



JOURNALISTS:
THE *BÊTE NOIRE*
OF ORGANIZED
CRIME

**REPORTERS
WITHOUT BORDERS**
FOR FREEDOM OF INFORMATION

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FOREWORD

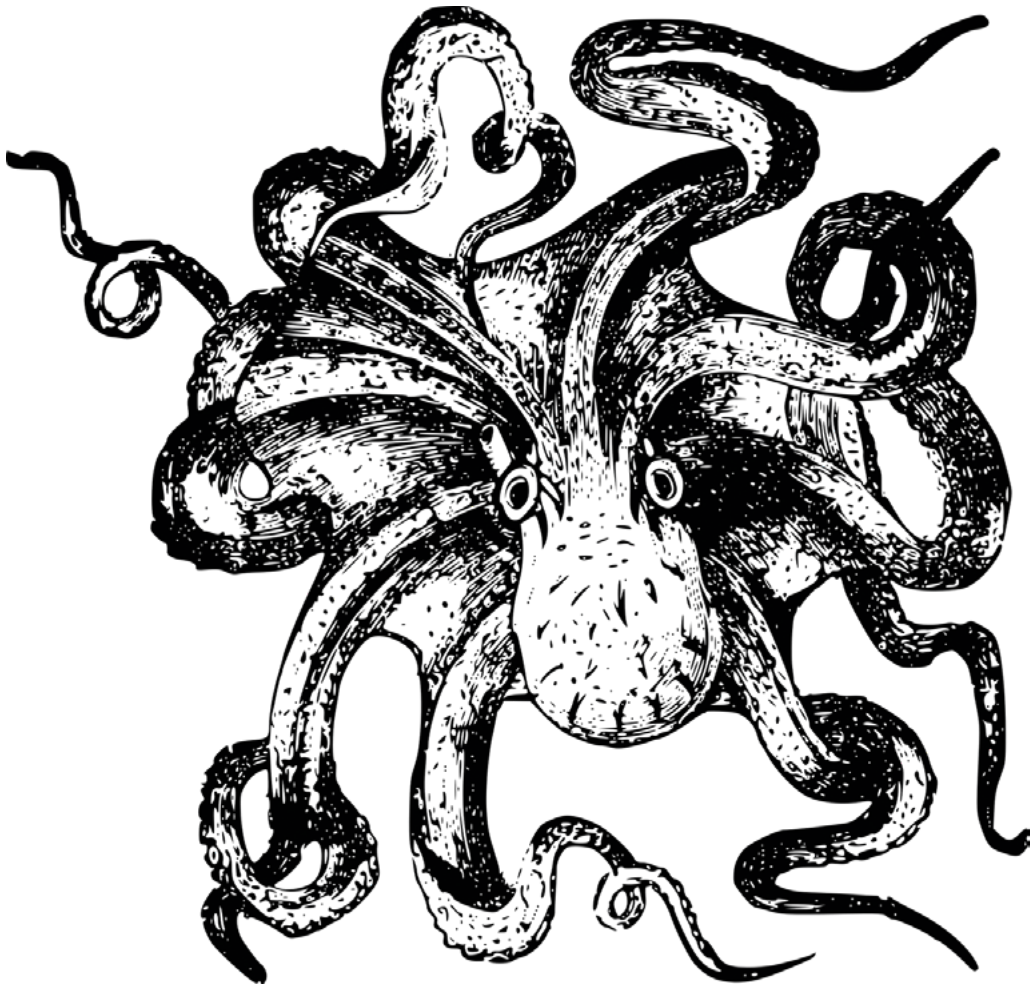
Shut up or die

Organized crime knows no borders, scorns the rule of law in democracies, and leaves little choice to journalists, who have limited resources and are extremely vulnerable. The only choice for reporters is often to say nothing or risk their lives. Either they don't do their job as journalists or, by violating the criminal code of silence, they expose themselves to terrible reprisals from organizations that stop at nothing to defend their interests. Such is the dangerous dilemma for the media. And it's not just in Italy, the cradle of the mafia, or in Mexico, where narcos control entire swathes of the country. The Mob has spread its tentacles around the globe faster than all the multinationals combined and has spawned offspring whose virulence matches their youth.

From Beijing to Moscow, from Tijuana to Bogotá, from Malta to Slovakia, investigative journalists who shed light on the deals that involve organized crime unleash the wrath of gangsters, whose common feature is an aversion to any publicity unless they control it. Very sensitive to whenever their image is at stake, organized crime's godfathers do not hesitate to crack down on any reporter who poses a threat. Those who tell the truth deserve to die. For exposing the sordid underside of the Italian mafia's activities, writer and journalist **Roberto Saviano** has been condemned to living under permanent police protection, with less freedom of movement than those he exposes, who threaten to kill him.

The criminal underworld is always masked, but the biggest danger for the investigative reporter nowadays is not necessarily the ruthless, bloodthirsty individuals who people this world; rather, in many countries, organized crime has established a kind of pact with the state, to the point that you cannot tell where one stops and the other begins.





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How is it possible that Mexico's drug cartels sprout and flourish like mushrooms without the support of part of the state's apparatus in the field? [How do you explain the murky links between the yakuza and state in Japanese society?](#) How do these small armies at the head of sprawling business empires manage to live outside the law without the – at least passive – complicity of the states in which they are often well established? Far from combatting them head-on, states tolerate them and give them a free hand by omission. By, for example, failing to apply controls in ports and airports.

Organized crime does not fight states; it seeks to merge with them. Instead of trying to exercise power, it wants to control it or rather to contaminate it. Journalists who try to draw attention to organized crime's corruption of the political and business elite in their country must brave not only gangsters, but also white-collar crime that has married its interests to those of the gangsters whose antennae reach into the very heart of the state. Those who tackle this almost institutional impunity need to know that they will be alone at the hour of reprisals, especially in countries where the special units that are supposed to combat organized crime have become no more than cosmetic tools for assuaging public opinion.

"A mafia is not a cancer born by chance from healthy tissue," said Giovanni Falcone, the anti-mafia Italian judge who was murdered on May 23, 1992. Investigative reporting that tries to identify the diseased tissue's ailments is nowadays a deadly activity. Here is the evidence.

[CRIME TERMINOLOGY]

Mafias and cartels

Organized crime families, or mafias, are secret societies with antennae and branches reaching beyond their borders, whose main goal is profit using corruption and fear to prosper. They differ from criminal associations that are formed for a specific project and then disbanded. The only way to leave a mafia family is by dying or turning state's evidence.

Organized crime families use influence and violence to obtain silence both within their own ranks and outside them. With strong roots in the territory where they operate, woven into its social fabric, they subjugate the population and impose their code of silence. Those who betray the family are not just excluded from the group; they also risk their lives.

Organized crime families compete with the state. They assert economic and business control and tend to take on justice and police functions. They penetrate the centers of authority in order to control any attempts to combat them. They have an international reach based on migration and control of their diasporas.

The Italian mafia, the Chinese triads, and the Japanese boryokudan or yakuza are the archetypes. Comparable groups are found in Russia and other former Soviet countries, in Turkey and in Albania. The Latin American cartels, the latest variation on this model, are both criminal groups based on predation, military groups often recruiting from within special forces, and political militias capable of exercising territorial and social control. To maintain terror, they go so far as to recruit former soldiers or policemen as "sicarios" (hitmen) to eliminate rivals and terrorize the population and police. Their aim is not to overthrow the state but to induce the police, military and judicial system to refrain from disrupting their activities. The amounts of money handled by these organizations are so large that they play an essential role in the economy of some countries.

[The business activities of these organized crime families include](#) drug trafficking, cigarettes, racketeering, prostitution, forgery, migrant smuggling, arms trafficking, loan sharking, kidnapping, waste management, gambling, agricultural fraud and European Union subsidy swindles.

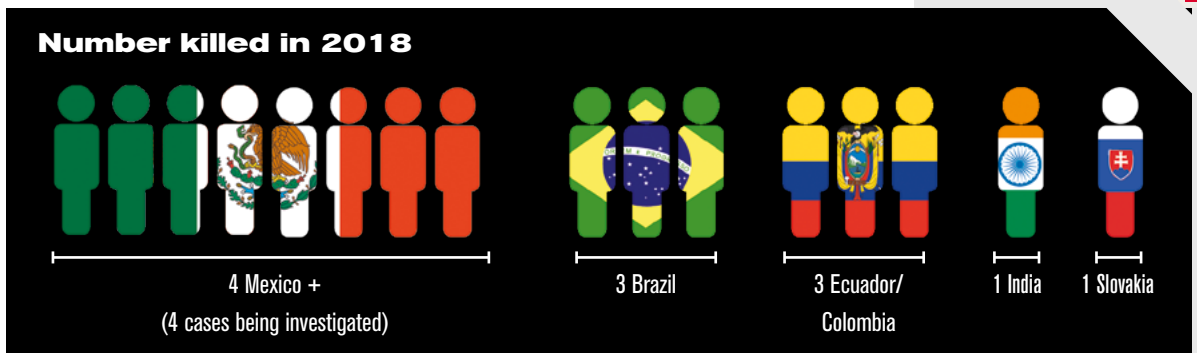
Marilù Mastrogiovanni, a journalist based in southern Italy's Puglia region who has been under police protection since being threatened a year ago by the local criminal family, the Sacra Corona Unita, [describes the mafia as a state within the state](#). The name is different in each region—Costa Nostra in Sicily, 'Ndrangheta in Calabria and Camorra in Campania—and each has its own history, but all have the same ability to infiltrate the real, supposedly clean, economy.

This is a worldwide tendency. Crime families invest their illegal earnings in legal business activities, often abroad, especially in Germany or in London, and often with the same idea: offering a sufficiently respectable façade in order to obtain EU subsidies. The Italians have a name for it: "[i mafiosi dai colletti bianchi](#)"

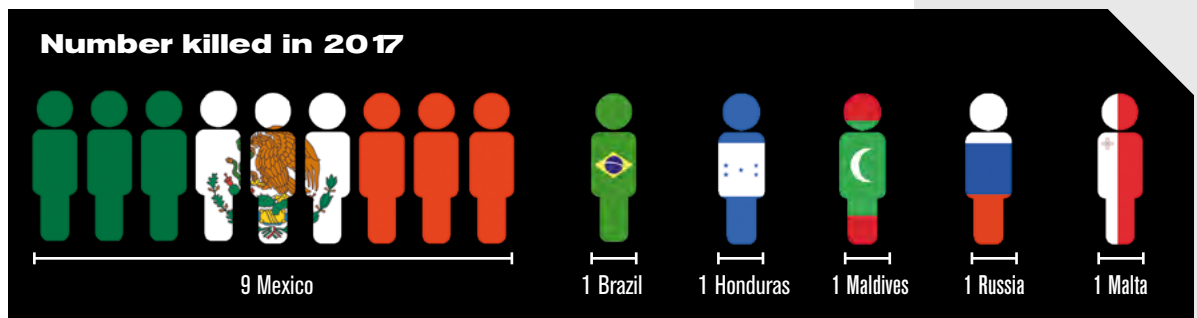
(white-collar mafiosi). These are tomorrow's multinationals, ones that cannot stand anyone poking a nose into their accounts. Their No. 1 concern is to not attract the attention of politicians and, less still, the police. Their enemy is the journalist who, with a single article or single video, can topple an empire.

