

# Briefing: Press freedom suffers in Council of Europe member states under COVID-19

52 press freedom cases documented in CoE Member States during pandemic

29 April 2020

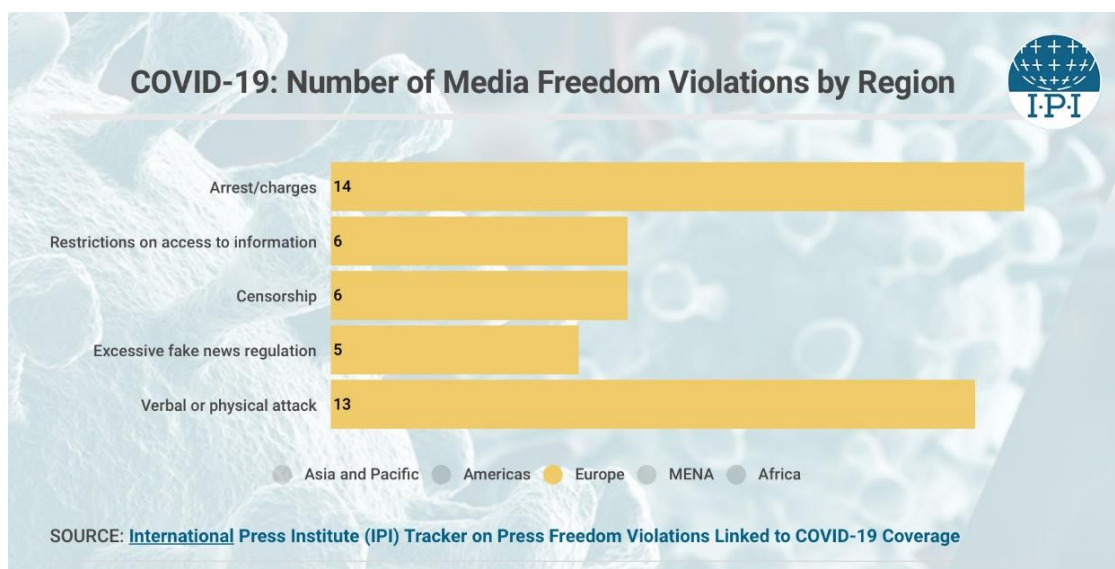
## Purpose

This briefing note provides an overview of media freedom violations monitored in each Member State of the Council of Europe (CoE) since the COVID-19 pandemic hit the continent in late February 2020. The briefing helps provide a clearer picture of how the coronavirus, and government responses, are having an effect press and media freedom in Europe<sup>1</sup>.

## Background

Over the past few months, COVID-19 has exacerbated existing issues and posed new challenges to journalists and media across Europe. These fresh attacks on media freedom have worsened an already gloomy outlook for the press. Worryingly, they also risk becoming a new normal as several CoE Member States enact measures and restrictions that could have an effect on media long after the health crisis has ended.

According to IPI's [data](#), violations in CoE Member States make up around a third of all violations documented globally. These range from arrest and serious verbal or physical attacks to increased censorship and unprecedented curbs on access to information. Meanwhile, several governments have vastly expanded surveillance and passed new laws to punish "fake news".



<sup>1</sup> This briefing was co-ordinated by IPI as part of the Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR) project and produced in cooperation with other press freedom partners. MFRR is supported by the European Commission.

As the 2020 Annual Report by the partner organisations to the Council of Europe Platform to Promote the Protection of Journalism and Safety of Journalists notes, these threats risk a tipping point in the fight to preserve a free media in Europe.

They also underscore the report's urgent wake-up call on Council of Europe member states to act quickly and resolutely to end the assault against press freedom, so that journalists and other media actors can report without fear.

## Current Situation

### Albania

- On March 23, Albanian Prime Minister sent citizens an intrusive voice message through Vodafone advising people to wash their hands against coronavirus and “protect themselves from the media”<sup>2</sup>.
- On March 23, Ora News journalist Elio Laze was threatened aggressively by a private construction company worker for filming work in violation of the country's COVID-19 curfew<sup>3</sup>.

