



International
Press
Institute

**MEDIA
FREEDOM**
in Europe in
the shadow of
COVID-19



MONITORING REPORT

Media Freedom in Europe in the Shadow of COVID-19

MONITORING REPORT

2020



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Introduction

Few global events in recent decades have had such an immediate and significant effect on press and media freedom as the COVID-19 pandemic. As the health crisis spread across the globe, governments responded with unprecedented measures, restricting freedom of movement, locking down society, launching record financial rescue packages and scrambling to understand and contain the virus to protect public health. So exceptional was the situation that the need for clear, quality information on which policy makers and the public could base their decisions, had never been greater.

The media's role in ensuring a free flow of news and information about the pandemic therefore became central. Journalism needed to deliver urgent health-related information to the public and provide clear and sober news on the pandemic on the basis of which policy responses, and the public's support for them, could be developed. Media needed to assess the strategies and examine if the imposed restrictions on basic rights were necessary and justified in the protection of public health, or whether governments were guilty of overreach either through misjudgement or opportunistic power grabs. Most importantly the press had to maintain a critical distance, counter government efforts to control the media message and build public trust.

In a reflection of this crucial role, media quickly came under pressure. Alarm over the impact of pandemic measures and media coverage of them became apparent as governments started restricting access to press conferences, introducing powers to counter so-called "fake news" about the virus, and threatening to close or prosecute media whose narrative contradicted the official line. Unscrupulous governments swiftly sought to equate critical journalism with disinformation, seeking powers to block stories, close media, and jail reporters.

IPI's [Covid-19 Press Freedom Tracker](#), which has been monitoring the situation since February 2020, has recorded 107 different media freedom violations in Europe¹. Within the EU itself, almost no country was spared the effects of the pandemic. The [Mapping Media Freedom](#) platform monitored violations linked to the COVID-19 in 19 of the EU's 32 different Member States and Candidate Countries.

IPI COVID-19 PRESS FREEDOM TRACKER

MAPPING MEDIA FREEDOM PLATFORM

¹ In IPI's COVID-19 Tracker, the Europe region includes all EU Members States and Candidate Countries, including Turkey, plus Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine



Unsurprisingly, many of these violations came from those states with existing authoritarian tendencies and already [chequered media freedom records](#) such as Hungary, where the pandemic has been exploited to grab more powers and tighten control over information. Budapest led the pack with emergency legislation rushed through parliament in April criminalizing the spread of false or distorted information about the pandemic with penalties of up to five years in prison. Similar initiatives were taken up in Romania and Bulgaria, while beyond the EU, numerous states introduced restrictive laws or decrees outlawing “false information” about the virus, most prominently [Russia](#).



There has been a disturbing rise in violent assaults against journalists, particularly when covering anti-lockdown demonstrations or reporting breaches of lockdown measures, worsening an already worrying climate of hostility against the press in some parts of Europe.

