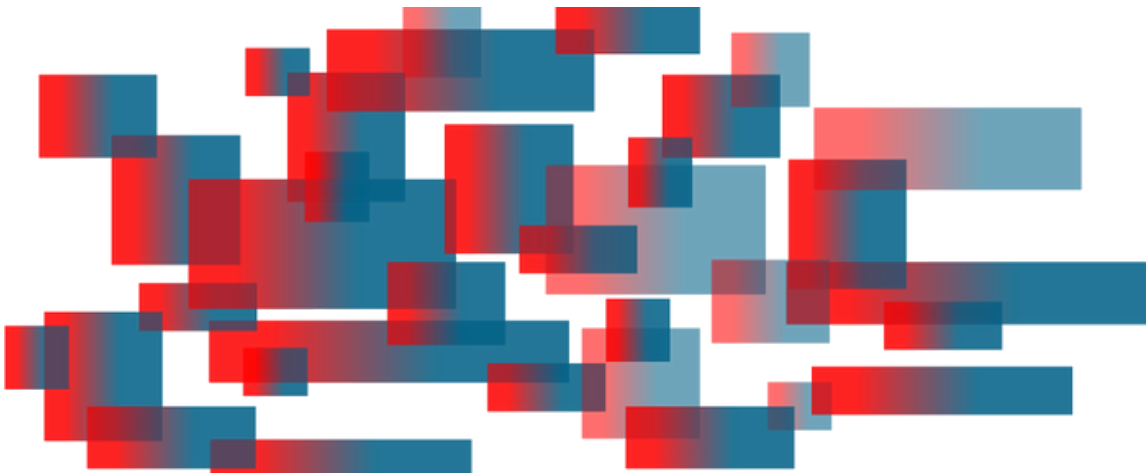
- Harassment: any verbal or physical attack that has occurred in relation to the fact-checking work that the respondents do, including, but not limited, to:
 - Verbal attacks including threats, inciting violent or retaliatory behaviour, spreading false claims about the respondent or their work, organizing or instigating harassment on social networks: coordinated reporting, "trolling", impersonation, "doxing", intimidation, sexual and/or gender-based harassment, mobilizing followers or voters against the respondent, offensive or disturbing content and hate speech in messages and comments, stalking, etc.;
 - Attacks on the respondents' digital assets (hacking and similar) or physical property;
 - Physical violence against the staff.
- Political actors: persons directly involved in party politics or governance, including:
 - Elected or appointed officials, holding political positions in any branch or level of government;
 - Persons active in political parties.
- Relevant actors: public figures not directly involved in politics, but engaged in public discourse on policy-related topics, such as:
 - Media personalities like pundits, analysts, commentators; celebrities and influencers engaging on political or social issues;
 - Public figures advocating for social or political causes (activists belonging to civil society organizations, groups or movements; religious leaders);
 - Persons with significant power or influence outside of politics (representatives of large companies, tycoons, investors).

DATA PRIVACY AND PROTECTION

The survey was conducted via a Google form. The respondents were asked to enter their names and email addresses, which were not shared or visible to anyone but the researchers. The respondents could choose between three data privacy options and their answers have been used in this report in accordance with their choices:

- Consent to the full use of any information provided in the questionnaire (publishing names of persons and organizations, locations, descriptions of events, etc.);
- Consent only to the use of information that is already public (news reports published about cases of harassment described in the questionnaire);
- Consent only to the use of anonymized information about specific cases of harassment (descriptions of events may be used, but without naming any persons or specifying locations).

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