

OLIGARCHS, AUTOCRATS, LIARS AND BULLIES

-THE PLAYBOOK-



ANNUAL REPORT 2021

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During 2021, while the world moved to slowly face a second year of pandemic and the prospects of a ‘return to normality’ began to emerge in some regions, economic and political crises started to take form. The instability aggravated by the pandemic provided the perfect storm scenario – oligarchs, autocrats, liars, and bullies took advantage of this context to unfold their playbook.

We saw the consolidation of a culture of oppression and authoritarianism that put attacks on freedom of expression and information at its center.

Disinformation and misinformation, internet shutdowns, content removal and censorship were observed around the globe, and there were multiple attempts to control the flow and access to information in order to manipulate perceptions about their gravity, or hide authoritarian agendas from the public eye.

Where speech and information control by those in power was not possible or not ‘sufficient’, increased use of force led to intimidation, persecution, and violence – in its many forms. **IFEX** members not only had to double their efforts to support journalists and human rights defenders amidst a global health crisis, they had to face direct assaults on their work and their staff. Attacks against civil society organizations, and against civic space more broadly, were a constant.

The public space was surveilled and closed down, and those who protested against this state of affairs were silenced, and in many cases, placed under arrest.

But where trends towards authoritarianism were observed, **IFEX** and its members responded with their own playbook – one of resistance and resilience. They worked together, and their solidarity provided the support network that civil society groups and individuals needed to face these challenges through collaboration and experimentation. **IFEX’s** tested and proven strategies were reinforced, and new services and research were brought into play, to ensure that the struggle for human rights remained timely and relevant.


In response to the pandemic and the increased silencing of voices and closing of public spaces, **IFEX** had to pivot and innovate. The context required a great deal of work and a strong commitment to long-term strategic goals, as well as creative responses to an unstable, challenging and ever-changing context. This capacity to balance consistency and invention was a core trait of **IFEX’s** work in 2021.

In the oligarchs, autocrats, liars and bullies’ playbook, the manipulation of information is a central strategy. **IFEX** and its members stand firm against this dirty game against democracy and human rights. We build on the experience and expertise of the network to find novel and effective ways to face the challenges presented.


**WE KNOW WHO THEY ARE, WE KNOW WHAT THEY DO,
AND WE CONTINUE TO CALL THEM OUT.**

2021 kept us busy. We are ready for 2022.

*Annie Game
IFEX Executive Director*



PLAYING FAST
AND LOOSE
WITH FACTS
**RIGHT TO
INFORMATION**



PLAYING IN THE DIGITAL FIELD

Digitalization has taken hold of so many aspects of our lives that today our relationship with technology and the impact of technology on the circulation of information have become central components in the work of many **IFEX** members.

COVID-19 has rendered our relationship with the digital world even more complex. A renewed surge of techno-solutionism has led to the adoption and implementation of technological tools to address the health crisis without proper assessment of their need, effectiveness, or their human and environmental rights impacts. The digitalization fostered by the pandemic resulted in forcing the use of applications and online tools to access public services, public spaces, and decision-making processes, with no due consideration for the existing digital divides.

THE MISCARRIED USE OF TECH AGAINST COVID

In this context, many **IFEX** members have called attention to the adoption of technology by government agencies and law enforcement that pose serious threats to safety and the right to privacy. In Colombia, for example, members questioned the compulsory use of the CoronApp application by travelers. **IFEX-ALC**, the network of **IFEX** members in Latin America and the Caribbean, submitted an Amicus Brief in a lawsuit filed by three women – two journalists and one human rights defender – against CoronApp. The women argued that their privacy was violated and their safety put at risk by the application, which uses contact tracing and geolocation. While travelling by air within Colombia, they were repeatedly required to use this government application and had to submit

a considerable amount of personal data, including on their health status, origin and destination, and specific information about their flights. In the brief presented, **IFEX-ALC** highlighted the potential negative impact of this type of tracking system on the work of journalists, sources, and human rights defenders.

CONTENT MODERATION, HATE SPEECH AND INFORMATION INTEGRITY IN THE NEW PUBLIC SQUARE

Another central issue in the digital agenda many members have been working on is the role of social media and the perception that internet platforms constitute the new public square. A main concern has been the role of private companies that operate in this space and their accountability for rights violations that occur online.

In 2021, following some high-profile actions by the so called ‘Big Techs’ that included the blocking and/or banning of former US president Donald Trump and some of his allies, **IFEX** put together a StoryMap that featured quotes from a few selected **IFEX** members who shared their perspectives on content moderation issues. The piece, *Who should control what gets shared over social media?* provides a strong regional and civil society lens on the global issue of content moderation and its relation to digital authoritarianism. For Mishi Choudhary, founder of **IFEX** member the Software Freedom Law Centre in India (SFLC.in) and an **IFEX** Council member, *“Social media platforms, which enable their users to publish their thoughts and emotions directly, have become the largest and most influential media companies on the planet. They now tightly ‘oligopolise’ the digital advertising market that they have transformed through large-scale privacy invasion. These are directed against*

**DIGITALIZATION HAS TAKEN HOLD
OF SO MANY ASPECTS OF OUR LIVES**

▶ PLAYING FAST AND LOOSE WITH FACTS - RIGHT TO INFORMATION

those very users who make and consume their content, whose every breath and movement online they have arranged to spy on.”

The arbitrariness of these companies in their content moderation policies and practices was highlighted by Observacom, an Americas region member whose work was supported by **IFEX**. It launched a campaign to inform internet users about the terms and conditions and other content moderation policies adopted by the largest social media platforms, and how these norms could affect their right to freedom of expression and information. The campaign is built on the premise that securing users’ rights is fundamental to ensuring the dissemination and exchange of information as well as robust debate around diverse ideas and opinions on topics of public interest over social networks. It included sharing information about mechanisms and tools that can be used to protect these rights.

An example of how content moderation rules and practices can result in curtailing investigative journalism is the case of Sudestada v. Google. Articles published online by journalist Fabián Werner in the news portal Sudestada were removed from Google search results, with no opportunity for defense before removal or due process. **IFEX** members Cainfo and Observacom supported Sudestada in filing a ground-breaking lawsuit against Google. In support of the case, **IFEX-ALC** collaborated with Alianza Regional por la libre expresión e información on an Amicus Brief presented to the Uruguayan court on the case. It focuses on the implications of the so-called “right to be forgotten” and how it can be used to restrict the dissemination of information about irregularities and corruption in public affairs.

Another serious critique of social media platforms has been their lack of systematic action to significantly reduce the circulation of hateful and hatred filled content online, especially speech targeting minorities, women, and groups in vulnerable situations. Much of this content has been

fueled for political purposes, particularly by regimes and leaders embracing authoritarian practices.

In response to this concerning context, **IFEX** provided support to the work of members, for example to the South East European Network for Professionalization of Media (SEENPM) for the organization of its annual network meeting where members not only discussed the situation of hate speech and issues of information integrity online, but coordinated efforts to counter these trends in the Balkans region.

IFEX has also been contributing to the efforts of the Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA) to empower journalists, human rights defenders, and lawyers in Uganda with the requisite skills, knowledge, and tools to advance digital safety and rights, including freedom of expression, access to information, and safety of human rights defenders in the context of COVID-19 and in the aftermath of a contentious and violent general election in 2021. The project has a particular focus on combating information disorders that became rampant in the electoral context. CIPESA has shown how the government has used the excuse of “fake news” to justify arrests and detentions.



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IFEX has promoted material by CIPESA and the Human Rights Network for Journalists - Uganda (HRNJ-U) that show how the right to information has been impacted during the pandemic in that country – the threats and restrictions faced by media workers attempting to report on the pandemic, as well as digital taxes meant to raise revenues in light of the related economic crisis which have thrown up

new barriers for citizens, especially under-employed and unemployed youth, to access the internet.