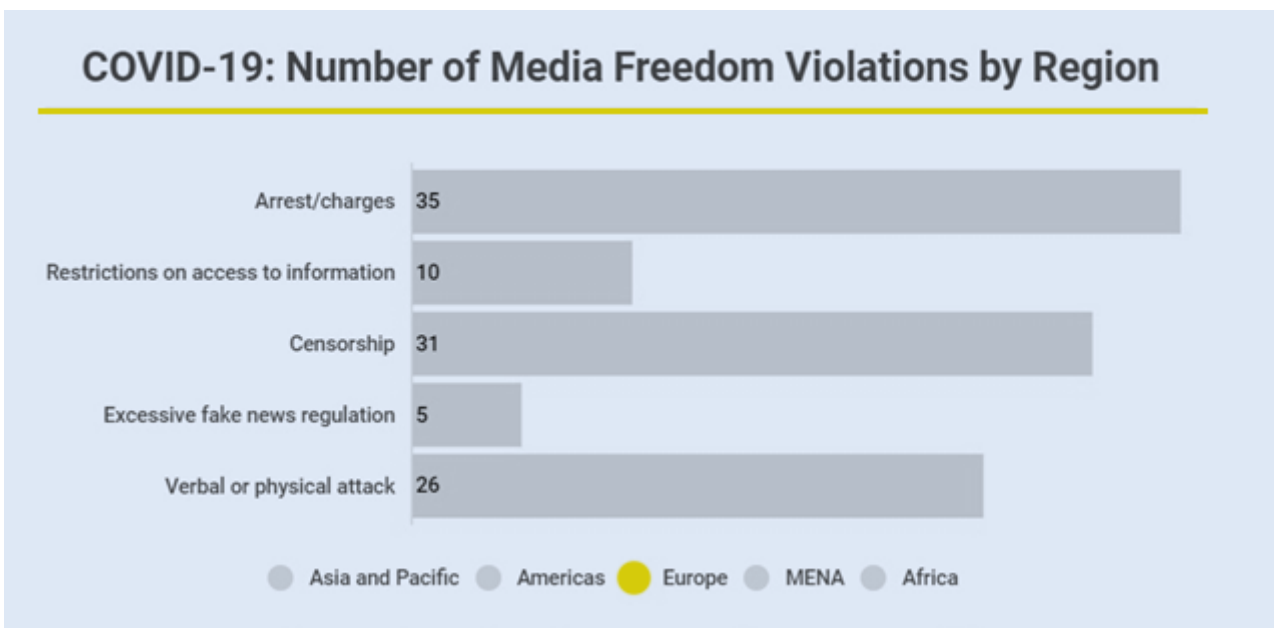
The next step in government efforts to control the narrative around the pandemic and their handling of it was to restrict access to government information. This included weakening or suspending obligations on Freedom of Information (FOI) laws while restricting access to press conferences and censoring questions from certain media. As the economic impact of the crisis on media became apparent with the collapse in advertising income, governments such as those in Greece and Poland took advantage of financial support packages and public health campaigns to reward loyal publications while punishing critical media.

As the political and economic crises developed over the summer, growing public restlessness and hostility over continued lockdowns were coopted by far-right groups and unscrupulous politicians to turn public frustration against media, creating a febrile atmosphere. As a result, in recent months there has been a disturbing rise in violent assaults against journalists, particularly when covering anti-lockdown demonstrations or reporting breaches of lockdown measures, worsening an already worrying climate of hostility against the press in some parts of Europe.



Visit IPI's COVID-19 Tracker, monitoring attacks on journalists and the press worldwide linked to the pandemic at <https://ipi.media/covid19/>

Many of these press freedom violations have intensified and exacerbated existing pressures on media in problematic countries, while also creating new challenges in others. This report by the International Press Institute (IPI) presents a summary of the effect that COVID-19 has had on press and media freedom in the EU. This report analyses the main types of violations and attacks monitored in the last 10 months, documents the key trends observed during this time, and assesses their impact on press freedom within Europe.



Media Freedom Violations in Europe: users can sort the individual press freedom alerts by type of violation (including arrest, limitations on access to information, or physical attack) as well as country and region; <https://ipi.media/covid19/>

“Fake News”: Tightening Controls on Information

History has shown that moments of crisis can lead to rash and disproportionate responses that fundamentally reshape norms for years, if not decades, to come. The COVID-19 pandemic has been no different. Over the last ten months, IPI’s COVID-19 Tracker documented at least [17 countries worldwide](#) in which some form of legislation or decree has been passed to target “online misinformation”, “false information” or so-called “fake news” about the health crisis. Though the increase and dangers of online falsehoods has been clear to see during the pandemic, this rush to regulation raised serious concerns that vaguely defined laws would be used to censor critical reporting and have implications that would long outlive COVID-19.

Fake News Regulations

List of countries that have passed ‘fake news’ regulations during Covid-19 pandemic.