DISTURBING FIGURES

Organized crime groups have killed more than 30 journalists in the past two years alone.



In 2018, criminal organizations have murdered a total of 12 journalists in reprisal for their reporting, and there have been at least 4 other murders of journalists in Mexico that are being investigated to establish whether they were linked to their journalism. These already disturbing figures could fall far short of the reality in these countries. In Mexico, the police and judicial systems move slowly or deliberately arrest the wrong people when both narcos and politicians wanted to silence a journalist. In some cases, absolutely no investigations are carried out.



At least 14 journalists were murdered in 2017 by criminal groups or groups with suspected links to organized crime.

In the past two years, RSF has also registered at least five murder attempts against journalists in which the perpetrators and instigators were members of criminal organizations. There have also been many cases of threats and attacks against journalists and destruction of media outlets.

1 EMERGENCE OF A EUROPEAN MAFIA

MURDERS IN THREE EU COUNTRIES IN LESS THAN A YEAR

“Organized crime is moving abroad, globalizing,” [Gen. Giuseppe Governale](#), the Palermo-born head of Italy’s anti-mafia investigative unit, warned at a press conference in Rome on June 5, 2018. Cosa Nostra, the Italian mafia, has long had a presence in the United States, Canada and Australia. But now, in a new development that is not yet fully understood, the ‘Ndrangheta (the Calabrian mafia) [also has representatives all over the world](#), including Marseille, where the local offshoot has a degree of autonomy, and in Brussels, where it is buying real estate and, in some cases, entire neighborhoods.

The mafia travels well. This is one of the secrets of its success—expanding by means of travel, exporting its methods and its gunmen. Europe has just discovered this through the murders of two journalists in less than six months: [Ján Kuciak in Slovakia](#) on February 21, 2018, and [Daphne Caruana Galizia in Malta](#) on October 16, 2017. They were evidence, if any were needed, that Italy is not a special case in Europe and that Italian journalists are not the only ones who live under the threat of reprisals if they examine the bottomless pit that is the mafia economy today.

[Albanian crime reporter Klodiana Lala's family home was targeted in the early hours of August 30, 2018.](#) “As yet unidentified individuals fire a dozen shots at her home with an automatic weapons, without causing any injuries,” Reporters Without Borders (RSF) reported at the time. Lala, who had been covering organized crime for one of the main Albanian TV channels, News 24, for more than ten year, wrote in a Facebook post that the shooting was the direct result of her investigative reporting. Two weeks before the attack, she had linked a ruling Socialist Party deputy to the organization headed by Emiljano Shullazi, [who is alleged to be one of the country's leading crime bosses.](#)

Slovakia: Ján Kuciak wasn’t just annoying the ‘Ndrangheta

Although only 27, [Ján Kuciak was an experienced journalist adept at gathering information in a completely legal manner from public data banks when he was murdered at his home along with his fiancée, Martina Kušnírová](#), in February 2018. At the time of his death, he was doing investigative reporting for the news website [Aktuality.sk](#), in cooperation with the [Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project \(OCCRP\)](#), on the ‘Ndrangheta presence in Slovakia and how this Calabrian



→ Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová were shot dead in their home near Bratislava in February 2018. Kuciak had been investigating the role of the Calabrian mafia, the 'Ndrangheta, in the large-scale misuse of EU funding for agriculture in Slovakia. The outcry about his murder forced Prime Minister Robert Fico to resign.

© AFP / Alex Halada

criminal organization had managed to divert some of the EU's funding for agriculture in Slovakia, an already well-established practice. In particular, he had shed light on the extremely disturbing links between well-known members of SMER, the social democratic party that heads Slovakia's ruling coalition, and Italian families directly linked to the 'Ndrangheta, and he had his sights on several government agencies suspected of corruption.

He was shot by a professional killer named as [Tomáš Sz. by the Slovak police, who said on September 30 that a 44-year-old woman identified as Alena Zs.](#) was suspected of hiring him. Several Slovak media outlets reported that Alena Zs., who was arrested in the southern city of Komárno, worked as an interpreter for Marián Kočner, a Slovak businessman with reputedly criminal links, and the daily *Denník N* said he was her daughter's godfather. Suspicions were reinforced by the fact that Kuciak had on several occasions covered Kočner's activities.

Kuciak took enormous precautions, systematically encrypting his files and communications, but he could not conceal his identity when using his right of access to public information and when questioning judges, police officers and agricultural agencies. To increase his chances of getting answers from officials, including in the especially corrupt eastern part of the country, he provided a great deal of detail about what he was investigating. This obviously begs the question: were those who ordered his murder told about his research by the officials he was questioning? According to the OCCRP, such leaks were reported in nearby Montenegro when journalists were investigating the real estate boom in the protected coastal area of Perast, and in Serbia, where an anti-corruption agency contacted a potentially dangerous individual targeted by reporters to see if he agreed to the media being given information concerning himself.

This was not the first time that a journalist has been targeted in Slovakia while investigating organized crime. Several journalists were subjected to intimidation while covering the links between then Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar's authoritarian regime and notorious criminals in the 1990s. At least two – **Arpád Soltész**, a member of the staff of *Korzár*, a local daily in the east of the country, and **Tom Nicholson**, an employee of *The Slovak Spectator*, an English-language weekly – were injured in targeted physical attacks. Slovakia's democratization and subsequent EU accession in 2004 did not end the threats against journalists



→
Maltese journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia was killed on 16 October 2017 by a bomb placed under her car. In her blog, she had been exposing alleged money laundering and corruption in Malta.

© AFP / Matthew Mirabelli

covering organized crime. The home of **Nad'a Šindlerová** of the weekly *Plus 7 dní* was torched in 2007. **Laco Ďurkovič** of TV Joj saw his car burned in 2008. The car of **Miloš Majko**, a journalist working for the seredonline.sk news website in the small western town of Sered, was attacked in 2016. **Kristína Kóvešová**, an investigative reporter for *TV Markíza*, was shot at in 2017 by a man she had been trying to question about illegal dog-fighting.

Malta: symbol of persecution of investigative journalists

In her [Running Commentary](#) blog, **Daphne Caruana Galizia** often criticized the Maltese government for using low tax rates to attract foreign companies and for offering confidentiality to foreign bank account holders if they became residents in return for a fat payments that only millionaires can afford. Most of the population preferred to turn a blind eye to such practices, which are completely at odds with the rules prevailing in other EU countries. But Caruana Galizia never gave up, constantly denouncing corruption within Malta's political class, as well as the intimidation to which she was subjected. She had for years been the target of increasingly specific and violent threats, many of them coming from the ruling Labour Party. The house in which she lived with her family was set on fire several times. Her dog was found one day with its throat cut on her doorstep. And [she was finally killed by a bomb placed under her car on October 16, 2017](#).

Like Ján Kuciak in Slovakia, Caruana Galizia took a close interest in the Italian mafia. In 2005, she began shedding light on some of the Neapolitan Camorra's financial operations in Malta. Then she focused on the 'Ndrangheta, revealing that, since [becoming the dominant European player in the lucrative cocaine market](#), the Calabrian mafia had invested more than a billion euros in online gambling companies in Malta.

In 2015, the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) asked her to handle the Maltese end of the Panama Papers investigation. Her software engineer son, Matthew, developed the software tool that the ICIJ used to scan the 11.5 million leaked documents that came from the Panamanian law firm Mossack Fonseca. Mother and son together tracked down an offshore company linked to Panama's ruling politicians.

On February 22, 2016, a long political and judicial wrangle began between Caruana Galizia and Prime Minister Joseph Muscat focused above all on Egrant Inc., a Panamanian company whose shareholders include the energy minister, the prime minister's chief of staff and the prime minister's wife, Michelle Muscat. [At the time of her death, Caruana Galizia was the target of a total of 42 defamation suits designed to keep her under constant pressure.](#)

In this small island nation with just 430,000 inhabitants, many journalists were already censoring themselves before Caruana Galizia's murder. Maltese journalists feel "colonized by gangs of crooks who are above the law," *Times of Malta* columnist Michael Briguglio [told RSF last year](#). "Some journalists sit on their stories," said Caruana Galizia's sister, Corinne Vuela. "Daphne was the only one who constantly held people in power to account, using her personal, self-funded blog to break her big stories." Malta is now ranked [65th out of 180 countries in RSF's 2018 World Press Freedom Index](#) after falling more than any other country (18 places) in a single year.

Bulgaria: journalist's murder under investigation

The body of **Viktoria Marinova**, the 30-year-old presenter of a current affairs program on a local TV channel in Ruse, in northern Bulgaria, was found in a city park on October 6, 2018. She had been beaten, raped and strangled, the interior ministry said, adding that all hypotheses were being considered, including the possibility that she was killed in connection with her work. In [her last broadcast](#), she and journalists from the Bulgarian investigative news website *Bivol* jointly presented a *Bivol* report about the alleged embezzlement of a huge amount of EU funds involving businessmen and politicians. When the report was published in September, [RSF](#) had expressed concern about the serious threats to *Bivol*'s journalists and had asked for them to be protected. Was Marinova murdered to set an example? At the time of writing, no hypotheses has been ruled out. Bulgaria is ranked 111th in the latest World Press Freedom Index.



“
One small death serves as a good lesson to all the others.

A mafioso after arrest, referring to the plot to kill Paolo Borrometi

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ORGANIZED CRIME TIGHTENS HOLD ON MANY EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

In Italy: Saviano, Borrometi and 194 others



→
Paolo Borrometi
© Ansa/Angelo Carconi

Born in Sicily in 1982, the Italian journalist and writer **Paolo Borrometi** is an expert in the Sicilian mafia, especially its branches in the cities of Ragusa and Syracuse. As a result of his courageous reporting in the *Giornale di Sicilia* and then [La Spia](#), the online newspaper he created in 2013, he is constantly threatened and is protected by five policemen around the clock. Two masked men attacked him in the street in 2014, permanently injuring his shoulder, and a fire was started outside his family's



apartment in Modica. He went into "exile" in Rome in 2015 to get away from the danger and from there he has continued to combat organized crime in articles for the news agency *Agenzia Giornalistica Italia* (AGI), for *La Spia* and for the website of [Articolo 21](#), an association that he now heads.

His latest investigative reporting about mafia infiltration into Italy's food processing sector — a criminal business worth billions of euros — has increased the threats to his safety. The police learned from wiretaps in [April 2018 that the head of a mafia clan in Sicily was plotting to use explosives to kill Borrometi and his five police bodyguards during their upcoming visit to Sicily that was to include several public appearances](#). The plot seems to have been organized down to the last detail. The mafiosi were planning to rent a house, steal several cars and then stage a "massive explosion" that would recall the "hell of the 1990s," one said, alluding to the bombs used to kill anti-mafia judges Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino in Sicily.

When questioned about the plot's goal, one of the mafiosi involved said: "One small death serves as a good lesson to all the others." He also explained that they wanted Borrometi dead because he had made them "lose millions with his revelations." Despite all the danger, Borrometi is continuing his investigative reporting. Prior to Caruana Galizia's murder, the two of them worked together on the Sicilian mafia's investments in Malta.