Challenges posed by an overwhelming amount of hate speech and serious threats to information integrity have also been observed in the MENA region. **IFEX** produced a [regional brief](#) highlighting how Egypt uses accusations of “spreading false news” to target protestors, academics and others.

ALSO IN THE MENA REGION, IFEX MEMBER 7AMLEH HAS BEEN STRENGTHENING ITS EFFORTS TO TACKLE CASES OF INCITEMENT TO VIOLENCE, MISINFORMATION, AND DE-PLATFORMING OF PALESTINIAN CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS, THROUGH IMPROVED DOCUMENTATION.

In May 2021, given the intensification of violations observed by 7amleh, the organization launched an effort to strengthen its reporting and documentation with direct support from IFEX. First, a Google form in English, Arabic, German, Spanish, French, Dutch, and Italian was created to allow civil society in Palestine, as well as people all over the world speaking out for Palestinian rights, to report on digital rights violations. Months later, the Palestinian Observatory of Digital Rights Violations (7or) was launched. 7or is the first open-source online platform to monitor, document and follow up on the violations of Palestinians’ digital rights. During 2021, the platform documented 1010 such cases. The data collected was crucial to guide 7amleh’s

institutional strategies.

Some of the cases documented were directly taken to and discussed with social media platforms. For example, 7amleh addressed incitement to violence against Palestinians on Telegram by submitting cases to Telegram through the Tech Against Terrorism platform, and successfully had several groups that were organizing violence against Palestinians and Arabs closed down. As a result of the constant advocacy targeting these companies, 7amleh was invited by Twitter to become a member of its Trust and Safety Council, and in particular the Human and Digital Rights Advisory Group, in June 2021. As a member, 7amleh is advising Twitter on the impact of their policies on human and digital

rights, and advocating for adherence to digital rights. 7amleh has also been participating in Facebook’s ‘Trusted Partner’ program and has contributed to the development and evaluation of Facebook policies.

The material collected by 7amleh was also used in international advocacy efforts before international organizations, such as the United Nations Human Rights Council and the European Union human rights bodies.

The documentation of digital rights violations through the initial Google form and dedicated database was designed to take into account violations targeting women, specifically through a template on gender-based violence online (GBVO) and smear

campaigns. According to 7amleh data, 18 out of 20 cases of smear campaigns in their last reporting period were directed against women. All documentation templates were designed to include a question on gender. The database team has gone through several rounds of feedback and evaluation in order to include diversity as a core element; for this purpose, 7amleh held a number of meetings with women’s rights groups.

IFEX support was timely and flexible. 7amleh was able to not only successfully manage a prompt response in a time of crisis –when violations saw a peak – but also to build on these circumstances to create a large-scale monitoring system for the long-run within a short period of time.

▶ PLAYING FAST AND LOOSE WITH FACTS - RIGHT TO INFORMATION

In particular, the brief looked at the case of activist Sanaa Seif, who was sentenced to 18 months in prison for disseminating “false news on the deterioration of the country’s health situation, and the spread of the coronavirus in prison” and “misusing social media”. Sanaa was released in December 2021. Another case brought to **IFEX’s** attention involved Ahmed Samir Santawy, an academic researching women’s reproductive rights, who was arrested and accused of spreading false news on social media.

PROMOTING PROGRESSIVE STANDARD SETTING

The work of members in 2021 made it evident that when autocratic regimes and ultra conservative actors are unable to control and manipulate information circulating online, they seek to restrict access to the internet altogether. **IFEX** brought member perspectives to UN human rights bodies and other international fora and highlighted the tendency of governments in different parts of the world to impose internet disruptions, including shutdowns. **IFEX** also highlighted the challenges network shutdowns pose to freedom of expression, and more specifically to the work of media and human rights defenders, including during a panel that launched SFLC.in’s new internet shutdown tracker (see more on that, below).

IFEX-ALC has been especially articulate in its interaction with regional human rights bodies in relation to digital rights. The regional network organized a number of activities with the IACHR’s Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression in order to collaborate in an ongoing multi-stakeholder dialogue on concrete actions needed to address content moderation challenges, the deterioration of public debate, and digital literacy needs in the Americas. New freedom of expression regional standards are expected as a final output of this process. **IFEX-ALC**, as partner in this initiative, disseminated news about the process, put together a dedicated guide to facilitate participation of civil society and hosted



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a meeting with **IFEX-ALC** members and the Special Rapporteur's office to collect inputs.

CREATING SPACES FOR DEBATE AND INNOVATION

In the MENA region, **IFEX** supported member Social Media Exchange (SMEX) in expanding its reach in facilitating a regional digital rights community. One of its key, related activities is the organization of the annual Bread&Net conference.

In 2021, Bread&Net welcomed around 1000 participants from 74 countries to take part in the regional discourse on digital rights and freedoms in the Arabic-speaking world. Over the course of four days, technologists, organizers, researchers,

lawyers, and journalists brought forth their ideas, concerns, insights, and recommendations in the four key areas of policy advocacy in difficult contexts, digital security in practice, technology as a resource, and resistance communities. With critical discussions tackling topics including re-envisioning the Santa Clara Principles, increasing digital accessibility, and combating cyber-violence against women journalists and the LGBTQI+ community, Bread&Net has become a major networking and exchange event in the region, and has increasingly attracted the interest and participation of digital rights groups from other regions, creating important opportunities to disseminate information on the challenges facing civil society in the MENA region.

IN THE SHADOWS OF THE PANDEMIC

Access to public information has

been especially critical during the pandemic. At the same time that the health emergency required individuals and communities to inform themselves and make decisions – on issues such as access to vaccines, preventive measures against contamination, availability of medical services – governments have sought to limit access to information, mainly due to concerns about public scrutiny of their handling of the crisis.

In the midst of restrictions on access to

information – both in law and in practice – being imposed around the globe, IFEX members in Africa continued their longstanding, persistent and innovative work to ensure the formal recognition of this right.

In 2016, the Gambia Press Union (GPU) initiated efforts to push for the development of an Access to Information bill in the country. After a series of consultative meetings with the government and other civil society organizations, the GPU collaborated with TANGO (The Association

of NGOs) to establish the CSO Coalition on Access to Information. After three years of work by the Coalition, with support from the African Freedom of Expression Exchange - AFEX (IFEX's regional network of members in Africa), a draft bill was first presented to the National Assembly in December 2019 by the Ministry of Justice for enactment. The Bill went through a series of reviews both at the national and international levels.

On 1 July 2021, the Access to Information Bill was passed by the

National Assembly. It is the first time in the history of The Gambia that the right of access to information is legally recognized as a human right.

The landmark law is the culmination of years of coordinated efforts and dedication by GPU, in collaboration with many IFEX members in Africa who have contributed to significant progress at the global level as well, as evidenced by the milestone success of creating an International Day for the Universal Access to Information in 2020.



CLOSING
SHOP ON
CIVIC SPACE



HOT SPOTS – BE THERE, JOIN FORCES

Civic space continues to be seriously undermined in a number of countries, with hot spots where democratic institutions are in direct and imminent threat. In some of these countries, including Belarus, Afghanistan, Myanmar and Nicaragua, **IFEX** members have worked together to confront freedom of expression and information restrictions.

These emergency situations relate not only to the pandemic, but to oppressive and authoritarian practices that have forced civil society organizations to pivot in their work in order to respond effectively. This was the case with the **IFEX** network. We heard members' and partners' calls for improved coordination to face critical scenarios, and stepped in as a leading voice promoting coalition-building and joint actions. **IFEX** has been able to play a central role promoting synergy and cooperation amongst partners, prioritizing local voices, and providing direct support in critical circumstances. We are breaking new ground in working with very diverse groups, and have invested time, resources and trust to build collectively. 2021 was a year for innovating in this front, and we consider the results have been both promising and encouraging.

The challenge, of course, is that other urgent situations continue to emerge. While we recognize and will respond to the need for action in relation to unfolding/upcoming situations, **IFEX** will continue to make long-term investments in the issues, projects and initiatives it takes on. 2022 will be a time for

consolidating the learning from the experiences of 2021, and keeping our ears to the ground.