Interactive map available [here](#)

In April, the government of Viktor Orbán made international headlines when it succeeded in [passing a new law](#) in Hungary criminalizing the spreading of “false” or “distorted” information which undermines the authorities’ fight against COVID-19 with fines and up to five years in prison. Despite government assurances, journalists and media freedom advocates feared the law’s language would later be weaponized to silence [what remains of the country’s independent press](#). While to date there have been no cases of the law being used directly against the press, journalists have [described](#)

how the law had a chilling effect and led to increased self-censorship in newsrooms, particularly smaller, independent media.



Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán wears a protective face mask during a press conference. 11 June 2020. EPA-EFE/MARTIN DIVISEK

In neighbouring Romania, the president signed an emergency decree in March which gave authorities the power to remove, report or [close](#) websites that spread “false information” about the virus, with few safeguards and no opportunity to appeal. This decree expired after the state of emergency. In Bulgaria, the government used a state of emergency decree to try to amend the penal code and introduce prison sentences for spreading what it deemed disinformation about the outbreak with up to three years in prison or a fine of up to €5,000. On this occasion, the bill was vetoed by President Rumen Radev. In Bosnia's predominantly Serb-populated entity, Republika Srpska, the government introduced [fines and other punitive measures](#) in March for spreading “fake news” regarding the coronavirus outbreak in media or on social networks, leading to criticism from the OSCE and the law's reversal.

As the majority of these laws either expired or were blocked, the damage from these legislative efforts in the EU has been limited. Strong scrutiny from European institutions and civil society groups has been fundamental in pushing back against these efforts. However, this push for regulation has further moved the Overton window in the debate around combating “fake news”, bringing dangerous forms of regulation that can be weaponized against critical journalism closer.

Access Denied: Restrictions on Information Gathering

Just at a time when the need for transparency was at its greatest both to win the confidence of a skeptical public about the lockdown measures and to combat the threat of disinformation, numerous governments instead sought to restrict access to information as much as possible and to tightly manage the news around the pandemic. This led to excessive and counterproductive limits on the freedom of the media. As social distancing and lockdown rules came into force and work moved online, so too did press conferences and health briefings become virtual. In many states, this transition to online events went seamlessly and gave ample time for different media to pose questions. In others, this switch was poorly managed and led to and disproportionate barriers for journalists taking part in events. Though some were quickly rectified, these moves may have reflected ignorance or unpreparedness on the part of governments and revealed a lack of appreciation for the role of the media in moments of crisis. However in some states, these changes provided cover for governments to block certain media from attending altogether or pre-select journalists to shield politicians from probing questions.

“ While governments justified these extensions as freeing up government bodies to help tackle the pandemic, they undermined the ability of journalists to receive timely information about the quickly changing health crisis. Numerous journalists complained that requests for information from public institutions from independent media were being disregarded altogether.

In the Czech Republic, a major publication critical of the government, Forum 24, has been [denied accreditation](#) to participate in online press conferences since March. [Repeated appeals](#) for accreditation have been ignored. In Malta, the national broadcaster has frequently [cut](#) the live airing of journalists' questions during press conferences. In Spain, much of the country's leading media

joined in April to denounce the [“censorship”](#) of questions during the prime minister’s press conferences. In this case, the secretary of state for communication was [accused](#) of only selecting WhatsApp questions from outlets favoured by the government. In the UK, openDemocracy reporter [James Cusick](#) was also barred from asking questions at the government’s official daily COVID-19 briefings, despite being a member of the parliamentary lobby. In Hungary, authorities [ignored](#) interview requests from independent media and daily COVID-19 press conferences heavily favoured pro-government media. Similar challenges were reported in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Greece and Slovenia.

In other European states, government attempts to avoid probing questions took different forms. Beginning in March, a handful of governments extended or suspended deadlines by which public bodies were required to respond to FOI requests. Bulgaria, Serbia and Romania [doubled](#) the maximum response time, while Hungary trebled it from 30 to 90 days. Other states such as [Spain](#) and Slovenia suspended FOI deadlines altogether. In Italy, the government suspended all “non-urgent” requests for more than two months. While governments justified these extensions as freeing up government bodies to help tackle the pandemic, they undermined the ability of journalists to receive timely information about the quickly changing health crisis. Numerous journalists complained that requests for information from public institutions from independent media were being disregarded altogether. In Romania, for example, as soon as these rules were implemented two county health directorates reportedly [refused to respond](#) to requests for information coming from journalists. In Hungary, too, journalists having to wait three months for FOI responses faced big barriers in accessing up-to-date information.

