

DISPATCHES: Let's talk about 2020...

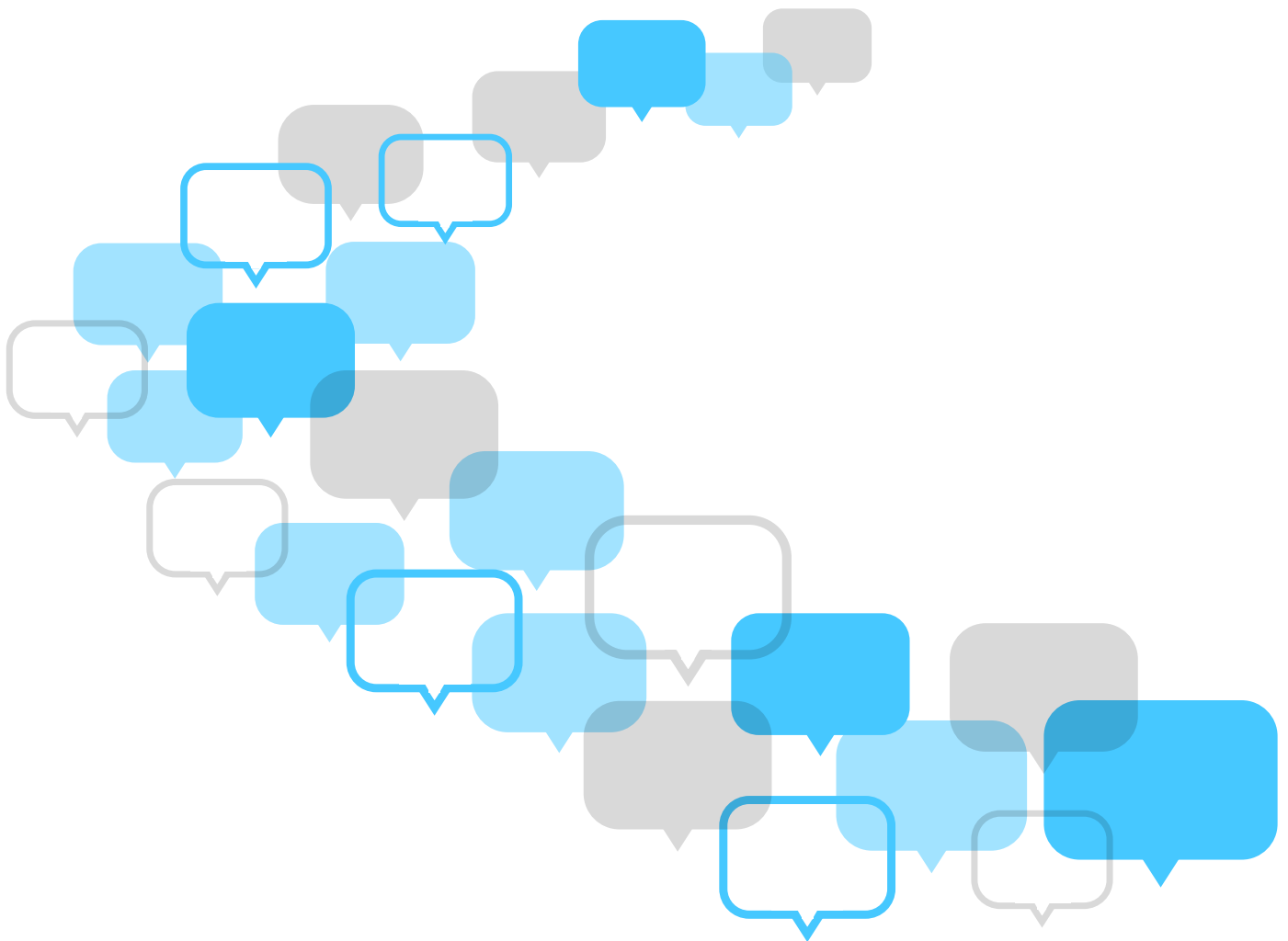


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Letter from the Executive Director

Let's talk about 2020.

It was the exciting first year of the roll-out of a new five-year Strategic Plan for IFEX. Would it stand the test of time, given the global upheaval that took place? Absolutely.

One thing was evident: our focus on the right to information could not have been more prescient.

Could our network weather the storm? Absolutely.

We reached out to all of our members early on, and decided to document some of their experiences – the contextualized challenges they were facing, the strategic solutions they were coming up with – in a project we call '[In our own words: IFEX voices from the pandemic](#)'. You'll see excerpts from their reflections on the impact of the global health crisis on them, personally, and on their work, throughout this report.

The pandemic forced us all to reexamine our priorities, recalibrate our paths, and draw on our experience, and to be creative and effective in our response. Listening to the members as they grappled with the challenges they faced provided us with the insight, analysis and direction on how best to direct our efforts and find ways to engage and support them in their important work.

We didn't take our eyes off the ball. In our [op-ed](#), we reinforced the powerful message we heard from members: that the work of promoting and defending human rights must never flag, even as we address this crisis.

Whether defending critical voices and the right to protest in Cambodia and Cuba, pushing back against crackdowns in Belarus and Turkey, mobilising to release human rights defenders from jail in Egypt, continuing to support efforts made in the investigation of the murder of Daphne Caruana Galizia, defending the rights of women journalists and human rights defenders in El Salvador, or providing emergency support to high-risk or detained journalists during Uganda's election season – pandemic or no pandemic, the IFEX network delivered.

The pandemic remains disruptive and unpredictable, and somewhat destabilizing for those with best-laid plans like IFEX. However, we ended the year feeling confident that we can apply what we learned, given that the network has shown that they can be resilient and safe, without sacrificing either their ideals or their voices.

As we move forward, the precept remains clear – **Be Safe, Not Silent**. And frankly, from what we have seen of IFEX members, silence is never an option.