→
Italian journalist Paolo Borrometi now lives under police protection because, in the eyes of a Sicilian mafia clan, he took too close an interest in the billions of euros in profits that the mafia is reportedly making from the food processing industry.



→ Italian anti-mafia judge Giovanni Falcone (second from the left), surrounded by bodyguards in Marseille in 1986. He was killed by a bomb in Sicily in 1992.

© AFP / Gérard Fouet

Local journalists first in line of fire

[Federica Angeli](#), a journalist from Ostia, a town near Rome, who works for the daily *La Repubblica*, has also been living under police protection since 2013. She is subjected to constant intimidation and death threats. Threats have also been made against her children, sister and lawyer. But she still lives in Ostia and continues to cover the mafia activity that paralyzes the town. “They did everything possible to make me stop writing, but they failed,” she said during a demonstration in defence of media freedom on November 16, 2017. “Now we are all gathered here and at last there’s an ‘us’ behind me. I promised my children and I promise to you as well that my pen will always be at the service of Ostia and its well-being.”

[Daniele Piervincenzi](#), a reporter for an investigative program on one of the Italian state broadcaster RAI’s TV channels, was attacked when he tried to interview [Roberto Spada](#), the brother of a mafia boss in Ostia in November 2017, about his friendship with a local representative of the neo-fascist party CasaPound. Spada responded by headbutting Piervincenzi, breaking his nose, and then chasing him down the street with a baton. All this took place on camera and the scene was repeatedly shown on Italian TV. At first, Spada was not detained because Piervincenzi’s injuries were not considered sufficiently serious. But the carabinieri finally did arrest him and he was given a six-year jail sentence in June 2018.

The cases of Angeli and Piervincenzi received a great deal of media attention but there are many other reporters for small, local media outlets who also work with extraordinary courage to cover the activities of the mafia bosses in their area. They include four journalists with the online daily [TP24.it](#). While covering mafia activity in Sicily’s Trapani region, they received death threats on Facebook: “You must all die” and “Remove the article from the site or I will do things to you that you’ve never seen in your life.” They also received threatening letters and envelopes containing powder.

It is hard for journalists who live in proximity to the targets of their investigative reporting. They can easily meet one of the mafiosi they have been covering at the bar of a café, at a street corner or in church. Journalists doing reporting in Corleone, a hill town near Palermo where many mafia bosses have come from, have been physically attacked on the street and their computers have been stolen during break-ins at the places where they were staying.

[The Italian interior ministry reported in December 2017 that a total of 196 Italian journalists had received police protection that year.](#) RSF estimates that ten journalists are currently protected by police bodyguards around the clock. Italy is ranked [46th out of 180 countries in the 2018 World Press Freedom Index.](#)

→ Journalists who get too curious are quickly the targets of mafia intimidation that can take various forms, including threatening letters, break-ins and physical violence. When journalists work for local media in small towns, they and their families are particularly exposed because of their proximity to local mafiosi.

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INTERVIEW with **Lirio Abbate**



Now the deputy editor of the weekly L'Espresso, **Lirio Abbate** worked for many years for Italy's leading news agency ANSA and the daily *La Stampa*, and is an expert in organized crime. He began his career in Palermo in 1990 and was the only journalist present when Bernardo Provenzano, Cosa Nostra's "*capo di tutti i capi*," was arrested in April 2006. The following year, he wrote a book called "*I Complici*" (The Accomplices) about the close links between politicians and mafiosi. Since then, he has never been alone because he has a permanent police escort. He now works from Rome, where he helped expose the "*Mafia Capitale*" scandal about a new and extremely violent Rome-based criminal network with links to far-right groups.

In what circumstances were you first threatened?

"The Palermo mafia tried to kill me ten years ago by putting a bomb outside my home. I had received direct threats from mafia bosses accused of planning murders and massacres on a large scale. Thanks to telephone taps, the police realized that some of them had planned to kill me to punish me for my coverage of the links between the mafia and politicians. The bombing was foiled thanks to the intervention of the police, who found the explosives in time.

New death threats followed the publication of a series of reports for L'Espresso about the wives of the 'Ndrangheta's bosses. This mafia now has the monopoly on drug trafficking and therefore has a lot of money that it invests in activities that appear to be legal but, in reality, are not. I revealed the names of the intermediaries and frontmen with whom the mafiosi work in Italy and abroad. And in the process I discovered that the mafiosi and, above all, their accomplices are more concerned about an article or a TV report than what a judge may do. More death threats were made against me in Rome after my revelations about this new mafia linked to the far right and to the historic mafias in Sicily and Calabria.

Your reporting exposes you to what in particular?

My main subject is collusion between the mafia and politicians, and the corruption resulting from these links. I was threatened because I was regarded as dangerous, because I uncovered what the police had not yet revealed, and I made it public with supporting evidence. When you act in this way, you become "whitefly," easy to identify and eliminate. As well as bombs, you have to deal with all sorts of accusations, defamation proceedings and "instant" lawsuits, that is to say, lawsuits with no real grounds, lawsuits that are filed just to send journalists an intimidatory message and subject them to the stress of a legal case.

How do you protect yourself in such a situation?

When you cover these subjects, you have to adhere to some security practices, but the police protection allows me to continue my reporting. I just have to take a bit more care than the others.

What do you envisage for the future?

I want to be able to continue doing my job, without becoming obsessed about it. To continue being professional, lucid, accurate and right"

→ Lirio Abbate has been under police protection since 2007, when his book "*I Complici*" was published. Blacklisted by Cosa Nostra and the target of frequent intimidation, he was included in RSF's list of the world's leading "information heroes" in 2014.

© AFP / Vincenzo Pinto

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“
The mafiosi and above all their accomplices are more concerned about an article (...) than what a judge may do.

Lirio Abbate

”



→ Paul Vugts, a Dutch journalist who has been investigating organized crime, including drug trafficking, in the Netherlands for more than two decades, had to leave his home after being threatened.

© AFP

Two journalists protected around the clock in Netherlands

[Paul Vugts, 44, has worked for the Amsterdam daily *Het Parool* for the past 21 years.](#) The subject that most interests him is organized crime in the Netherlands. It has been flourishing for decades, the experts say, and is marked by a significant Moroccan presence that is linked to drug trafficking, as well as a Turkish, Chinese and Latin American presence. Vugts has received serious threats in connection with his coverage of this subject.

“At first, I directly approached those who were threatening me in an attempt to reduce the pressure,” he told RSF. “But in the autumn of 2017, it became clear to me that the order had been given to kill me. A group of individuals were clearly in the process of working on the execution of this plan. I was forced to move to a safe place and I received police protection for more than six months. My partner and I no longer live at home but things are moving in a positive direction. Some of the criminals have been arrested, other have been killed in a process of score-settling, and finally some are in hiding.”

The reporting that had prompted these plans for extreme retaliation was about a series of murders carried out by Dutch gangsters of Moroccan origin. As well as having bodyguards, Vugts was also forced to use an armour-plated car for a while. He has no reason to criticize the police, who responded superbly and did not hesitate to give him protection. “For me, there was no alternative but to accept the assistance of authorities,” he said.

How should one behave in the face of such threats? “The best way,” Vugts added, “is for us to continue doing our job and to write about the groups that threaten us, as we always have.” One of his colleagues who was also covering Moroccan organized crime in the Netherlands has been receiving similar protection since December 2017.

France not spared

In France, the most serious threats against journalists have always come from the Corsican underworld (and its offshoot in Marseille), the only one in France that can be compared to the Italian mafia.

Back in 1996, a *Libération* reporter was placed under police protection after writing several stories about the internal war then devastating the Corsican nationalist underworld, a few years before the Corsican National Liberation Front (FLNC) was formally disbanded.

Since then, other journalists have received clear warnings when covering the Corsican underworld and its mainland offshoots. In some cases, the warnings have been delivered during trials in the form of explicit gestures designed to have a chilling effect on courtroom reporters. One Corsica-based reporter for a national daily in Paris was subjected to more sustained pressure designed to deter him from writing a book about one of the island's crime families.

France's other criminal underworld is a very informal one with a strong presence in deprived urban areas. Threats are quickly followed by action that serves to discourage reporters from hanging around in areas where drugs are being sold. It ranges from seizing notebooks and pens from print reporters, or cameras from photographers and TV reporters, to physical blows. Many TV crews, French and foreign, have had this experience. It is a very pragmatic way of preventing first-hand visual coverage.



BALKAN JOURNALISTS AND RUSSIAN MOB

Jovo Martinovic in Montenegro


He ticks all the boxes. **Jovo Martinovic** has been an investigative journalist in Montenegro since 1999, working for European and US media outlets covering organized crime and corruption in a country that was under communist rule for decades. [He is currently being prosecuted for the Podgorica high court on no less a charge than having founded a criminal organization for the purpose of drug trafficking.](#)

[Martinovic was arrested on October 22, 2015](#) while doing research for the French TV production company Capa for a *Canal+* TV documentary about the smuggling of arms from the Balkans to France for sale to criminal organizations and Islamist terrorists. He was finally freed after being held for 14 months and 13 days, but has to report to a police station every month and has to request permission every time he wants to travel abroad. He has always insisted on his innocence and has rejected offers of a discharge in return for signing a confession.

A few weeks before his trial's scheduled conclusion on September 24, 2018, the judicial authorities suddenly decided to combine his case with that of another defendant who was on the run and was being tried in absentia. This has had the effect of delaying the end of Martinovic's trial. [The decision was taken just as he was about to receive the Peter Mackler Award for Courageous and Ethical Journalism](#) at a ceremony in New York, which he was unable to attend because he was not allowed to leave the country.



→ A specialist in covering organized crime in the western Balkans for such leading international media as The Economist, Financial Times and CAPA, Montenegrin freelance journalist Jovo Martinovic spent 15 months in preventive detention on a charge of heading a criminal organization. His trial is still on going. He must ask permission whenever he wants to leave Montenegro.



The prosecution's case against him is based above all on his contacts with a source, a jailed member of a ring of jewel thieves based in the Balkans known as the "Pink Panthers," which has been the subject of other documentaries. After being allowed to visit him in prison, Martinovic communicated with him by means of a telephone app, resulting in a conversation record that the prosecution has used against Martinovic.

Montenegro's intelligence services have been spying on Martinovic for years for the simple reason that he was working with western news media. Although Martinovic was well aware of the surveillance, the prosecution implausibly claims that he set up a drug trafficking operation with a criminal who was also under close surveillance. On the basis of these claims, the judicial authorities have frozen Martinovic's assets, including his apartment.

The real reason for the persecution of Martinovic is not just political. The authorities fear that, with Martinovic's help, the western media could reveal the links between organized crime and Montenegrin officials, who are in turn closely connected with the Kremlin. Moscow seems to have feared that information could get out about the way dirty Russian money is being laundered through this small Balkan "brother" country. The trap that was set for Martinovic is worthy of the Soviet Union in its heyday and is a black mark for a country that aspires to EU membership.

Albania: smeared, hounded and threatened, Alida Tota keeps going

[Born in in Kukës, in northern Albania, Alida Tota studied journalism](#) at the University of Tirana, began working as a journalist in 1995 and covered the crisis in neighboring Kosovo for foreign newspapers and TV channels three years later. Having acquired political expertise, she also worked for the ministries of labor, social affairs and the family, and for several UN agencies responsible for human rights and children. The story that sabotaged her career was the death of a 17-year-old worker at an enormous rubbish dump, in which she cited the appalling and dangerous conditions, the lack of a work contract and the Tirana city hall's involvement. She was fired the day after she called the city hall (for whom her then boss had worked in the past) to requests its version. She was also told to drop the story for good.