Public information on the pandemic also became scarcer as governments sought to limit media contacts with health workers and impose centralized control over all COVID-19 related information. In Hungary, health information was centralized by the government’s “Operative Unit”, meaning that journalists’ questions to local hospitals, schools and municipalities have to be handled by the national authorities. Individual state hospital workers were already barred from speaking to journalists and now the heads of health institutions had to seek approval and coordinate with authorities before giving interviews. This new communications strategy obstructed the work of the media’s ability to report on the reality of the situation for those working on the front line of the pandemic.



Romania's Prime Minister Ludovic Orban (C) speaks to media at Parliament Palace in Bucharest, Romania, 31 August 2020. EPA-EFE/ROBERT GHEMENT

In Serbia, the government centralized information about the virus and penalized local institutions from releasing health information to the media that was not “authorized” by authorities in Belgrade. This decree, later reversed by the prime minister, was partly responsible for the arrest of a journalist. The Romanian Ministry of Internal Affairs issued an order banning the publication of local information on the number of COVID-19 tests performed, the number of people tested positive, the health of patients and the locations where quarantine centres would be opened, leading to an outcry from press groups. In Spain journalists were met with a similar information blackout and struggled to access data about the rate of infections, hospital occupancy, and the total death toll. National and regional governments also restricted press access to hospitals, elderly residences, and official institutions, leading to criticism they were prioritizing image control over transparency. In many states, these restrictions [compounded already challenging](#) landscapes for transparency and access to information for the press.

Legal Threats: Arrests, Detentions and Charges

To tackle the pandemic, governments introduced a raft of measures aimed at enforcing lockdowns, social distancing and mask wearing. These rules posed a number of challenges for journalists and their editors seeking to cover the story. While in some cases uncertainty over the status of the media as “essential workers” led to journalists being wrongly penalized, in others these new rules were used by police and law enforcement to prosecute journalists.