Good to know: Right to information

When the year began, the right to information (RTI) was a brand new strategic goal area; one of four pillars in IFEX's 2020-2024 strategy. We envisaged a smooth transition over five years towards a greater focus on promoting and defending open, safe, and equitable access to information, its circulation and its integrity, both online and offline.

The year had other plans, as we saw a global pandemic render access to factual and timely

information a necessity to survival. Members confirmed as much when **IFEX reached out** to them during the onset of the pandemic, as part of our commitment to remaining informed, engaged, and connected with them in these disconnected times.

They expressed concerns about how the spread of COVID-19 has been accompanied by a surge in misinformation and disinformation, and, in some countries, government censorship, and underscored the growing

importance of RTI during the pandemic.

These conversations helped inform our decision to focus even more than we had envisaged on RTI as a strategic goal in the first year of our new Strategic Plan. Recognizing its vital importance to public health, and responding to member concerns and perspectives, **IFEX redirected resources** accordingly to fill critical needs, designing relevant and impactful responses in its **communications and network building** work.

Direct support to members

While the pandemic presented new problems and challenges, it also created new opportunities to advance RTI – even to build awareness and new allies. IFEX provided **support** to its members as they shared their concerns and made specific recommendations to governments in their local or regional contexts, or internationally. Issues they raised included data collection and surveillance and **privacy concerns** around contact-tracing apps, the online censorship of vital news, as well as the spread of **threats to information integrity** in an expanding “infodemic”.

IFEX provided grants to members working on pandemic-focused initiatives.

The **Centre for Independent Journalism (CIJ)**, in Romania, received support towards its

critical work monitoring the decisions authorities are taking to restrict FoE&I, while developing media literacy programs for the general public to empower them to resist and counter mis/disinformation.

IFEX also provided support to the timely and essential RTI work of several members in sub-Saharan Africa.

- The **Africa Freedom of Information Center (AFIC)** is building on their years of work in this field to advocate for the adoption of **access to information laws** in three countries, and to monitor their implementation. Advocacy messages will include specific asks for proposed access to information laws to ensure non-discrimination, and promotional measures to ensure that groups

including women, people with disabilities, and displaced persons are enabled to access and use public information.

- The **Collaboration on International ICT Policy in East and Southern Africa (CIPESA)** is documenting and researching COVID-19-related **copyright and surveillance** practices and policy responses by governments and relevant private actors, such as telecom companies, that affect peoples' right to information in Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania. They are integrating a diversity lens into reports and blogs that address the impact of COVID-19 interventions on the digital rights of women, youth, and persons living with disabilities.

- The **Center for Media Studies and Peacebuilding (CEMESP)**, in Liberia, is combatting pandemic misinformation. They are creating a credible information-generation and

information-sharing pathway, using access to information tools.

With authoritarian government threats very real, urgent, and quickly evolving in the pandemic,

these issues will need to be closely monitored during the global health crisis as well as in a post-pandemic era, where draconian measures are likely to linger long after the crisis has come to an end.

We are resolute

IFEX played a lead role alongside member **ARTICLE 19** to facilitate civil society input to the first **Human Rights Council (HRC) thematic resolution on freedom of opinion and expression** in almost a decade. Led by Brazil, Canada, Fiji, Namibia, Netherlands and Sweden, and co-sponsored by over 50 other countries, the resolution was adopted by consensus on 16 June 2020.

We worked closely with ARTICLE 19 throughout the negotiation process, shaping member input around key issues into positive language adopted by the resolution, including around: **RTI-related issues** such as internet shutdowns, encryption,

and anonymity; responses to mis/disinformation, counter-terrorism and extremism; and digital security.

Reaffirming that the right to freedom of expression constitutes one of the essential foundations of democratic societies and development, the resolution recognised this right as an important indicator of the level of protection of other human rights and freedoms. It also addressed the gender digital divide, and reaffirmed that the protection of the right to freedom of expression people have offline must be extended online.

With the last iteration of this resolution adopted in 2009, coordinating civil society input

and shepherding the resolution to the finish line was no easy feat. The process also involved dealing with hostile language introduced by Russia and like-minded states that placed undue emphasis on restrictions to the right to freedom of expression, and presented problematic interpretations of what constitutes ‘incitement’.

IFEX quickly learned from these challenges, and **developed new approaches** to help address similar obstacles with future resolutions. A few months later we would be applying the **lessons learned** from this process in our next battle: helping shape an HRC resolution on the safety of journalists (see section [“In hot pursuit: Safety and justice”](#)).



We'd like to inform you...

IFEX's communications team found ways to draw attention to RTI issues throughout 2020, while looking for opportunities to proactively integrate gendered perspectives.

As with all IFEX communications relating to COVID-19, we established a reassuring, informative tone, ensuring that our messaging was consistently clear and factual, and taking a targeted approach that would add value to the conversation – not add to the noise.

Here's a look at some of the work we did to promote open, safe and equitable access to information, its circulation and integrity, both online and offline, in 2020.

First International Day for Universal Access to Information

On 28 September, IFEX joined members to celebrate the first **International Day for Universal Access to Information (IDUAL)**. The Day was the culmination of years of **IFEX-supported advocacy** by members in Africa who, as part of the African Platform on Access to Information, tirelessly campaigned to have it recognised by the UN General Assembly.

Their successful advocacy proved all the more relevant and timely in 2020. For its first year, IDUAL's theme centered on the **right to information in times of crisis**, emphasising that having government policies that guarantee public access to information can “save lives, build trust, and help the formulation of sustainable policies through and beyond the COVID-19 crisis.”

IDUAL was a key opportunity for all of us at IFEX to reflect both on progress achieved, and challenges ahead. Our hope is that IDUAL will provide an annual opportunity for **IFEX to rally organisations** and focus attention on the importance of ensuring open, safe, and equitable access to reliable information, prompting states to reflect on their commitments, and work with civil society organisations and other stakeholders to ensure those commitments are met.