THE AFGHANISTAN DISPATCH

On 30 August 2021, the United States completed its withdrawal from Afghanistan, and the Taliban took control. Ahead of the G7 summit on the situation, **IFEX** and members, along with partner organizations, called on G7 countries to make a clear and explicit commitment to making the safety of journalists and media workers an urgent and immediate priority, ensure their protection, and evacuate them and their families.

In the fall of 2021, **IFEX** launched the Afghanistan Dispatch – a space where organizations that are supporting efforts during the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan connect over updated and trustworthy information, in order to operate more efficiently. The weekly exchange included information on context, vulnerable groups, different international efforts, and resources. In late 2021, the Dispatch Convo initiative was piloted. **IFEX** organised a virtual meeting of organizations working in and on Afghanistan to discuss the best ways to keep the information flow up and running, provide broad access to pertinent facts regarding the human rights situation in the country, share data to save time and catalyze efforts, and avoid possible mistakes and duplication of work. The focus was the protection of journalists and human rights defenders covering rights abuses by the new government and government backed groups.

“ MINDFULLY MOBILIZING GLOBAL COLLABORATION ”

SOME OF THE MAIN TAKEAWAYS FROM THE DISPATCH CONVO INCLUDED:



The need for some consensus on safe, efficient and verified information sharing techniques, with a recognition that not everything works for everyone in the same way.



The importance of mapping and exchanging information on new channels for the sharing and receiving of information – which keep appearing.



Despite being crucial for the work, information coming from and returning to Afghanistan could be halted at any time. Organizations need to be prepared for that and develop concrete plans on how to manage the situation if it occurs.



Organizations should continue exploring avenues to strengthen its communication channels with governments in charge of resettlement and relocation of vulnerable groups.

The Dispatch has provided a space for exchange in a critical moment of humanitarian and human rights crisis, and demonstrated **IFEX** leadership in coordinating efforts to improve results in the coverage of the conflict and to better support journalists and organizations on the ground.

Dispatch recipients expressed their satisfaction with the initiative: *“Dispatch is massively helpful, extremely good on context.”* *“Dispatch has been valuable. Working on the ground has made this info sharing essential. Pace of developments makes it hard to get info.”*

As we transition from an emergency to an ongoing crisis in Afghanistan, the focus is slowly shifting from

immediate evacuation to protection for vulnerable groups that remain in the country and resettlement for those who have left, as well as preserving and supporting civic space and the free flow of information (including independent media) inside Afghanistan, and among its diaspora. In partial exile to provide holistic support.

As long as it remains relevant, we will continue to produce and host the Dispatch, facilitate an agile emergency response in the shorter term, and a sustainable crisis management mechanism in the medium-to-longer term. **IFEX** remains committed and flexible in order to provide the type of support considered most relevant by those on the ground.

THE BELARUS COORDINATION GROUP

Another country suffering under tyrannical leadership in 2021 was Belarus. Here as well, **IFEX** work concentrated on coordinating efforts with members and partners for direct support, circulation of information, and international advocacy.

Since 2020, regular meetings have been carried out by a coordinating group which **IFEX** helped establish; frequent exchanges of information, plans, and strategy discussions took place. A shared document was created for the compilation of that information, which also served as a tool for partners to come together around initiatives that required rapid response, and to identify new opportunities for coordination and collaboration.

An example of a coordinated intervention took place at the 48th session of the Human Rights Council. The group presented joint recommendations to the Office of the High Commission for Human Rights (OHCHR) and member states aimed at strengthening UN monitoring of the human rights situation in Belarus.

IFEX led the group's response to Belarus's hijacking of a Ryanair flight and detention of editor and blogger Raman Pratasevich, putting out a [joint statement](#) and recommendations to the international community.

IFEX has also been compiling an ongoing [Belarus Chronology since 2020](#). The chronology provides monthly information about developments on the ground, giving prominence to the voice of local organizations, with the goal of supporting the advocacy efforts of the Belarus coordination group and others involved in related advocacy. The Chronology has been a unique source for a clear, organized and systematized overview of the freedom of expression situation in the country.

The second half of 2021 saw a drastic escalation of attacks against civil society organizations and independent media in Belarus, including direct targeting of **IFEX** member the Belarusian

IN BELARUS IN 2021 THERE WERE RECORDED:

146

Raids on journalists'
homes and offices

13

Media groups
labelled "extremist"

113

Journalists
arrested

270+

Belarusian civil society
groups **forced to close**

* Sources: BAJ, PEN Belarus.



TOGETHER OUR
VOICES CAN
PROTECT FREE
EXPRESSION

Association of Journalists (BAJ) and close local partner organization, PEN Belarus.

In August 2021, **IFEX**, its members and partners issued an urgent call to the international community to show solidarity with all Belarusian individuals and organizations who are struggling for their basic human rights, often at great risk to their livelihoods – and their lives. The groups made a plea for intensified international efforts to pressure the Lukashenka administration to change course and respect the human rights of the Belarusian people.

That same month, IFEX issued a statement in support of BAJ following a politically-motivated decision by the Belarus Supreme Court to legally liquidate the organization. **IFEX** again called on the international community to support all Belarusian journalists and rights defenders.

CRACKDOWN IN MYANMAR

In February 2021 in Myanmar, the military junta seized power and violently suppressed nationwide peaceful and democratic protests. The crackdown on independent media and freedom of expression within the country that immediately followed has dramatically degraded press freedom.

Shortly after seizing power, the junta amended section 505A of the Penal Code to criminalize comments that supposedly “cause fear,” spread misinformation, or incite crimes against government employees. Offences under that section are non-bailable and subject to arrest without a warrant,

with a guilty charge punishable by up to three years in prison. In July, **IFEX** called on Myanmar’s military junta to drop all charges under Penal Code section 505A and to immediately release all protestors and journalists detained under it and other laws. At that time, there were reports of over 6,500 people who had been arrested, charged, or sentenced.

Women human rights defenders and journalists have been at particular risk of arrest under the legislation. On 8 April, Thin Thin Aung, co-founder of **IFEX** member Mizzima, was arrested in Yangon along with James Pu Thoure, a staff member. Her house was ransacked, her computer seized, and the entirety of her and her news outlet’s funds were removed. Both were taken to Mingalardon interrogation center (Yay Kyi Aing) for two weeks, before being transferred to Yangon’s Insein prison on 21 April. Both were later freed, among 10,000 prisoners released on 19 October.

IFEX also continued to call for the restoration of media licenses to Mizzima News and other media outlets that have played an essential role in shedding light on the violence inflicted by the junta against their own people. Despite having to flee and disperse for safety, they kept up their reporting, from hidden locations.

Advocacy letters were sent to Media Freedom Coalition country embassies in Thailand and India, highlighting the barriers faced by journalists and media workers forced to leave Myanmar under the ongoing threat of detention, physical violence, and other forms of persecution since the military coup,

MISINFORMATION
SHOULDN'T BE A
BUSINESS MODEL

DEMOCRACY
ISN'T AFRAID
OF WORDS

PROTECT
CIVIC SPACE

as well as their continued insecurity in Thailand and India. The letters called on officials to leverage their relationship with Thai state officials to voice concern for their safety, and to support the rights of journalists and media workers who have fled Myanmar, fearing for their lives.

IFEX has consistently kept the situation in Myanmar as a priority, including regularly and prominently including updates in our Regional Briefs for Asia-Pacific and sharing member statements in cases of imprisonment.

WHEN IS AN ELECTION NOT AN ELECTION? TURBULENT TIMES IN NICARAGUA

Since officials and state security forces responded to widespread protests in April 2018 with a brutal crackdown on protesters and the media, Nicaragua has become an ever-more hostile climate for the press. News outlets have been forced to close, and individual journalists have been threatened, harassed, sued, surveilled, and jailed, as dozens more fled the country for their safety.