### Armenia

- On March 16, Armenia's State of Emergency declaration banned media outlets and social media users from publishing information deemed ‘panic mongering’ or didn't come from official government sources.
- On March 23 it was reported that the government ordered 22 different media outlets to remove or edit what it considered to be misleading or incorrect information about the coronavirus<sup>4</sup>.
- Numerous journalists and media have since reported being forced to delete social media and web posts after the police took a hard line against media reporting on COVID-19, prompting journalism organizations to protest that the government is overreacting<sup>5</sup>.

### Azerbaijan

- Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the national parliament of Azerbaijan amended the law on information to allow authorities to prosecute the owners of online media for

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<sup>2</sup> <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/03/13/albania-premier-urges-citizens-to-protect-themselves-from-the-media/>, *Rama Takes his War on Media to Albanians' Phones*, Balkan Insight, 13 March 2020

<sup>3</sup> <https://exit.al/en/2020/03/24/ora-news-journalist-threatened-by-salillari-employee-after-possible-curfew-violation/>, *Ora News Journalist Threatened by Salillari Employee After Possible Curfew Violation*, Exit Albania, 24 March 2020

<sup>4</sup> <https://hetq.am/en/article/114899>, *Armenia: State of Emergency Press Restrictions Continue; 22 Media Outlets Told to Remove/Edit Coronavirus Content*, hetq.am, 23 March 2020

<sup>5</sup> <https://eurasianet.org/armenia-takes-hard-line-against-media-reporting-on-covid-19>, *Armenia takes hard line against media reporting on COVID-19*, Eurasianet, 23 March 2020

publishing any “inaccurate” or “dangerous” content. The vaguely worded law raised concerns it would open the door to increased censorship<sup>6</sup>.

- On April 9, journalist Natig Izbatoev of online news outlet 7gun.az was arrested as he was filming interviews with people at a protest about the economic effects of the quarantine in Xirdalan, a city near Baku. He was sentenced to 30 days in jail for violating quarantine rules, despite having official documents which gave him permission to work as a journalist. His editor-in-chief, Javid Shiraliyev, claims he was assaulted at the police station<sup>7</sup>.
- On April 13, Ibrahim Vazirov, a journalist and blogger with Kanal24 Internet TV, was arrested in the city of Shirvan, days after police had demanded he delete online reports about the social and economic impact of COVID-19. According to the Ministry of the Interior, Vazirov was arrested for disobeying a lawful request by the police and detained for 25 days<sup>8</sup>.
- On April 13, Reportyor.info journalist Mirsahib Rahiloglu was arrested in Shirvan for “violating quarantine rules” and detained for 30 days. He had also been critical of the local authorities and published interviews with citizens expressing frustration at the lack of financial support during the lockdown<sup>9</sup>.
- On April 20, journalist Teymur Karimov was physically assaulted by unknown men in Baku as he tried to interview residents about the economic implications of COVID-19 measures. His SD card was also stolen<sup>10</sup>.

## Bosnia and Herzegovina

- On March 19, the government of Bosnia's predominantly Serb-populated entity, Republika Srpska, introduced fines and other punitive measures for spreading “fake news” in the media and on social networks<sup>11</sup>.
- The Association of BH Journalists has also criticized what it says is a restrictive system for journalists asking questions to ministers and health bodies<sup>12</sup>.
- On April 20, an RTV Slon journalist and camera operator were briefly detained by police while shooting images in the Tuzla Canton, despite having valid press cards and permits that allowed them to move around and work during the curfew. They were reporting on a group of citizens which had arrived at a COVID-19 isolation centre in Tuzla. The police seized the journalists' phones and deleted all the footage<sup>13</sup>.