But that was not all. She received many death threats by SMS to the point that she stopped going out at night and avoided using her car. She left for Sweden after her detractors targeted her 13-year-old son, who was conspicuously followed on his way to school. The family did not stay there long, returning in February 2017 after escaping a bombing in Sweden that may have been targeted at her. She then decided both to resume fighting in the courts and to resume her reporting with the support of *Publicus*, an investigative journalism website. After she reported that the death of a woman employee at the same dump and in similar circumstances had been covered up, the police began an investigation and at least one arrest was made.



→ Albanian journalist Alida Tota was fired after her coverage of the death of a young worker at a Tirana rubbish dump exposed appalling work conditions and the absence of contracts for those employed there.

© AFP

Tota was convinced that dozens of women were working at this dump in conditions of near slavery and were the victims of sexual abuses. After all the entities that should have exercised control had visibly failed, she finally managed to get a parliamentary investigation, albeit behind closed doors. But other reprisals soon followed in the form of articles by pro-government journalists questioning her professionalism. This smear campaign was typical of the corruption that characterizes Albania, where organized crime is king, or almost, and the judicial system is weak and manipulated.

In yet one more example of this corruption, the rubbish dump's manager was seen in the company of several officials although now wanted by the police. This was presumably linked to the fact that his cousin is the local chief of police and that one of the company's administrators heads the regional branch of the Socialist Party, which is part of the ruling coalition. In such circumstances, it could be dangerous for Tota to request police protection. Instead, she has sought protection from international organizations and some embassies. "The best way to resist is to tell the truth," she courageously says.

SOFT CONTROL: INFILTRATING THE MEDIA

A Bulgarian deputy and oligarch's media empire

Rather than silence recalcitrant journalists one by one, what better solution than to infiltrate the media outlets they work for or try to influence the owners from outside? In countries where organized crime aspires to be at one with the state, media companies are exposed to a danger that is all the more threatening because newspaper finances are in the worst possible shape. The danger comes in the form of dirty money provided by straw men, by front men who serve to hide the identity of the real investors.

The oligarch Delyan Peevski, Bulgaria's leading cigarette manufacturer and a representative of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms in the national assembly, has created a shadowy media empire together with his mother, in order to better intimidate and denigrate his critics. He does not always keep the best company

and he does not like journalists investigating his business dealings and associates. Despite accusations of corruption and conflicts of interest, Peevski has become a kingmaker in Bulgaria.

[In the past decade, media ownership has become increasingly concentrated in the hands of the circle around Peevski.](#) In a January 2016 report headlined "[Bulgarian politician Peevski, corruption iceberg.](#)" the German newsweekly *Der Spiegel* described him as one of the Bulgarian public arena's most controversial figures. His rapid rise to power in the political world in Bulgaria since the age of 35 has had much to do with corruption and his links with criminal networks, *Der Spiegel* said. Peevski's motives for investing in the media clearly appear to go beyond those of a publisher. His media seem to be, above all, tools of influence for drawing attention to certain matters, hounding his opponents, promoting the interests of particular candidates and controlling the news available to the public. In short, almost undisguised political racketeering.

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There are countless examples of journalists being harassed for criticizing Peevski's operations. They are sued and subjected to smear campaigns in the scandal sheets that he owns. Bivol, an independent news website that does investigative reporting on organized crime, was hounded in this manner after reporting that the cigarette company, Bulgartabac, was smuggling part of its output to the Middle East. The identity of Bulgartabac's real owners is cloaked behind offshore companies and Peevski associates, and [Bivol](#) had issued several appeals for their real identity to be revealed. This was tantamount to lèse-majesté.



→ Bulgarian parliamentarian Deylan Peevski has climbed the political ladder in record time and become a king-maker thanks to his media empire, but journalists who dare to get in his way and investigate his murkier business activities are systematically smeared and sued.

2

ATTENTION,

SUJETS INTOUCHABLES

TAKE CARE, SUBJECT OFF LIMITS

Narcotics are the engine of all the organized crime activities south of the Rio Grande. The cradle of the cocaine cartels, Colombia continues to be one of the three biggest producers of the paste that is at the origin of a business generating billions of euros in illegal profits every year and corrupting everyone in its path, starting with the government agencies that are supposed to combat it. But the Colombians have been supplanted by those to whom they had entrusted distribution, the Mexican cartels, which have become richer and more powerful because they control access to the North American market.

Cocaine has devastated everything along its route, including press freedom. Anyone doing investigative reporting on the links between drug barons and representatives of the state—policemen, customs officers, the military, prison staff and governors — is almost certain to die, regardless of the precautions they take.

At least 32 Mexican journalists killed by cartels since 2012

Based in Hueyapan, a small town in the south of Veracruz state, **Cándido Ríos Vázquez** reported for a regional newspaper, the *Diario de Acayucán*, and edited his own local newspaper, *La Voz de Hueyapan*. He was arrested for the first time and tortured by the police in 2001, when investigating the local drug trade. He also filed several complaints against the then mayor. According to the Veracruz State Commission for the Attention and Protection of Journalists (CEAPP), [the Veracruz attorney general's office opened an investigation into physical attacks against Ríos in 2012. Finally, in March 2017](#), the Federal Mechanism for Protecting Human Rights Defenders began providing him with protection.

Five months later, on August 22, 2017, Ríos was gunned down outside a supermarket in Hueyapan along with two other people. The under-secretary for human rights at the federal interior ministry (SEGOB), Roberto Campa Cifrián, was adamant that Ríos was not the target. The targets, he insisted, were the two people with him, one of whom was Víctor Antonio Alegría, a former Acayucán police inspector. Ríos was the 22nd journalist to be murdered in Veracruz state since 2000. In all, at least nine journalists were murdered by criminal organization in Mexico in 2017, making it one of the world's deadliest countries for the media.

[Ranked 147th in the Press Freedom Index, Mexico has been just as deadly in 2018. This year's victims include Luis Pérez García, a 75-year-old magazine editor.](#) The firemen who found his body after being summoned to put out a fire in his Mexico City home on July 9 initially assumed that he had died from smoke inhalation. But the Mexico City attorney-general's office announced two weeks later that it was treating

his death as murder. It is now believed someone struck him on the back of the head and then started the fire to conceal the fact that he had been murdered. RSF urged investigators not to disregard clues pointing to the possibility that he was killed in connection with his journalism. Pérez had edited the magazine *Encuesta de Hoy* for more than 30 years and was a member of the Mexican Association of Radio Hosts (ANLM).

At the time of writing this report, ten journalists had already been murdered in Mexico since the start of the year, of whom four were killed by organized crime. RSF is currently investigating four of the ten cases to determine if the victims were killed in connection with their work. The level of violence is now completely unprecedented.

Colombia: no-go areas

Two Ecuadorian journalists working for one of Ecuador's leading newspapers, El Comercio, reporter **Javier Ortega** and photographer **Paul Rivas**, and their driver **Efraín Segarra**, [were kidnapped](#) on March 26, 2018 [while doing a report on conditions in Mataje](#), a village in the northern province of Esmeraldas that is just a few kilometers from the Colombian border. The area has seen frequent clashes between the authorities and drug traffickers since January 2018 when coca plantations and cocaine laboratories began proliferating there.

The three Ecuadorians were abducted by the *Frente Oliver Sinisterra*, an armed group led by Walter Arizola, also known as "El Guacho," which turned to drug trafficking after breaking away from Colombia's biggest Marxist guerrilla group, the FARC. [A photo was passed to media outlets showing the three men in chains](#). Then the *Frente Oliver Sinisterra* sent a "[communiqué](#)" to the International Committee of the Red Cross and other organizations confirming that they had died. Their bodies were finally recovered and repatriated in June. "El Guacho" is still at large and is officially regarded as one of Colombia's most wanted men.



→ Security conditions are disastrous for Mexican journalists, especially in Veracruz state. Many have been gunned down for covering stories linked to drug trafficking or the other activities of Mexico's criminal cartels. Ten have been murdered since the start of 2018.

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ENVIRONMENTAL JOURNALISTS TARGETED BY LOCAL GANGS

India's sand mafia sows death

From Brazil to Africa and India, criminal groups are getting rich by breaking all the environmental rules to plunder natural resources. There is money to be made from minerals, timber, petroleum and even sand, to judge from what is happening in India. [Sandeep Sharma, a reporter who covered a local "sand mafia," was deliberately run down and killed by a dumper truck in the central state of Madhya Pradesh](#) on March 26, 2018. He had told the police about the death threats he had received but they took no action, presumably because he had discovered that a local police chief was linked to members of this mafia.

The lucrative sand business involves a chain of disparate participants ranging from the villagers who allow the sand mafia gangsters to dredge riverbeds illegally at night to big entrepreneurs making massive profits from the real estate boom by cutting raw material costs – all this with the blessing of the local district police, judicial officials and politicians and a laissez-faire attitude on the part of the state authorities and central government, who have no desire to obstruct an activity that is helping to fuel GDP growth.

Journalists who investigate this phenomenon are subjected to terrible reprisals. [The victims have included Jagendra Singh, who died of burn injuries in June 2015,](#) after accusing the police of deliberately setting fire to him during a raid on his home a week earlier. He had been investigating the Uttar Pradesh governor's links with illegal mining. A few days later, **Haider Khan**, who had been writing about illegal land expropriations linked to mining, [was beaten and then dragged behind a motorcycle](#) for a hundred metres. [In October of the same year, Hemant Kumar Yadav was fatally shot in the chest by gunmen on a motorcycle in an apparent reprisal for his reporting.](#)

In none of these cases has the police investigation yielded the least result, which serves to guarantee impunity for those who order these reprisals. Two more journalists, **Karun Misra** of the *Jansandesh Times* and **Ranjan Rajdev** of the *Hindustan Daily*, [were killed by gunmen](#) on motorcycles in 2016 in Uttar Pradesh after writing articles on the same subject – illegal exploitation of land resources. More recently, the journalist **Satyendra Gangwar** was gunned down on June 22, 2018 in northern India, near the Nepalese border, by the same gangsters who had already attacked him three months earlier.

As well as murder or attempted murder, Indian journalists are exposed to many sorts of intimidation. [Two TV reporters who went to cover illegal sand mining in the Indian state of Punjab](#) on July 29, 2018, suddenly found themselves being attacked by a crowd of around 100 to 200 people, who injured them and smashed their

equipment. The police took 40 minutes to respond when the reporters called to request help. The dangers are greater for journalists in rural India because they are usually poorly-paid freelancers who lack resources and are rarely offered much in the way of protection by the media that hire them.

↓ The illegal extraction of sand is very profitable for criminal groups in India and Cambodia and journalists who get too close are exposed to exceptionally violent reprisals.

© AFP / Tang Chhin Sothy



Journalists versus Cambodia's sand cartels

Three journalists who support the NGO [Mother Nature Cambodia](#) were arrested in August 2015 for filming the illegal dredging of vast amounts of sand along Cambodia's coasts and estuaries in an attempt to show that those involved were wrecking the coastal ecology and flagrantly violating international regulations. The three journalists ended up being held for ten months and had to pay \$26,500 in damages to obtain their release.

