

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

A LOCKDOWN FOR INDEPENDENT MEDIA?

Effects of the COVID–19 pandemic on the media landscape and press freedom in Central and Southeast Europe

Working paper

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Correspondents in nine countries – Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, and North Macedonia – have analysed how the pandemic has affected their work environment.



Lockdowns have caused print media sales and advertising revenue to collapse. Media with wealthy benefactors or state support are better placed to survive impending economic hardships.



Various emergency laws and provisions allowed governments increased control over public information. In several cases, these enabled officials to evade scrutiny and attack journalists whose reporting challenged official statistics and the effectiveness of crisis measures.

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n-ost
border crossing journalism

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Preface

Seldom have questions of life and death (or even “freedom or lockdown”) depended on the availability and reliability of correct information as much as now in the battle against COVID–19. Wherever there is scant trust in the media and their credibility is doubted from the start, conspiracy theories and uncertainties abound.

In most countries the executive has come into its own with the advent of COVID–19: governments have been given robust mandates to manage the crisis. Some have taken advantage of the situation to control the flow of information about the pandemic. This has almost inevitably brought them into conflict with the self-image and interests of the independent press, whose social mandate is to monitor governments through independent research and analysis.

The press researches and communicates facts, presents different points of view and in this way helps orient societies through the crisis period. Unhindered access to (government) information is an important basis for their reporting. When this access is restricted, the role of the media is undermined.

In Central, Eastern and Southeast Europe, where independent journalism has long been in decline and media pluralism is under threat, this danger is particularly acute.

Even though demand for news and information has soared since the outbreak of the COVID–19 pandemic, there were already indications quite early on of a collapse in media marketing and advertising revenues. Fears were soon voiced that the crisis posed an existential threat to financially vulnerable critical media, and that it would further accelerate market concentration among media moguls who pursue political interests.

The economic consequences of the lockdown are rapidly and perhaps irreversibly endangering the already precarious social model of independent journalism in the region.

The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) and n-ost consider media pluralism and media freedom to be key building blocks for democracy, and at the same time a prerequisite for any strong and prosperous society. This study therefore offers a snapshot of the situation of the media and the political

press in the pandemic from the perspective of journalists based in the region: How has the coronavirus crisis affected the daily routine of editorial staff? How dangerous are the economic consequences? Where is access to information guaranteed by governments, and where is it undermined?

Correspondents of the n-ost network in nine countries – Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, and North Macedonia – have analysed the changes to their work environment and conducted interviews with the editors of major media companies. The report features rankings, based on circulation data where available, of each country’s most prominent political media outlets (defined as, for example, newspapers primarily known for covering political developments, as opposed to their tabloid or lifestyle competitors).

The result is a collection of country reports which provide a close look at the country-specific factors determining the media situation in these states. At the same time the report also shines a light on the existing transnational trends and tendencies exacerbated by the pandemic, as well as those it has created anew.

Our review of the situation at this decisive moment in the crisis aims to contribute to the crucial debate on how to ensure sustainable media pluralism in the region.

We wish you an interesting and insightful read!

HANNO GUNDERT
CEO, n-ost

JÖRG BERGSTERMANN
Director, FES Budapest

Executive summary

As European societies emerge from the first wave of the pandemic, observers are taking stock of the immense social, economic, and political repercussions of COVID-19. The pandemic may have reaffirmed the crucial role of the press in such times of crisis – informing the public and holding governments to account at times when the latter demand national unity. However, the crisis has also highlighted enduring systemic threats to the future survival of the media, from political interference to the gruelling search for a sustainable funding model in the digital era. These uncertainties unite newsmakers and newsrooms across the world.

The aim of this report is to reflect on how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the press in nine countries across Central and Eastern Europe: Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Serbia, and Slovenia. These states mostly shared a similar approach to containing the epidemic – so similar, in fact, that international observers have [started to speak of a new “East-West divide”](#) when it comes to COVID-19 infection and death rates. It is a comparison which, with a few exceptions, is flattering to the continent’s eastern half. Thanks to early lockdowns and border closures, central and eastern Europe largely avoided repeating the scenarios seen in wealthier countries such as Britain, France, Germany, and Italy.

For some rulers in the region, the COVID-19 response is yet further evidence that it is high time Europe’s West stops lecturing Europe’s East about good governance. But

others warn against giving the region’s rulers too much credit.

Right-populist governments, regularly shirking accountability and transparency, were a feature of central and eastern Europe well before the model became fashionable elsewhere. Although there are low levels of trust in elected officials across central and eastern Europe, [polling indicates](#) that citizens of many of these states place great importance on the value of a free and independent media.

Meanwhile, the economic consequences of the pandemic will be no less grave in Central and Eastern Europe. Busi-

nesses are on the brink, labour migrants face new obstacles accessing job markets, and investors have scaled down their ambitions. Whether many media outlets will survive the coming economic hardships of the post-COVID-19 era remains to be seen.

These reports by nine authors, all media professionals with years of experience working in their respective countries identified the following trends since the pandemic began:

- Journalists across the region noted a surge of public interest in their work. However, this thirst for new information has not translated into a rise in financial stability for the media providing it. **The crisis has demonstrated that existing business models are vulnerable and funding mechanisms woefully inadequate.**
- **The advertising market has nearly collapsed**, with serious repercussions for all media formats without wealthy benefactors. This potentially makes media outlets more dependent on state advertising contracts, therefore vulnerable to different forms of political pressure.
- **Media funded by wealthy individuals appear in a better position to survive**, though such ownership models can have negative consequences for editorial independence.
- In several countries, government press conferences were moved online; questions often had to be provided in advance, and some journalists were refused access. **Digital press conferences offered officials new ways to avoid scrutiny.**
- Several governments issued decrees which directly or indirectly gave officials full control over public information. **Emergency laws put journalists at legal risk when reporting critically.**
- These decrees **impacted the right to freedom of information**; some doubled the permitted response time to requests.
- **Authorities took the fight against “fake news” into their own hands**, empowering themselves to block sites deemed guilty of spreading it, often with little oversight. Restrictions on “scaremongering” or spreading “misleading” information were similarly elastically defined.

- Lockdowns severely impacted distribution networks for newspapers and magazines. **These financial losses could accelerate the collapse of an already declining print sector.**
- **Broadcast, online, and print media laid off large numbers of employees** or cut salaries; planned projects and expansions were put on hold.
- **Freelance journalists**, on whom many newsrooms had come to depend, reported a huge drop in commissions and fees for their work. As few freelancers are unionised, it is hard to obtain data on the scale of their current economic hardships.
- Various state support schemes to fund the majority of furloughed workers' salaries allowed publications to avoid layoffs, but also meant **newsrooms were widely understaffed.**
- Under-resourced and overstretched **newsrooms focused on COVID-19 almost exclusively**, to the detriment of other important stories.
- Financial cutbacks in recent years means **newsrooms have lost many journalists with specialist beats,**

potentially to the detriment of quality reporting on public health issues.

- **Newsrooms have transitioned en masse to remote working**, with benefits for editorial staff but potential downsides for reporters.

The COVID-19 pandemic could be far from over. But with several elections scheduled across the region in coming months, journalists in central and eastern Europe will soon have other stories to tell. In the words of Nelly Ognyanova, a professor of media studies at Sofia University in Bulgaria,

the pandemic has come to magnify existing problems

in the region's media landscape. It now falls to policymakers to look closely. A proper diagnosis could ensure the survival of robust, independent, and professional journalism across the region – and the journalists of this report are unanimous in saying that its survival is indeed at stake.

BULGARIA

Press Freedom Doesn't Come Free

Boryana Dzhambazova

Population: 6,951,482 (December 2019 estimate)¹

Prime Minister: Boyko Borissov (GERB), since May 2017

Government: Coalition government led by the centre-right GERB party, with the United Patriots, an alliance of three far-right parties.