## Bulgaria

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.osce.org/representative-on-freedom-of-media/449146>, *Coronavirus response should not curb freedom of the press in Azerbaijan*, OSCE, 25 March 2020

<sup>7</sup> <https://ipi.media/azerbaijan-abuses-quarantine-rules-to-jail-critical-journalists-and-bloggers/>, *Azerbaijan abuses quarantine rules to jail critical journalists and bloggers*, IPI, 23 April 2020

<sup>8</sup> <https://agreqator.az/az/hadise/690407>, *The journalist was sentenced to 25 days in prison*, Aqreqator, 13 April 2020

<sup>9</sup> <https://oc-media.org/azerbaijan-arrests-journalists-for-violating-quarantine/>, *Azerbaijan arrests journalists for ‘violating quarantine’*, OC Media, 16 April 2020

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.amerikaninsesi.org/a/reportyor-fiziki-t%C9%99zyiq%C9%99-m%C9%99ruz-qald%C4%B1%C4%9F%C4%B1n%C4%B1-bildirir-/5383227.html>, *The reporter reported being physically abused*, VOA, 21 April 2020

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.osce.org/representative-on-freedom-of-media/450115> *OSCE concerned about decree against “fake news” in Republika Srpska, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and calls on authorities to withdraw it*, OSCE, 14 April 2020

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.bljesak.info/vijesti/flash/bh-novinari-upozoravaju-ovakvi-postupci-vlasti-vode-ka-cenzuri/307122>, *BH journalists warn: Such actions by the government lead to censorship*, Bljesak.info, 31 March 2020

<sup>13</sup> <http://ba.n1info.com/Vijesti/a427475/BH-novinari-i-OSCE-reagovali-zbog-brisanja-fotografija-ekipi-RTV-Slon.html>, *BH journalists and OSCE responded by deleting photos of RTV crew*, N1 BiH, 22 April 2020

- In Bulgaria, the government used the state of emergency decree to try to amend the penal code and introduce prison sentences for spreading what it deemed “fake news” about the outbreak with up to three years in prison or a fine of up to €5,000. While that part of the decree was vetoed by the President, another bill was submitted to parliament by a party in the ruling coalition on April 19 which, if passed, would hand authorities greater powers to suspend websites for disseminating “internet misinformation” - widening the scope of the law far beyond the immediate health crisis<sup>14</sup>.
- The government also doubled the amount of time for public bodies to respond to Freedom of Information (FOI) requests from 30 to 60 days<sup>15</sup>.
- Police forces have been given the power to obtain mobile data on those flouting lockdown measures without prior judicial authorisation, raising privacy and surveillance concerns<sup>16</sup>.

## Croatia

- Croatian journalist Živana Šušak Živković from the Dalmatinski portal was assaulted and injured by a group of worshippers while reporting on an Easter Mass near the city of Split that was being held illegally during the COVID-19 lockdown<sup>17</sup>.

## Greece

- On April 18, the Athens-based offices of SKAI, one of the largest media groups in Greece, was targeted in a firebomb attack by an anarchist group which accused it, among other things, of purposefully misleading people on the behest of the state during the COVID-19 crisis. The building, which hosts the prominent daily newspaper Kathimerini and the SKAI radio and TV stations, was hit by two makeshift devices which exploded in the courtyard and first floor balcony. The attack was later claimed by a group called Anarchist Comrades, who posted footage online alongside a statement denouncing SKAI as being part of the “mass media” mouthpiece of the right-wing government during the pandemic. COVID-19 coverage was specifically mentioned as part the group’s justification for the attack.<sup>18</sup>
- From March 23, the Greek Ministry of Health, citing public health, close its doors to health editors for the daily briefings from Sotiris Tsiodras’ spokesman and Deputy Ministers of Civil Protection and Health. Journalists can submit one question only, in writing, to the Press Office, to be read out on “air”<sup>19</sup>.

## Hungary

- On March 30, the Hungarian parliament passed legislation handing Prime Minister Viktor Orbán sweeping new emergency powers to indefinitely rule by decree. The new

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.osce.org/representative-on-freedom-of-media/450193> COVID-19 response in Bulgaria should not curb media freedom, says OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, OSCE, 15 April 2020

<sup>15</sup> <https://cji.ro/en/manufacturing-censorship-consent-not-required/>, Manufacturing Censorship (Consent not Required), Center for Independent Journalism, 24 March 2020

<sup>16</sup> <https://rsf.org/en/news/coronavirus-state-measures-must-not-allow-surveillance-journalists-and-their-sources>, Coronavirus: State measures must not allow surveillance of journalists and their sources, Reporters Without Borders, 10 April 2020

