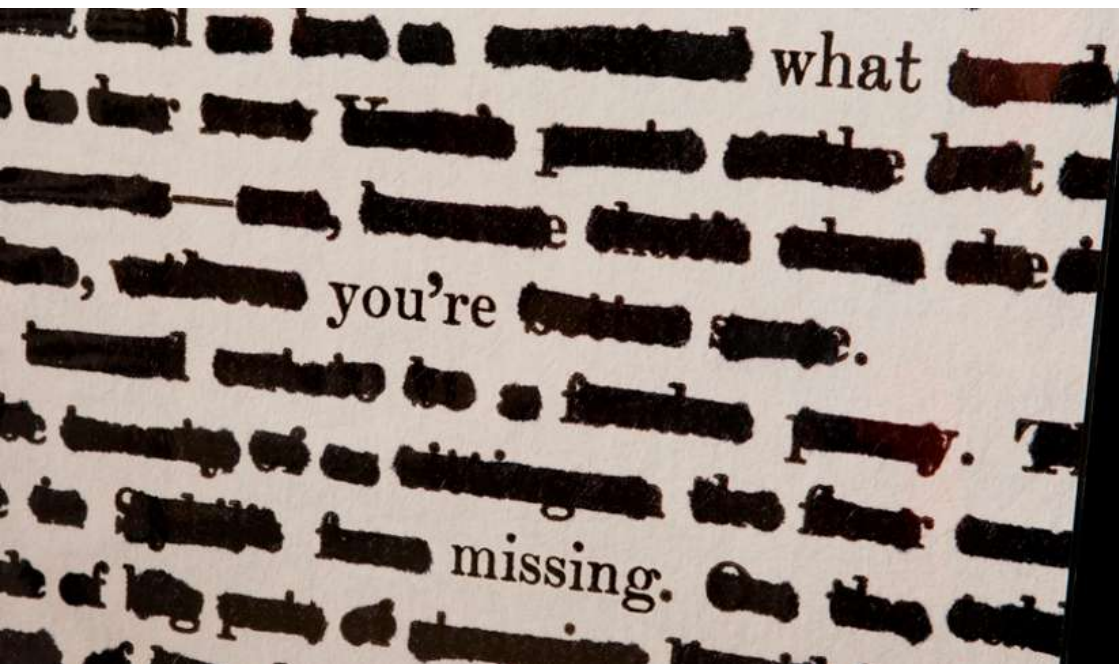


# COVID-19 ADDENDUM PRESS FREEDOM SUFFERS IN COUNCIL OF EUROPE MEMBER STATES UNDER COVID-19



COVID-19 Addendum to the Annual Report  
by the partner organisations  
to the Council of Europe Platform  
to Promote the Protection of Journalism  
and Safety of Journalists

2020

**safety of  
journalists  
platform**



COUNCIL OF EUROPE



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Cover and layout:  
Documents and Publications  
Production Department (SPDP),  
Council of Europe.

This publication has not been copy-edited by the SPDP Editorial Unit to correct typographical and grammatical errors.

Cover Illustration:  
*La censure littéraire*  
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Council of Europe, June 2020.  
Printed at the Council of Europe.

# 52 different press freedom issues were 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 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 on press and media freedom on the continent.<sup>1</sup>

## Background

— Violations in Council of Europe Member States make up just over a third of all violations documented globally, according to data collected by the International Press Institute (IPI).



<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.

■ The five broad topics highlighted are:

- ▶ disproportionate emergency measures, in particular excessive regulations against disinformation,
- ▶ arrests, detentions and charges brought against journalists
- ▶ restrictions on access to information,
- ▶ verbal and physical attacks risking the safety of journalists, and
- ▶ surveillance and privacy threats.



## Current Situation

### Albania

■ On 23 March, the 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 23 March, *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>

2 <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

3 <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

## Armenia

■ On 16 March, Armenia's State of Emergency declaration banned media outlets and social media users from publishing information deemed "panic mongering" or which didn't come from official government sources.

■ On 23 March, 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 organisations 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 publishing any "inaccurate" or "dangerous" content. The vaguely worded law raised concerns it would open the door to increased censorship.<sup>6</sup>

■ On 9 April, journalist Natig Izbatov 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 13 April, 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>

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4 <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

5 <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

6 <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

7 <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

8 <https://aqreqator.az/az/hadise/690407>, *Jurnalistə 25 sutka həbs cəzası verildi...*, Aqreqator, 13 April 2020

■ On 13 April, *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 20 April, 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 19 March, 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 criticised what it says is a restrictive system for journalists asking questions to ministers and health bodies.<sup>12</sup>

■ On 20 April, 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

■ 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,

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

10 <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>, *Reportyor fiziki təzyiqə məruz qaldığını bildirir*, VOA, 21 April 2020