Largest political daily newspapers:²

Telegraph (45 percent), not critical of the government (owned by Bulgarian Intrust EAD)

24 Chasa (39 percent), not critical of the government (owned by Media Group Bulgaria OOD)

Trud (27 percent), not critical of the government (owned by Bulgarian Bluskov Media AD)

Largest political weeklies:

Capital (15 percent), critical of the government (owned by Bulgarian Economedia AD)

168 Chasa (11 percent), not critical of the government (owned by Media Group Bulgaria OOD)

Politika (2 percent), not critical of the government (owned by Bulgarian Intrust EAD)

Largest online political newspapers:³

NovaTV News online (40 percent), owned by Bulgarian Advance Media Partners AD

BTV News online (37 percent), owned by CME Bulgaria

ABV News online (32 percent), owned by Bulgarian Nova Broadcasting Group EOOD

Status quo: Bulgaria confirmed its first case of COVID-19 on March 8. The government then declared a state of emergency on March 13, putting limitations on travel, closing schools and shopping malls, and banning public gatherings. Many businesses were forced to limit or cease operation due to these restrictions. These measures started to be gradually eased in late April.

Thirty years after the collapse of communism, myriad problems plague the media landscape. There are now fears that the COVID-19 could prove yet another setback in resolving these issues, which include highly concentrated and non-transparent media ownership, strong ties to business and political interests, and hate speech against minorities. Investigative stories and in-depth reporting are scarce. For years, the country's few independent and in-

vestigative journalists have been targeted by smear campaigns and harassment for their reporting. Given this grim picture, it is perhaps not surprising that a [2018 survey](#) by local pollster Alpha Research found that just

nine percent of Bulgarians believe their country's media to be independent.

Media freedom in Bulgaria has been deteriorating for more than a decade. In 2007, the country ranked 51st of 169 in Reporters without Borders' Press Freedom Index. Since then, the country has dropped 60 places and was ranked 111th place of 180 countries in the [2020 index](#). "Corruption and collusion between media, politicians, and oligarchs is widespread in Bulgaria," reads the accompanying 2020 report. Bulgaria's current rating is not only the worst in the European Union, but also the worst in the Balkans.

Impacts of COVID-19: As the pandemic devastates the global advertising market globally, Bulgaria's media sector has had to face yet another challenge. The news industry has already seen

the first round of job losses and closures.

At the end of May, a small media group announced plans to shut five of its magazines, according to [reports](#) in local

¹ December 2019 estimate of the National Statistical Institute of Bulgaria (<https://www.nsi.bg/bg/content/3928/%D0%B-D%D0%B0%D1%86%D0%B8%D0%BE%D0%B-D%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%BD%D0%BE-%D0%B-D%D0%B8%D0%B2%D0%BE>)

² According to the Association of European Journalists in Bulgaria's 2018 survey on print media. Ranked by percentage of respondents who cited the given publication as one they had read within the last 30 days. (<http://printmediareport.aej-bulgaria.org/research/>)

³ According to the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2020. Ranked by percentage of respondents who cited the given website as their most frequent source of online news per week (https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-06/DNR_2020_FINAL.pdf)

media. Club Z, a monthly magazine and news site, is already losing advertising money. Two current advertising contracts have only been partially paid, while three potential companies put their plans to advertise in the media on hold. So far the publication has managed to operate without making pay or staff cuts. However, editor-in-chief Svetlana Dzhamdzhieva, fears that might change. “We might have to cut salaries by 15 percent, unless we find another way to lower our costs,” she says.

The privately owned national channel Nova TV has already laid off 60 employees, including five journalists, since the start of the lockdown, blaming the pandemic. Econo-media, one of the country’s leading media groups, has seen a steep decline in ad money. “Our ad revenue dropped by estimated 60-70 percent, compared to the same period last year,” notes Galya Prokopieva, managing director of the company. Prokopieva expects this trend to worsen in coming months; as a result of the crisis, she says, the company is also planning wage cuts: this year all its employees are likely to receive their salaries for 11 instead of 12 months of the year. “At the same time we are striving to lower other costs, so we could keep our editorial teams intact,” says Prokopieva.

Bulgaria’s regional publications, which have been struggling to stay afloat for years, are expected to bear the brunt of the coronavirus-related crisis. As of now, [at least two](#) regional papers [have closed](#) and more could follow suit. Marieta Dimitrova, editor-in-chief of Blagoevgrad News, a news portal based in the small town of the same name near the capital Sofia, has had to dismiss three of her staff while she looks for other funding opportunities. The newsroom now comprises Dimitrova and her husband.

Freelancers have also struggled during the pandemic. “We were the first newsrooms made redundant,” recalls Ruslan Trad, a Sofia-based freelance journalist. “The past couple of months have been tough as commissions dropped drastically,” continues Trad, who says that some publications have cut their freelance fees by 50-70 percent in recent months.

As advertising budgets plummet, news publications have seen a spike in readership as demand for information increased in the first months of the pandemic. During the first two months of the COVID-19 crisis in Bulgaria, Club Z almost trebled its readership from 45,000 unique visits per day prior to the pandemic to up to 120,000 unique visits. Dnevnik.bg, an online news site owned by Econo-media, reached a record readership over March and April; its unique users per month went up to 2.6 million, compared to 1.3 to 1.5 million prior to the pandemic.

The pandemic has even given websites of traditional print publications and their social media presence a boost, according to [research for Media Club](#), a local media agency. However, media professionals say that the increased interest is only temporary and the readership is returning to its regular pre-pandemic levels.

This new interest notwithstanding, Bulgaria’s newsrooms have faced challenges when it comes to access to information and newsgathering.

Shortly after declaring a state of emergency on March 13 the National Crisis Council, a taskforce in charge of fighting the coronavirus outbreak, started holding daily news briefings, sometimes even twice daily. These briefings were broadcast online, but journalists were allowed to attend them in person to ask questions.

Some journalists welcomed these news briefings; others were sceptical about their effectiveness, arguing that the data provided were incomplete.

Velislava Popova, editor-in-chief of Dnevnik.bg, describes

the daily news briefings as creating a false sense of transparency.

“Key data was missing and we never heard back when sending specific questions on important issues,” she recalls.

Nelly Ognyanova, a media observer and professor at Sofia University, says that the state has had “a monopoly of information”, given that it had all the statistics at its disposal. “It has been a challenge for the media to operate in a situation where they have access to only fragmented information,” she explains.

However, several media outlets chose to rebroadcast the government press briefings in their entirety on their websites or social media channels. This means, in the opinion of Silvia Velikova, a reporter and presenter at Bulgarian National Radio, that “instead of asking tough questions, the media voluntarily deferred its role to the state.”

On April 10, the government launched a [dedicated website](#) for all COVID-19 related updates, almost a month after the country declared a state of emergency.

For reporters based outside Sofia, reporting on the crisis has been even tougher. “Communication with hospitals’ press offices, doctors, and the authorities can be difficult, as they try to conceal or provide only fragmented information,” says Dimitrova, the Blagoevgrad-based journalist.

Across the country, newsrooms have completely changed their daily routines. The three biggest TV networks (public broadcaster Bulgarian National Television, and two private channels bTV and Nova TV) have split their staff into teams to minimise the risk of infection. Meanwhile Bulgarian National Radio has been forced to limit the number of journalists in the newsroom and conduct most interviews by telephone, instead of inviting guests to the studio.

Many newspapers and online publications have switched to digital news production and allowed their reporters to

work remotely, a transition which they have made relatively quickly compared to other media.

At the same time, reorganisation of newsroom routines has significantly increased reporters' workloads.

"Reporters have been overwhelmed with work, especially when they are on duty and their work day starts early in the morning and ends late at night," says a reporter at Bulgarian National Television who wants to remain anonymous.

In the meantime, the pandemic has put a lot of pressing issues on the back burner, as both audiences and reporters have been preoccupied with an endless stream of pandemic updates.

"COVID-19 has overshadowed everything else.

Almost no other story, no matter how substantial, would make the cut unless it's pandemic-related," says the radio journalist Velikova. "Major current affairs developments and corruption scandals have faded into obscurity."

Coverage of the pandemic has also laid bare the need for specific expertise in reporting. "After the 2008 crisis many media outlets were forced to downscale and give important beats like healthcare and social affairs to general reporters," says Iliya Valkov, a journalist at Club Z magazine and media professor at Sofia's University of National and World Economy, in an interview.

That job is made more difficult by a wave of disinformation and falsehoods has flooded social networks and online portals.