In February 2021, PEN Nicaragua and the Violeta

Barrios de Chamorro Foundation announced that they were suspending operations in Nicaragua due to concerns about potential prosecution under the Foreign Agents Law, which requires individuals and organizations that receive funding from outside Nicaragua to register as “foreign agents” with the Interior Ministry. Following these suspensions, journalists’ union Periodistas y Comunicadores de Nicaragua (PCIN) declared a “permanent alert” due to the increased risk of practicing journalism in the country.

In view of the deteriorating state of freedom of expression in the country, **IFEX-ALC**, **AMARC-ALC**, Committee to Protect Journalists, Pen International, Race and Equality, and Voces del Sur began to coordinate efforts to share information and identify opportunities to coordinate, in order to be more effective around strategies that (i) promote greater respect and protection of the right to freedom of expression and information and ensure that the issue is present on the regional and international agenda for freedom of expression; and (ii) support and demonstrate solidarity with those who have seen their human rights affected as a result of the exercise of their freedom of expression (journalists, human

rights defenders, protesters). The organizations learned via reports from affected journalists that they were being subjected to excessive scrutiny, insults and assaults while carrying out their work. They were also forced to remove their face masks, used for preventing the spread of COVID-19, in order to be photographed. Journalists also reported incidents of sexual abuse. In May 2021, through a [joint statement](#), the Nicaragua coordination group expressed concerns with an environment that was openly hostile toward journalism.

By July 2021, the Nicaraguan Customs Authority (DGA) refused to grant constitutionally guaranteed tax exemptions to La Prensa, Nicaragua's oldest

newspaper, for imported paper and other supplies necessary for the newspaper to operate. As a result, [August 2021](#) marked the last print edition of [La Prensa](#). At that point, a number of the paper's executives were imprisoned, including Cristiana Chamorro, Pedro Joaquín Chamorro and Juan Lorenzo Holmann, as well as presidential candidate and journalist Miguel Mora, sports journalist Miguel Mendoza, political commentator Jaime Arellano, and others. The Nicaragua coordination group held meetings with high level officials at the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights to report on the situation of freedom of expression and information in Nicaragua.

IN NOVEMBER, THE NICARAGUA COORDINATION GROUP EXPRESSED DEEP CONCERN WITH THE CRACKDOWN AGAINST JOURNALISTS OBSERVED IN THE RUN-UP TO THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS, HIGHLIGHTING:



The cancelation of the legal status of more than 50 non-governmental organizations



The judicial persecution against journalists



Repeated arbitrary raids and seizures against journalists



Mass exile of journalists and the stripping of passports of others, in order to prevent them from leaving the country



Numerous stigmatising campaigns on social media

IFEX-ALC and its partners stressed that these events were taking place in a context that lacked even the minimal conditions for free, fair and transparent elections.

The coordination group continued to closely monitor developments on the ground till the end of 2021, sought to give visibility to the worsening circumstances, and brought information on Nicaragua to international fora such as the IACHR and to the UN Special Rapporteurs. The work continues in 2022.

COLLABORATION... WITH BENEFITS

In addition to supporting local actors, the Nicaraguan collaboration initiative has allowed the strengthening of relationships with allies outside of the network such as Race and Equality, and Voces del Sur. **IFEX-ALC** has been keen to reach beyond the countries within which **IFEX-ALC** members work, to collaborate where there is benefit to highlighting, promoting and defending freedom of expression and information issues. The 2021 work in Nicaragua was one of the first times that the network collaborated to take this initiative forward, and it has proven to be a successful story of solidarity and synergy on many levels.

This marks another step in the consolidation and determination of the regional network. **IFEX-ALC** has developed and matured as a force to be reckoned with, speaking strongly with its own collective voice. Its members are very active and busy as individual organizations that value the network as a space for exchanging and collectively reaching out to other situations of concern in their region.

READYING RESISTANCE – MEMBERS FACING EMERGENCIES

In addition to the initiatives described above and other efforts promoting coordination and collaboration, **IFEX** took action to provide direct support to assist members with their plans in facing immediate threats and challenges to the civic space in their countries.

In Hungary in recent years, civic space has become severely strained with ongoing attacks on civil society organizations and journalists, and the rampant closure or capture of independent media outlets. This has created a climate that is not conducive to free and fair national elections set to take place in 2022. In 2021. In the face of this, the Centre for Independent Journalism - Hungary (CIJ-Hungary) began working to equip independent media outlets with the information and skills needed to ensure that watchdog functions continue, and that they are able to effectively resist attacks and smear campaigns during the electoral period.

With funding from **IFEX**, CIJ-Hungary also began a project to host public roundtable discussions and direct trainings of journalists, independent media, and free speech activists on topics such as the safety of journalists, digital security, reporting on diversity (including the LGBTQI+ and Roma communities), coping with smear campaigns, strengthening solidarity among journalists, countering mis/disinformation, SLAPPs, covering the coronavirus epidemic, and access to information of public interest.

**IFEX-ALC HAS DEVELOPED AND MATURED AS
A FORCE TO BE RECKONED WITH, SPEAKING
STRONGLY WITH ITS OWN COLLECTIVE VOICE.**

THE BIG SWEEP – SURVEILLANCE

A common safety concern among civil society groups and journalists has been the surge in surveillance. Recognizing its dangerous and pernicious impact on the media and CSOs, as well as its overall chilling impact on expression, **IFEX** made a concerted effort throughout 2021 to out this trend through stories about surveillance in its regional briefs. We also made surveillance of journalists the focus of the MENA Regional Spotlight article released in August, and made surveillance the focus of our Op Ed – [Stalking the messenger: Ending impunity for illegal surveillance](#) – and [Twitter threads](#) for the International Day to End Impunity - IDEI, in addition to curating a good number of member pieces about the issue throughout the year.

In July, for example, **IFEX's** [regional brief for the Americas](#) highlighted the use of Pegasus in Mexico. According to Mexican award-winning journalist Carmen Aristegui, up to 21 July 2021, based on information from publicly known contracts, the government of former president Enrique Peña Nieto invested at least 950 million pesos in licenses to carry out government espionage. **IFEX** members in Mexico have stressed that urgent measures should be taken to guarantee both the non-repetition of spying practices, and the full clarification of the facts concerning the acquisition, illegal use and cover-up of the Pegasus malware use by government bodies and agencies.

In August, the [MENA regional spotlight](#) amplified

stories of mass surveillance in that region. The brief reported on accounts from Citizen Lab and Red Line for Gulf that identified nine Bahraini rights workers, including three staff members from **IFEX** member the Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR), who were hacked with NSO Group's Pegasus spyware between June 2020 and February 2021. The report found that some of the activists were hacked using two zero-click iMessage exploits: the 2020 KISMET exploit and a new exploit dubbed FORCEDENTRY, which bypasses the iPhone's messaging security features.

In November, **IFEX's** Op Ed warned that *“increasingly used as a laser-focused tactic, a weapon to intimidate, instil fear, and paralyse the work of journalists, this kind of surveillance puts sources at risk and impedes journalists from providing us with information to expose crime and corruption, and to speak the truth about power.”*

IFEX highlighted the individual and collective severe impacts of mass surveillance, and encouraged organizations struggling against it to draw inspiration from the fight to end impunity in cases of crimes against journalists:

BACK TO THE STREETS

After months of constraints related to the pandemic, street protests in many countries started to build again in 2021, some fueled by disagreement with the manner in which authorities handled the

“THERE IS A MASSIVE, GLOBAL NETWORK OF PEOPLE – WORKING IN DIFFERENT FIELDS, PERHAPS, OR FOCUSING ON DIFFERENT ISSUES – BUT WITH THE COMBINED SKILLS, EXPERTISE, AND CLOUT NEEDED TO ENSURE THAT ILLEGAL SURVEILLANCE DOES NOT GO UNCHALLENGED, THAT THOSE FOUND CULPABLE PAY A PRICE, AND THAT THIS PRICE EFFECTIVELY DETERS OTHERS. AS LONG AS WE KEEP LEVERAGING OPPORTUNITIES LIKE IDEI [INTERNATIONAL DAY TO END IMPUNITY FOR CRIMES AGAINST JOURNALISTS] TO COME TOGETHER, COLLABORATE, LEARN FROM AND SUPPORT EACH OTHER, RAISE OUR VOICES AND FIND STRATEGIC PRESSURE POINTS WHERE WE CAN HAVE A REAL IMPACT, WE CAN, AND WILL, COUNTER THE SCOURGE OF ILLEGAL SURVEILLANCE OF JOURNALISTS.”

health crisis, others fueled by discontent with the aggravation of the economic crisis, but all based in old structural socio-political tensions that re-erupted after months of imposed curfew and restricted movement.