The dredging was being carried out in prohibited areas and at much greater depths than what was permitted, and all the dredged sand was being shipped to Singapore for building polders as part of a major land reclamation project there. The companies carrying out the illegal dredging, none of which was identified, were part of what was in effect a criminal enterprise or cartel believed to include senior officials within the ministry of mines and energy and local authorities. The only person identified was Ly Yong Phat, an unscrupulous businessmen with links to Prime Minister Hun Sen's family, who had the backing of a group previously owned by Hun Sen's two daughters.

Two other reporters were jailed in September 2017 after filming large naval vessels collecting silica sand while their Automatic Identification Systems were turned off, which constitutes a violation of maritime law. The two journalists had just released a video denouncing the undeclared export of sand worth an estimated \$35 million to Taiwan. The video ended up being seen more than 2.3 million times and shared nearly 100,000 times. Enormous sums of money are involved in these illegal activities, which are clearly backed by the state. [To the delight of the sand cartel's barons, government officials meanwhile threaten and harass journalists.](#)

GRAND ANGLE



May Titthara, survivor

The editor of the *Khmer Times* since 2000, **May Titthara**, 39, has been living on borrowed time ever since he investigated Cambodia's illegal logging "mafia." How many times has he been threatened? He has lost count. "They" initially offered him money, and then offered him more money when he turned down the first offer. Then they threatened him with prosecution and the possibility of a road accident in which he could be killed.

While reporting in Pursat province one day, he discovered he was being pursued by a group of corrupt police officers and environmental protection agents who wanted to bump him off. By bribing his hotel's concierge and fleeing on a motorcycle in the middle of the night, he managed to avoid ending up in the middle of the jungle with a bullet in his head.

→ Cambodian journalist May Titthara covers the criminal groups that plunder one of his country's natural resources, timber. After trying to buy him, they organized a hit squad that fortunately failed in its bid to kill him while he was reporting in the field.

© cco

"No one thought I would survive, but I survived and I'm still doing my investigative reporting," he told RSF, going on to describe all the precautions he takes both for himself and his family, who could also fall victim to a deadly attack. He admits to sometimes feeling very alone, for example, when he asks his bosses for some days off in order to go into hiding. "Is it a mistake to tell the truth?" he sometimes cannot help asking himself when starting to write an article.

“

**Never forget
that we scare
them more
than they
scare us**

Namibian journalist
John Grobler

”



→ Most of the reports that Namibian journalist John Grobler posts on social networks are about the looting of primary sources. He was badly beaten in an attack by members of the country's main political party.

© John Grobler

John Grobler runs into Cosa Nostra in Namibia

A 55-year-old journalist based in his native Namibia, **John Grobler** tries to identify organized crime's hidden role in the extraction of primary resources, which usually has the consent of corrupt politicians. He was threatened when he came across representatives of Cosa Nostra, the Sicilian mafia, in Africa. This was when he was trying to establish whether Gen. Gaddafi's legendary hoard of 200 tons of gold was being laundered by the Palazzolo family, which had been linked to the Namibian president's son in a diamond deal.

“In 2009,” he said, “I was investigating a state-owned holiday resort whose manager had handed over the equivalent of nearly 400 million Namibian dollars in kind to friends of Pendukeni Iivula-Ithana, who was then the secretary-general of [the ruling] SWAPO as well as being justice minister, attorney-general and a parliamentarian. I received several threatening anonymous phone calls, for which I suspected she was responsible. She then waged a smear campaign on the SWAPO website, accusing me of being a member of the apartheid-era elite and a mass murderer. Later, when I was in a popular bar, I was badly beaten by four members of the SWAPO youth league. I filed a successful civil suit but there was no criminal prosecution by the state. A smear campaign against me ensued on Facebook but I turned it against them.”

Grobler ended his chilling tale on an optimistic note: ***“Never forget that we scare them more than they scare us.”***

ORGANIZED CRIME ALLIED WITH CORRUPT BUSINESSMEN AND POLITICIANS

Poland: Tomasz Piatek versus Russian mafia

[Born in 1974 and an RSF Press Freedom prize recipient, Polish journalist Tomasz Piatek](#) found his life turned upside down when he shed light on then defense minister Antoni Macierewicz's links with Russia in 2017, in particular his hidden ties with Russian intelligence agencies and with Solntsevo, a branch of the Russian mafia.

After writing a dozen articles on the subject, he was approached by a former Polish diplomat (also a former arms dealer and Moscow ally), who tried to dissuade from writing about the defence minister's links with organized crime and claimed to be able to offer something much more explosive – that he was a paedophile. Piatek did not act on the tip because he thought it was completely implausible and suspected a trap designed to get him to use false information in order to discredit him.

Piatek's perspicacity annoyed the diplomat, who managed to get a Catholic fundamentalist news website to portray him as a drug addict and claim that it knew this because it had obtained access to his private conversations. Piatek had indeed been an alcoholic and had consumed psychotropic drugs, but had given all this up with the help of therapy, which he had discussed with friends by telephone.

After more articles about the defense minister and his links to organized crime, [a book by Piatek on the same subject was published in June 2017](#) and quickly became a bestseller, triggering a wave of personal attacks from the highest levels of the state that were relayed in the pro-government media. The weekly *Do Rzeczy*, for example, published several articles portraying Piatek as an "amateur" peddling "conspiracy theories" or as a paranoid working for an internationally-backed party driven by a radical hatred of Catholics. All this was accompanied by pseudo-reports from the Polish intelligence services supporting the theory of an international conspiracy.

Piatek was physically attacked in December 2017 by Sergey Grechushkin, a pro-Putin Russian journalist based in Poland, who posed as a taxi driver to get into Radio *Wyborcza/TOK FM*. He tried to provoke Piatek into fighting back, which would undoubtedly have been used as additional grounds for smearing his reputation. Piatek was convinced that his phone was being illegally tapped at this time because of the noises heard during phone conversations. His email account's weird behavior also aroused his suspicions to the point that he reported it to the police. The response from the police, that no evidence of illegal surveillance could be found, was quickly seized on by his opponents to support claims that he was paranoid.



→ Polish journalist Tomasz Piatek stirred up a hornet's nest when his book "Macierewicz and his secrets" was published in 2017. For exposing the defence minister's murky relations with Russian intelligence agencies, he was even prosecuted by a military court on a terrorism charge. The case was finally dropped in March 2018.

© Jakub Porzycki / Agencja Gazeta

On the judicial front, the defense minister took an unusual course. Instead of a libel suit, he referred the matter to a military court, using an article of the criminal code under which the publication of a book could be construed as a “terrorist act.” The fact that the military court’s prosecutor owed his career to the defense minister was clearly not an insignificant factor in this decision. [The confrontation with the defense minister ended in March 2018](#), when he was fired in a cabinet reshuffle and the military court case was subsequently dismissed. But Piatek continues to be the target of libel suits by three other prominent persons named in the book as being linked to the same criminal network.

Russia: politicians and hitmen

French history saw many political assassinations, in which people in positions of power recruited gangsters to execute the crimes. The method is still practiced in many countries including Russia, where politicians, spies and criminals have always been ready to work together to get rid of troublemakers.

Almost everything is known about the perpetrators of well-known Russian journalist **Anna Politkovskaya**’s murder on October 7, 2006. Chechen gang leader Lom-Ali Gaitukayev was given a life sentence for organizing it, a sentence shortened by his death in a prison infirmary in June 2017. According to the prosecution, he was the one who recruited the shooter. He didn’t look far, choosing his own nephew, Rustam Makhmudov. He also hired two of Makhmudov’s brothers to act as lookouts during the killing. And he hired a retired police officer, Dmitry Pavlyuchenkov, for his expertise – he supervised the tailing of Politkovskaya – and his contacts – he provided the murder weapon.

There’s just one problem, a major one: the person or persons who ordered Politkovskaya’s murder have not been identified. And it’s hard to dismiss the most plausible hypothesis, namely that they were directly linked to the political and military leaders – Russian and pro-Russian Chechen – on whom she focused her reporting, with the support of her newspaper, *Novaya Gazeta*, one of the few independent media outlets that dared to annoy the Kremlin.



→ Anna Politkovskaya, a *Novaya Gazeta* reporter who covered the war in Chechnya and was an outspoken critic of Kremlin boss Vladimir Putin, was shot dead in her Moscow apartment building’s stairwell.

© AFP / Stan Honda

The murder of **Igor Domnikov**, another *Novaya Gazeta* journalist, is also edifying. He died on July 16, 2000, after receiving hammer blows to the head three months before from assailants outside his Moscow apartment. The mastermind was eventually identified, but too late. A gang leader, Eduard Tagirianov, and three members of his gang were sentenced to life imprisonment in 2007 for carrying out Domnikov's murder, and 20 other murders. And then a businessmen, Pavel Sopot, was sentenced to seven years in prison in 2013 for supervising the recruitment of Tagirianov and his gang to murder Domnikov. From the outset, *Novaya Gazeta* had suspected that the mastermind was the Lipetsk Region's deputy governor, Sergey Dorovsky, because Domnikov had criticized his economic policies in a series of articles during the year prior to his death. But it was only in April 2015 that Dorovsky was finally charged with commissioning the attack on Domnikov. And conveniently for Dorovsky, this was exactly one month after the statute of limitations on this crime expired, so the prosecution had to drop the case. Dorovsky died in August 2018 without having been arrested again.



Turkey: pro-government gangster's blacklist

The deadly message that jailed gangster Alaattin Çakıcı briefly posted on Instagram on June 29, 2018, was explicit: "All my life I have always given an advanced warning to those I am about to harm," he wrote, going on to name seven journalists who write for the newspaper *Karar*. "They will be punished in Turkey or abroad. To those who have told me, 'Order us to kill, order us to die,' I say: 'Carry out your duty.'"

[The well-known journalists Ali Bayramoğlu, Etyen Mahçupyan, Akif Beki, Hakan Albayrak, İbrahim Kiras and Gürbüz Özaltnlı were all named by Çakıcı.](#) He also named the columnist Elif Çakır, but asked his followers to spare her because "she is a woman." Çakıcı had it in for *Karar* not only because it described his request for a pardon as "insolent" but also because, he said, it took part in the "axis of evil" instead of supporting President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's alliance during the June 2018 election. He added that *Karar* was in the pay of the United States and the Gülen movement, accused by the government of masterminding a coup attempt in July 2016.

Jailed since 2004, Çakıcı reportedly supports the ultra-nationalist MHP, a party that entered into an alliance with President Erdoğan's party for the June election. MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli has repeatedly called for Çakıcı's release and visited him in hospital in May. On June 26, 2018, Bahçeli [issued a list](#) of 70 well-known figures including many journalists whom he accused of "relentlessly defaming" him during the election campaign. Turkey is ranked 157th out of 180 countries in [RSF's 2018 World Press Freedom Index](#).

JAPANESE MEDIA KEEP MUM ABOUT THE YAKUZA

Yakuza – they who shall not be named

The term “yakuza” designates the four families that constitute the core of organized crime in Japan. They have long occupied an important place in Japan’s traditional social structure and are regarded by many Japanese as a “necessary evil” that helps to maintain social equilibrium. They are reputed to have close links with the business and political elite although the authorities are officially supposed to combat them.