On March 19 members of VMRO, a nationalist party and one of the junior partners in the ruling coalition, introduced a bill aiming to tackle disinformation online, allowing the state to close websites which disseminate false information. According to local media watchdogs, the bill could be used [for censorship](#).

"Some outlets didn't bother to offer responsible news coverage of the pandemic but rather spread fear and panic by opting for sensationalist reporting," remarks Dimitrova, the regional journalist.

Ognyanova, the media observer, says that the crisis has served to magnify existing problems. "In times of crisis good journalists keep doing their job well, while the pro-government media keeps spreading their propaganda," she notes.

Outlook: Journalists warn that Bulgaria now risks seeing its press freedom slump even further.

"You can't have free media in a captured state. In times of crisis new problems arise but systematic issues persist,"

says Ognyanova. "The state will continue supporting pro-government media and continue pressuring independent publications which are aiming to expose wrongdoing."

Most reporters and media executives interviewed for this report agree that difficult times await the Bulgarian press. Some doubt whether financially-starved publications would be able to weather the coming storm.

"I expect to see some publications go under. It won't be on a mass scale but troubled media are especially vulnerable now," Dzhamdzhieva predicts.

Spas Spasov, a Varna-based correspondent and founder of Za Istinata (For the Truth), an independent, online media platform for regional journalism in Bulgaria, agrees.

Between 2013 and 2016, Spasov [published a series of investigations](#) alleging that the authorities in ten cities had been funnelling money into certain media outlets in an attempt to "buy friendly coverage." He fears the crisis will give those in power more leverage to pressure troubled regional media.

Prokovieva, whose media group is often harassed because of its reporting, is concerned that the crisis might deepen some existing problems. In Bulgaria, she says,

very few publications rely heavily on advertising to survive,

instead depending on their owners' political and business connections. The collapse in advertising, she predicts, will therefore hit independent media the hardest. "The rest won't be susceptible to the market turmoil, as their future depends on the financial welfare and the whim of their sponsor," she concludes.

Some journalists suggest that this crisis might lead to more reporters leaving the profession altogether. "I'm afraid that, just like after the 2008 crisis, many reporters may be forced to look for better-paid jobs," Valkov warns.

Even amid this doom and gloom, some dare to see a silver lining. Ognyanova hopes that the crisis might inspire a generation of young journalists to search for innovative approaches for newsgathering and strengthening independent media.

"As journalists it's our duty to keep asking probing questions even when the pandemic is over: 'How is the state spending taxpayers' money to handle the outbreak? How are hospitals spending donations?'" says Popova. If journalists ask enough of those questions, she hopes, perhaps the pandemic might help Bulgarians rediscover the value and importance of a free press.

CROATIA

Judge, Jury, and Editor

Jelena Prtorić

Population: 4,087,843 (mid-2018 estimate⁴)

Prime Minister: Andrej Plenković (HDZ), since October 2016.

Government: Coalition government led by the right-wing Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), with the centre-left Croatian People's Party – Liberal Democrats (HNS-LD). Parliament now dissolved, parliamentary elections to be held on July 5.

Largest political daily newspapers:⁵

24 Sata (circulation 60,000), no consistent stance towards the government, tabloid newspaper (owned by Austrian Styria Media Group AG)

Jutarnji List (circulation 27,700), critical of the government, centre-left (owned by Croatian Hanza Media DOO)

Večernji List (circulation 16,500), not critical of the government, centre-right (owned by Austrian Styria Media Group AG)

Largest political weeklies:⁶

7Dnevno (circulation 22,000), critical of the government, right-wing (owned by Croatian Portal Dnevno DOO)

Hrvatski Tjednik (circulation 7,000), critical of the government, right-wing (owned by Croatian Tempus DOO)

Nacional (circulation 5,000-20,000), somewhat critical of the government, centre-left (owned by Croatian NCL Media Grupa DOO)

Largest online political newspapers:⁷

1. Index.hr, no consistent stance towards the government, tabloid news website (owned by Croatian Index Promocija)

2. 24 sata, no consistent stance towards the government, tabloid news website (owned by Austrian Styria Media Group AG)

3. Jutarnji List, critical of the government, centre-left (owned by Croatian Hanza Media DOO)

Status quo: Croatia confirmed its first case of COVID-19 on February 25. The government started [rolling out precautionary measures](#) in early March, and officially declared an epidemic on March 13. From March 16–19, public spaces, schools, non-essential businesses, and finally borders were closed in rapid succession. These restrictions were gradually loosened in late April, with the country almost completely reopening by mid-May.

COVID-19 has struck at an already fractured media landscape. Croatia's media market is characterised by a strong TV presence, a declining print sector, and a number of free online portals mostly funded by advertising rather than subscription. A negative trend in regard to media independence has been observed in the last years following the

election of a conservative governing coalition in 2016. The then Minister of culture cut all financial support to non-profit and independent media (seen as progressive and often critical of the government) introduced by the previous social democratic government.

When the pandemic struck, media outlets were struggling to cope with the financial repercussions.

Public broadcaster HRT is strongly influenced by the government, as reported also in the [Reporters Without Borders](#) yearly analysis. HRT editorial policy shows a clear pro-government bias, and the Broadcaster even [brought a legal action against its own journalists](#) and the Association of Croatian Journalists (HND), a trade union, which complained about editorial policies.

In Croatia, criminal proceedings for insult and defamation and civil proceedings against journalists are very common, which leads to self-censorship. At least 905 litigations brought by politicians and public figures against journalists in the course of their work are currently ongoing in Croatia, according to the [Croatian Journalist Association](#)

⁴ Mid-2018 estimate of the Croatian Bureau of Statistics (https://www.dzs.hr/Hrv_Eng/publication/2019/07-01-03_01_2019.htm)

⁵ According to the Croatian Chamber of Commerce. NB: Croatian newspapers are obliged to provide their circulation figures but do not always do so consistently; hence such figures are often estimates.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ According to the Reuters' Institute 2020 Digital News Report. (https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-06/DNR_2020_FINAL.pdf)

(HND). Moreover, Croatian journalists operate in a growing hostile working environment, and threats, harassment, and cyber-attacks, continue to be a major problem [without strong reaction from the authorities](#).

Croatia came 59th place out of 180 countries ranked in Reporters without Borders 2020 [Press Freedom Index](#). This represented an improvement on the previous year, when the country ranked 64th place.

Impacts of COVID-19: On March 22, in the midst of the pandemic in Croatia, an earthquake hit Zagreb. That same day, the country also recorded its [highest average daily individual TV viewing time](#) since recording started in Croatia on January 1 2003. As Nielsen data [reveal](#), the weeks following the introduction of special quarantine measures were marked by a significant rise in viewership.

However, this new thirst for information has not translated into a rise in financial stability for the media providing it.

Given that Croatia's daily and weekly newspapers do not publish their circulation figures, it is impossible to know if and to what extent their sales or circulation have fallen. Similarly, no analyses of Croatia's advertisement trends on digital media have been published since the pandemic began. However, a [survey of four industries](#) which usually invest significant funds in digital marketing (apparel, tourism, furniture, and electronics) reveals that costs per mille⁸ over the second half of March fell by 35–53 percent compared to the same period last year.

The COVID-19 pandemic has hit Croatia's already precarious freelance journalists particularly hard. According to a [survey conducted by the Trade Union of Croatian Journalists](#) in April, 28.7 percent of 164 freelance journalists surveyed had had all their assignments (and 26 percent most of their assignments) cancelled since the beginning of the crisis. Meanwhile, 54 percent of non-profit media outlets expect to see financial [losses greater than 50 percent in the year ahead](#).

Those employed by private and state media holdings have not been spared, either. According to the data from the [Trade Union of Croatian Journalists](#) and Croatian Journalists Association, the Croatian public broadcaster HRT has cancelled all of its contracts with freelance workers. Hanza Media, one of Croatia's largest private media holdings which owns [37 print and 19 digital titles](#), has cancelled a number of contracts with long-term freelancers and cut its employees' by 30 percent. Moreover, salaries in the local daily Glas Istre (Voice of Istria) have been cut by 50 percent.

