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Briefing: Latest Media Freedom Violations in Europe during COVID-19

Several arrests of journalists covering anti-lockdown protests documented in European states

18 May 2020

Purpose

This briefing note provides an update of press freedom violations linked to the Covid-19 pandemic documented in Europe since mid-April. It also highlights key trends observed by members of the Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR) and presents key documents and reports from consortium members. It follows a previous briefing published on April 20¹. It covers EU Members States, Candidate Countries and other European states².

Key trends

Arrests and attacks on journalists covering anti-government protests during Covid-19

Across Europe, several journalists have been arrested, detained or charged by police in recent weeks as they were reporting on anti-government/anti-lockdown protests in their countries. On each occasion, the media workers were detained for breaching lockdown and social distancing measures. All were simply there to do their job and report events of public interest for their respective media outlets.

¹ *Media freedom violations in the EU under COVID-19*, IPI, 20 April 2020, <https://ipi.media/media-freedom-violations-in-the-eu-under-covid-19/>

² 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.

Poland

- On May 8, Pawel Rutkiewicz, a reporter for Gazeta Wyborcza in Warsaw, was arrested by police while covering an anti-lockdown demonstration in the city. Rutkiewicz attended to report and had been inside the crowd interviewing protesters and reporting news to editors at Gazeta Wyborcza. When police broke up the protest and demanded those in attendance leave the scene, Rutkiewicz attempted to leave. However, he was blocked by officers at a police cordon. Despite repeatedly identifying himself as a journalist and showing his press pass, he was detained. After the newspaper intervened, Rutkiewicz was released without charge. No formal apology was offered. Gazeta Wyborcza said it considered the detention as an act of “intentional intimidation” against independent journalists thinking of reporting on anti-government protests³.
- A petition for punishment of a photojournalist from "Gazeta Wyborcza" newspaper Wojciech Jakub Atys for breaking quarantine measures has been submitted to the court by the Warsaw Żoliborz Police Station. On 29 March, the journalist took photos of the protest of two activists in front of the house of the leader of Law and Justice party, Jarosław Kaczyński. Police said he broke social distancing rules. The editors of Gazeta Wyborcza in Warsaw stressed Atys had been there in his profession capacity as a photojournalist, condemned the police's actions and demanded the case against him be withdrawn⁴.

Belarus

- On 11 and 12 May, courts in Belarus, sentenced four journalists, Ales Asiptsou, Mikhail Arshynski, Alexander Burakou and Zmitser Lupach, to 10 days of administrative arrest for alleged “participation in unauthorized protests” held during the COVID-19 lockdown. All four were covering the demonstrations for their respective media outlets^{5/6}.

Ukraine

- On April 29, police in Ukraine aggressively grabbed and then broke the equipment of Bohdan Kutepov, a journalist at online TV and news platform Hromadske, as he reported on an anti-lockdown protest in the capital Kiev. During the filming, five police officers approached the journalists and cameramen and ordered them to leave. Video footage then shows one of the policemen grab the journalist and roughly drag him away from the scene⁷.

Slovenia

- On April 27, Slovene Interior Minister Aleš Hojs called for journalists and media professionals who reported from the scene of anti-lockdown protests to face criminal prosecution. Hojs said on Twitter that police should identify anyone who attended, took

³ Poland: Journalist detained while reporting on anti-government protest in Warsaw, Mapping Media Freedom, 11 May 2020, <https://mappingmediafreedom.usahidi.io/posts/23306>

⁴ Poland: Photojournalist faces punishment for photographing a protest in front of Jarosław Kaczyński's house, Mapping Media Freedom, 5 May 2020, <https://mappingmediafreedom.usahidi.io/posts/23291>

⁵ Belarus: four journalists sent to prison just for doing their job, EFJ, 12 May 2020, <https://europeanjournalists.org/blog/2020/05/12/belarus-four-journalists-sent-to-prison-just-for-doing-their-job/>

⁶ Four journalists jailed as Belarus cracks down on opposition reporting, IPI, May 13, <https://ipi.media/four-journalists-jailed-as-belarus-cracks-down-on-opposition-reporting/>

⁷ Ukraine: Police aggression against Hromadske journalist covering anti-lockdown protest, Mapping Media Freedom, 30 April 2020, <https://mappingmediafreedom.usahidi.io/posts/23284>

photographs or reported from the scene and charge them violating lockdown measures. In an April 28 tweet, Hojs then singled out Grega Repovž, editor-in-chief of the left-leaning weekly Mladina, as having attended. The Slovene Association of Journalists (DNS) urged the minister to refrain from calling for prosecutions of journalists and emphasized that media were at the event to inform the public⁸.

Key reports

ECPMF: Journalists and media workers need to be protected when covering demonstrations and protests⁹

The Leipzig-based European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF) led a joint statement signed by MFRR partners to highlight the increase in arrests, detentions and violent attacks on journalists and media professionals covering anti-government demonstrations in EU member states and candidate countries during the pandemic. MFRR partners called for greater protections for those reporting from the front line.

Access to information

During the pandemic, several European countries have implemented restrictions which have affected journalist's right to access to information. More than 10 countries have either extended or suspended deadlines for authorities to respond to Freedom of Information (FOI) requests. There have been numerous accounts of media outlet's questions to government task forces being rejected or ignored outright. If these kinds of restrictions become normalized or extended indefinitely, it could have a serious effect on press freedom.