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Croatia/Croatia-journalists-beaten-up-on-a-Ustasha-Easter-201041> Croatian Journalists Beaten up at Easter, Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa, 15 April 2020

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.kathimerini.gr/1074456/article/epikairothta/ellada/epi8esh-me-molotof-sto-ktirio-toy-skai-kai-ths-ka8hmerinhs>, Molotov cocktail attack on the building of SKAI and Kathimerini, Kathimerini, 18 April 2020

<sup>19</sup> [https://www.efsyn.gr/ellada/koinonia/240641\\_se-karantina-i-enimerosi-haropaley-i-eleytheria-toy-tytoy](https://www.efsyn.gr/ellada/koinonia/240641_se-karantina-i-enimerosi-haropaley-i-eleytheria-toy-tytoy), In a quarantine, information, the freedom of the press rejoice, Efsyn, 26 April 2020

law also criminalizes the spreading of “false” or “distorted” information which undermines the authorities’ fight against COVID-19 with fines and up to five years in prison<sup>20</sup>. The law was strongly criticized by press freedom groups, who said it represents a step toward total information control and the further suppression of press freedom in the country.

- The government has also centralized communications about the pandemic and is filtering the release of information about COVID-19, according to a report by the Hungarian Civil Liberties Union. It says alternative sources of information, especially healthcare workers, are afraid of being fired if they talk to the press, and that the new “Coronavirus bill” will lead to more self-censorship among journalists. During government press conferences, questions chosen for answering are highly selected, with certain outlets neglected and many sensitive questions unanswered<sup>21</sup>.

## Italy

- On March 23, a journalist and a cameraman working for the Livorno edition of Italian regional newspaper Il Tirreno (The Tyrrhenian) were insulted and threatened with a metal rod while reporting on life under coronavirus measures<sup>22</sup>.
- On March 25, a photojournalist working for Italian newspaper La Stampa was surrounded by a crowd, harassed and had his SD card stolen while documenting a protest over coronavirus restrictions at a local market in Turin<sup>23</sup>.
- On April 2, the spokesman of Russia’s Defence Ministry, Major General Igor Konashenkov, sparked a press freedom row after he publicly criticized Italian newspaper La Stampa and issued a veiled threat against its reporter over an article about coronavirus aid, leading to condemnation from Italian journalists and authorities<sup>24</sup>.
- La Repubblica journalist Salvo Palazzolo has faced persistent threats after writing an article on April 8 about the mafia using the coronavirus crisis to increase his influence in certain districts of Palermo<sup>25</sup>.

## Moldova

- On March 19, the Security and Intelligence Service (SIS) has used emergency laws to order internet providers to block access to 52 different websites that allegedly disseminate fake news about the coronavirus pandemic, heightening concerns that censorship measures could extend to target critical media<sup>26</sup>.
- On March 24, the president of Moldova’s Audiovisual Council issued a decree ordering media in Moldova to refrain from printing or broadcasting ‘opinion’ and to convey only

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<sup>20</sup> <https://ipi.media/hungary-press-freedom-threatened-as-orban-handed-new-powers/> Hungary: Press freedom threatened as Orbán handed new powers. International Press Institute. 30 March 2020

<sup>21</sup> <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/04/27/hungary-censoring-information-on-covid-19-report-says/>, Hungary Censoring Information on COVID-19, Report Says, BIRN, 27 April 2020

<sup>22</sup> <https://iltirreno.gelocal.it/livorno/cronaca/2020/03/23/news/giornalisti-del-tirreno-aggrediti-il-comunicato-del-comitato-di-redazione-1.38628499>, Tirreno journalists attacked, the press release of the editorial board, Il Tirreno Livorno, 23 March 2020

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.editoria.tv/aggredito-e-minacciato-a-torino-fotografo-de-la-stampa/>, La Stampa photographer attacked and threatened in Turin, Editoria.tv, 25 March 2020

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/cronache/caso-stampa-russia-insorge-pd-intervenga-commissione-ue-1849771.html>, Case La Stampa-Russia, the Pd rises: “The EU Commission intervenes”, Il Giornale, 3 April 2020

<sup>25</sup> <https://rsf.org/en/news/italian-journalist-threatened-after-reporting-abuse-sanitary-crisis-mafia-sicily>, Italian journalist threatened after reporting on the abuse of sanitary crisis by mafia in Sicily, Reporters Without Borders, 16 April 2020

<sup>26</sup> <http://media-azi.md/en/stiri/doc-sis-ordered-block-52-anonymous-sites-allegedly-disseminate-fake-news-about-covid-19>, SIS Ordered to Block 52 Anonymous Sites that Allegedly Disseminate Fake News About Covid-19, Media AZI, 20 March 2020



the position of authorities during a state of emergency. The order was reversed after a storm of criticism from journalists and media associations<sup>27</sup>.