Ever since the pandemic hit Croatia, the Croatian Journalists' Association and the Trade Union of Croatian Journal-

ists have lobbied for economic subsidies specially for journalists. On May 20, Croatia's Ministry of Culture confirmed that [financial support would be secured for freelance journalists](#) whose income had fallen since the crisis began.

Financial woes have therefore been at the centre of Croatian media's hardships during the pandemic. "In Croatia, so far there has been no criminalisation of the work of journalists, on the contrary,

we witnessed praise for the media's role as they correctly informed the population

and avoided spreading hysteria and fake news," noted Pavol Szalai, head of Reporters without Borders' European Union & Balkans Desk.

However, on Easter Sunday journalists were attacked in the city of Split while [reporting from the Church of Sirobuje](#), where the local priest was holding a mass despite the nationwide lockdown and strict ban on gatherings. When Živana Šušak Živković, a journalist from local website Dalmatinski Portal, started live streaming the mass, a church-goer assaulted her and knocked the phone out of her hand. An N1 television – regional cable [news channel](#) with headquarters in [Belgrade, Sarajevo and Zagreb](#) – crew reported that another worshipper rushed towards their camerawoman and hit her camera, and that they were verbally insulted by the priest and worshippers. Croatia's Interior Minister Davor Božinović condemned the attacks in a press conference on April 12.

On January 31, the government created a Crisis Headquarters Team to provide journalists and the wider public with updated infection, recovery and death figures. It held daily press briefings throughout the pandemic, which were discontinued in May when the number of new cases plunged. However, the government was less transparent about some topics and incidents, such as a COVID-19 [outbreak in a nursing home in Split](#) which resulted in 18 deaths (the nursing home's director Ivan Škaričić [is a member and former MP of the ruling party HDZ](#)). At press conferences, government spokespeople repeated that there had been "no oversights," and to date it has not been established how the first patient at the facility became infected.

The civil society watchdog GONG has warned that during the pandemic, meetings and sessions of parliamentary working groups were increasingly happening "via emails and behind closed doors." Thus the public couldn't get an insight into "how particular parliamentary members voted in the latest 40 laws that were passed in an urgent procedure," says Oriana Ivković Novokmet, GONG's executive director.

Most journalists saw the regularity of these press conferences positively. But as working conditions became

⁸ A unit of cost referring to sums paid by advertisers per thousand clicks or views of an advertisement

tougher, journalists had fewer opportunities to ask questions.

Reporters have frequently complained of delayed responses to requests for comment from state institutions,

due in part to officials' disrupted work schedules and remote working. This was particularly true with freedom of information requests; receiving answers to these is a lengthy process in Croatia even in normal circumstances.

Nevertheless, while freedom of movement within the country was restricted during the pandemic, journalists were eligible for electronic passes allowing them to move freely. Most newsrooms opted for working from home during the crisis.

Since March, newsrooms' work has been dominated by updates to COVID-19 figures and restrictions. This pressure has meant only sporadic reporting on more in-depth topics such as public spending. For instance, it is still unclear how much medical equipment Croatian authorities have purchased, at what price, and from whom. The conditions under which donations of medical equipment from China and the UAE were negotiated also remain unknown.

The surge of interest in news consumption has come as a mixed blessing. It means that fact-checking services such as [Faktograf](#) (a member of [International Fact Checking Network](#)) have seen a big increase in the amount of

dubious news to debunk. "Professional misinformation creators – anonymous websites making money by clicks – have realised that the path to a new audience is now open. Fear and confusion during the first weeks of the epidemic represented a fertile ground for misinformation," recalls Ana Brakuš, Faktograf journalist. Faktograf has contributed to an [international database of COVID-19 related misinformation](#) and launched a [live blog](#) dedicated to the topic.

Outlook: Rather than creating entirely new challenges, the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified the problems Croatia's newsrooms already face. They will be put to the test later this year; on May 18 parliament was dissolved and a general election was scheduled for July 5. "We must now pay special attention as Croatia enters the pre-election period and the authorities try to capitalize on crisis management to get good results. It is important that transparency of information and the right to criticise [the authorities] are guaranteed in this crucial moment," says Reporters without Borders' Szalai.

Hrvoje Zovko, president of the Association of Croatian Journalists, agrees. He identifies Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPP) as a key tool for "censoring, intimidating, and silencing journalists with legal proceedings" in months ahead. He hopes that change might come at a European level; on May 20, the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ) co-signed [an open letter](#) to the European Commission with 25 organisations to take action against vexatious litigations against journalists, activists, and trade unionists. "In Croatia, judges have taken over the role of editors; in court, they assess what is and is not appropriate to publish," warns Zovko.

CZECH REPUBLIC

Will Only Big Fish Survive the Coming Storm?

Vojtěch Berger

Population: 10,694,364 (March 2020 estimate⁹)

Prime Minister: Andrej Babiš (ANO), since December 2017

Government: Minority coalition government led by the centre-right ANO party, with the centre-left Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD), and some confidence and supply support from the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM).

Largest political daily newspapers:¹⁰

Blesk (circulation 186,000), not strongly critical of the government, centre-right (owned by Daniel Křetínský's Czech Media Invest group)

MF Dnes (circulation 110,000), supportive of the government, right-wing (owned by the Czech Agrofert Holding)

Deník (circulation 99,000), not strongly critical of the government, centre-right (owned by the Czech-Slovak Penta Investments Group)

Largest political weeklies¹¹

Reflex (circulation 37,000), somewhat critical of the government, centre-right (owned by Daniel Křetínský's Czech Media Invest group)

Respekt (circulation 38,000), strongly critical of the government, centre-left (owned by Zdeněk Bakala's Czech Economia AS.)

Týden (circulation 45,000), varying approach to the government, centrist (owned by Jaromír Soukup's Czech Em-presa Media)

Largest online political newspapers¹²

Seznamzpravy.cz, (3.5 million returning visits per week), critical of the government (owned by Ivo Lukačovič's Czech Seznam.cz AS)

Novinky.cz (3.3 million returning visits per week), neutral towards the government (owned by Ivo Lukačovič's Czech Seznam.cz AS)

iDnes.cz (1.99 million returning visits per week), supportive of the government (owned by the Czech Agrofert Holding)

Status quo: The Czech Republic confirmed its first three cases of COVID-19 on March 1. A state of emergency was declared on March 12, followed by a nationwide lockdown on March 16; the country was among the first in the European Union to almost completely close its borders.

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck the Czech Republic, the press was undergoing what is generally known as "media oligarchisation." This refers to the acquisition of media outlets by Prime Minister Andrej Babiš which began in 2013. Most Czech media is owned by influential local entrepreneurs; [cases have been reported](#) of owners at-

tempting to [directly influence media content](#). In February 2017, Babiš [transferred his companies to a trust fund](#) in accordance with a new law, formally avoiding a conflict of interest. Nevertheless, the [European Commission](#) and anti-corruption NGOs [suspect](#) that the prime minister retains access to his business empire. Journalists are concerned by the potential for political interference in their work, particularly given the influence of media control committees, whose members are elected by parliament, over public TV and radio.

The pandemic has highlighted the Czech media's long-term weaknesses, including

an ailing print sector, declining advertising revenue, and an underdeveloped mechanism for paid content.

Czech audiences have not seemed prepared to spend money on quality journalism online, a fact which remains unchanged months into the crisis – leaving outlets without wealthy benefactors in the lurch.

⁹ Estimate of the Statistical Office of the Czech Republic, March 31, 2020 (<https://www.czso.cz/csu/czso/population>)

¹⁰ Circulation and readership details from the Publishers' Union of the Czech Republic, December 2019 (http://www.unievydavatelu.cz/cs/unie_vydavatelu/medialni_data/overovani_nakladu_tisku)

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Visitor statistics from a MediaGuru study published May 2020 (<https://www.mediaguru.cz/clanky/2020/05/navstevnost-zpravodajskych-webu-klesla-na-polovinu-oproti-breznu/>)

Reporters without Borders has voiced concern about this growing concentration of media ownership, as well as public verbal attacks against journalists by senior state officials, including President Miloš Zeman. The Czech Republic came 40th out of 180 countries in the [2020 World Press Freedom Index](#) – a significant drop from 16th place in 2013.