11 <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

12 <https://www.bljesak.info/vijesti/flash/bh-novinari-upozoravaju-ovakvi-postupci-vlasti-vode-ka-cenzuri/307122>, *BH novinari upozoravaju: Ovakvi postupci vlasti vode ka cenzuri*, Bljesak.info, 31 March 2020

13 <http://ba.n1info.com/Vijesti/a427475/BH-novinari-i-OSCE-reagovali-zbog-brisanja-fotografija-ekipi-RTV-Slon.html>, *BH novinari i OSCE reagovali zbog brisanja fotografija ekipe RTV Slon*, N1 BIH, 22 April 2020

another bill was submitted to parliament by a party in the ruling coalition on 19 April 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 18 April, the Athens-based offices of *SKAI*, one of the largest media groups in Greece, was targeted in a firebomb attack. 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 COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>18</sup>

■ From 23 March, the Greek Ministry of Health, citing public health, close its doors to health editors for the daily briefings from Sotiris Tsiodras’ spokesman

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14 <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

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

16 <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

17 <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

18 <https://www.kathimerini.gr/1074456/article/epikairothta/ellada/epi8esh-me-molotof-sto-ktirio-toy-skai-kai-ths-ka8hmerinh8>, *Επίθεση με μολότοφ στο κτίριο του ΣΚΑΙ και της Καθημερινής*, *Kathimerini*, 18 April 2020

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 30 March, the Hungarian parliament passed legislation handing Prime Minister Viktor Orbán sweeping new emergency powers to indefinitely rule by decree. The new law also criminalises 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 criticised 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 centralised 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 23 March, 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 25 March, 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>

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19 [https://www.efsyn.gr/ellada/koinonia/240641\\_se-karantina-i-enimerosi-haropal-eyei-i-eleytheria-toy-typoy](https://www.efsyn.gr/ellada/koinonia/240641_se-karantina-i-enimerosi-haropal-eyei-i-eleytheria-toy-typoy), Σε каранτίνα η ενημέρωση, χαροπαλεύει η ελευθερία του Τύπου, Efsyn, 26 April 2020

20 <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

21 <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

22 <https://iltirreno.gelocal.it/livorno/cronaca/2020/03/23/news/giornalisti-del-tirreno-aggre-diti-il-comunicato-del-comitato-di-redazione-1.38628499>, Giornalisti del Tirreno aggrediti, il comunicato del comitato di redazione, Il Tirreno Livorno, 23 March 2020

23 <https://www.editoria.tv/aggredito-e-minacciato-a-torino-fotografo-de-la-stampa/>, Aggredito e minacciato a Torino fotografo de La Stampa, Editoria.tv, 25 March 2020



■ On 2 April, the spokesman of Russia's Defence Ministry, Major General Igor Konashenkov, sparked a press freedom row after he publicly criticised 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 8 April about the mafia using the coronavirus crisis to increase its influence in certain districts of Palermo.<sup>25</sup>

## Moldova

■ On 19 March, 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 24 March, 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 the position of authorities during a state of emergency. The decree was reversed after a storm of criticism from journalists and media associations.<sup>27</sup>

■ On 3 April, 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>

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24 <https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/cronache/caso-stampa-russia-insorge-pd-intervenga-commissione-ue-1849771.html>, *Caso La Stampa-Russia, insorge il Pd: 'Intervenga la Commissione Ue'*, Il Giornale, 3 April 2020

25 <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

26 <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

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

28 <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

## Poland

■ On 14 April, journalists Wojciech Cieśła 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 16 March 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>

## Russian Federation

■ On 1 April<sup>32</sup>, the federal government stepped up its efforts against “fake news” by approving an amendment to the criminal code that allows fines of up to € 22,000 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 € 112,000 if they disseminate disinformation about the outbreak.<sup>33</sup>

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29 <https://www.lppsa.com/en/informacje-prasowe/lpp-has-sued-for-infringement-of-personal-rights>, *LPP Filed a Lawsuit for the Protection of Personal Rights*, LPP, 14 April 2020

30 <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

31 <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

32 <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2020/04/28/85124-tsena-kazhdomu-zadushennomu-izdaniyu---zhizni-lyudey>, «Цена каждому задушенному изданию — жизни людей», *Novaya Gazeta*, 28 April 2020

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

■ 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>

■ Prominent Russian investigative journalist Elena Milashina was targeted with threats and insults by head of the Chechen Republic, Ramzan Kadyrov, after she published an article questioning the preparedness of the Republic's hospitals for the coronavirus.<sup>35</sup>

■ On 15 April, *Novaya Gazeta* was 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 21 April, the Supreme Court forbade the verbal dissemination of unverified information about the coronavirus which would fall under criminal responsibility along with posts on social networks and publications in the media.<sup>37</sup>