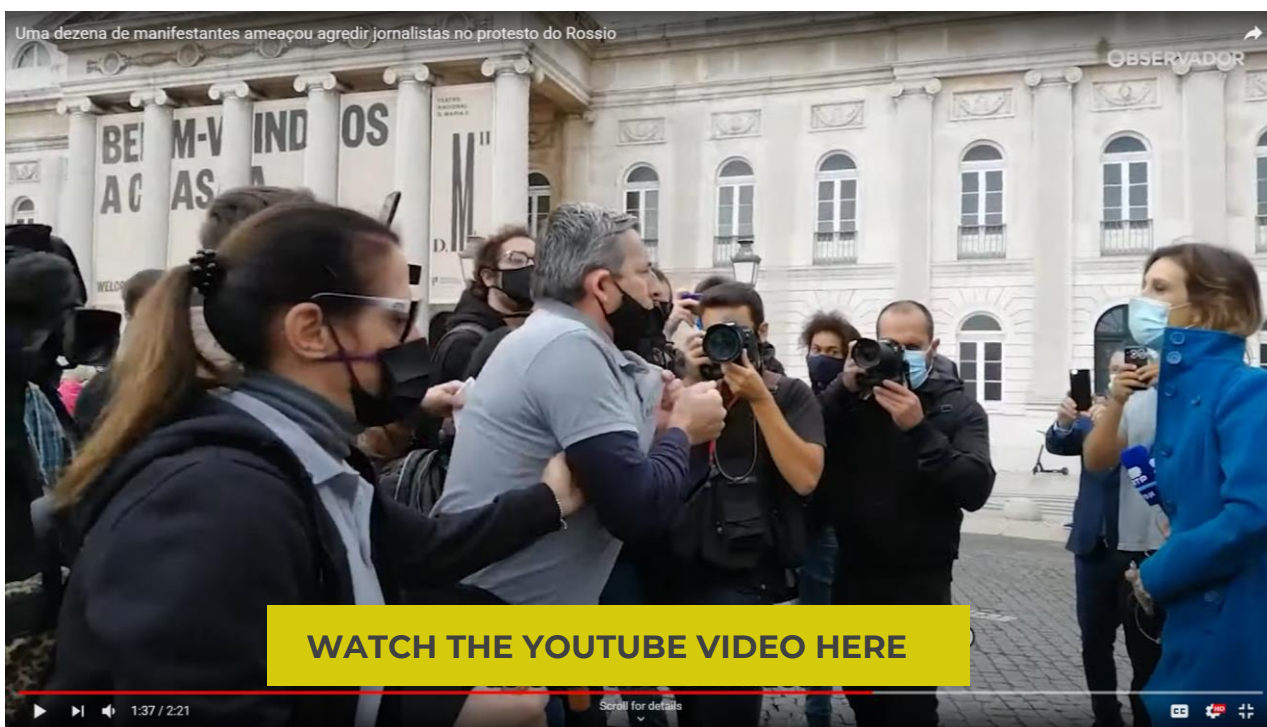
In many of these cases, it appears COVID-19 rules were misused to detain media workers covering sensitive topics or restrict access to certain areas. In Bosnia, for example, a RTV Slon crew were [detained](#) by police despite having valid press cards and permits that allowed them to travel for work during curfew. Police seized the journalists’ phones and deleted footage. In Poland, a reporter for leading daily newspaper Gazeta Wyborcza, Pawel Rutkiewicz, was arrested while covering an anti-lockdown demonstration in Warsaw, despite showing his press pass. In Serbia, a journalist and a cameraperson of KTV station in Zrenjanin were [arrested](#) allegedly for failing to undergo mandatory disinfection when they were trying to interview local authorities about a land sale organized at a council building despite a ban on gatherings.

Legal measures were also used to intimidate or sideline critical press. In May one of Albania’s biggest broadcasters, RTV ORA, was ordered to close indefinitely and fined for allegedly not respecting social distancing rules. Following protests, the closure was later reversed. In Poland, President Andrzej Duda was accused of using social distancing rules to refuse two journalists from the critical tabloid Fakt to join the press core on the presidential plane.

In rarer cases journalists faced arrest or investigations for what they had written on the pandemic. In April, [Ana Lalić](#), a journalist for Serbian online news portal Nova.rs, was arrested for “causing panic and disorder” in an article she wrote about the lack of personal protective equipment available in a city hospital. In interviewing anonymous medical staff, officials said she had violated a government decree on “unauthorized” information from local institutions. After protests, Lalić was released and the decree was reversed by the prime minister. However, she continued to face a barrage of threats and hate online. In Turkey, journalists were [taken into custody](#) over reports about the spread of the virus, [arrested](#) for reporting on coronavirus deaths, and [summoned](#) for “creating fear and panic amongst public” over COVID-19 coverage.

COVID-19 Intensifies Anti-Press Sentiment

During the pandemic IPI monitored numerous examples of death threats and other forms of intimidation of journalists for their COVID-19 reporting. Many incidents involved journalists being targeted for reporting on violations of curfews or lockdown rules or on the spread of the virus. In Serbia two people broke into the house of Jeton Ismaili, editor of FOLonline, and threatened to kill him and his family after his outlet reported on the suspected local coronavirus deaths. In Croatia, journalists from news portal Zadarski.hr were threatened by an unknown man who entered the editorial office in Zadar threatening to “slaughter” its journalists over a report about a wedding held in violation of COVID-19 rules. Other threats occurred as journalists and TV crews were reporting on the streets. In Croatia, a reporter and camera operator for N1 were threatened and insulted as they tried to record an interview about COVID-19 in Zagreb. In Italy two journalists working for the newspaper Il Tirreno were threatened with a metal bar by a news agent after they tried to interview him about the coronavirus measures.