Impacts of COVID-19: The economic consequences of the COVID-19 lockdown were felt immediately and painfully, particularly by print media. Respekt, one of the country's most important print weeklies, [reported](#) a 60-70 per cent drop in advertising revenues compared to pre-pandemic levels. Another weekly, Týden, [ceased publication on March 23](#) for a month. Their subsequent promise to switch from a weekly to a monthly is regarded by some in the media community as the beginning of the end for the periodical. Jaroslav Plesl, editor-in-chief of the MF Dnes daily newspaper, [admitted in April](#) that the number of copies sold during the pandemic has dropped to only 30,000 per day.

In contrast to print media, online news platforms recorded surging visitor numbers in March and April, in some cases increases of more than 100 per cent; Index.cz has received its highest ever number of unique visitors during the pandemic. However, figures from mid-May suggest that visitor numbers are returning to pre-crisis levels.

Many print publications also maintain websites. However, even when visitor traffic to these has increased, as in the cases of the Respekt and Echo weeklies, it has not compensated them for a loss in print sales. Editor-in-chief of Reportér magazine Robert Čásenský says that his publication's subscriber numbers are 40 percent higher than a year ago. Yet despite much experimentation, such as offering the magazine through food delivery network rohlík.cz, Čásenský has struggled to improve Reportér's sales.

Radio has also suffered from the dramatic decline in advertising revenue. In the words of Jan Neuman, one of the owners of the MMS Radio Network, the crisis has been "the hardest challenge for the Czech private radio market ever." Neuman estimates that his network's revenue dropped by 60 percent in April, despite the online radio audience growing by 30 percent.

As of mid-May, there had been no large-scale layoffs announced in the Czech media. However, planned media projects were stopped or postponed. The launch of the CNN-Prima TV channel, which its owners hoped would compete with the public ČT24 news channel, was delayed for weeks. It finally started broadcasting on May 3. Czech Public Radio stopped a large project dedicated to the anniversary of the Prague Uprising, which was to be a two-day "live broadcast" from 1945, and has scrapped plans to launch a dedicated sports channel for another year. The print version of the new business weekly Hrot was also published weeks later than planned due to the lockdown.

The monthly Czech-language version of Forbes Magazine has even postponed publication one of its flagship products – its ranking of the 100 richest people in the world. However, Forbes' Czech editor-in-chief Petr Šimůnek sees the financial situation less dramatically than many others: "I believe we can be back at the old levels by the end of the year," he says.

But the crisis has also revealed the resourcefulness of the Czech media.

Seznamzpravy.cz developed [a map-based application](#) which enabled Czechs to monitor the spread of COVID-19 in the country and help them avoid encountering infected people. Czech Public Television's ČT2 channel was widely praised for making the lockdown bearable for parents and children who were stuck at home due to school closures. The channel quickly developed and launched a daily educational programme for children "UčíTelka" ("Learn by TV"). Furthermore, the DVTV video platform [managed to raise 9.7 million Czech Koruna](#) (359,000 Euros) in a crowdfunding campaign, the most collected for a media project and the most successful in Czech history.

Politically, the COVID-19 pandemic gave the Czech government a chance to test its powers to the limit. For the first days and weeks after the outbreak of the pandemic, Czech media had a cooperative relationship with the government. That all changed when details about the government's crisis management came to light in April and May. Media started to question the effectiveness of the government's measures, in particular [the nature of state procurement of protective equipment](#) such as masks from China. But Prime Minister Babiš again could rely on the support of publications to which he has financial ties. For example, on April 24 the editor-in-chief of the daily newspaper Lidové Noviny [published an op-ed](#) praising the government for its wisdom in managing the crisis. Nevertheless, many media outlets started to publish more and more stories contradicting this rosy picture – stories about [nurses and doctors with no protective equipment](#) and [small businesses struggling to survive](#). The general narrative of critical media was that the Czech government had no long-term plan, and was simply reacting to public mood. This coverage led Prime Minister Babiš on April 24 to [emphasise](#) the country's low level of COVID-19 cases compared to western Europe and to publicly wonder why his government was being so fiercely criticised when the crisis "was over."

Government transparency has assisted the work of journalists in important ways. Firstly, any contract paid for with public finances must be recorded in the public procurement register. Secondly, while the Czech Republic's Freedom of Information Law has limits, it enables the media to request information from public institutions. Both were used to check the costs of masks and personal protective equipment imported from China.

However, lockdown meant limited access to press conferences; accordingly, the government started holding these by videoconference, where journalists were able to ask critical questions of government officials. In late May, the Seznam Zprávy editorial team [analysed roughly 650 such questions](#), finding that 504 were neutral towards the government and 134 were critical. They found no positive sentiment in any questions.

The relationship between the media and the authorities did not appear to change significantly during the pandemic. Although they were sometimes delayed, government press officers did respond to journalists' requests for comment. Media reports prompted the Supreme Control Authority, which audits all state finances, to announce that it would more closely scrutinise public spending during lockdown. This goes to show that in difficult circumstances, Czech media were able to perform their civic role, producing high quality news and deep investigative journalism to hold the government to account.

The pandemic turned Czech journalists' daily routine upside down; many started to work from home for the first time in their lives.

They made news broadcasts from their living rooms and held editorial meetings by videoconferencing.

Some editors praised these changes as “highly effective,” cutting unnecessary meetings down to a minimum. But foreign reporters and investigative journalists, who depend on direct contact with sources and travel, were more handicapped.

While the pandemic has proven the skills and professionalism of many publications, it also came to dominate the Czech news agenda. For two months, the headline of nearly every news programme began with “as of today, the Czech Republic had [number] of COVID-19 cases.” This routine presentation of statistics without context often overwhelmed and confused audiences, without necessarily adding to their understanding of the crisis.

Outlook: Given the fall in advertising revenues and a generally uncertain economic outlook, it looks likely that Czech media will enter a period of stagnation. New or costly media projects which have been postponed may not resume at all. The ongoing fall in sales of daily print newspapers will accelerate, while public sector media can forget about demanding an increase of their licence fee (which has not been increased since 2008 for TV and 2005 for radio). For small and independent media outlets, paid content could become a tempting source of income. It would be premature to say that Czech media are on the verge of collapse. Ironically, its oligarchic ownership structure could be what enables Czech media outlets to weather the coming storm – even while that same structure represents a huge long term threat to journalistic independence.

HUNGARY

Where Journalists are “Scaremongers” or Cheerleaders

Leonárd Máriás

Population: 9,772,756 (2019 estimate¹³)

Prime Minister: Viktor Orbán (Fidesz), 1998-2002, current term began in 2010

Government: Coalition government led by the right-wing Fidesz-Hungarian Civic Alliance (Fidesz-MPSZ) and Christian Democratic People’s Party (KDNP), third successive term with a supermajority since 2018

Largest political daily newspapers:

Népszava (average daily circulation for 2020: 18,886¹⁴), critical of the government, centre-left (owned by the Hungarian XXI. század Média Kft.)

Magyar Nemzet,¹⁵ supportive of the government, centre-right, (owned by the Hungarian KESMA)

Magyar Hírlap,¹⁶ supportive of the government, centre-right (owned by the Hungarian Magyar Hírlap Kiadói Kft. and SGH Kft.)

Largest political weeklies:

HVG (average daily circulation for 2020: 28,293¹⁷), critical of the government, centre-left (owned by the Hungarian HVG Kiadó Zrt)

Magyar Hang,¹⁸ critical of the government, centre-right (owned by the Hungarian Alhambra Press Bt.)

Magyar Narancs,¹⁹ critical of the government, centre-left (owned by the Hungarian MagyarNarancs.hu Lapkiadó Kft.)

Largest online newspapers:²⁰

Index.hu (average daily UU: 1,063,649), critical of the government (owned by the Hungarian Magyar Fejlődésért Alapítvány)

Origo.hu (average daily UU: 830,721), not critical of the government (owned by the Hungarian KESMA)

24.hu (average daily UU: 821,536), critical of the government (owned by the Hungarian Central Média csoport Zrt.)