- On April 3, authorities in Moldova have tripled the amount of time public bodies have to respond to Freedom of Information (FOI) requests, from 15 days to 45, due to the coronavirus. Media have reported that requests to bodies such as the health ministry for public information have been outright refused<sup>28</sup>.

## Poland

- On April 14, journalists Wojciech Cieśla and Julia Dauksza were sued by Polish clothing company LPP over an article they published online in Newsweek Poland about the company's decision to send protective COVID-19 masks to its supplier factories in China. The company also sued Newsweek editor Aleksandra Karasińska and the publisher Ringier Axel Springer Polska. They allege the editorial team had disseminated "false statements and suggestions" and are claiming damages of three million Polish złoty (€660,000)<sup>29</sup>.

## Romania

- On March 16 the president of Romania signed an emergency decree which, among other measures, gives authorities the power to remove reports or close websites that spread "fake news" about the virus, with no opportunity to appeal<sup>30</sup>.
- The emergency legislation also doubled the amount of time to respond to FOI request from 30 to 60 days. Since then, media have reported that local institutions have refused to provide information, citing the new rules<sup>31</sup>.

## Russia

- On April 1<sup>32</sup>, the government stepped up its efforts against "fake news" by approving an amendment to the criminal code that allows fines of up to \$25,000 and prison terms of up to five years for anyone who knowingly spreads "false information about circumstances posing a threat to the life and safety of citizens." Media outlets can be fined up to \$127,000 if they disseminate disinformation about the outbreak<sup>33</sup>.
- Several media outlets faced penalties after federal regulators invoked the nation's newly enacted law against "fake news" to censor reports about the coronavirus pandemic<sup>34</sup>.

<sup>27</sup> <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/03/31/battling-coronavirus-moldova-targets-unwanted-media-opinion/>, *Battling Coronavirus, Moldova Targets Unwanted Media 'Opinion'*, BIRN, 31 March 2020

<sup>28</sup> <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/04/06/central-and-eastern-europe-freedom-of-information-rights-postponed/>, *Central and Eastern Europe Freedom of Information Rights 'Postponed'*, BIRN, 6 April 2020

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.lppsa.com/informacje-prasowe/lpp-zlozylo-pozew-o-ochrone-dobr-osobistych>, *LPP Filed a Lawsuit for the Protection of Personal Rights*, LPP, 14 April 2020

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.osce.org/representative-on-freedom-of-media/449380> *Coronavirus response bill should not curb freedom of information in Romania*, OSCE, 30 March 2020

<sup>31</sup> <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/04/06/central-and-eastern-europe-freedom-of-information-rights-postponed/>, *Central and Eastern Europe Freedom of Information Rights 'Postponed'*, Balkan Insight, 6 April 2020

<sup>32</sup> <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2020/04/28/85124-tsena-kazhdomu-zadushennomu-izdaniyu-zhizni-lyudey>, *"The price of every strangled publication is people's lives"*, Novaya Gazeta, 28 April 2020

<sup>33</sup> <https://apnews.com/dbbf02a747b11d8ffe3b07d5e33ff129>, *Fake news or the truth? Russia cracks down on virus posting*, Associated Press, 1 April 2020

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2020/mar/20/russia-invokes-fake-news-law-to-order-removal-of-c/>, *Russia invokes 'fake news' law to order removal of coronavirus reports from web*, Washington Times, 22 March 2020