Tomohiko Suzuki, an investigative reporter who got himself hired by the energy company Tepco as temporary worker one summer in an attempt to demonstrate organized crime’s links with the nuclear industry, describes a yakuza-orchestrated system of corruption involving not only politicians but also leading media executives and editors.

The Japanese media tend to censor themselves on anything to do with the yakuza, who are usually referred to by the euphemistic expression “anti-social forces.” In practice, very few journalists or publishers dare to cover Japanese organized crime, for fear of reprisals.

The well-known journalist **Mizoguchi Atsushi**’s 34-year-old adoptive son was murdered in 2006 after Atsushi wrote a series of investigative stories that displeased a yakuza godfather. Sixteen years before that, Atsushi was himself badly injured after writing an article revealing the structure of the Yamaguchi-gumi, the biggest of the four yakuza families.

Even if such acts of violence are quite rare, freelance journalists feel particularly exposed. [Makiko Segawa, a fixer for many foreign media outlets and RSF’s correspondent](#), experienced this in 2012 while investigating organized crime’s involvement in clean-up operations after the Fukushima nuclear disaster. “My colleagues tried to dissuade me, constantly telling me that I was putting my life in danger,” she said. No leading Japanese media outlet was willing to publish her story, which was finally published in English on the website of [The Asia-Pacific Journal](#), an academic review, and therefore had little impact on the Japanese public.



→ The Yakuza use terror in Japan and have no qualms about targeting the families of journalists who annoy them, as Mizoguchi Atsushi learned to his cost. After writing a series of investigative stories that annoyed a Yakuza boss, his son was murdered.

INTERVIEW with Jake Adelstein



“The yakuza use the media as an instrument of pressure”

US journalist Jake Adelstein was working for the Tokyo newspaper *Yomiuri Shimbun* in 2005 when he received [death threats](#) while writing an investigative story about money laundering by the biggest yakuza family. He resigned because his editors refused to publish it. It finally appeared three years later in the *Washington Post* and in the form of a book entitled “Tokyo Vice.” Now aged 49, Adelstein has also worked with the Japanese NGO [Lighthouse](#) in combating trafficking in human beings and [supports journalists](#) who investigate subjects that are off limits in Japan.

→ : US journalist Jake Adelstein covers organized crime in Japan, where the Yakuza impose their law.
©CCO

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Do you think your status as a foreign journalist gives you more freedom in your coverage of organized crime?

“Absolutely. Being a *gaijin* [foreigner] changes everything. It means I'm not subject to Japanese society's obligations and values. To the Japanese mind, what a foreigner says is less credible and is therefore seen by organized crime as less of a threat. But what's interesting is that the foreign media, by covering sensitive subjects in Japan, often persuade the Japanese press to cover the same subjects, something they wouldn't have done spontaneously. For example, [I had a photo published in Vice](#) revealing the hidden relationship between the Japanese Olympic Committee's vice president and the godfather of Japan's biggest organized crime family. The photo had already gone around the Japanese media but no one dared publish it. Its publication on a foreign website enabled the Japanese press to publish it.

You've been threatened in connection with your reporting. Are there mechanisms for protecting journalists in Japan?

No, there's no special mechanism for protecting journalists from reprisals by the yakuza. And the Shinzo Abe government's hostility towards the media means we cannot expect any change. You always have the option of turning to the police but the police will not get involved if the threats are coming from yakuza groups that have political support. Personally, I was obliged to use the services of a private bodyguard for four years, someone who was himself a former yakuza.

How have the Japanese reacted to your stories about the yakuza?

I've had positive feedback from Japanese readers. Many of my media colleagues in Japan have told me they would have liked to have written about the yakuza and other taboo subjects but they didn't because of social pressure. For example, the very mention of the word “yakuza” in a TV programme will be edited out. Judging by what my Japanese colleagues say, it's a privilege to be a foreign journalist in Japan because I'm free to choose what I cover and I can leave Japan at any time. Japanese reporters feel cornered within an environment that makes them censor themselves.

“

I was obliged to use the services of a private bodyguard for four years, someone who was himself a former yakuza

Tokyo-based US journalist
Jake Adelstein

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Have relations between the Japanese media and organized crime evolved?

The relationship between organized crime and the media has changed a lot in recent years. If you were to judge by my personal experience alone, you might think this relationship has always been hostile but there was a time when organized crime and the media coexisted without any friction. Nowadays, a compromise has been found that I would describe as “detente.” Journalists have dropped the word “yakuza” from their vocabulary and organized crime groups have ceased to make direct threats against the press. In a world in which media coverage is decisive, the yakuza want above all to protect their reputation and avoid being compared to terrorist groups. So you can read stories in the press about organized crime groups coming to the aid of victims after [an earthquake](#).

Does the status quo between yakuza and journalists give journalists more freedom (and protection)?

The Japanese press still avoid writing about anything to do with organized crime until the police have made it public. But the yakuza are not completely absent from the Japanese media. On the one hand, there are specialized magazines catering to yakuza culture fans. And on the other, I've seen reporting in which the yakuza were the story's main source. For example, when former Japanese justice minister Keishu Tanaka [became a front-page story for conspiring with an organized crime group](#). It was the crime group itself that gave the story to journalists. The media thereby became a tool used by the yakuza to put pressure on their enemies.”

3

HOW TO RESPOND TO THE THREAT FROM ORGANIZED CRIME

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STATE PROTECTION... OFTEN NOT ENOUGH

Mexico: inadequate protection

[Rubén Pat](#), the editor of *Semanario Playa News*, a local online weekly, was murdered last summer in Playa del Carmen, in the southeastern state of Quintana Roo, after being threatened and requesting protection, but receiving only very limited protective measures. He was shot six times in a café on July 24, 2018. [In June 2017, he had been arrested arbitrarily, threatened and tortured](#) by members of local police in the nearby municipality of Solidaridad, a few days after revealing information about links between local officials and criminal gangs.

Pat had requested urgent protection from the [Federal Mechanism for Protecting Human Rights Defenders and Journalists](#) after receiving threats via WhatsApp in May 2018, but had been given just a GPS and a panic button. When he complained about the inadequacy of [these protective measures to RSF](#), saying he was living and “working in fear,” RSF contacted the Federal Mechanism and requested urgent reinforcement of Pat’s protection – with no success. Pat was murdered less than a month after his website’s crime reporter, [José Guadalupe Chan Dzib, was himself the victim of an execution-style murder in a bar](#).

“The Mexican authorities must draw the inevitable conclusion from this terrible event, namely that the Federal Mechanism for Protecting Journalists failed in its duty to protect Rubén Pat although his situation of vulnerability had been known for a long time,” RSF said at the time, calling on President-elect Andrés Manuel López Obrador to prioritize the protection of journalists. [Mario Leonel Gómez Sánchez meanwhile became the 10th journalist to be murdered](#) in Mexico in 2018 when he was gunned down outside his home in the state of Chiapas on September 21.

© CCO

CRIME SCENE DO NOT CROSS



FOUR FEDERAL ENTITIES ARE SUPPOSED TO PROTECT JOURNALISTS IN MEXICO:

- 1)** The FEADLE (Special Prosecutor's Office for Crimes against Freedom of Expression) is an offshoot of the Federal Attorney-General's Office. It lacks the necessary personnel, funding and political will to deal quickly and effectively with the complaints it receives. When it finally prepares cases and takes them to court, they are only too often rejected by the judge on the grounds of being legally flawed.
- 2)** The CNDH (National Human Rights Commission) is a governmental body with legal and financial autonomy. It is headed and run by a president and a consultative council with ten members, who are all appointed by the federal senate. It receives complaints from journalists in danger via its special programme for journalists and human rights defenders. When state agents are responsible for the acts of aggression against journalists, the Commission can issue recommendations but they are not binding.
- 3)** The Federal Mechanism for Protecting Human Rights Defenders and Journalists is an offshoot of the interior ministry (also known as SEGOB). It is overseen by a special committee, called the Junta del Gobierno), that consists of a four-member consultative council (two journalists and two human rights defenders) and a representative from each of the following entities: FEADLE, SEGOB, the National Security Commission, the foreign ministry and CNDH.
- 4)** The Executive Commission for Attending to Victims (CEAV) is an autonomous body tasked with assisting individuals (of all professions) whose basic rights have been violated in connection with their work. Created at the initiative of civil society organisations, it concentrates on providing victims with assistance and financial compensation. A special unit responsible for journalists was created in 2018 but it has so far helped few journalists.

As a rule, these federal entities do not communicate sufficiently among themselves and are governed by their own laws and internal regulations.

Italy: vigilance and blackmail

The situation in Italy is different. "It was the authorities who told me about the danger I was in," the journalist **Lirio Abbate** said. "They were the ones who noted the first danger signals before I had realized how serious my situation was, and they were the ones who insisted on giving me round-the-clock protection."

Italian politicians are unanimous on this issue, superficially at least. Most threatened journalists receive the public support of local and national politicians, especially centre-left ones. They also benefit from the support of the judicial authorities, who are often leading the way in investigations into the mafia.

[After the plot to kill Paolo Borrometi](#) was thwarted in April 2018, he received statements of support from politicians of all colours including then Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni and several unions. [Pope Francis also issued a much-commented condemnation of the mafia](#) (although the first pope to publicly criticize the mafia was John Paul II). In an unprecedented initiative, interior minister Marco Minniti announced plans for a coordination center between his ministry, the police, journalists' associations and the media in general to ensure full and immediate coordination between all sectors as soon as a journalist is threatened or attacked. The center would have been the first of its kind in Europe but the project was abandoned after a new government took office in June.

The protection provided by the Italian police, and its investigation of potential dangers before any explicit threats are made, are extremely valuable. [Hence the gravity of the explicit threat by the new interior minister, Matteo Salvini, to withdraw the protection provided to the writer and journalist Roberto Saviano](#), a specialist in the Neapolitan mafia, after Saviano criticized the new government. Salvini would not be able to carry out the threat without the approval of the committee responsible for protection, but the mere fact that he made the threat at all has set a dangerous precedent.



→ Rome street graffiti portraying the pope as a superhero was defaced after he criticized the mafia in 2017
© twitter / Lirio Abbate



→ Marilù Mastrogiovanni, a journalist who founded a website called *Il Tacco d'Italia* in southern Italy's Puglia region in 2003, has had fulltime police protection for years because of threats from Puglia's mafia, known as the *Sacra Corona Unita*.

© AFP

Marilù Mastrogiovanni holding on in Puglia

An investigative journalist based in southern Italy's Puglia region, **Marilù Mastrogiovanni** edits *Il Tacco d'Italia*, the news website she founded in 2003, and specializes in covering the region's mafia organization, known as *Sacra Corona Unita*. For years, she has taken a particular interest in waste management in Puglia, which – thanks to the complicity of certain local government representatives – has become a major source of profits for this mafia group.

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There are not enough police officers to combat the mafia and even fewer to defend journalists.

Marilù Mastrogiovanni,
journaliste italienne.