Status Quo: Hungary confirmed its first case of COVID-19 on March 4, 2020. The country’s first fatality caused by the virus was announced on March 15. A state of emergency due to a public health risk, as permitted by the constitution, was declared on March 11, enabling the government to introduce extraordinary measures and suspend laws. Epidemic control measures were overseen by the Operational Staff, which began its work on January 31

under the direction of the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Human Resources. On 30 March, the Hungarian Parliament passed the controversial Enabling Act, which empowered the government to rule by decree without parliamentary approval. On May 26, a draft law was submitted which repeals the Enabling Act from mid-June. The ruling party alliance, FIDESZ-KDNP, has played a significant and active role in regulating the ownership and day-to-day operations of Hungarian media outlets since 2010, in accordance with its political interests.

The Hungarian media landscape is significantly distorted and polarised by pro-government political influence,

which is mainly reflected in the concentration of media ownership in the hands of figures who are seen as not critical of the government. Furthermore, state advertising expenditure is an important tool which unilaterally finances pro-government print media outlets. This puts outlets critical of the government at a significant competitive disadvantage.

Since 2015, pro-government investors and players have made rapid and significant expansion on the media mar-

¹³ Estimate of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office (http://www.ksh.hu/docs/hun/xstadat/xstadat_eves/i_wnt001c.html)

¹⁴ Circulation figures from Magyar Terjesztés-ellenőrző Szövetség / Hungarian Audit Bureau of Circulation (matesz.hu)

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ No audited circulation figures were available at the time of publication. This newspaper has been included on the basis of general observation of the Hungarian media market.

¹⁷ Circulation figures from Magyar Terjesztés-ellenőrző Szövetség / Hungarian Audit Bureau of Circulation (matesz.hu)

¹⁸ No audited circulation figures were available at the time of publication. This newspaper has been included on the basis of general observation of the Hungarian media market.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Online newspapers ranked by average unique users per day in April 2020, according to the Hungarian Digital Audience Measurement Joint Industry Committee (dkt.hu)

ket. Based on 2017 data, the [share of sales revenue of government-leaning outlets](#) in the public print market was 80.2 percent. This ratio reached 86.8 and 52.8 percent on the radio and television market respectively, and 49.2 percent in the online public segment of the media market.

In 2018, pro-government media ownership was concentrated even further due to the establishment of the Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA) with the government's assistance. Many media owners not critical to the government transferred a total of 476 media outlets to the non-profit organisation free of charge, consolidating an existing pro-government media network for propaganda purposes. This network includes all regional daily newspapers published in the 19 counties of Hungary. A peculiarity of the Hungarian press landscape is that several regional newspapers have a higher or much higher circulation (e.g. *Kisalföld*, *Észak-Keleti Napló*) than the national Hungarian political newspapers. This growing network, which has existed for several years, is completely aligned with the values and conduct of Hungary's public service media.

Despite their competitive disadvantages, the remaining outlets which are critical of the government still operate on a market basis and follow the principles of traditional journalism. These had proved sustainable before the COVID-19 pandemic; such publications closed last year with a slight profit or a manageable, moderate loss. Nevertheless, a [2020 survey](#) of 150 publications by the Hungarian Publishers' Association found that 60 percent of all publishers have financial reserves for between one and a half to three months. This indicates the enduring vulnerability of Hungary's media market.

The changes of recent years have led to a significant deterioration in Hungarian media freedom. In [Reporters Without Borders' World Press Freedom Index](#), Hungary fell from 56th place in 2013 to 89th place out of 180 countries in 2020. The report notes that state institutions seldom respond to requests for comment from media outlets critical of the government, and that members of the ruling Fidesz party dominate the state press regulator.

Impacts of COVID-19: According to the aforementioned Hungarian Publishers' Association survey, about two-thirds of Hungary's media outlets report that the situation caused by the pandemic and related measures have caused major disruptions to their operations. Furthermore, the COVID-19 crisis could [result in a 21-30 percent decrease](#) in revenue of media companies in 2020 compared to previous year, which would equal to a loss of about HUF 80-120 billion and potentially lead to a significant contraction in the supply of Hungarian-language news content.

The stagnation of the advertising market played a significant role in the loss of revenue, which according to the advertising companies may [reduce the overall size of the](#)

[market](#) by 38 percent or HUF 75 billion in 2020 on a year-to-year basis. The change led to a dramatic drop in the revenue for the majority of media outlets critical of the government, with some publishers' advertising revenue dropping by 90 percent compared to the same period of 2019. Print media were in a better position than their online counterparts, with publishers reporting a drop in sales of up to 20 percent in March and April 2020. Websites with fewer employees, which are mainly funded through readers' contributions, were also in a better position.

Despite their advantageous position, the crisis has also negatively affected some pro-government media outlets. Publishers falling under KESMA's auspices have suspended certain sports publications or reduced their output.

Whatever their leanings, all Hungarian media outlets severely affected by the collapse of the advertising market responded with tough austerity measures in a matter of weeks.

Most online publications critical of the government and print media have implemented temporary cutbacks

to save 20-25 percent of their operating costs.

One leading media outlet dismissed 4-5 members of its editorial staff instead of imposing a newsroom-wide salary cut. Several publishers critical of the government busied themselves with crowdfunding campaigns and enhanced their efforts to attract other external funding. The government's Economic Protection Action Plan, which granted Hungarian media outlets exemption from paying employers' social security contributions to compensate for their lost advertising revenue, has improved the situation of publishers and significantly contributed to the success of their cost reduction efforts. In addition, several media workers could benefit from a temporary tax exemption targeting individual entrepreneurs.

Independent and critical journalists accuse the government of actively restricting access to information about the epidemic, thereby obstructing their ability to report objectively. The media did not receive any relevant information about the calculations and technical evidence on which the government's COVID-19 response was based. On the occasions when the government and the institutions under its control did respond to questions on the topic, they did so in a hostile and evasive manner, further obstructing the work of journalists. Verifying official reports became increasingly difficult, because those who spoke to or leaked information to critical media outlets (primarily healthcare workers, teachers, staff of emergency services, and other experts involved in the fight against the epidemic) were [threatened with retaliation](#). Scientific and technical issues were no exception; some university

professors did not dare to speak to journalists, claiming that they had been banned from doing so.

The Operational Staff responsible for management and communication concerning the epidemic proved a major obstacle to accessing information. As a result, state-led communication about the emergency became centralised and was narrowed down to the board's daily online press conferences. The board could only be asked questions in writing, which were filtered by the government upon receipt. Few substantive answers were given, and journalists did not have the opportunity to ask follow-up questions for clarification.

Pro-government media often attacked the credibility of the epidemic-related coverage of critical outlets,

calling journalists scaremongers or spreaders of fake news. In some cases, they demanded the arrest of critical journalists. These calls may have resulted in the fact that during the epidemic, some journalists who voiced criticism of the government's response received death threats via email and social media.

The pro-government parliamentary majority also tightened Hungary's penal code during the early period of the state of emergency. Reporting on the epidemic was thereby further limited, as "scaremongering" was made punishable by imprisonment from one to five years. This crime was defined as when an individual states or disseminates an untruth or distorted fact in any way which could hinder the effectiveness of the state's defensive measures during the period of a special legal regime. As a result of the rule, which enables the authority a broad interpretation, most critical publications began to impose stricter conditions on the news they circulated; in several cases, due to the government's failure to respond to requests for comment, these publications were unable to publish urgently needed information in a timely fashion, if at all. These new regulations therefore catch critical publica-

tions in a Catch-22: official bodies do not respond to their questions, but the stakes for publishing information without the government's input are suddenly a lot higher.

Representatives of the critical press also reported a case where an institution not only refused to answer a question, but threatened the journalist by citing the new restrictions against scaremongering. These same restrictions also deter the wider public, such as social media users, from voicing doubts and strong opinions about the pandemic response, which narrows the media's opportunities to receive and publicise information from whistleblowers. When the Hungarian police detained an individual who criticised the Orbán government on Facebook on suspicion of scaremongering, [concerns were raised](#) that these new regulations were being abused for political ends, with chilling consequences for freedom of expression.

Outlook: Given the Hungarian government's attitude towards its critics in the media and even in the general public, it can be stated that it used the opportunities afforded by the COVID-19 emergency to further restrict media freedom. Hungarian government officials fiercely dismissed characterisations of the emergency powers as an assault on democracy; indeed, they may well present its impending repeal as proof that they were right all along, and that the government's critics were motivated by political bias. Nevertheless, critical media outlets expect that the charge of scaremongering will remain part of the Hungarian Penal Code even when the emergency is over, potentially providing the government with another means of maintaining its control over the media.