*A dozen protesters threatened to attack journalists at Rossio's protest in Portugal on 14 November 2020.
Source: <https://observador.pt/2020/11/14/ameacas-de-agressoes-a-equipa-do-observador-na-manif-do-rossio/>*

Yet more threats and acts of intimidation occurred during protests. In Portugal, crews from Televisão Independente and Observador radio were [insulted](#) as they covered a demonstration in Lisbon organized by restaurant industry groups demanding more support during the pandemic. In Vienna, an Austria Broadcasting Corporation (ORF) crew was surrounded by a ring of protesters who booed and chanted “Lügenpresse” (“lying press”) during anti-lockdown protests. In Italy, [anti-media songs](#) were chanted during protest marches, denouncing journalists as “terrorists” and “liars”.

Threats also came not from politicians and government officials. In April a spokesman of Russia’s Defence Ministry issued a [veiled threat](#) against a reporter from Italian newspaper La Stampa over an article it published about Russian COVID-19 aid. In Albania, prime minister Edi Rama sent a [voice message](#) to all Vodafone clients with health advice that included a warning to “protect yourself from the media”. In Slovenia, investigative journalist [Blaž Žgaga](#) was subjected to abuse online after a government account retweeted the false claim that he was an “escaped psychiatric patient” after he had submitted a Freedom of Information request about the government’s COVID-19 state of emergency powers. These cases exemplify the wider issue of media being stigmatized, denigrated or smeared by politicians as ‘fake news peddlers’, anti-Government agents or foreign operatives, deliberately stoking a climate of hostility towards media.

Journalists in the Firing Line: Physical Attacks and Intimidation

The growing hostility to the press recorded above inevitably led to outbreaks of actual physical violence threatening the safety of journalists in the last few months of 2020. IPI and its partners in the [Media Freedom Rapid Response](#) (MFRR) recorded a sharp rise in attacks on journalists covering anti-lockdown protests. Between September and November, at least 58 incidents involving assaults, physical aggression, threats and intimidation against journalists by members of the public were [documented](#) in Germany, Italy and Slovenia. The attacks came predominantly from anti-lockdown or conspiracy theory groups, others came from far-right groups which had hijacked rallies to push their own agenda, such as the Forza Nuova in Italy or National Democratic Party of Germany.



Protesters clash with riot police during the "No to a new lockdown" demonstration in Piazza Campo dei Fiori in Rome, Italy, October 31, 2020. EPA-EFE / ANGELO CARCONI

In the German city of Leipzig at least 43 journalists faced harassment, insults and obstruction by protesters at the “Querdenken” demonstration on November 7, [according](#) to the German Union of Journalists (DJV). In Italy at least nine incidents involving 14 members of the media were [recorded](#) in six different cities over a three-week period in October, including Rome, Naples and Florence. Journalists were [assaulted and](#) had [glass bottles](#) or stones thrown at them, while others were [chased](#) or faced [death threats](#) from anti-mask protesters. In Slovenia, photojournalist Borut Živulovič was hospitalized after being knocked unconscious by an unidentified protester while covering anti-lockdown protests in Ljubljana.

Not all attacks on journalists were by protesters. In April the Athens-based offices of SKAI were targeted in a [firebomb attack](#) by an anarchist group which accused it, among other things, of purposefully misleading people at the behest of the state during the COVID-19 crisis. In October, Italian photojournalist Tommaso Germogli suffered a head trauma after being punched by a street vendor while reporting on public adherence to social distancing and mask wearing rules from a local street market in Florence.