Help Break the Chain: #CheckBeforeYouShare

IFEX also marked IDUAL by helping to combat the scourge of misinformation. IFEX-ALC – the alliance of IFEX members in Latin America and the Caribbean – launched its Help Break the Chain [campaign](#), which highlighted the dangers of inadvertently sharing inaccurate information, emphasised the particularly serious implications of this phenomenon during a pandemic, and empowered individuals to be part of the solution. The innovative, IFEX-supported campaign shared [recommendations](#) on how to verify information discovered online, in an effort to encourage critical-thinking among users of social media platforms and messaging services.

A day dedicated to press freedom around the world

The essential role that journalists play in ensuring access to information is a given. Last year's World Press Freedom Day (WPFDF) was yet another annual

event that took on an entirely new look against the backdrop of COVID-19. IFEX decided to use the day to [promote](#) the wealth of information and resources that members, allies, and partners like UNESCO have produced to help journalists during this extremely challenging time.

Leveraging IFEX's growing social media, website, and weekly newsletter channels and audience, we broadcast, loud and clear, the importance of a **robust, pluralistic, and independent media** in ensuring our access to the information we need to be safe and healthy.

UNESCO's annual WPFDF conference had been moved online. They reached out to the **International Civil Society Organization on the Safety of Journalists Coalition (ICSOSOJ)** to help shape the session on the safety of journalists in the pandemic. As members of that coalition, IFEX co-organised a virtual session and was able to facilitate interventions by members and other key actors on this critical issue, including a speaker to discuss **gendered aspects of COVID-19's impact on journalists**.

As well as directly amplifying the work of members, IFEX used WPFDF to get the word out about key IFEX-produced resources, including our website's [Access to Information](#) hub, which received a record number of visits in 2020, reflecting enhanced concerns about access to information that came along with the pandemic. The hub page is continually refreshed with new content, helping readers stay up-to-date with how IFEX members are working to protect press

freedom and ensure open, safe, and equitable access to reliable information, **both online and offline**, at this critical time.

On time and on target

Our communications rely on and draw from the expertise of IFEX members, and that is particularly true when it comes to RTI. Many members are recognized experts, with years of experience advocating for online and offline information rights. They serve as a go-to source for information and insights for the whole network, as well as helping to inform and guide IFEX's RTI-focussed communications.

In addition to highlighting RTI-related issues in our regular communications channels, our weekly e-newsletters, and our monthly Regional Briefs, IFEX produced two **special editions** of the Asia Pacific and Africa briefs in 2020 to help curate the massive influx of information from members and beyond, as well as help counter the massive influx of mis/disinformation that have accompanied the crisis.

IFEX's **Asia Pacific** regional editor [explored](#) website blocking in Myanmar and court rulings in India censoring COVID-19 reporting, asking: "How can people get reliable data if they are disconnected from communication networks? What happens to media credibility if authorities mandate the reporting of government perspectives on the health crisis?" In **Sub-Saharan Africa**, IFEX's regional editor [examined](#) the

pandemic's impact on access to information and the efforts of media workers trying to verify COVID-19 reports in countries with declared states of emergency.

Equal time: a focus on gender

IFEX proactively seeks opportunities to bring a gendered lens to its communications on key thematic goal areas, and vice-versa: to integrate our key thematic goal areas into our gender-forward communications. For example, for 2020's **International Women's Day (IWD)**, we produced original feature articles with a particularly strong RTI lens.

The IWD series helped inform IFEX's growing readership on how our free expression rights and realities are gendered in a range of regional contexts. Articles were viewed **954** times across our website and Medium, and Twitter threads promoting them garnered over **135,214 views** across all four languages. Together, they helped yield a **137% increase** in impressions compared to our 2019 IWD content performance.

From the fundamental question of access, to the growing issue of mis/disinformation, IFEX published dedicated pieces with integrated gendered perspectives, highlighting: the greater barriers among women in [Africa](#) to accessing information online and offline, restrictions to information on reproductive rights in [Europe](#), and how access to information by women in the [MENA](#) region is restricted, silenced, and smeared.

WPF on Twitter, by the Numbers:

287,000

number of views our Twitter campaign garnered during the campaign.

82,500

number of views for our English-language Twitter thread, which was also the most retweeted English IFEX thread ever.

57,000

number of views for our Spanish-language Twitter thread, which was also the most liked and retweeted Spanish IFEX thread ever.

15,000

number of views for our Twitter-thread focusing on the case of four Yemeni journalists sentenced to death by Houthi authorities, which IFEX highlighted on WPF.

Access to engagement: Civic space

The pandemic loomed large in civic space over the past year, impacting issues related to FoE&I both online and off. Governments around the world weaponised legislation and leveraged emergency measures to crack down on civic space and civil society organisations. While the pandemic exacerbated the closure of civic space and placed increased pressures on CSOs, marginalised groups were even further marginalised, facing increased barriers.

IFEX listened to members, to learn what they were experiencing within their organisations and in their contexts.

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The pandemic definitely underscores the importance of well-being at work. Who we are at work is not separate from what we are going through in the rest of our lives, and the pandemic underscored that truth.

– **Jessica Anderson,**
Co-founder and Operations
Manager, Visualizing Impact,
18 July 2020

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Over the past year, we have continued to strongly advocate for the value of civic space and push back on encroaching restrictions,

bringing more focus and external advocacy to approaches we had been implementing through the network.

While we see **challenges** facing civil society and civic space in the era of emergency measures, including decreased access to funding and limits on cross-border travel impacting programming, it is important to also see **opportunities and progress.**

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It was quite interesting – and amazing – that it really helped us internally. It really did help us as a team, to appreciate the beauty and the value of using technology that eased our work in terms of communication. It helped us inform new research questions and opportunities for projects and problems that will actually be solved.