For the meantime, critical media outlets will have to cope with a loss of revenue by themselves, while their pro-government competitors continue to be funded by public advertising contracts. Nevertheless, despite the grave situation, representatives of Hungarian media outlets are optimistic. Market conditions, they say, are expected to gradually return to normal by the second half of the year. At the same time, their hopes are tempered with significant uncertainty due to the unpredictability of the course of the epidemic, including the possibility of a second wave.

NORTH MACEDONIA

When The Bottom Line Bites

Bojan Stojkovski

Population: 2,125,971 (July 2020 estimate²¹)

Prime Minister: Oliver Spasovski (SDSM), since January 2020.

Government: Coalition government led by the centre-left Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) with the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI) and four other parties primarily representing the Albanian and other ethnic minorities.

Largest political daily newspapers:²²

Vecer (circulation 6,500), critical of the government, centre-right (owned by North Macedonian Vecer Press DOOEL)

Sloboden Pecat (circulation 7,500), not critical of the government, centre-left (owned by the North Macedonian Sloboden Pecat DOO)

Nova Makedonija (circulation 7,000), non party-aligned, centre-right (owned by the North Macedonian Repro Print DOOEL)

Largest political weeklies:²³

Fokus (circulation 6,000), critical of the government, centre-right (owned by the North Macedonian Media Plus Fokus DOO)

Kapital (circulation 3,000), not critical of the government, centre-left (owned by the North Macedonian Kapital Media Group)

Largest online political newspapers:²⁴

1. Sdk.mk (Sakam da Kazam), not critical of the government (owned by the North Macedonian SDK Mihajlovski DOOEL)

2. Plusinfo.mk, critical of the government (owned by the North Macedonian Plusinfo izdavastvo DOOEL)

3. A1on.mk, critical of the government (owned by the North Macedonian Clip Media Group)

Status quo: North Macedonia confirmed its first case of COVID-19 on February 26, and declared a state of emergency on March 18.

By this time, media outlets in North Macedonia had been preparing to report on parliamentary elections in April. However with the elections postponed, the media's attention shifted fully to covering the pandemic. North Macedonian media outlets already faced financial difficulties. State funding is only available under strict conditions, while private media largely survive due to funds from their owners' companies, advertising revenue, or grants and donations. Subscription-based funding models for media are very rare. A provision in electoral law allowing state funding for party political advertisements led to a [record 235 media outlets applying this year](#). However, several of

these publications were web portals managed by a single person, whose content is mostly plagiarised from other websites.

This alone illustrates how desperate North Macedonia's publications are for ready cash. Under the current restrictions, which include a curfew and the closure of non-essential businesses, this desperation has only increased. Consequently, most journalists must now redouble their efforts to report about the pandemic while witnessing the financial losses their funders are incurring and prospects for even deeper economic hardship.

While political influence on media outlets is still a cause for concern, there has been a marked improvement since the fall of the conservative VMRO-DPMNE government in 2016. That year, the country ranked 118th of 180 on Reporters Without Borders' Media Freedom Index. The [latest report](#) puts North Macedonia in 92nd place.

Impacts of COVID-19: Predictably, the crisis has compelled journalists who kept their jobs to cover the COVID-19 pandemic on a daily basis, often at the expense of their previous beats. Some media workers, however, weren't as fortunate; in March, the media company that

²¹ CIA World Factbook (https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/print_mk.html)

²² Average (pre-pandemic) circulation figures provided by the publications named

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ According to Amazon's Alexa Rankings, accessed on May 26.

owns the web portals “Standard” and “Lokalno” fired five full-time staff journalists, and ceased work with several part-time employees.

The Association of Journalists (ZNM) and Independent Union of Journalists and Media Workers (SSNM), the two largest journalists’ associations in the country, warned in a [statement](#) on April 1 that these layoffs could have a “domino effect” and encourage other media to follow suit. Journalists and media workers have reported further layoffs and salary cuts in subsequent months.

The already difficult financial situation faced by journalists in North Macedonia has deteriorated even further as a result of the pandemic. Most companies which advertised in the media saw their marketing budgets disappear overnight, with dire consequences for publications.

The online news magazine 360 Stepeni has tried a different approach. When its employees were told about possible financial losses,

they all agreed to create an internal solidarity fund

to which they would contribute a certain percentage of their salaries. This would then support colleagues who would be affected by cutbacks. As the magazine did not make any pay cuts, the fund’s resources were instead used to donate 2,000 protective masks to a local hospital, said reporter Sonja Trajkovska.

“A large part of the budgets from political parties has been cut, which unfortunately have been seen by most of our media as a stable and legitimate source of income for years,” explains Dejan Azeski, a media expert studying at the Institute for Communication Studies in Skopje. “False information was also spread claiming that the virus survives on paper the longest, meaning that sales of the few surviving print media dropped significantly.”

Indeed, print media have long been at the forefront of the North Macedonian media’s struggle for survival. *Nova Makedonija*, founded in 1944, is the country’s oldest newspaper and currently has a circulation of just 7,000. The fact that some of the country’s print newspapers had a circulation of up to 100,000 just a decade ago well reflects the plummeting fortunes of North Macedonia’s print media.

Fokus, another long lived political newspaper, also saw a drop in advertising revenues, although its editor-in-chief Gordana Duvnjak acknowledged that other financial hardships for the paper had yet to manifest themselves.

“If the crisis continues for a long time, most of the commercial media in the country and the region will disappear. This is why the government is trying to help alleviate the situation through various financial funds and grants,”

explained Alexander Srbnovski, a senior reporter for *Nova Makedonija*. “However, even that is not so encouraging, since the economic crisis that will follow will also affect the state authorities.”

As always, government assistance could be a double edged sword. Some news outlets claim that political pressure they face from the authorities has continued during the COVID–19 pandemic.

“The situation is particularly difficult for critical media outlets. Government officials regularly refuse to appear in our news programmes, and we even have a hard time getting to ask a question at press conferences, because

pro-government media always have the advantage,”

said Dragan Milosavljevic, an editor for the conservative TV network Alfa.

Due to health and safety concerns, most of these press conferences are now held online. While media workers approve of this change, they also have reservations. The online format of the press conferences, they say, makes it even harder to ask follow-up questions beyond those submitted in advance.

Accordingly, some claim that the government has converted press conferences into venues for self-promotion.

“In most cases, press conferences are filled with statistics, and ministers are acting as PR spokesmen to score political points,” explains Furkan Saliu, a journalist for Klan TV, an Albanian-language network based in Skopje.

Furthermore, the government press service organised several TV debates itself, featuring prominent medical officials who promote the government’s pandemic measures. In this fashion, says Saliu, the government has become a media actor in its own right.

“[These] press conferences include journalists that we have never heard of, who praise the work of the authorities and do not actually ask questions,” Saliu notes.

The pandemic has completely changed the daily routines of most newsrooms. Now that most editors and journalists work from home, they coordinate over social media. Field reporting now includes not only microphones and cameras, but masks and gloves.

Several local stories went under-reported throughout March and April; they were the collateral damage from the media’s strong focus on the pandemic. Due to the small size of the country, some reporters slowly managed to return to their everyday beats by May. Nevertheless, the constant influx of information on COVID–19 brings with it the potential for disinformation, given the fact that the pandemic

coincided with the pre-electoral period. On top of the added diligence needed to report on a pandemic, North Macedonia's newsrooms are now gearing up to report on the postponed election, which will be held on July 15.

Outlook: The outlook is bleak. Yet in a bid to help news outlets weather their financial hardships, North Macedonia's authorities announced a media relief fund. It is currently in the initial phase of planning and has not yet been discussed with journalists' associations. The latter have [voiced concern](#) that such funding could act as a lever of political control over the media in the post-pandemic era. The authorities [respond](#) that the ruling SDSM party is strongly opposed to interfering with editorial policies, arguing that they have subsidised print media for several years without negative consequences for journalists' work.