■ On 25 April, 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 penalising local institutions for releasing information to media about the coronavirus outbreak that was not “authorised” by the authorities in Belgrade. The directive, which was later reversed, was partly responsible for the arrest on April 1 of journalist Ana

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34 <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

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

36 <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

37 <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a589670/NDNV-Nastavlja-se-kampanja-mrznje-protiv-Ane-Lalic.html> *NDNV: Nastavlja se kampanja mrznje protiv Ane Lalić*, N1, 16 April 2020

38 [https://lenizdat.ru/articles/1157141/?fbclid=IwAR04highSOI2wm73Dk94c31GCgPi3QIO-aLiClp9Q0nb6DTiSJN9v0\\_KzFr4](https://lenizdat.ru/articles/1157141/?fbclid=IwAR04highSOI2wm73Dk94c31GCgPi3QIO-aLiClp9Q0nb6DTiSJN9v0_KzFr4), *Петербургская журналистка готовится к обыскам и уголовному делу за “фейк” про коронавирус*, lenizdat.ru, 25 April 2020

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 26 March, 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 11 April, journalists were banned from attending the government's daily COVID-19-related press conferences on "health grounds". Media were allowed to submit question via e-mail only, rather than video call, with no follow up questions permitted.<sup>42</sup> Other journalists have criticised the lack of access to information from ministers and health officials.<sup>43</sup>

■ 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 FOI to the authorities in Ljubljana about the government's handling of the COVID-19 crisis.<sup>45</sup>

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39 <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

40 <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a589670/NDNV-Nastavlja-se-kampanja-mrznje-protiv-Ane-Lalic.html>, *NDNV: Nastavlja se kampanja mržnje protiv Ane Lalić*, N1, 16 April 2020

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

42 <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

43 <https://www.juznevesti.com/Drushtvo/Informacije-o-korona-virusu-ubuduće-samo-od-Kriznog-staba-novinari-ukazuju-na-prikrivenu-cenzuru.sr.html>, *Informacije o korona virusu ubuduće samo od Kriznog štaba, novinari ukazuju na prikrivenu cenzuru*, *Južne Vesti*, 1 April 2020

44 <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

45 <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

## 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 20 March, journalists Mustafa Ahmet Oktay and Eren Sarıkaya from Bartın-based *Halk Newspaper* and *Pusulula Newspaper* were taken into custody over a report published about the spread of COVID-19.<sup>47</sup>

■ On 25 March, journalist Tugay Can was accused of "creating fear and panic amongst the public" over coronavirus news coverage.<sup>48</sup>

■ On 31 March, 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 31 March, 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 31 March, 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>

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46 <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

47 <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

48 <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/400419/iz-gazete-muhabiri-tugay-can-korona-virus-salginini-haberi-dolayisiyla-ifade-verdi>, *İz Gazete muhabiri Tugay Can korona virüs salgını haberi dolayısıyla ifade verdi*, Evrensel, 25 March 2020

49 <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

50 <https://www.habercaldiran.com/haber/4122833/gazeteci-oktay-candemir-ifadeye-cagrildi>, *Gazeteci Oktay Candemir İfadeye Çağrıldı*, Haber Çaldıran, 31 March 2020

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

■ On 3 April, Hakan Aygun, a veteran Turkish journalist who used to lead the staunchly critical of President Erdoğan television channel *Halk TV*, was arrested for inciting hatred with a social media post that mocked President Erdoğan's campaign to raise funds for victims of coronavirus.<sup>52</sup>

■ On 15 April, 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 13 April, the parliament passed legislation allowing for the early release of up to 90,000 prisoners excluding those convicted of terrorism related crimes that have been used to imprison up to 50 journalists for their critical journalism. It also excluded persons in pre-trial detention who are not convicted of any crime.<sup>54</sup>

## Ukraine

■ On 25 March, 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 2 April, a journalist and a cameraman of *ZIK TV* channel were insulted and attacked by a man as they filmed a report in Kyiv about the observance of restrictions imposed by the government to tackle the spread of COVID-19.<sup>56</sup>

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52 [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

53 <https://gazetekarinca.com/2020/04/fox-tvye-uc-kez-yayin-durdurma-cezasi/>, *FOX TV'ye üç kez yayın durdurma cezası*, *Gazeta Karınca*, 15 April 2020

54 <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

55 <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

56 <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

## 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 Council of Europe 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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■ This briefing was prepared by the International Press Institute (IPI) on behalf of the Council of Europe Platform to Promote the Protection of Media and 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)
- ▶ PEN International
- ▶ Reporters Without Borders (RSF)
- ▶ The Rory Peck Trust