- Prominent Russian investigative journalist Elena Milashina was targeted with threats and insults by head of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov, after she published an article questioning the preparedness of the republic's hospitals for the coronavirus<sup>35</sup>.
- On April 15, Novaya Gazeta was then ordered to delete the article by the country's media regulator Roskomnadzor, which threatened the block access to the outlets entire website unless it took down the report<sup>36</sup>.
- On April 21, the Supreme Court forbade the verbal dissemination of unverified information about the coronavirus would fall under criminal responsibility along with posts on social networks and publications in the media<sup>37</sup>.
- On April 25, authorities opened a pre-investigation check under the newly amended article 207.1 of the criminal code on Tatyana Voltskaya, a St. Petersburg-based journalist, over an article she published which interviewed a medical worker about the possible shortage of ventilation machines<sup>38</sup>.

## Serbia

- In Serbia, the government initially issued a decree penalizing local institutions from releasing information to media about the coronavirus outbreak that was not "authorized" by authorities in Belgrade. The directive, which was later reversed, was partly responsible for the arrest on April 1 of journalist Ana Lalić of online news portal Nova.rs, who wrote about conditions for staff dealing with COVID-19 in a city hospital<sup>39</sup>.
- Since her release, Lalić has received several serious threats, calls for prosecution from pro-government media, and been targeted in an online smear campaign branding her an enemy of the state<sup>40</sup>.
- On March 26, a TV crew of the KTV station was arrested for allegedly failing to undergo mandatory disinfection while trying to enter an administrative building to conduct an interview about a land sale being conducted during the COVID-19 lockdown<sup>41</sup>.
- On April 11, journalists were banned from attending the government's daily COVID-19-related press conferences on 'health grounds'. Media are only able to submit questions via email, rather than video call, with no follow up questions permitted<sup>42</sup>. Other journalists have criticized the lack of access to information from ministers and health officials<sup>43</sup>.

<sup>35</sup> <https://ipi.media/chechnya-leader-launches-violent-tirade-against-russian-investigative-journalist/>, *Chechnya leader launches tirade against Russian investigative journalist*, IPI, 15 April 2020

<sup>36</sup> <https://meduza.io/en/news/2020/04/15/officials-order-novaya-gazeta-to-delete-article-on-covid-19-in-chechnya-following-kadyrov-s-threats-to-have-the-author-attacked>, *Officials order 'Novaya Gazeta' to delete article on COVID-19 in Chechnya following Kadyrov's threats to have the author attacked*, Meduza, 15 April 2020

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.fontanka.ru/2020/04/21/69105622/?ref=t&fbclid=IwAR15724NdOrN8RseuQAtijh-bX9msNDDeHZKcwmkuKBd8rMQ19oXrQUMkZKQ>, *The Supreme Court forbade not only to publish unverified information about the coronavirus, but also to discuss it out loud*, Fontanka, 21 April 2020

<sup>38</sup> [https://lenizdat.ru/articles/1157141/?fbclid=IwAR04highSOI2wm73Dk94c31GCgPi3QIOaLiClp9Q0nb6DTiSJN9v0\\_KzFr4](https://lenizdat.ru/articles/1157141/?fbclid=IwAR04highSOI2wm73Dk94c31GCgPi3QIOaLiClp9Q0nb6DTiSJN9v0_KzFr4), *Petersburg journalist prepares for searches and criminal case for "fake" about coronavirus*, lenizdat.ru, 25 April 2020

<sup>39</sup> <https://europeanjournalists.org/blog/2020/04/03/covid-19-serbian-government-urged-to-guarantee-free-flow-of-information/> *COVID-19: Serbian government urged to guarantee free flow of information*, EFJ, 3 April 2020

<sup>40</sup> <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a589670/NDNV-Nastavlja-se-kampanja-mrznje-protiv-Ane-Lalic.html> *NDNV: The hate campaign against Ana Lalic continues*, N1, 16 March 2020

<sup>41</sup> <http://rs.n1info.com/English/NEWS/a582431/TV-Crew-arrested-for-refusing-disinfection.html>, *TV Crew arrested for refusing disinfection*, N1, 26 March 2020

<sup>42</sup> <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/03/16/coronavirus-live-updates/#1927> *Serbian Health Minister Blames 'Corona in Newsrooms' for Press Conference Ban*, Balkan Insight, 11 April 2020

<sup>43</sup> <https://www.juznevesti.com/Drushtvo/Informacije-o-korona-virusu-ubuduce-samo-od-Kriznog-staba-novinari-ukazuju-na-prikriveni-cenzuru.sr.html> *Information about the coronavirus in the future only from Crisis Staff, reporters point to covert censorship*, Južne Vesti, 1 April 2020

- FOI deadlines have also been suspended during the state of emergency<sup>44</sup>.