”

[As a result of recurrent threats from Sacra Corona Unita of a direct and explicit nature](#), the website's office has received intermittent protection from the police that ended whenever the tension fell. When there was a new threat, police patrol visits would be organized again but, as Mastrogiovanni told RSF, “that doesn't stop the mafia.” On several occasions, burglars broke into the office and stole computers. She was also subjected to pressure at her home on the outskirts of the small town of Casarano. One night, intruders slipped into the garden and beat her dog to death. Another night, someone started a fire behind the house, which she and her husband managed to put out.

When a local politician close to the mafia announced on Facebook that he was going to go Mastrogiovanni's home in order to beat her up, the police stationed a patrol car outside. In 2017, the mayor of Casarano – a member of the same party as the other local politician – used public funds to have posters put up on the walls of the town urging residents to reprove Mastrogiovanni, whose mafia coverage was hurting the town's image, he said.

Mastrogiovanni is now one of the ten or so Italian journalists receiving round-the-clock police protection. But tension increased again [recently after she published an investigative story about organized crime infiltration](#) into the tourism sector in southern Puglia's Salento region, which is famous for its beach resorts and mountain villages. Bags of trash were spilled outside her home as a warning at the end of June. Two week later, on July 7, she found around 4,000 emails containing death threats in the website's inbox. Another 600 were sent to her husband, who is also a journalist and the legal representative of the journalists' cooperative that runs the website.

She is complying with requests from the local prefect and police chief to report all her planned movements in advance so that patrols can be organized. But the last time she returned to Casarano, no one was there to protect her family. After placing her children with friends, she spent two sleepless nights before deciding to leave Casarano and her isolated house on the town's outskirts. “There are not enough police officers to combat the mafia and even fewer to defend journalists,” she said. To top it all, the threats have put off some of the advertisers who helped keep the website going. Its last chance to survive is direct funding from readers.

Slovakia: protected for a few weeks

Slovak journalists who cover crime put not only their own lives at risk but also the lives of their family members. The editor of a national media outlet, who asked not to be named, has for the past 18 months been investigating the relationships between Italian businessmen linked to the 'Ndrangheta and the Slovak political and business elite. His staff are not only the targets of defamation proceedings that could lead to long jail sentences but are also often threatened on social networks. He has himself been attacked verbally in the street.

He has been taking many precautions since Ján Kuciak and his fiancée, Martina Kušnírová, were murdered in February 2018. His news organization was given police protection immediately after this double murder, but it lasted only a few weeks. He is confident those who killed them will end up behind bars. "We are not heroes," he said. "We just want to tell people what is really happening in Slovakia, even the dark things." Might he stop? "Out of the question."

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Combating impunity: need for thorough investigations

In a country such as Mexico, where the number of bodies found in the streets or in mass graves might give the impression that a civil war was going on, organized crime knows that both the police and judicial system are overwhelmed and that this guarantees impunity. According to the figures compiled by the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH), more than 90% of crimes of violence against journalists in Mexico go unpunished. In certain states such as Tamaulipas, Veracruz and Sinaloa, the impunity rate is close to 100%.

Murders of journalists are much rarer in Slovakia and Malta but these two countries have something in common with Mexico. The police forces in charge of investigating the murders seem to contain officers with no interest in seeing the investigations progress. Also, the masterminds of these murders take precautions and usually limit any possible tracks and clues by using professional killers.

A year after Daphne Caruana Galizia's murder in Malta in October 2017, it is clear that the investigation is not progressing. This does not bode well for a successful conclusion because the passage of time always benefits the killers.

90% of crimes of violence against journalists go unpunished





A year after Daphne Caruana Galizia's murder in Malta in October 2017, it is clear that [the investigation is not progressing](#). This does not bode well for a successful conclusion because the passage of time always benefits the killers.

Her son, Matthew Caruana Galizia, told RSF.

“My family and I are campaigning for full justice. That includes justice for my mother’s assassination and justice for her stories about corruption and abuse by powerful government officials and businesses that operate together as organised crime. Our prime minister appeared on CNN as soon as my mother was assassinated, making promises to catch the assassins that all the world immediately knew to be false. No government can guarantee justice for a crime in which it is itself suspected of being complicit.”

→ Matthew Caruana Galizia, the son of murdered Maltese journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia, is campaigning for nothing less than complete justice for his mother.

© AFP

“Time has proved that to be correct: we’re one year from the bombing of an EU member state’s most important journalist, in broad daylight and in front of her family, and nothing has happened. The failure to prosecute government officials for the corruption that was exposed by my mother was the first demonstration of impunity in Malta. The fact that she was blown up in broad daylight, in front of her family, is the second demonstration of impunity. Covering up the assassination, stalling the investigation, violating our human rights, fighting calls for a public inquiry into how the murder could have been avoided, declaring that my mother’s children are ‘enemies of the state’ in government press releases: that is the third demonstration of impunity. The cycle of impunity and corruption will lead to more murders of journalists in Europe. Toxic states like Malta need to be dealt with immediately. Other European leaders will otherwise look at the journalists in their own countries and think, ‘If Muscat can get away with it, why not I?’”

**“
This cycle of corruption and impunity will inevitably lead to other murders of journalists in Europe.”**

Matthew Caruana Galizia, the son of murdered Maltese journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia

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→ Maltese journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia's car was hurled into a field when the bomb placed underneath it exploded with her at the wheel near her home.

© AFP



→
Roberto Saviano
© Paul Grelet

WHEN THE PRESSURE IS TOO MUCH

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Exile

Fleeing abroad means depriving oneself of one's sources, giving in to organized crime and leaving it to reign supreme. But it is often a question of physical and psychological survival. The gravity and repetition of the threats can end up driving journalists to put thousands of kilometres between themselves and their story.

An over-confined existence can also undermine any normal person. Paolo Borrrometi, one of the Italian journalists receiving round-the-clock police protection, has complained of being unable to have a normal romantic relationship, go to the cinema, walk freely in the streets or even visit his parents in Sicily. How does one put up with death's constant presence, danger's oppressive weight and the feeling of solitude that eventually takes over anyone spending day after day with bodyguards? Especially as Borrrometi's fellow journalists sometimes fail to appreciate, in his view, the awfulness of his situation or, for example, the significance of the thwarted bomb plot. "I would need to be killed for this kind of attack to make the front pages," he told RSF.

Threats are sometimes also made against journalists' families, which makes the situation even more unbearable. Mafiosi ensured that the Italian journalist Federica Angeli feared for her children, in the same way that they endangered Borrrometi's parents by setting fire to the house where they were staying.

Albanian freelance journalist **Basir Collaku** is on the verge of opting for exile, like Roberto Saviano, who now spends more time in the United States than in Italy. Collaku annoyed Albania's interior minister by getting an exclusive interview with Dritan Zagani, the head of a police drugs unit in a provincial city who was threatened and arrested after denouncing police corruption. A newspaper and a TV channel agreed to run Collaku's interview but then backed off after getting calls from the prime minister and interior minister. In the end, Collaku's report appeared only on social networks while several government media outlets denigrated his journalism.

Two years later, evidence presented at a criminal prosecution in Italy confirmed some of Collaku's revelations without going so far as to incriminate the now former interior minister. Collaku's life has meanwhile become a nightmare, and he has limited his nocturnal movements, fearing that he could be targeted by thugs in the pay of drug traffickers. The situation has affected both his family life and his work, with many media outlets turning their back on him for fear of alienating the country's ruling clique. He is now seriously thinking of leaving Albania for the sake of the peaceful life that Saviano has tried to recover by putting an ocean between himself and his country.



→
Oscar Arturo Cantú Murguía,
the former editor of the newspaper
Norte de Ciudad Juárez.

©José Zamora

Stop reporting

INTERVIEW with Oscar Arturo Cantú Murguía

Former editor of the *Norte de Ciudad Juárez* newspaper`

Why did you decide to close *Norte*?

[Last year's murder of our journalist Miroslava Breach](#) was the trigger. We were very close professionally and her death caused me a great deal of pain. I asked myself about the lack of security and guarantees for the critical, investigative and watchdog journalism that I had practiced for 27 years. I weighed the risks that we face and the impunity that has existed in the past and continues today. We felt abandoned by everyone, by society and by government institutions, several of whose spokesmen have denigrated the media's work.

I weighed all these factors in the balance and came to the conclusion that we had to do something different from what we had been doing until then. What we published had not had any resonance within society or the government. So I decided to close the newspaper as a protest. The first thing was to demand that Miroslava's murders be found, and to make it very clear that we would tolerate no impunity. Even if the decision to stop was painful, I no longer wanted to continue losing human lives.

It wasn't just Miroslava. Threats were also made against the people dear to me. I never talked about this because I didn't want to provoke even more fear on the part of my wife and daughters, who were already terrified.

Can you give us some details about the threats, harassment and intimidation of *Norte*'s journalists?

Shots were fired at our offices on several occasions. Journalists were abducted and beaten by drug traffickers. I personally received anonymous calls. I was told that I would have to stop "creating problems" if I did not want to experience what happened to Miroslava. I don't know if these threats were coming from the killers or from members of the political class. The only person I told that I was going to close the newspaper was the governor, Javier Corral. I even went to Chihuahua to speak with him and tell him what I was going to do. It was the day after this meeting that the threats occurred. He was the only person who knew that I was going to shut down as a protest.

How is the investigation into Miroslava's murder going?

One person is in prison but I don't as yet know if judicial proceedings have begun. A recording was found in the murderer's home. On it you can hear a conversation between a Chínipas municipal councillor, a member of the National Action Party, the PAN, asking the PAN's media person to track down Miroslava's sources at the request of PAN's general secretary who is now the governor's private secretary.

What articles angered the narcos?

Above all, our investigative reports about corrupt police chiefs. There was a similar level of harassment when we defended the innocence of two persons accused of murdering women. Their lawyers were murdered and one of the defendants was killed in prison. We managed to get the other one released.

Do you see a way out of this?

Norte has a new project based on “periodismo de contrapeso” [alternative journalism]. We are going to launch a print magazine with investigative reporting. The aim is to not accept any state advertising and to rely on civil society alone, in order to avoid being exposed to pressure.



→ Czech journalist Pavla Holcová set up her own investigative reporting website in 2013.

© Blesk.cz

JOURNALISTS RESIST

Avoiding isolation: Pavla Holcová's method

The solution for Czech journalist [Pavla Holcová](#) was to be her own boss. It was the best way to avoid pressure from superiors, but it was also an enormous source of danger. While covering organized crime in Italy and the Balkans, and its offshoots in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, she received threats that tended to take the form of “friendly” warnings, recommendations to stop her investigative reporting before the dangers became too great. The messages were never signed, obviously. She was badly shaken by the murder of Ján Kuciak, with whom she had worked. It was hard not to see it as message to all of the region's investigative reporters, and she was placed under police protection for several months.

She dedicated most of her energy to the website [Investigace.cz](#) after founding it in 2013. To avoid isolation, she linked up with the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project ([OCCRP](#)) and participated in several ICIJ projects including the Panama Papers and Paradise Papers. She finally set up the [Czech Centre for Investigative Journalism](#), which has been responsible for several investigations into leading Serbian and Italian organized crime figures, Macedonian intelligence agency investments in Prague, money-laundering and off-shore companies.