IPI COVID-19 PRESS FREEDOM TRACKER

REPORTING THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON JOURNALISM



The Economic Crisis and Weaponization of Public Health Advertising

IPI's COVID-19 Tracker seeks to document all incidents of violations of journalists' rights as a result of the health pandemic. Underlying all these violations and representing as great a threat to the independence and sustainability of journalism, has been the economic impact of the crisis on media. As the crisis hit an industry already weakened from years of underinvestment and falling income, the sudden collapse of remaining advertising revenue created an immediate economic crisis for all commercial media across Europe. The full impact may not be known for some time. But across Europe thousands of journalists were furloughed as newsrooms slashed costs while also seeking to meet a sudden rise in public demand for quality journalism. Numerous media houses either temporarily or permanently cut staff wages, and some laid off newsroom employees forcing hard decisions about the scope of news coverage. With editors forced to prioritize their own newsrooms and make spending cuts, many newsrooms cut their collaboration with freelancers, laying bare the [precarious working conditions](#) of freelancers across Europe.

The crisis particularly impacted local media, reflecting the urgent need for intervention to sustain media diversity that talks to its audience where they live. IPI is conducting a separate analysis of local media to identify its particular needs. Governments across Europe responded to the call introducing emergency packages to provide immediate support to relieve the worst excesses of the economic crisis. Many of these have provided an essential lifeline to media. But governments have also struggled to find appropriate mechanisms to distribute funds that ensure it is done impartially, transparently and without risk to compromising the independence of the media.

Some governments are guilty of using public funds to buy favourable coverage and are likely to continue to take advantage of the economic fragility of media emerging from this crisis to continue to reward alignment and punish dissenting media. In July, Greek investigative newspaper Documento was [revealed](#) to be the only major media outlet in the country to be excluded entirely from the government's emergency funding scheme. The weekly, known for being critical of the New Democracy government, was side-lined entirely from the €20 million public health awareness campaign. When the full list of recipients, 1,232 in total, was finally made public, it revealed that several other critical outlets had received very small amounts compared to government-friendly websites, despite having far larger circulation, readership and more employees. Other beneficiaries included obscure websites, tiny blogs with almost zero readership, and inactive web pages. News media friendly towards the government received [disproportionate](#) sums. One [analysis](#) estimated that less than 1 percent of the funding went to "opposition" news outlets during the campaign.



In Poland the leading daily Gazeta Wyborcza, which is often critical of the current government, was the only major media outlet to be completely excluded from paid announcements with public health advice placed in newspapers by the Chancellery of the Prime Minister. This denied public health advice to several hundred thousand of the newspaper's readers. The government denied any media was "bypassed" on purpose and claimed that funding was allocated based on readership and credibility. In Malta, the government allocated close to €1 million in COVID-19 support. Despite [FOI requests seeking details](#), the government has refused to divulge the beneficiaries, citing a confidentiality clause that is normally applied to protect commercial interests. In Austria the system for [distributing public advertising](#) has been severely criticised for favouring government friendly newspapers and that the COVID-related emergency support distributed on the basis of circulation figures to the advantage of big tabloid papers at the expense of quality media. The media also criticised the Austrian government for channelling emergency assistance through private companies that are not subject to the same level of parliamentary oversight or freedom of information requirements as government bodies making it much harder to scrutinise how emergency funds are spent.

There is perhaps no ideal model for providing public funds, let alone emergency funds, to support independent journalism. But distribution mechanisms, despite their imperfections, have brought much needed relief. Governments and the media community should thoroughly review the experience of the emergency funding and other mechanisms for public funds to support the journalist sector. The lessons learnt must then be applied to maximise the transparency and impartiality based on criteria that rewards quality, independent, public service journalism.

IPI COVID-19 PRESS FREEDOM TRACKER

REPORTING THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON JOURNALISM



Digital Transition: New Opportunities for Online Media

The experience of the media under COVID-19 has made 2020 a pivotal year in the digital transition of traditional media and the emergence of new digital players. The combination of lockdowns and economic downturn has accelerated the process of change. The pandemic has undermined the independence and sustainability of journalism, yet also triggered experimentation in journalistic forms and products. It drove media to examine new methods of distribution and connect with its audience.