## Slovenia

- Slovenian investigative journalist Blaž Zgaga has been targeted by a hate campaign fuelled by the government and a pro-government TV station for submitting an official Freedom of Information Request to the authorities in Ljubljana about the government's handling of the COVID-19 crisis<sup>45</sup>.

## Spain

- The Spanish government faced strong criticism from several hundred journalists and several of the country's leading newspapers over the system for media to ask questions during press conferences. The outlets denounced the restrictive questioning format, in which submissions were written in advance and pre-selected by the government. A new system was introduced which allowed questions to ministers in a live communication and without intermediaries<sup>46</sup>.

## Turkey

- On March 20, journalists Mustafa Ahmet Oktay and Eren Sarıkaya from Bartın-based Halk Newspaper and Pusula Newspaper were taken into custody over a report published about the spread of COVID-19<sup>47</sup>.
- On March 25, journalist Tugay Can was accused of "creating fear and panic amongst the public" over coronavirus news coverage<sup>48</sup>.
- On March 31, Kurdish journalist, writer and activist Nurcan Baysal was summoned by the police to testify for sharing prisoners' letters and two articles on the pandemic<sup>49</sup>.
- On March 31, Oktay Candemir, a local journalist for Van Haberdar, was called to testify for his social media posts on the spread of COVID-19 in the region<sup>50</sup>.
- On March 31, a police investigation was opened against Mezopotamya News Agency correspondent Ahmet Kanbal, who was accused of "inciting hatred and enmity" in a news report about coronavirus safety measures in a hospital<sup>51</sup>.
- On April 3, Hakan Aygun, a veteran Turkish journalist who used to lead the staunchly critical of President Erdogan television channel Halk TV, was arrested for inciting

<sup>44</sup> <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/04/06/central-and-eastern-europe-freedom-of-information-rights-postponed/> *Central and Eastern Europe Freedom of Information Rights 'Postponed'*, Balkan Insight, 6 April 2020

<sup>45</sup> <https://rsf.org/en/news/seven-organisations-call-slovenian-government-stop-harassing-investigative-journalist>, *Seven organisations call on the Slovenian government to stop harassing an investigative journalist*, RSF, 27 March 2020

<sup>46</sup> <https://rsf.org/en/news/coronavirus-spanish-government-yields-pressure-journalists-and-agrees-live-press-conferences-0> *Coronavirus: Spanish government yields to the pressure of journalists and agrees to live press conferences*, Reporters Without Borders, 9 April 2020

<sup>47</sup> <https://www.osce.org/representative-on-freedom-of-media/449023>, *OSCE Media Freedom Representative concerned about detention of several journalists following their reports on coronavirus crisis in Turkey*, OSCE, 23 March 2020

<sup>48</sup> <http://bianet.org/english/freedom-of-expression/221687-detained-for-reporting-on-coronavirus-2-local-journalists-released>, *Iz Newspaper reporter Tugay Can testifies for corona virus outbreak news*, Evrensel, 25 March 2020

<sup>49</sup> <http://bianet.org/english/freedom-of-expression/222257-writer-nurcan-baysal-deposed-over-coronavirus-posts-articles>, *Writer Nurcan Baysal Deposed over Coronavirus Articles*, Bianet, 31 March 2020

<sup>50</sup> <https://www.ajanscaldiran.com/haber/4122833/gazeteci-oktay-candemir-ifadeye-cagrildi>, *Journalist Oktay Candemir Called for Expression*, Ajans Çaldıran, 31 March 2020

<sup>51</sup> <https://gazetekarinca.com/2020/03/gazeteci-ahmet-kanbal-hakkinda-corona-sorusturmasi/>, *'Corona' investigation about journalist Ahmet Kanbal*, Gazeta Karınca, 31 March 2020



hatred with a social media post that mocked President Erdogan's campaign to raise funds for victims of coronavirus<sup>52</sup>.