This was the case, for example, with the large protests seen in 2021 in Colombia and Cuba. Authorities responded with violence and brutality.

During a public hearing at the Inter American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), **IFEX-ALC** and other regional organizations collaborated with and supported Cuban organizations in exposing the human rights and freedom of expression violations during and after the mass protests that took hold of the country on 11 July, 2021.

In mid-2021, in an open letter, **IFEX-ALC**, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) and the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) called on Colombian authorities to condemn the attacks against protesters – as well as against journalists covering protests – by police agents and security forces. The letter also highlighted the importance of the internet in the context of protests and the need to guarantee a free circulation of information online and offline during times of unrest.

IFEX has also provided support to the Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR) to work on a wide range of freedom of expression issues including freedom of assembly. Among other activities, CCHR monitors the state of freedom of association and assembly in the country through the application of a Monitoring Tracking Tool. Data is drawn from multiple sources including a desk review of the laws in place, to determine whether they meet international human rights standards; cases reported in the media; a public poll; a civil society organization and trade union leaders survey; and incidents reported directly by organizations or individuals. This is a collaborative project with partner non-governmental organizations Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association and the Solidarity Center, which allows

ONE SIDE OF
THE STORY IS
NOT ENOUGH

END
IMPUNITY,
FREE
EXPRESSION!

the data to be drawn from across the country. The project publishes an annual report each year, based on the findings from the monitoring activities, that provides an overview of trends concerning the exercise of fundamental freedoms in Cambodia.

Through its communications team and efforts, **IFEX** has curated these trends and amplified the work in this area being carried out by its members around the world. For example, we highlighted the forced dispersing of protests and the detention of demonstrators protesting economic conditions in Oman, as authorities restricted media reporting on the event. We also called attention to the situation of Tunisian LGBTQI+ activists who were targeted



**FREEDOM HOUSE
REPORTED IN 2021:**

11th

Consecutive year of
declining internet freedom

20

Countries that
**suspended
internet access**

21

**States that blocked
social media platforms**

45

Countries suspected
of **obtaining
sophisticated spyware
or data-extraction
technology from
private vendors**

**WHEN THE
INTERNET GOES
DOWN, DEMOCRACY
GOES WITH IT**

by security forces during protests, and who face online harassment in violation of their right to privacy and free expression. We amplified member concerns as authorities continued to arrest and intimidate protesting teacher union activists in Jordan, one year after they suspended the country's largest professional union.

**THE EXPANSION OF
ONLINE CIVIC SPACE**

Alert to the growing importance of online mobilization and activism, and the centrality of both online and offline freedom of expression, information and assembly to the contemporary public sphere, **IFEX** members have proposed and promoted a better understanding of 'online civic space'.

With **IFEX** support the Asociación por los Derechos Civiles (ADC) completed a project in 2021 that identified and mapped the online civic space and threats against it. The broader goal is to propose concrete policy recommendations for the protection of plurality and freedom in this space, and the project had a particular focus on applying a gender and sexual diversity lens to this analysis.

Shutdowns in India are too often an attempt to end protests and cut off the communication platforms that facilitate assembly in the country. SFLC.in has launched a comprehensive internet shutdown tracker and campaign. As part of the launch, a panel was organized to discuss the human rights impacts of internet shutdowns, and **IFEX** Executive Director Annie Game was invited to take part.



PLAYING IT SAFE
SAFETY AND JUSTICE



Stigmatizing speech and verbal attacks against the press have been increasingly common throughout the world, and they find especially fertile soil in social media. Members have highlighted how public officials, including at the highest levels, have used these tactics against independent press. In many places, this situation escalates into threats, acts of violence, and even murder.

In 2021, members continued to collaborate and provide various types of essential assistance – legal, psychological, financial – to journalists at risk, and have actively engaged in the design of public policies aimed at promoting increased safety and preventive measures.

POLITICALLY MOTIVATED VIOLENCE AGAINST JOURNALISTS AND RIGHTS DEFENDERS

The Gambian Press Union (GPU) received financial support from **IFEX** to promote the safe work of journalists in the run-up to the country's elections. It engaged the leaders of 17 of the 18 registered

political parties ahead of the December 2021 presidential election concerning the need to grant journalists adequate legal protection and alter existing legislation that may pose a threat to freedom of expression. The discussions also looked at how to address the rise in attacks on journalists by party militants.

Through GPU's engagement with the police high command, the Inspector General of Police (IGP) has now established a direct channel of communication with GPU to quickly alert the IGP office of any possible attack on journalists in the course of duty by any police officer.

IFEX also supported a project by the Human Rights Network for Journalists – Uganda (HRNJ-U), which offered emergency support to journalists and media practitioners in the country during the 2021 elections, strengthening the normative environment and protection practices.

In Egypt, **IFEX** directly called on authorities to immediately drop their politically-motivated

THE HRNJ-U PROJECT INCLUDED THE FOLLOWING ACTIVITIES, AMONG OTHERS:



Various emergency measures to ensure the safety of journalists and some of its staff during the election season. Such measures included rapid response and rescue by an assembled team, including lawyers and managers who were on standby to follow up on incidents (such as detentions, transfers of victims to safer hubs, medical support for victims and improved personal protection at work, in transit and home for high-risk individuals). HRNJ-U was able to extend emergency support to over 65 journalists before, during, and after the national elections in February 2021.



In order to secure concerted and holistic support for journalists in the country, HRNJ-U arranged three editors and managers meetings in Kampala (central region), Kabale, and Jinja. In the meetings a call was made by HRNJ-U to editors and managers to support journalists in the face of brutality prior, during, and after the February 2021 national elections in Uganda. This helped bridge the gap between the journalists and the news rooms/ board rooms in tackling common concerns during the election period and afterwards.

IFEX WAS THANKED FOR HELPING PAVE THE WAY FOR INTERNATIONAL AND LOCAL MEDIA ATTENTION ON THE UNPRECEDENTED ATTACKS ON TUNISIAN PUBLIC MEDIA AND JOURNALISTS.

prosecution of human rights defender Gamal Eid, describing it as the latest example of a sustained program of judicial harassment against him. Gamal Eid is a prominent lawyer, human rights defender and director of the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI), an **IFEX** member. Over the past 10 years, he has been subjected to an extensive campaign of judicial and physical harassment, including a travel ban, an assets freeze, and a brutal beating at the hands of Egyptian security forces. In a [statement published by IFEX in July](#), Annie Game affirmed that “Gamal is one of the strongest independent voices still fighting for human rights in a country that has been dismantling civil society and closing the space for freedom of expression and information for far too long.”

In Tunisia, **IFEX** actively contributed to the mobilization of rights groups to condemn the [police attack on the headquarters of Tunis Africa Press \(TAP\)](#), in Tunis, during which a number of its journalists and employees were assaulted while taking part in a peaceful sit-in. In a joint statement, civil society organizations demanded that those who ordered the police incursion into the premises of TAP and the assault of its journalists and employees be brought to justice.

STANDARD SETTING, REGULATIONS, AND POLICIES

Members also engaged in advocacy to promote advances in standard-setting in relation to safety issues at national, regional and international levels.