As well as highlighting the vulnerabilities of smaller and regional media outlets, the pandemic accelerated the [digital transformation](#) of larger media companies. As a rule of thumb, the further along the process of transition that individual companies had travelled before the pandemic, the better off they were. Those companies that had lagged behind are being forced to catch up to survive.

For all its downsides, the pandemic also offered up positive stories of success and resilience from European media. In the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, lockdown encouraged newsrooms to find new ways to present content and organizing remote work helped both journalists and news organizations develop their digital capabilities. Some newspapers decided to end their print edition and make the jump to digital only. Online outlets like Denník N in Slovakia and its sister publication in the Czech Republic provided a [model](#) of how media outlets that successfully monetized content had thrived during COVID-19.

It has made urgent the need for deepened intervention by media support organizations to ensure the opportunities of this pivot are seized to build a vibrant news ecosystem out of the principles of journalism and the demands of democracy. This experience demonstrates the need for ongoing support for independent media and, particularly, support for the transition to digital sustainability through arms-length arrangements that protect the integrity and independence of Europe's news media.

Conclusion: EU Weathering the COVID-19 Storm

In the last decade press freedom globally has been widely perceived as being in decline due to rising authoritarianism and populism, political systems in which free media are increasingly seen as opponents or “enemies” to be confronted rather than bulwarks of democracy. At the same time, media across the world were already facing increased challenges from digital surveillance, declining levels of public trust, and an existential financial crisis caused by seismic shifts in the way journalism is consumed and paid for. The COVID-19 pandemic struck right in the middle of these overlapping political, technological and economic crises, aggravating existing issues and leading to restrictions and violations on a scale unprecedented in recent years.



*General view of hemicycle during a one-day plenary session of European Parliament, Brussels, Belgium, 16th April 2020.
Photo by Shutterstock / Von Alexandros Michailidis*

This report has focused on the EU, where media is comparatively much better off. In China, Iran and Egypt journalists were thrown in jail for reporting on the reality of COVID-19 deaths, while in Russia misinformation laws were used to force the takedown of articles criticising authorities’ handling of the health crisis. In contrast, the EU remains by far the most free and open region for media in the

world. As a direct result of the pandemic, newsrooms in EU states were not raided. Newspapers have not been shuttered. Journalists were not thrown behind bars. Nevertheless, the pandemic-driven restrictions on fundamental rights, the greatest since the Second World War, clearly placed pressure on the rights of the media and journalists, and the crisis had undoubtedly challenged the profession's ability to remain an effective watchdog.

“ The COVID-19 crisis, and governments’ response to it, are fundamentally reconfiguring, entrenching and in some cases intensifying the challenges facing media. Authoritarian governments have accelerated their moves to increase their power over media, underscoring the need to fight to protect the media’s watchdog role.

European journalists and policy makers must not ignore the alarm bells that the crisis has set off. The bloc has seen an unprecedented rise in hostility against journalists fed by unscrupulous politicians feeding a hostile environment which legitimizes violence against journalists in the eyes of their supporters. The culture of transparency and access to information has been significantly compromised and the struggle to contain online disinformation has legitimized powers that can be easily turned against independent critical journalism. Increased state surveillance architecture is also posing more threats to source protection and creating further risks for journalists wanting to pursue certain stories. And the misuse of financial tools to reward and punish media have proved their effectiveness encouraging further abuse in the future. While some restrictions on press and media freedom were the result of misguided attempts to steer the flow of information for public health reasons, most violations resulted from the deliberate opportunistic use of the crisis as a cover to extend long-running campaigns to undermine independent and critical journalism.

The COVID-19 crisis, and governments’ response to it, are fundamentally reconfiguring, entrenching and in some cases intensifying the challenges facing media. Authoritarian governments have accelerated their moves to increase their power over media, underscoring the need to fight to protect the media’s watchdog role. Meanwhile, the economic crisis and lockdown have accelerated the digital transition. Innovation has sped up as journalists develop new media models and new ways for reaching the public. Above all, the public demand for quality independent information has never been so strong, bringing, despite the tremendous hurdles, reason to be hopeful yet about the future sustainability of journalism.

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