– **Ruth Namara, Advocacy and**
Communications Officer,
Africa Freedom of Information
Center, Uganda, 21 August 2020

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Virtual convenings and online decision-making spaces are giving access to more organisations and activists that are usually marginalized from participation due to physical restrictions.

Also, as more and more activities move online, issues around online civic spaces are gaining prominence.

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I feel that the pandemic has created new problems when it comes to the core rights we work for – freedom of expression and privacy. These challenges are constantly changing, but I feel like people are slowly realising how important the internet is – and by extension, digital rights – and that opens up avenues for advocacy and awareness.

– **Shmyla Khan, Director of**
Research and Policy, Digital
Rights Foundation, Pakistan,
7 July 2020

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Members have also been using their expertise to adapt to new challenges in the pandemic, taking advantage of their extensive networks of relationships and established know-how to respond strategically to new and continuing issues. IFEX worked to collate this member expertise, to document new approaches and insights into emerging issues and contexts, and to cultivate knowledge-sharing opportunities to support a more informed network.

Read (and hear) this!

Supporting member engagement in a COVID-19 world

The pandemic brought considerable uncertainty as to how civil society would be able to participate in virtual global advocacy spaces. IFEX developed new approaches to generate network engagement and inform new audiences about emerging civic space issues.

We immediately revamped our **Global Advocacy Digest** to introduce the new work we are doing through participation in global coalitions, and to share with members how opportunities for their engagement have been impacted by the pandemic.

We also updated our [Opportunities & Assistance](#) page to include a range of COVID-19 related funding, resources, and guides for civil society, sharing these with members in a tailored way depending on their needs, expertise, and eligibility.

Hello Africa! Reaching new audiences

IFEX launched its monthly [Africa Brief](#) podcast in 2020, expanding our use of non-text-based communications to reach audiences whose internet access may be minimal or intermittent. Co-hosted by IFEX's Africa Regional Editor and Media Specialist, each podcast provides a deeper dive into selected items from the monthly brief, and is shareable as a WhatsApp file, allowing us to reach people who access digital content primarily or solely from smartphones. IFEX will also be reaching out to community radio stations in

the region to explore potential collaboration in broadcasting the increasingly popular series.

Capturing the moment – and learning from it

The global context has thrown myriad challenges to CSOs, and documenting the impact and responses to the moment is essential for future learning.

In the summer of 2020, IFEX collected member responses for a project we are calling '[In our own words: IFEX voices from the pandemic](#)' – chronicling members' experiences and responses, as well as the impact of the global health crisis on their professional and personal lives.

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How can we capture and leverage what we've learned so far? By documenting our experiences during COVID-19, and the activities of our respective civil society organizations, and looking at our own personal experiences, and sharing them.

– **Malcolm Joseph, Executive Director, the Center for Media Studies and Peacebuilding, Liberia**, 26 August 2020

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While providing essential historical documentation – allowing us to aggregate and share knowledge, ideas, learning, and resources within the network and beyond – the project also offers a unique opportunity to share facets of the human faces of civil society with broader audiences, building new allies.

AMERICAS: CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE IACHR

In September, Pedro Vaca Villarreal – Executive Director of Colombian IFEX member Foundation for Freedom of the Press (FLIP) – was [named](#) the new Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) Special Rapporteur for freedom of expression. IFEX took the opportunity to record a wide-ranging interview with him as he began his mandate in this very important role, which has been essential in developing Inter-American policies, standards, and jurisprudence regarding FoE&I in the Americas.

Given the importance of this position for FoE&I rights in the region, IFEX-ALC monitored the selection process to ensure transparency, and collaborated on a project to promote active and informed civil society engagement in the process, publishing an [infographic](#) on IFEX highlighting the selection criteria, in addition to organising a live [public webinar](#) with the ten finalists.

IFEX-ALC also coordinated activities with partner organisations working on broader human rights issues, including CEJIL, DPLF, REDLAD, Alianza Regional para la libertad de expresión e información, and Voces del Sur – witnessing the power of bringing organisations working on human rights together with those focussed on FoE&I.

Pushing back

The IFEX network was active in pushing back in places where the right to free expression and peaceful protest were threatened last year.

Authorities in **Cambodia** have clamped down on civil society, silencing independent media, political opposition, and critical voices raised in protest. Opposition leader Kem Sokha, whose criminal trial for unsubstantiated treason charges has been marred by irregularities since it began, remains banned from politics and faces up to 30 years in prison if convicted.

In July, **IFEX joined 32 civil society organizations** in a [statement](#) urging the governments of 13 developed countries – Australia, Canada, Finland, France, Germany, India, Japan, New Zealand, Sweden, the Netherlands, the Republic of Korea, the United Kingdom, and the United States – to echo the European Union’s call for the respect of human rights in Cambodia. The EU partially suspended the country’s “Everything But Arms” tariff preferences, in response to the Cambodian government’s “serious and systematic violations” of labour and human rights conventions.

IFEX’s network in Latin America and the Caribbean, **IFEX-ALC**, published a [statement](#) rejecting a draft law in **Uruguay** that, if passed, would result in a serious setback to the right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly in the country. The Urgent Consideration Law passed in July, but undeterred civil society organisations continue to fight. A new campaign calling for amendments to certain

articles of the law, specifically those that give greater powers to the police force during public demonstrations, was launched.

IFEX-ALC also joined rights groups in a [joint statement](#) denouncing the numerous arbitrary arrests, restrictions, and internet service cuts aimed at preventing demonstrations against a rise in police violence in **Cuba**. Last year saw at least 132 people, including artists, journalists, and activists, facing arrests, restrictions on leaving their homes, and internet service cuts for their participation and for reporting on protests against police violence.