Hungary

- At the end of April, the government weakened rules on Freedom of Information (FOI) deadlines. In the previous system, state bodies had a maximum of 30 days to respond to a journalist's request for publicly held information. This has now been trebled to a maximum of 90 days during the state of emergency. With Hungary having implemented a state of emergency indefinitely and only the ruling party having the power to lift it, there are concerns these deadlines could be extended for a significant period of time. Numerous independent journalists have complained that questions to the government's Covid-19 task force have gone unanswered, making it increasingly difficult for journalists to work.

Key reports

IPI: Crisis point: Covid-19 intensifies challenge for independent media in Hungary¹⁰

⁸ *Slovenia: Interior minister calls for criminal prosecution of journalists covering lockdown protest*, Mapping Media Freedom, 29 April 2020, <https://mappingmediafreedom.usahidi.io/posts/23283>

⁹ *Journalists and media workers need to be protected when covering demonstrations and protests*, ECPMF, 11 May 2020, www.ecpmf.eu/media-workers-protection-covering-demonstrations-protests-mfrr-statement/

¹⁰ *Crisis point: Covid-19 intensifies challenge for independent media in Hungary*, IPI, 18 May 2020, <https://ipi.media/crisis-point-covid-19-intensifies-challenge-for-independent-media-in-hungary/>

The International Press Institute (IPI) published a report about the deteriorating situation for independent media in Hungary during the health crisis. The report speaks to Hungarian journalists and highlights challenges over access to information, a precarious financial situation, and fresh attempts to discredit and undermine critical reporting by the government's propaganda machine.

ARTICLE 19: Advances in freedom of information under threat during coronavirus pandemic¹¹

ARTICLE-19 produced a report entitled *Ensuring the Public's Right to Know in the COVID-19 Pandemic* which warns that the coronavirus pandemic could have a negative impact on global freedom of information. It stressed that governments, including those in Europe, are trying to limit criticism of poor decision-making or as a larger effort to restrict human rights or hide corruption.

Other press freedom violations linked to Covid-19

Albania

- On May 15, one of Albania's biggest TV stations, RTV ORA, was ordered to close indefinitely and fined by state health authorities for allegedly not respecting social distancing in its shows. The outlet said the State Health Inspectorate fined it 2 million Albanian leks (16,000 euros) and ordered it to stop broadcasting after two anchors held shows with three people in the studio instead of two allowed under lockdown rules¹².

Hungary

- László Toroczkai, leader of the Hungarian far-right political party Our Home Movement, and the ruling Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP) have announced that they will sue cartoonist Gábor Pápai for alleged blasphemy about a COVID-19-related cartoon. Pápai had published a cartoon in the opposition daily Népszava on 28 April 2020, representing Cecília Müller, the Chief Medical Officer at the National Centre for Public Health and member of the Government's "Coronavirus Task Force"¹³.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

- In late April, Director of the Federal Civil Protection Directorate Fahrudin Solak demanded an investigation by the Cantonal Prosecutor's Office of Sarajevo Canton into alleged "biased and false allegations". It follows media reports in Fokus.ba, Klix.ba, Oslobodjenje, TVSA, Dnevni avaz and other media outlets that there were suspicions about the purchase of 100 respirators to help the country deal with the corona virus pandemic¹⁴.

¹¹ *Advances in freedom of information under threat during coronavirus pandemic*, ARTICLE-19, 11 May 2020, <https://www.article19.org/resources/advances-in-freedom-of-information-under-threat-during-coronavirus-pandemic/>

¹² *Albania: National Health Directorate ordered the closure activities of broadcaster RTV Ora*, Mapping Media Freedom, 15 May 2020, <https://mappingmediafreedom.usahidi.io/posts/23317>

¹³ *Hungary: Threats of Legal Action against Cartoonist Gábor Pápai*, Mapping Media Freedom, 12 May 2020, <https://mappingmediafreedom.usahidi.io/posts/23308>

¹⁴ *Bosnia and Herzegovina: Civil defence chief targets media who questioned purchase of COVID-19 respirators*, Mapping Media Freedom, 1 May 2020, <https://mappingmediafreedom.usahidi.io/posts/23288>

Other key reports/articles

IPI: New ‘fake news’ law stifles independent reporting in Russia on COVID-19¹⁵

This IPI article explores how newly amended misinformation legislation in Russia has already been used to target independent media reporting critically on the government’s handling of the health crisis, as well as increasing censorship of the country’s media regulatory agency.

ECPMF: GFMD emergency appeal for support to journalism and media

To mark World Press Freedom Day 2020, ECPMF joined the Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD) and more than 90 organisations to launch an emergency appeal for journalism and media support in response to the COVID-19 crisis¹⁶.

This briefing was prepared by IPI as part of the Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR), supported by the European Commission, which tracks, monitors and responds to threats to journalists and violations of press and media freedom across Europe.

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¹⁵ *New ‘fake news’ law stifles independent reporting in Russia on COVID-19*, IPI, 8 May 2020, <https://ipi.media/new-fake-news-law-stifles-independent-reporting-in-russia-on-covid-19/>

¹⁶ *ECPMF joins GFMD emergency appeal for support to journalism and media*, ECPMF, 3 May 2020, <https://www.ecpmf.eu/ecpmf-joins-gfmd-emergency-appeal-for-support-to-journalism-and-media/>