A number of members sought to promote improved regulations and policies on safety at the national level. This was the case, for example, of the Pakistan Press Foundation (PPF) and its sustained efforts to improve a draft [national journalist protection bill](#) in Pakistan and promote its passing into law. Lessons learned from PPF’s experience were shared by Owais Aslam Ali, Secretary General of PPF, and discussed with other members of the **IFEX** network during a dedicated convening, Tea with Owais. The convening served as a space for celebrating a success story and learning more about [PPF’s work](#); it also allowed for PPF to engage with other members of the **IFEX** network to identify best practices that could be applicable at the global level. After the convening, PPF stated that “*We found the experience of the online Tea to be very useful and important. The event was intimate and this allowed for serious interactions with other organizations interested in working for enacting media safety laws. The comments about pitfalls relating to implementing laws were also very useful that we will keep in mind as the process proceeds in Pakistan.*”

In Mongolia, **IFEX** provided resources for member Globe International Center to [promote the implementation of Human Rights Council Universal Periodic Review recommendations](#) concerning freedom of expression in the country. Activities were also carried out to lobby for an enabling legal environment for the work of journalists and human rights defenders, including by providing legal expertise for the drafting of a new version of the Media

Freedom law, and to campaign against worrisome provisions of a new Human Rights Defenders law and civil and criminal defamation legislation.

IFEX also directly supported work being done in relation to the case of Daphne Caruana Galizia, with a focus on broader policy change in Malta. **IFEX** joined others in a [statement](#) that urged the prime minister to ensure that those responsible for the murder of the investigative journalist be held accountable, and for the establishment of an Independent Commission of Experts to strengthen the normative environment and help to ensure justice for Daphne and other journalists moving forward.

In response to a call for inputs by the United National Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, **IFEX-ALC** submitted a report about the impact of the global pandemic on the work and safety of journalists in Latin America and the Caribbean. Their contribution fed into the OHCHR's report on the safety of journalists worldwide. The **IFEX-ALC** submission was based on information collected by the network between April and June 2020, when members were invited to share their reflections and concrete initiatives about how they were facing the pandemic.

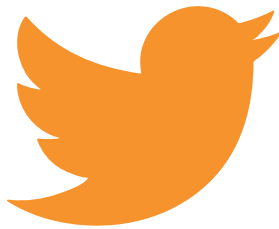
Members' coordinated efforts were also key to giving more visibility to violations in countries rarely discussed at the global level, but where the safety of journalists and human rights defenders has been threatened by oligarchs and their relationships with organized crime. **IFEX-ALC** and the Paraguay Journalists Union (SPP), for example, prepared and presented [a report on the state of freedom of expression and information in Paraguay](#) to the UN Human Rights Council. Advocacy around the report focused on recommendations to strengthen the normative environment and protection measures by Paraguayan public bodies. Another important set of recommendations touched on the need to improve justice to end impunity in crimes against journalists in Paraguay.

Another key initiative carried out in 2021 was the mobilization and advocacy around the Safety of



FEEL FREE
TO DISAGREE,
DISAGREE
TO FEEL FREE

WORKING TOGETHER, IFEX MEMBERS LITIGATED AROUND KEY INDIVIDUAL CASES.



@FatouJagneS: Thank @IFEX @AnnieGame for the positive steps and for always standing 4 free expression. Working together will continue to help us address the huge challenges faced by independent journalism.

- May 3, 2021

@NABEELRAJAB: @IFEX @IntIFreeEx Good job dear friends and wish all of you all the best - May 3, 2021

- May 3, 2021

@ErolOnderoglu: @IFEX @RSF_inter Many thanks dear @IFEX members and colleagues, for your precious support!

- Sep 29, 2021

Journalists Resolution by the UN General Assembly. It received the highest number of co-sponsoring states to date, including some states that **IFEX** members had reached out to at the request of the Secretariat.

LITIGATING IMPUNITY, AND OTHER PATHS TO JUSTICE

Working together, **IFEX** members litigated around key individual cases that saw important developments and some breakthroughs during 2021.

Two defamation lawsuits brought against Catherine Belton and her publisher Harper Collins were clearly SLAPPs (Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation). SLAPPs have been increasingly used to stifle freedom of expression. They drain their targets of as much time, money, and energy as possible in order to bully them into silence. The individual may be sued personally, and several lawsuits may be brought at the same time, including in different jurisdictions. These two lawsuits, which have since been dropped, were brought by Russian businessman Roman Abramovich and the Russian state energy company Rosneft in relation to Belton's book, *Putin's People: How the KGB took back Russia and then took on the West*, published in April 2020. In a joint statement, **IFEX** and members urged the UK government to strengthen the normative environment by considering measures, including legislative reforms, that would protect public watchdogs from being subject to burdensome, lengthy, and financially draining legal actions, which can stifle public debate.

PLAYING THE LONG GAME: A VINDICATION OF THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN JOURNALISTS

Investigative journalist and women's rights advocate Jineth Bedoya Lima has long been a face that represents the struggles and courage of women journalists supported by IFEX members. In 2021, after more than 20 years, a ruling in her case marked an important moment in the recognition of the importance of women journalists, the challenges they face, the responsibility of the state, and the need to make a critical stand against gender-based violence.

On 25 May 2000, Bedoya was a reporter for *El Espectador* working on a story about violence and

corruption at a maximum-security prison that involved state officials and paramilitary groups. She was abducted, tortured, and raped by three paramilitaries. As they tortured her, Bedoya's attackers told her, "We are sending a message to the press in Colombia." The abduction took place in broad daylight and, it is suspected, with the complicity of local law enforcement.

Given a lack of progress at the national level, the case was taken to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, and, later, to the regional human rights court. Throughout the case, IFEX supported local

member Fundación para la Libertad de Prensa (FLIP) in the leading work they carried out for Jineth. In March 2021, IFEX submitted an Amicus Brief to the Inter-American Court. It explained the many impacts of impunity on the exercise of freedom of expression and how Jineth's case provided an opportunity to establish new standards in this area from a gender perspective.

During the procedure, IFEX quickly responded when representatives of the Colombian government left a key hearing, alleging a lack of impartiality on the part of the Court

judges. We urged the Colombian state to ensure Jineth's access to justice, and noted that its representatives' behaviour demonstrated "indifference, if not contempt, for the violence suffered by Bedoya and sen[t] a negative message to all journalists who are fighting against impunity." IFEX rapidly coordinated a response with other organizations working on the safety of journalists. A number of statements were published, and international pressure was channeled against Colombia's actions, and in support of the Court.

The pressure resulted in the re-engagement

of Colombian authorities, and on 21 October, a ruling was published. The Court ordered a series of reparation measures including symbolic measures and guarantees of non-repetition as reparation for the damages caused to Jineth Bedoya and to society at large. Among other measures, the Court ordered the State of Colombia to develop “a comprehensive policy for the protection of journalists”, as

well as to design and implement a public system for collecting up-to-date facts and figures on gender-based violence and on threats and violence against journalists and human rights defenders.

Bedoya’s case, in the end, is a success story. But it is so due to the relentless work of FLIP and its close partners, CEJIL in particular, who engaged for years through advocacy, litigation and direct support to Jineth.

It was only thanks to this intense and consistent effort that a result can be celebrated today. Without their expertise and commitment, Jineth would not have received the attention and respect she deserved. She knew she was not alone.

According to FLIP, the ruling “is dignifying not only for Jineth but represents hope for the thousands of victims of sexual violence during the Colombian armed conflict.”

Beyond that, the ruling created a paradigmatic precedent that has the potential to impact the lives of women journalists, human rights defenders, and victims of sexual violence in the Americas and around the globe. After the ruling was published, FLIP shared a letter with IFEX Deputy Executive Director Rachael Kay, which stated:

“On behalf of the Foundation for Press Freedom (FLIP) we would like to sincerely thank you for the support that IFEX has given us in the case of Jineth Bedoya Lima. (...)