Bolstering Belarus: A Network Response

Belarusian CSOs and journalists had already been facing draconian pressures on civic spaces when the rigged presidential election in August ignited a massive wave of popular protest that swept across the country, bringing together people from all sections of society in a call for new elections.

Thousands of protesters were arrested, including at least 170 journalists, in the [six weeks](#) following the elections alone.

“The violence with which this political dissent was met stunned the international community,” wrote IFEX’s Europe and Central Asia Regional Editor in their [monthly brief](#). In an act of **network solidarity**, members reached out to us to ask what they could do to support the local IFEX member during the relentless attacks on civic freedoms.

We connected with the **Belarus Association of Journalists (BAJ)**, and other members and partners that focus on Belarus, coordinating with them as to how best to respond to the evolving needs and context.

IFEX responded in a number of ways. We facilitated increased international attention to pressure the Belarus Government. We also increased communications on emerging issues; each month, IFEX’s Europe and Central Asia Regional Brief began to include a regular [Belarus update](#).

We also helped establish a **Belarus Coordinating Group** with local and other international partners, facilitating a strategic space for coordination on actions and communication.

In this work, BAJ and other IFEX members, including the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ), ARTICLE 19, Human Rights Watch, Reporters Without Borders (RSF), PEN America, the Committee to Protect Journalists and Free Press Unlimited, have served as invaluable sources of information, monitoring this increasingly threatened civic space and keeping us informed about the latest attacks on the press, freedom of expression and assembly.

Such groups exemplify the importance of IFEX’s experience in facilitating essential exchanges between members and allies, and creating space for the network to explore new opportunities for collaboration; a role vital to supporting sustained advocacy efforts in the pursuit of justice and accountability.

We were gratified in November

2020 when BAJ won the first [Canada-UK Media Freedom Award](#). Recognition of this kind helps draw international attention to the situation in the country, and is a well-deserved acknowledgement of their years of defending media freedom and keeping Belarusians informed.

Talking Turkey: A Meaningful Exchange

Civil society in Turkey faced a continued crackdown from authorities in 2020. According to a report from IFEX member the International Press Institute (IPI), at least 79 journalists are behind bars, with media regulatory bodies regularly used to muzzle public debate and critical journalism. Authorities also persisted in wielding anti-terrorism legislation to silence dissent in the digital sphere particularly. IFEX supported conversations and collaboration on FoE&I issues in Turkey.

Answering the call: Release prisoners in Egypt

In **Egypt**, the crackdown on civil society rages on, with the country's jails becoming home to thousands of prisoners of conscience, in the midst of a pandemic. Even doctors and healthcare workers have been detained for opposing official

narratives or criticizing the government's management of the health crisis.

When three staff members from the **Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR)** – one of the few remaining human rights organisations in Egypt – had been picked up and detained in Tora jail, **IFEX brought network support to a global [joint action](#)** launched by the **Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS)**, demanding their release.

Within days of the joint action, the three were released. However, the organisation's gender researcher, Patrick Zaki, who was forcibly disappeared in February, remained in detention, joining a growing trend of researchers, academics, and intellectuals jailed for their critical work.

In August 2020, the fifth "Terrorism Circuit" of the Cairo Criminal Court [sentenced](#) Baheyeldin Hassan, a veteran human rights defender and director of CIHRS, to 15 years in prison on the basis of his critical tweets. **IFEX [condemned](#)** the politically-motivated ruling, supporting CIHR's [call](#) for Egyptian authorities to end their long-running campaign of intimidation, repression, and judicial harassment against human rights defenders and others exercising their right to freedom of expression.

EROL'S CASE

The case of Turkish journalist and free speech defender Erol Önderoğlu, whose case IFEX highlights in our [Faces of Free Expression](#) series, has become emblematic of the precarious situation of civil society workers and media practitioners in Turkey. A journalist with IPS Communication Foundation (Bianet), and Turkey correspondent for Reporters Without Borders (RSF), both active IFEX members, Önderoğlu is once again facing the risk of jail time for his critical work.

On 3 November 2020, the Istanbul Regional Court of Appeal overturned his July 2019 acquittal, as well as that of his co-defendants in the Özgür Gündem case. The decision left each of the defendants facing up to 14 years in prison. IFEX joined members and human rights groups in [condemning](#) the decision and called on the Turkish government to drop the charges against them and cease the oppression of journalists, academics and writers.

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The entire IFEX network stands united in calling for Bahey's profoundly unjust sentence to be quashed, and for Egyptian authorities to immediately end their crackdown against human rights defenders and all those exercising their right to freedom of expression.

– IFEX Statement,
27 August 2020

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Are we all here? Equitable spaces

As IFEX continues to grow its voice and integrate civic space language into more aspects of our work throughout our 2020-2024 strategy, we are working to ensure this voice and work incorporates a diversity, equity and inclusion lens.

In 2020, **IFEX provided resources to the Cambodian Center for Independent Media (CCIM)** to host an online convening on navigating digital spaces in restrictive contexts and using online spaces to promote human rights.

The sessions featured diverse voices and topics highlighting women's voices, members of the LGBTQI+ community and youth, as well as sessions addressing indigenous issues and the experiences of religious minorities.

In hot pursuit: Safety and justice

As a network, IFEX has been working on elevating the issue of **impunity** since 2011. In 2015, we launched our [No Impunity campaign](#): a global call for accountability for crimes against activists, journalists, artists and others exercising their right to free expression.

Responding to increased risks and threats in this space, **IFEX** established **safety and justice** as one of the three thematic goals in our [2020-24 Strategic Plan](#); part of a concerted effort to achieve a strengthened normative environment for FoE&I, in addition to ending impunity and improving justice for those experiencing violations.