Holcová is also able to rely on her unshakable optimism. As she says, “it is very hard to live when you think your life is in danger.” The real difficulty is finding balance between your personal and professional lives.



→ Despite the threats, Ismael Bojórquez never considered closing the paper he edits, the Mexican weekly *Río Doce*, not even after his best reporter was murdered in 2017.

© Roxana Vivanco

Reducing the risks

INTERVIEW with **Ismael Bojorquez**

Editor of the Mexican newspaper *Río Doce*:

“We never gave up”`

After the murder of Javier Valdez [a reporter for *Río Doce* and AFP who was gunned down in May 2017], did you think of closing the newspaper, as the Norte de Ciudad Juárez did?

No, we've never considered doing that. An intern asked me to send her out to do reporting in the field, right after [Javier's](#) murder. I'll never forget that. We've never considered abandoning ship. We have always thought of the commitment we have to our readers. It's also in Javier's memory that we continue, as a sort of loyalty to him. We know the risks, above all when tackling the issue of drug trafficking. We try to take more care. We take security measures that are somewhat invasive. But we haven't changed our editorial line. We just pay a great deal of attention to the angles.

What form do the threats against *Río Doce's* journalists take?

A few months ago, someone approached the newspaper's building and took photos. We investigated and apparently it was nothing. But we're on tenterhooks. We pay attention to social networks. Before, when someone wanted to intimidate a journalist, they would come to see them at the newspaper or they would call them. Now all this happens on social networks. Doing journalism, talking about corruption and investigating drug trafficking continues to be dangerous in Sinaloa, as in the rest of Mexico. We try as far as possible to reduce the risk.

Do *Río Doce's* journalists work in fear of their lives?

Am I personally afraid? Yes. Unfortunately, we often have to censor ourselves. We don't work normally. Our main problem is money and finding a way to pursue our activities. We are a small group of reporters for the entire state of Sinaloa. There are not enough of us to cover stories properly. Juan Millán Lizarraga, who was governor of Sinaloa until 2004, threatened us by saying: “I'm going to starve them out. They are going to die of hunger.” We were very hard-hitting in our stories about corruption involving his government. A grenade was thrown into *Río Doce's* offices in 2009 but we never gave up.



→
These two French reporters have covered sensitive stories in Africa, including corruption, trafficking in rhinoceros horns and trafficking in human beings.

© Freeimage.com / Sias
van Schalkwyk

Stay in the shadows, say two journalists in Africa

How do you make investigative documentaries in Africa about such sensitive subjects as corruption and the trafficking of rhinoceros horns? Against a backdrop of political instability and poverty, danger lies in wait at every street corner, especially if there's a police station there. According to Olivia Mokiejewski, 41, a French documentary filmmaker, and her colleague Barbara Conforti, who has been reporting and filming in Africa for 20 years, the only solution is to practice constant dissimulation, use encrypted messaging services, tell no one about your plans— which can be dangerous, too—and, if possible, never retrace your steps.

“Reporting is much more difficult if the local inhabitants are very poor and are so dominated by the gangs that they serve as their eyes and ears,” Mokiejewski said. “I’ve often been told I should concentrate on women’s subjects. Everything can change dramatically at any time. You cannot trust anyone. You have to hide what you’ve filmed and change the place where you stay.”

The only time Conforti was really afraid was in Benin City in southern Nigeria. “For the first time ever, I had the feeling I’d gone too far,” she said. “I was in contact with traffickers in human beings who sell girls as if they are animals. I was with an intermediary in whom I had complete confidence. But something happened and we had to get out of the city as quickly as possible. It was only when our plane took off that I calmed down and decided to stop taking so many risks.”

Conforti usually travels on a tourist visa and one of her advantages is that, as a white woman with a camera, she looks more like a tourist than an investigative reporter. “But it is hard not to have problems with politicians, the police and government agencies, which are nearly always involved in trafficking.”

COUNTING ON SOLIDARITY

Italian method

→ Italian journalists Roberto Saviano, author of “Gomorra,” and Lirio Abbate, a reporter for the newsweekly L’Espresso, have been living under police protection for years, like their colleague Paolo Borrometi.

© Twitter / Roberto Saviano



Journalists who are threatened usually receive a lot of support from the media outlets they work for, hence the advantage of working for a sizable news organization – one that has an impact on the public debate and has partners abroad. Freelancers or journalists who work for a small, local media outlets may see the threats continuing indefinitely. News organizations also help threatened journalists financially, and not just by covering the legal fees when they are sued. Having a presence on the ground and being able to spread the word and make public statements is very important when it comes to containing the threat.

The Italian journalists Roberto Saviano and Lirio Abbate, for example, have received a lot of support from their media outlets (*La Repubblica* and *L’Espresso* respectively). Abbate was recently appointed as *L’Espresso*’s deputy editor. Aside from rewarding his undeniable talents (he is one of Italy’s best investigative reporters), as well as his courage and his professional generosity, this appointment has strengthened his position, enhanced his prestige and helped to protect him. But it has not shielded him from the hostility of the Association of Italian Lawyers that began during the “Mafia Capitale” trials, when the lawyer of a mafia boss who had been arrested as a result of Abbate’s reporting launched a virulent and seemingly interminable polemic against him that was relayed by *Il Dubbio*, a newspaper for Italian lawyers.

The Italian public broadcaster RAI meanwhile tries to draw as much attention as possible to mafia harassment of journalists in reports and interviews. The victims are often invited into its TV studios to relate their misadventures on camera. They also receive prizes for investigative reporting. Paolo Borrometi has received three prizes in 2018 alone – the Rocco Chinnici Prize, the Premio Ischia Internazionale di Giornalismo and the Premiolo. The Italian National Press Federation (FNSI) also does good work, constantly alerting the public and the media to threats against journalists and to other difficulties they may have encountered.



→ When Italian reporters are covering sensitive stories, they can usually rely on their news organizations, both financially and for psychological support. Freelancers are likely to be much more vulnerable.

© Unsplash / headwayio



The Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) is a coalition of 45 media outlets in 34 countries. By assisting investigative reporters, it helps to get more than 100 investigative stories published every year.

© CCO

Era of collaborative media investigations

■ Cross-border investigating by the OCCRP

Polish journalist Tomasz Piatek thinks there is just one possible response to harassment from organized crime and the corrupt officials and politicians who surf in its wake, and that is the pooling of information among journalists, regardless of the media they work for or their nationality. “The truth has no borders or brand,” he says. One might be tempted to add that creating cross-border networks has an even bigger advantage: there is nothing to be gained from killing a journalist if colleagues safely based in another country are poised to pick up the story the victim was working on.

“When you live and work in authoritarian countries where governments are openly hostile to journalists, you can only survive by building a trusted relationship with other journalists and with the public,” said **Drew Sullivan**, the co-founder of the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project ([OCCRP](#)), which was launched in 2006 when he was working on a story in Bosnia and began cooperating with **Paul Radu**, who was working on the same story in Romania.

The nascent OCCRP started to pick up steam, drew in other colleagues in the region and got an early boost in the form of the Global Shining Light Award in 2007. Pooling

all this energy not only allowed them to make economies but also to move more quickly and with more precision. It initially took shape as an information exchange platform that also offered cut-price media insurance and pooled purchases, including access to commercial databases. Above all pragmatic, the [OCCRP](#) quickly gained recognition as a collaborative, non-profit network that was effective at investigating organized crime.

Now consisting of 45 investigative centers and media in 34 countries, the OCCRP is happy to describe itself, in the words of Camille Eis, its director of partnerships, as a sort of “Uber” for investigative reporting, bringing together editors, researchers and technicians capable of assisting the researchers. *“With more than 20 international and regional editors coordinating stories, we catalyse reporting across borders by building teams and consensus with centres on each investigation,” Eis said. “It’s allowed us to publish more than 100 investigative stories per year, making OCCRP the largest producer of investigative content in the world.”*

In most of the countries where the OCCRP is present, including the Balkans and the Caucasus, independent media are not only fragile but also exposed to serious threats, especially when investigating complicity between local officials and organized crime. As well as providing logistic support, help with security and legal aid, the OCCRP also helps to circumvent censorship. Growing steadily, it recently established presences in Latin America, the Middle East and Africa, pooling its efforts with networks already there such as ARIJ, BIRN, Connectas ICOJ and GIJN, all of which were founded on the same model of cross-border investigating.

Cambodia team

“The aim of our group of citizen-journalists and activists is to denounce the Cambodian dictatorship’s environmental crimes,” said a spokesman for [Mother Nature Cambodia \(MNC\)](#), speaking on condition of anonymity for security reasons. “We also work in partnership with local communities that have been the victims of expropriation, exploitation of their resources and other human rights violations by the state or by businessmen and private companies directly linked to the state. Some of our journalists are based abroad, either for security reasons or because they’re blacklisted from returning to Cambodia. The others work confidentially because many of our team members have been arrested. Six of them have served sentences of several months on false accusations.”

This team of young Cambodians (its members are aged from 24 to 37) got started in 2012 with an investigation into the large-scale logging of rare woods by the state and by powerful businessmen linked to the regime’s leadership that was worth hundreds of millions of dollars. Subsequent campaigns targeted the proposed construction of a hydroelectric dam that would have flooded major wildlife habitats while generating little power, the dredging of marine sand on the spurious grounds that estuaries needed to be deepened for navigation, and evictions to make way for gold mining.

After initial setbacks, strict security measures were adopted, both to protect the journalists and their communications. They communicate among themselves only by encrypted means and do not communicate with sources without taking multiple precautions. “The identity of MNC members is never revealed publicly,” RSF’s source said. “And they don’t reveal their membership of the group when they are investigating. We also follow a strict policy as regards financial security.” All these measures are all the more essential in a country where the threats usually come from entities directly linked to the state.

ARIJ, promoting “accountability journalism” in the Middle East

Based in Jordan's capital, Amman, [Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism \(ARIJ\)](#) describes itself as the first regional network promoting “accountability journalism” to reporters, editors and journalism teachers in the Arab world, with the help of a “Story-Based Inquiry” training manual spelling out its approach to journalism.

“ARIJ supports committed journalists who demonstrate courage in the practice of their profession, one of the most dangerous ones, in one of the world's most exposed regions as regards press freedom,” an ARIJ representative said. “Editors and reporters who work with ARIJ are guided by their mission as society's guard dogs.”

Every proposed investigation is given a security evaluation, especially those implicating powerful people involved in corruption. “In our eyes, organized crime is not limited to just the organization itself,” the ARIJ source said. “Our journalists are dealing with criminal associations consisting of fairly large groups of politicians, some in office and some not, in cahoots with the ‘deep state,’ the business and political elite that tries to uphold the status quo and maintain its personal advantages and privileges at the expense of the public interest.”

Since its creation in 2006, ARIJ has supported more than 470 investigative reporting projects (print media, multimedia and video). Each of them helped to bring about beneficial (and sometimes radical) changes, whether within a few days of publication or gradually over a period of years. In the course of these projects, ARIJ has participated in more than 70 cross-border collaborations and has worked with the [ICIJ \(International Consortium of Investigative Journalism\)](#) and OCCRP in covering ramifications in its region of major international investigations into corruption and organized crime, including Panama Papers, SwissLeaks and LuxLeaks.



→ Based in Jordan, Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism (ARIJ) provides support to determined reporters in the Arab world.

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