On October 18, we were informed of the Court’s decision and we are comforted to know that after so many years and efforts, it seems that justice is finally coming our way. This would not have been possible without the support of IFEX all this time. (...)

Today we would like to express our gratitude for your commitment to this case, and we are deeply grateful for your willingness and solidarity. Please receive a cordial greeting from us and again our gratefulness for your support of this cause.”

THE COURT RECOGNIZED THE JOURNALIST'S RIGHT TO RECEIVE COMPENSATION, AS WELL AS REIMBURSEMENT FOR MEDICAL EXPENSES AND MEDICATION

IFEX-ALC members' solidarity was also important in the case of Alex da Silveira – a Brazilian journalist who lost his sight after being hit by a rubber bullet shot by the police while he was covering protests in Sao Paulo. Silveira underwent six eye surgeries and lost nearly all the vision in one eye, and in 2003, he filed a civil lawsuit seeking damages from the Sao Paulo state. After a negative decision at the state level, the case eventually moved to the Supreme Court.

In 2021, **IFEX-ALC** responded promptly to a request from **IFEX** member the Brazilian Association for Investigative Journalism (Abraji) to endorse [a letter to the Brazilian Supreme Court](#) about the case, highlighting the role of the Court in upholding freedom of expression and safety of journalists, and the impact the ruling could have as a precedent in other cases of journalists injured by police forces in the coverage of protests. The Court recognized the journalist's right to receive compensation, as well as reimbursement for medical expenses and medication. It overturned a decision by the Sao Paulo Court of Appeals that had judged Silveira responsible for his own injuries, based on the argument that he had put himself at risk by staying in the middle of the confrontation between police and protesting teachers.

The ruling is especially relevant given similar cases pending before the Brazilian Judiciary. Another emblematic case is that of photographer Sérgio Silva, who was also shot in the eye, while covering the June 2013 demonstrations, and who is still awaiting redress in the justice system. It is also worth noting the parallels in other countries in the region. In Chile more than 200 people were victims of serious eye trauma during the wave of protests that took place across the country at the end of 2020.





KEEPING THE
LIGHTS ON
**NETWORK
BUILDING**



▶ KEEPING THE LIGHTS ON NETWORK BUILDING

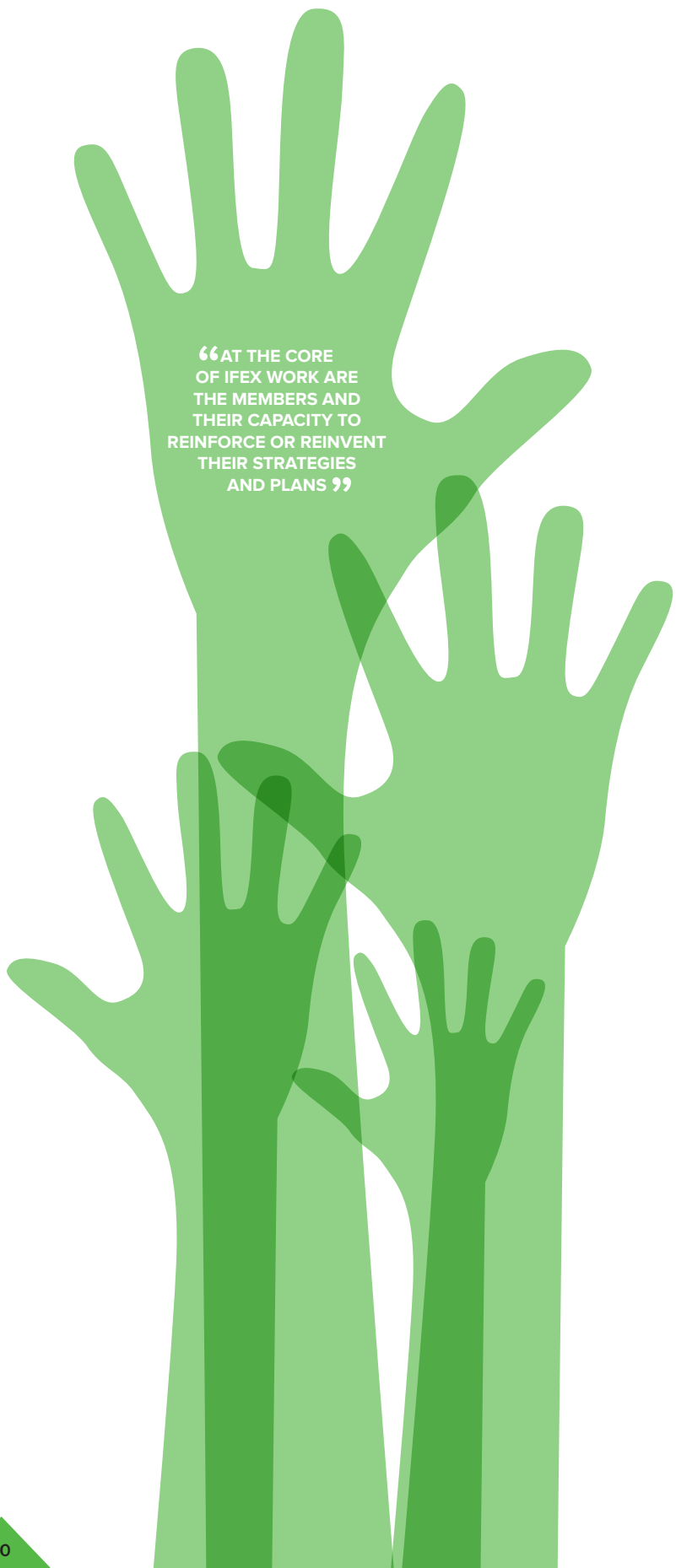
At the core of **IFEX** work are the members and their capacity to reinforce or reinvent their strategies and plans in view of tumultuous socio-political contexts, technology developments and unexpected crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

IFEX has worked hard to listen to members' shifting needs in these volatile times, to be responsive and provide relevant support. Members' needs have adapted to new realities, and **IFEX** has had to pivot in response.

New strategies and policies have been developed. In 2021, we worked on a new membership strategy, a renewed collaboration approach, an allyship plan, new granting schemes and the 'Innovating Change' project, described below. Change-making with solidarity, collective thinking, collaboration, and innovation has been our game.

In 2021, **IFEX** support was directed to members' work reassessing their environments and activities, escalating successful projects, and opening up new areas of work and / or cooperation.

In view of the anti-democratic trends and pandemic uncertainties, members sought the support of the network – both the Secretariat and peer members – to re-establish strong foundations for long term engagement, with renewed commitment to diversity, organizational wellbeing and safety, and adaptation and flexibility to major context changes. The pandemic and the oppression seen in so many contexts created much isolation; targeted outreach for communication and support provided a real sense of solidarity, common concerns and a shared commitment to keep the work moving forward.



“AT THE CORE
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AND PLANS”

KEEPING
CONNECTED,
BUILDING
ALLIANCES

CHANGE MAKING – INNOVATION IS THE WORD

With rising authoritarianism, exacerbated by the pandemic, IFEX’s traditional campaigning and advocacy tactics risk gaining less traction. As such, we need to shift our approaches to become more effective in creating change – and find ways to continue to adapt as contexts shift.