While IFEX's original safety focus was on journalists, members had called for a widening of our remit to include all those exercising their right to FoE&I, and to consider the specific situations of marginalised groups such as women, religious and ethnic minorities, displaced people, political opposition, and members of the LGBTQI+ community.

We listened. When formulating the safety and justice goal, we committed to paying particular attention to integrating **gender, diversity, and inclusion** in our work.

Expanding the focus to give safety equal weight was timely. As a result of the pandemic, we saw authoritarian governments

around the world weaponising public health legislation to restrict journalists' rights and safe access to free and transparent reporting. IFEX members reported governments controlling public discourse by hampering media freedom, and people being silenced for sharing accurate health information, or for criticizing government responses to the pandemic – including doctors and journalists.

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Governments have had to implement restrictive measures for the safety of everyone, but we cannot ignore the fact that some governments have abused their power to intensify repressive measures, including increased surveillance and restrictions on free expression and information. This should be motivation for civil society to continue fighting for these crucial rights.

– **Nedal Al-Salman, Acting President, Bahrain Center for Human Rights, Bahrain**

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Meanwhile, the **culture of impunity** that allows so many perpetrators of FoE&I violations to roam free has exacerbated during the global health crisis. **We responded**, dedicating resources to members to implement programming in their contexts to

address many of these emerging challenges.

We continued to use our voice and amplify the voice of IFEX members on the global stage.

- We helped integrate member input into an HRC resolution on the safety of journalists, a resolution that includes calls for gender inclusive policies, and highlights intersecting identities and forms of discrimination that may serve as additional barriers to the work of journalists and media workers.
- We joined the Defenders in Development Coalition to pressure International Financial Institutions (IFIs) to hold the governments to whom they provided COVID-19 emergency loans accountable for their mistreatment of journalists and for their human rights records.
- We worked with UNESCO and IFEX member **Free Press Unlimited (FPU)** to secure member state responses to the 2020 UNESCO Director-General's request for updates on cases of journalists killed. Despite expectations that responses would decline in 2020 due to the pandemic, we surpassed the previous year's response rate by 10%, following extensive outreach.

No place like home

In early June, after spending nearly three years unjustly imprisoned, **Nabeel Rajab**, Bahraini human rights activist and co-founder of IFEX members **Gulf Centre for Human Rights** (GCHR) and **Bahrain Centre for Human Rights** (BCHR), was finally released.

IFEX and local members had continuously advocated for Nabeel's freedom over the past

three years, and celebrated his release by publishing an online [video](#) highlighting his case.

While he must carry out the remaining three years of his sentence at home, his release serves as a reminder of the collective effort needed to call attention to his situation and that of many others who remain imprisoned, like BCHR's co-founder, **Abdulhadi al-Khawaja**.

IFEX continues to join its local members in drawing attention to the plight of specific cases of prisoners of conscience around the world, and collaborating to advocate for their release. As the global pandemic persists, thousands of prisoners of conscience continue to occupy jail cells across the world, being exposed to a deadly virus while held in unsanitary conditions, and in many cases denied essential medical care.

Advocating for accountability: It takes a network

IFEX's recent work aimed at strengthening the normative environment for FoE&I and advocating for justice for those experiencing violations underscored the power of this network even in uncertain times.

As members of the International Coalition of Civil Society Organizations on Journalist Security (**ISCO SOJ Coalition**), **IFEX** followed up on the group's 2019 mission to **Mexico** that saw the coalition's 17 international organisations dedicated to defending and promoting FoE&I coming together to address the prevalence of impunity in cases involving crimes against journalists. IFEX and the Coalition joined voices once again to call on the Mexican federal and state governments in 2020, to fulfil the commitments they had made to promote the security of journalists and combat impunity in an environment increasingly hostile for freedom of expression.

In **Paraguay**, **IFEX-ALC** worked with local member **Sindicato de Periodistas del Paraguay** (SPP) to provide input on a report ahead of the country's third

Universal Periodic Review (UPR) this year. Focusing on freedom of expression issues, it features a strong safety and justice component, calling attention to violence against journalists and impunity while highlighting issues related to journalists' working conditions and censorship. It includes a section on violence against women journalists and the discrimination they suffer in the workplace, calling for international standards to be respected. The report builds on past collaborative work between IFEX-ALC and SPP, including their participation in the second cycle UPR review, and their work with victims of impunity, their families, journalists, officials, and others, to bring the issue of Paraguayan impunity to international attention.

IFEX also provided feedback on IFEX member the **Cambodian Center for Human Rights**' (CCHR) review of **Cambodia's** proposed National Internet Gateway, facilitating expert input from Argentina IFEX member **ADC** on their work.

In the case of **Bangladeshi** journalist Shafiqul Islam Kajol,

COLOMBIAN DAY OF THE JOURNALIST VIDEO

IFEX marked Colombia's Day of the Journalist with a video that pays tribute to journalists who have been threatened, attacked, or murdered because of their work. Co-produced with IFEX member FLIP, the video highlights the ongoing search for justice in the cases of [Edison Molina](#), [Guillermo Cano](#), and [Jineth Bedoya Lima](#). The video builds on sustained support IFEX has provided FLIP in their pursuit of justice for these three cases, and their ongoing battle against impunity in Colombia.

Tweet: <https://twitter.com/IFEX/status/1226893859273134080>

IFEX helped organize a [joint statement](#) with international and local partners. Kajol was released from prison in December 2020 after spending 237 days in jail, but now faces criminal charges for his recent online criticism of authorities.

Inquiry into Daphne Caruana Galizia's murder

IFEX remained steadfast in its monitoring and support of advocacy work related to specific cases of journalists and the pursuit for justice from crimes committed against them. This includes the ongoing inquiry into the murder of Daphne Caruana Galizia, where IFEX spoke out alongside members of the **Malta** advocacy group when the investigation faced threats to its independence last year.