- On April 15, the Radio and Television High Council (RTÜK) issued broadcast bans to Fox TV for three nights on prime-time news over anchor Fatih Portakal's critical comments while reporting the state's Covid 19 policies. Fox TV was also fined 3 % of its advertisement revenue<sup>53</sup>.
- On April 13, the parliament passed legislation allowing for the early release of up to 90,000 prisoners in a law that excluded those convicted of terrorism related crimes that have been used to imprison up to 50 journalists for their critical journalism. It also excludes those on pre-trial detention who are not convicted of any crime<sup>54</sup>.

## Ukraine

- On March 25, a journalist from NewsOne TV channel in Ukraine was assaulted during a journalistic investigation into the illegal selling of protective coronavirus masks in the city of Krasiyiv. She was injured and needed treatment on her hand<sup>55</sup>.
- On April 2, a journalist and cameraman of ZiK TV channel were insulted and attacked by a man as they filmed a report in the capital Kiev about the observance of restrictions imposed by the government to tackle the spread of COVID-19<sup>56</sup>.

## Key considerations

During the ongoing COVID-19 health crisis, the need for the free flow of independent news is more essential than ever. Independent media is playing a central role in ensuring citizens have access to reliable, accurate and updated news about the pandemic. Moreover, in a period when our citizens' fundamental rights are being suspended, journalists are also acting as a key watchdog in maintaining public scrutiny and debate on the adequacy of government measures.

Unfortunately, at the same time, some governments in member states of the Council of Europe have opportunistically taken advantage of emergency coronavirus legislation to push through restrictions which erode press freedom. While some of these measures have threatened press freedom unintentionally, others have been implemented knowingly. While some curbs on rights may be necessary to combat the pandemic, those limiting media freedom are excessive. Most concerning, while some of the restrictions due to the coronavirus will be temporary, others risk being extended long after the health crisis is over. If institutions such as the CoE do not push back against these threats strongly, media freedom in Europe could emerge from COVID-19 in a very different state of health to that it entered in.

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<sup>52</sup> [www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-04-03/turkey-arrests-journalist-who-belittled-erdogan-virus-campaign](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-04-03/turkey-arrests-journalist-who-belittled-erdogan-virus-campaign), *Turkey Arrests Journalist Who Belittled Erdogan Virus Campaign*, Bloomberg, 3 April 2020

<sup>53</sup> <https://gazetekarinca.com/2020/04/fox-tvye-uc-kez-yayin-durdurma-cezasi/>, *Three times the suspension of broadcasting to FOX TV*, Gazeta Karınca, 15 April 2020

<sup>54</sup> <https://www.article19.org/resources/turkey-24-rights-groups-call-for-release-of-all-those-arbitrarily-detained-now-at-risk-of-covid-19/>, *Turkey: 24 rights groups call for release of all those arbitrarily detained, now at risk of Covid-19*, Article 19, 17 April 2020

<sup>55</sup> <https://112.international/politics/newsone-tv-channel-journalists-beaten-up-during-filming-illegal-mask-trade-49865.html>, *NewsOne TV channel journalists beaten up during filming illegal mask trade*, 112 Ukraine, 25 March 2020

<sup>56</sup> <https://112.international/ukraine-top-news/attacker-on-zik-tv-channel-crew-put-under-house-arrest-50290.html>, *Attacker on ZiK TV channel crew put under house arrest*, 112 Ukraine, 7 April 2020

This briefing was prepared by the International Press Institute (IPI) on behalf of the Council of Europe Platform for the Safety of Journalists representing leading press freedom and freedom of expression groups across Europe including:

#### ARTICLE 19

Association of European Journalists  
Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)  
European Broadcasting Union (EBU)  
European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF)  
European Federation of Journalists (EFJ)  
Free Press Unlimited (FPU)  
Index on Censorship  
International Federation of Journalists (IFJ)  
International News Safety Institute (INSI)  
International Press Institute (IPI)  
PEN International  
Reporters Without Borders (RSF)  
The Rory Peck Trust