The ‘Innovating Change’ project arose from feedback provided

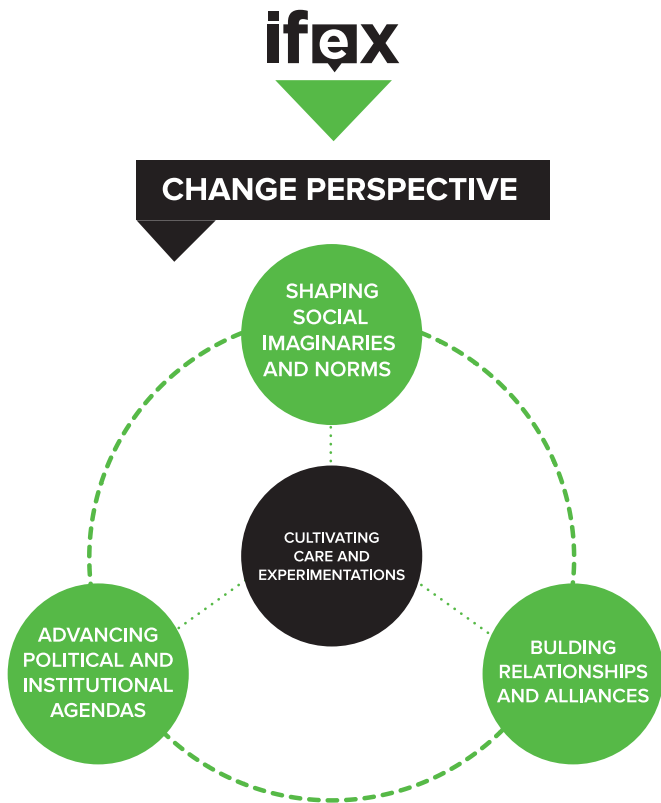
by IFEX members highlighting the need to identify novel tactics and strategies to achieve change. As a result, IFEX has engaged in over 20 conversations with advocates, activists and organizers from diverse sectors to understand how they are approaching the contextual changes and to learn from their experiences. This project also became an opportunity for IFEX to

strengthen connections with allies from outside the network.

We had a set of guiding criteria at the start of the process. Through our conversations we have been able to unpack the concept of Change-making into four key elements that we refer to as ‘spheres of change’.

These four spheres are highly interconnected and overlap with one another. Nevertheless,

they can be valuable to break down a complex conversation traversed by multiple phenomena (local, regional and global) into smaller and more manageable pieces. The four spheres of change can be used as a map to navigate the contextual challenges that are taking place, as well as a tool to discern the value of specific campaigning tactics and strategies.



THE FOUR SPHERES OF CHANGE ARE:

SHAPING SOCIAL IMAGINARIES AND NORMS

Shaping social imaginaries* and norms: Fostering a broader and deeper understanding of certain issues; creating an environment that will enable the desired change.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS AND ALLIANCES

Building relationships and alliances: Mobilizing the power of collaboration; creating opportunities to exchange experiences and enhance connections.

ADVANCING POLITICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL AGENDAS

Advancing political and institutional agendas: Engaging with local, regional or international democratic mechanisms to reverse unequal and unfair situations and to promote social justice.

CULTIVATING CARE AND EXPERIMENTATIONS

Cultivating care and experimentation: Balancing collective creativity and experimentation while creating a sense of support and security needed for individuals to flourish.

Thanks to the generous contributions of all those who participated in the Change-making Project we have been able to articulate this simple and intuitive approach around Change-making. We hope that this approach will allow us to continue listening and learning from one another, while enabling the conditions for genuine creativity, curiosity and surprise that we need to explore innovative tactics that achieve change.

In 2022, IFEX will continue this dialogue, bringing change-makers together to build on the analysis and to offer all of us new tools in our approaches to change.

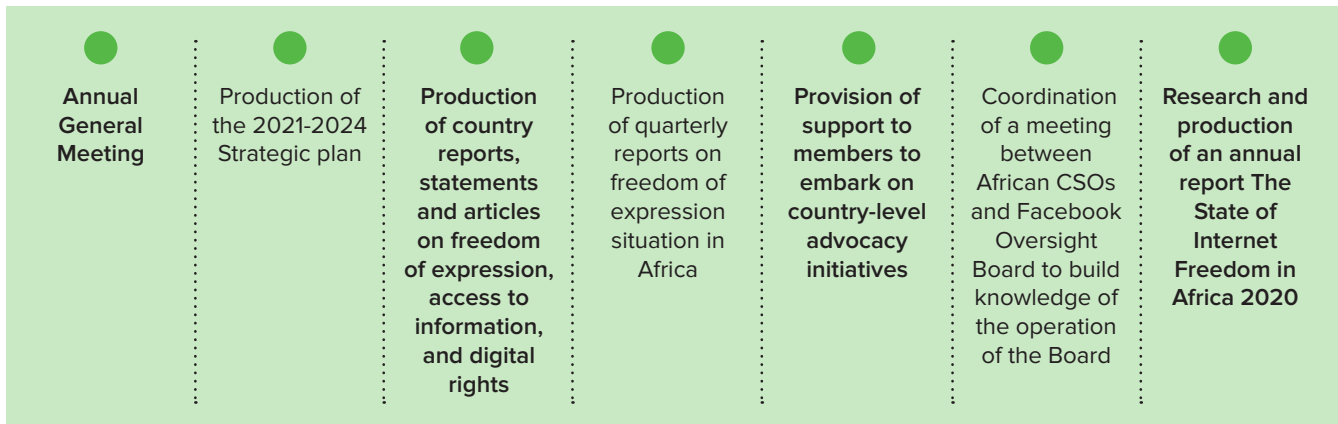
** Imaginaries are a set of values, laws, and symbols through which people imagine their social whole. It contains both the creative and symbolic dimensions through which human beings think about reality and represent their collective life.*

UPSCALING COOPERATION AFEX IN AFRICA

The African Freedom of Expression Exchange (AFEX) continental network, established in December 2013, includes some of the most influential media rights and freedom of expression organizations across the West, East, Central, and Southern Africa regions. AFEX is currently made up of 15 groups, all members of **IFEX**. While some AFEX members work in specific countries, others work across regional blocs.

With **IFEX** support, AFEX is seeking to improve the visibility and influence of the regional network, its members and their work.

A NEW PROJECT WAS LAUNCHED IN 2021, IN WHICH THE AFEX SECRETARIAT COORDINATED THE IMPLEMENTATION OF A BROAD RANGE OF ACTIVITIES:



Over the course of the year, more than 40 publications including country reports, analytical write-ups, statements, and articles were produced by the AFEX Secretariat, AFEX members, and consultants on freedom of expression, digital rights, access to information, the safety of journalists and other developments across Africa.

AFEX is looking to engage more with the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights and provide greater support to the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa, as part of efforts to better leverage the regional mechanism for the promotion and protection of freedom of expression on the continent. There are plans for AFEX and its members to establish a mechanism to routinely send the new Special Rapporteur information and reports on violations of the right to freedom of

expression as well as other developments in any country in the region.

In their feedback to **IFEX**, AFEX affirmed that it “is leveraging on its existing networks and building others by collaborating with other national, regional, and global actors from different sectors. The aim is to continue to be vibrant, relevant, and visible as a leading continental network of human rights and freedom of expression group on the continent, make our voice heard, and push for the protection of freedom of expression.”

The activities above are only a few examples, but they illustrate how AFEX has become a key space for catalyzing the work of members in the region and has addressed important gaps in the promotion of freedom of expression and information before regional human rights bodies.

“LEVERAGING ON ITS EXISTING NETWORKS AND BUILDING OTHERS BY COLLABORATING WITH OTHER NATIONAL, REGIONAL, AND GLOBAL ACTORS FROM DIFFERENT SECTORS ”

 AND ANOTHER THING...

At the time of writing, the second month of 2022, new chapters are being added to the autocrats' playbook. Destabilizing events with far-reaching and complex consequences are unfolding with Russia's invasion of Ukraine. We are looking at devastating impacts extending far beyond those two countries' borders including access to information restricted, disinformation weaponized and protests extinguished; all with civil society organisations left isolated and in the crosshairs of malevolent despots.

But IFEX will continue to grow, through its work, to meet these challenges. Our work in 2021 is a testament not only to our ability to adapt, but to the important role of networks to breach isolation and - through solidarity and strategic collaborations - to address crises, and bring about lasting change.

Looking ahead, our work will continue to be anchored by our experience, inspired by freedom of expression and information, driven by the need to defend civic space, and fueled by the passion and power of this network.

23 March 2022