In addition to state-sanctioned smear campaigns, Daphne

Caruana Galizia faced extraordinary financial and psychological pressure through numerous **SLAPP (Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation)** suits filed against her throughout her extraordinary career. In the last 18 months of her life, she faced 47 libel suits and her bank accounts were frozen in relation to a libel case brought by a government minister.

Building on our continued involvement in this work, **IFEX joined a coalition** of organisations working to establish a model EU Anti-SLAPP directive, which was recently finalized and launched alongside the European Democratic Action Plan.



CHANGING GEARS IN EL SALVADOR: GENDER FORWARD

The erosion of safety and justice over the past year has been particularly impactful for marginalised groups, who already face barriers to civic spaces, both online and offline.

Women in the media already experience increased levels of personal and sexual threats and harassment and dangers in their jobs. In El Salvador, women journalists and women human rights defenders (WHRDs) have been targeted by online gender-based violence during the pandemic. In June, IFEX-ALC joined over 100 organisations in [warning](#) that measures to tackle COVID-19 taken by the El Salvador government have created a violent and hostile environment that hinders the work of WHRDs and journalists in the country.

Money talks: Holding governments to account

Around the world, governments allow – and in some cases are even directly responsible for – attacks on journalists and for other rights violations, without repercussions. These same governments have received emergency funds related to COVID-19 from **International Financial Institutions (IFIs)**.

IFEX connected with the **Coalition for Human Rights in Development**, and began

working with them to expand their campaign targeting IFI's on human rights issues to include press freedom and reprisals against journalists reporting on the pandemic.

We also helped them develop a campaign strategy, connected them to national IFEX members in countries where reprisals are taking place to coordinate responses, and co-organized a [session on press freedom](#) at the World Bank's fall

session of the **Civil Society Policy Forum**. This year, we are beginning to implement the strategy and also expanding our involvement to broader free expression and civic space issues.

Our COVID-19 related funding and resources page was also promoted on [the Coalition's website](#), offering journalists a regularly updated list of distress funds, grants and fellowships curated by IFEX.

Safety first, online and off

As part of IFEX's strategy in the Safety & Justice thematic goal area, we worked hard to promote and foster an environment that reflects international standards for safety as they relate to FoE&I and to facilitate network engagement in the development and implementation of protection practices, while addressing both online and offline aspects of safety.

Having our say: A resolution on J-safety

An example of this is the critical role IFEX played in helping shape the **UN Human Rights Council (HRC) Resolution** on the [safety of journalists](#).

Having seen the challenges of passing the HRC **thematic resolution on freedom of opinion and expression** several months earlier, we learned how crucial it was to defuse potentially harmful language restricting FoE&I with corresponding positive language about state obligations for protection, and the need to begin formal consultation with CSOs to help shape that language much sooner.

Building on lessons learned, **IFEX mobilised** quickly, **coordinating** with members and the Austrian mission to the UN in Geneva to help shape the resolution, making sure to reach out to members throughout the process.

IFEX helped ensure their input translated into new mentions and recommendations on emerging issues such as extraterritorial threats, overbroad and vague laws, strategic lawsuits against

public participation (SLAPPs), accreditation regimes, access to information, as well as surveillance and safety during protests.

The resolution also strengthened language on gender-specific threats against journalists, and provided guidance on ensuring the safety of journalists in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

A regional, virtual exchange on the safety of journalists

In addition to concerns about their physical safety while reporting during a pandemic, journalists in the Americas have faced growing online hostility for their COVID-19 reporting, and have been increasingly targeted by surveillance and spyware operations.

In October, **IFEX-ALC** organized a virtual meeting for the network's members in Latin America and the Caribbean. Bringing together 22 organisations, a space was created for members to exchange lessons learned, experiences, and best practices on the issue of safety of journalists. Members also underscored the importance of focusing on digital safety for journalists, especially in an era of remote work.

The regional network aims to host future virtual meetings to advance conversations and engagement on the topic. Although this global health crisis poses new impediments and heightened risks for journalists, virtual convenings like these build strategic connections between IFEX

members, facilitate an essential exchange of regional and cross-regional learnings about policies and practices, and help members become better equipped to deal with these emerging challenges and fortify their work from new threats.

A global, virtual exchange on national safety mechanisms

IFEX also hosted its first **global virtual exchange** on national mechanisms for the protection of journalists and human rights defenders. Bringing together members from Afghanistan, Brazil, West Africa, Indonesia, Syria, Eastern Europe, Pakistan, and Mexico, IFEX created a virtual space for participants to introduce national safety mechanisms in their local contexts and the challenges they face.

Through a fruitful exchange of views, members probed pertinent questions, including the role international standards and partners have in supporting national protection mechanisms, how digital threats are being considered in the assessment and response of these mechanisms, as well as the pandemic's impact on their development.

IFEX also identified key opportunities for follow-up, including: working more closely with members working in conflict zones, tackling shared challenges in managing digital protection practices, and developing several ideas for potential international and regional support to local protection initiatives.

Digital security in Asia Pacific

Responding to members' needs amidst a pandemic that has seen a rise in digital security threats, IFEX hosted a reunion of its Asia Pacific members engaged on the growing issue.

Taking into consideration the challenges of convening virtually, IFEX created a more informal and

low-barrier space for members to re-connect, share updates from their contexts, and discuss any recent achievements and challenges related to digital security in the pandemic and beyond.

The virtual gathering built on the groundwork established in 2019 when IFEX brought together Asia Pacific members in Kuala Lumpur to share knowledge, connect around and learn about digital

security in their contexts. Guided by two digital security specialists, the gathering of **18 organisations and 29 participants** focused on promoting solidarity and increasing the capacity of members around ensuring the digital security of their organisations.

Since then, members have remained active and engaged with each other, tackling digital security issues which have been further exacerbated by the pandemic.

Facing up to impunity

Personal stories are a powerful way to bring the issue of impunity closer to people. On the International Day to End Impunity (IDEI), IFEX launched a campaign to promote its re-envisioned [Faces of Free Expression](#) profiles.

The series features over 80 individuals; we chose to kick things off in 2020 with a strong gender lens, [featuring eight women](#); change-makers who promote and defend safety and justice, as well as freedom of expression more broadly, and whose work embodies courage and perseverance in the face of sometimes unimaginable odds.

These included UN Special Rapporteur **Agnès Callamard**, human rights advocates like **Fatou Jagne Senghor** and IFEX member **Yara Bader**, human rights lawyer **Amal Clooney**, as well as bold journalists like the iconic **Maria Ressa** in the Philippines and investigative journalists **Khadija Ismayilova** in Azerbaijan and **Jineth Bedoya Lima** in Colombia. IFEX also paid tribute to murdered Maltese journalist **Daphne Caruana Galizia**.

The campaign acknowledged the important leadership of women in promoting media freedom, safety and justice, and served as a reminder that so many attacks on journalists, online and offline, are gendered.

“We need to continue to up our game in exposing the nature of impunity and battling those who rely on it to silence those voices critical of their actions,” wrote Annie Game in an [op-ed](#) marking the campaign launch. “We need to be creative, find new points of pressure and influence, and reach out to others to build an even broader movement. No one can do this work alone. The Faces of Free Expression series underscores that – far from being alone, we are in fact in very good company.”

The message clearly resonated, and the piece was widely republished, including by *Deutsche Welle Freedom*, the Global Forum for Media Development, *Hong Kong Free Press*, *Prachatai* (Thailand), *Rappler* (Philippines), and *The Shift News* (Malta), as well as new Arabic-language regional outlets IFEX targeted for promotion, including *Al-Bawaba* and *Raseef22*.

POWERFUL POTENTIAL: THE MFC ADVISORY NETWORK

In recognition of the important work of our network, IFEX Deputy Executive Director Rachael Kay, along with Silvia Chocarro of ARTICLE 19 and Owais Aslam Ali of the Pakistan Press Foundation, were elected to serve as Co-chairs of the Media Freedom Coalition – Advisory Network (MFC-AN).

Consisting of 17 members from civil society, of which a number are IFEX members, the advisory network was established by the [Coalition](#) to provide advice on the work of the coalition, and facilitate the selection of cases of journalists, media workers, and organisations that are under attack and in need of the coalition's diplomatic intervention.

IFEX has been exploring the MFC as an advocacy space and pushing for improvements and consistency in their responses to violations and in the way the coalition engages with and incorporates the recommendations of CSOs.

Creative connecting: Building the IFEX network

At the beating heart of IFEX's work in promoting FoE&I is our overarching Network Building goal. Our ability to drive change relies on a diverse, informed network, founded on principles of trust and transparency, and strengthened by meaningful connections between members as well as strategic relationships with key external allies.

Throughout 2020, IFEX fostered network solidarity, supported members in their transition to new working realities, and promoted financial sustainability at a time when it is most needed.

Guided by member requests, IFEX provided key support in the field of **strategic planning**. This includes promoting organisational strengthening measures such as HR policies, offering more innovative planning opportunities,

identifying and developing tools to support members integrating DEI in their work, and growing more partnerships and external resources that can provide practical support in the long run.

We responded to the need for continued support in **financial sustainability planning (FSP)**. IFEX invested in FSP skill-building for members' finance staff, and actively offered resources on innovative financial sustainability models in the form of our updated [Opportunities & Assistance](#) page.

IFEX also provided essential **institutional-strengthening grants**, coaching support, cohort skills exchanges, learning opportunities, informational resources and connections with specialists and consultants in a variety of fields, including FSP and digital security.

Piloting approaches: Supporting members in transition

The pandemic forced us to rethink and retool our approaches; IFEX continued to listen and respond to members' feedback and needs.

Recognizing that exceptional times call for exceptional responses, IFEX developed new approaches to network-building, piloting grants to help members **transition to remote work** as a result of the pandemic.

In our conversations throughout

the year, many members informed us about the emerging challenges and increased risks the pandemic has brought to their work promoting and defending FoE&I, and the resources required to support that work. Responding to this urgent need, IFEX's grants provided funds to cover essential material purchases, internet costs, consultant support, as well as other costs associated with making the transition to remote operations a less onerous process.

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The challenge for our organization was how to attend to the urgent while still not losing the broader long-term objectives. I think one way to solve that was to have a strategic plan. At the beginning of the year, and with the support of IFEX, ADC developed a strategic plan that establishes objectives, the vision for the coming years - it was fortunate to have had that, because it allowed us to face this new situation more clearly.

– Eduardo Ferreira, Senior Project Officer, Asociación por los Derechos Civiles (ADC), Argentina, 17 July 2020

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Maybe we are not in another world, as many are saying, but surely we find ourselves in a different world, to which we not only must adapt, but also shape. Freedom of expression also takes form in a new context, faces new challenges, perhaps more difficult and complex than before.

– Remzi Lani, Albania Media Institute, 14 Jul 2020

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Scanning for diversity, equity and inclusion

A critical cross-cutting theme of our 2020-2024 Strategic Plan is our commitment to meaningfully and consistently integrate diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) into our work, both internally and through support to members. In 2020, IFEX conducted an **analytical mapping of members' recent work in this**

area, capturing regional contexts and showcasing member activities, communications, advocacy, and initiatives that featured a strong diversity, equity, and inclusion lens in their FoE&I work.

As part of IFEX's resolve to draw on member expertise in its strategic direction, monitoring our

members work in this area has been crucial in gaining a deeper understanding of various contexts, challenges, and gaps. This research has provided us with baseline information to help better inform decision-making, and will allow us to strategically integrate and address these issues moving forward.