Journalists were among the beneficiaries of the government's economic support measures,

according to which employees in the hardest hit sectors would be guaranteed minimum salaries for April and May. In late March the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services, a state media regulator, [donated](#) around 1.7 million Euros for private and public media outlets' operating costs and for their purchase of protective equipment for staff. The government also announced that the relief fund

will include [subsidised](#) social and pension insurance contributions for media workers for June, July, and August 2020.

In late April, North Macedonia was [granted 160 million Euros](#) in financial aid by the EU, as part of a macro-financial assistance package to 10 EU neighbourhood partners. As the package does not formally constitute direct aid to the media, it remains to be seen whether some of these funds will be allocated to news outlets.

In these difficult circumstances, necessity is the mother of invention. Some media outlets are finding that the crisis means adapting to the digital media market; one example is Vidi Vaka, the country's first digital media platform. Founded in late 2016, it produces short-form video reports for social media channels.

"The ability to employ innovative strategies amid the COVID-19 pandemic, and to adapt to the new media sphere which will come, is what will determine whether media will continue to exist," stresses Goran Igic, founder of Vidi Vaka.

Others believe that state subsidies are only a short term solution, and that legal regulation of North Macedonia's media could do more good than harm. "Practice shows that at this level of development, self-regulation is utopian," concludes Azeski. In his view, proper regulation would "clear the market" of fake news peddlers, allowing "room for real media to breathe."

POLAND

No Vaccine for Press Woes

Karolina Zbytniewska

Population: 38.4 million (June 2019 estimate²⁵)

Prime Minister: Mateusz Morawiecki (PiS), since December 2017

Government: Informal coalition government known as the “United Right,” led by the right-populist Law and Justice (PiS), with the right-wing United Poland (SP) and centre-right Agreement party.

Largest political daily newspapers:²⁶

Gazeta Wyborcza (circulation 135,294, average for first quarter of 2020), very critical of the government, centre-left (majority owned by the Polish Agora SA)

Rzeczpospolita (circulation 45,843), moderately critical of the government, centrist (owned by the Polish Gremi Media SA)

Dziennik Gazeta Prawna (circulation 43,516), impartial towards the government, centrist (owned by the Polish Infor Biznes SA)

Largest political weeklies:²⁷

Polityka (circulation 126,939), critical of the government, centre-left (owned by the Polish Polityka cooperative)
Newsweek Polska (circulation 124,372), critical of the government, centrist (owned by Ringier Axel Springer Polska (RASP), part of the Swiss Ringier Axel Springer Media Group)

Sieci (circulation 87,275), supportive of the government, centre-right (owned by the Polish Fratria SP)

Largest online newspapers:²⁸

Onet.pl (UU/month: 11,082,352), somewhat critical of the government, neutral stance (owned by Ringier Axel Springer Polska (RASP), part of the Swiss Ringier Axel Springer Media Group)

WP.pl (UU/month: 10,074,282), balanced towards the government, neutral stance (owned by Polish Wirtualna Polska Holding S.A.)

Tvn24.pl (UU/month: 9,378,050), critical of the government (owned by the American Discovery Inc.)

Wyborcza.pl (UU/month: 6,540,308), very critical of the government, centre-left (majority owned by the Polish Agora SA)

Status quo: Poland confirmed its first case of COVID-19 on March 4, which was followed by a massive public information campaign. In just a few days, before the number of infections had reached 20, Poles started to voluntarily self-isolate. A lockdown was announced on March 13, one day after the country’s first death from COVID-19.

As the number of cases began to rise sharply from mid-March, so too did readers’ demand for information. It can be explained with 2 mutually related reasons. Two *IPSOS Mori studies* conducted on March 9-10 and March 12-13 revealed that in just three days, the share of people concerned about the outbreak rose from 63 to 75 percent. Consequently, more Poles stayed at home and checked the situation online.

²⁵ Estimate of the Statistical Service of the Republic of Poland (<https://stat.gov.pl/en/topics/other-studies/informations-on-socio-economic-situation/statistical-bulletin-no-42020,4,112.html>)

²⁶ Dailies’ circulation figures from the ZKDP (Press Circulation Audit Union), as cited by Wirtualna Media, May 2020 (<https://www.wirtualnemedi.pl/artykul/sprzedaz-gazeta-i-kwartal-2020-fakt-gazeta-wyborcza>)

²⁷ Weeklies’ circulation figures from the ZKDP (Press Circulation Audit Union), as cited by Wirtualna Media, May 2020 (<https://www.wirtualnemedi.pl/artykul/sprzedaz-tygodnikow-opinii-i-kwartal-2020-polityka>)

²⁸ Online newspapers ranked by unique users per month, according to Gemius/PBI research collated by Wirtualna Media in April 2020 (<https://www.wirtualnemedi.pl/artykul/koronawirus-epidemia-skok-odwiedzalnosci-serwisow-informacyjnych-onet-przed-wp-rmf24-pl-przed-wyborcza-pl-i-radiozet-pl-top10>)

Some media, particularly print publications, struggled hugely under lockdown. Online media, in contrast, experienced a boom in readership. Both examples illustrate that the COVID-19 crisis has simply intensified many longer-term processes affecting the Polish media landscape.

What has not changed is the already high level of politicisation of Polish media, which has peaked over the past four years. By many accounts, since the end of 2015, state media networks – TV and radio – have turned into *outright propaganda tools of the government*, praising its leaders’ every move while presenting the opposition as enemies of the state. There is a budgetary dimension to this process;

state-owned companies withdrew their advertisements from critical media outlets

and took their business to those which attacked the opposition instead. In early 2016 there was also an [attempt](#) to limit the circulation of “unfriendly” titles on the premises of public institutions. A lawyer contacted for this report confirmed that such titles are not on the general list of available publications for subscription by courts in Poland.

Polish officials and state media continue to regularly verbally assault their critics in the media, with particular disdain aimed at *Gazeta Wyborcza* and the TVN24 news network. As a result, Reporters Without Borders’ [2020 Press Freedom Index](#) ranked Poland 62nd out of 180 countries – its worst result yet. Poland had received its highest result – 18th place – in 2015. At the end of that year, PiS came to power.

Impacts of COVID-19: The crisis accelerated the development of the online sector at the expense of the print media. At the beginning of the pandemic, visits to news websites peaked, with a simultaneous massive reduction in sales of the print press, particularly of non-political titles such as lifestyle magazines.

Between March 9-15, Poland’s ten leading websites in the information and journalism category [recorded](#) a 57.4 percent rise in the number of users and a 137.5 percent rise in the number of page views compared to February 3 to March 1.

At the same time, sales of the vast majority of print titles fell this March in comparison to the same month last year. For example, sales of nationwide dailies [fell on average](#) by 15.5 percent and 12 percent for opinion weeklies. However, it must be noted that sales had also fallen in February, before Poland entered lockdown.

Reductions in print publications’ circulation was not the only hardship for publishing houses, which had increasingly come to depend on additional services (particularly conference planning) as a source of revenue. The pandemic cut off these additional sources of income. In March, the weekly *Wprost* decided to close its print edition and stick to online content, explaining that the pandemic had not only severely limited distribution but also made it impossible to organise events.

At the same time,

the massive rise in online media consumption has not translated into a rise in advertising capacity.

Several media employees confirmed that some media houses have withdrawn advertisements, as their clients [prefer not to be associated with difficulties posed by the pandemic](#) (illness, death, layoffs, recession). Simultaneously, companies placing advertisements directly, such as soft drink producers or car companies, have suffered financially from the crisis or expect to, so reduced their advertising budgets.

As a result of their economic downturn, media outlets adapted their employment policies. In April some outlets – mostly print lifestyle magazines – closed down entirely (e.g. *Logo*, *Podróże*, *Zdrowie*). Others announced layoffs. Some resorted to cutting salaries (e.g. *Agora* reduced all employees’ pay by 20 percent and *Polska Press* by 15-20 percent) and limited their work with external authors. One editor compared news about the Polish media market to obituaries.

Furthermore, some authors were startled to learn of retroactive cuts to fees, which they learnt about upon filing their work. These cuts, like others, were justified with reference to the pandemic; some journalists believe that media managers have used the crisis as a pretext to (further) deteriorate work conditions.

Cuts to correspondent jobs and reporting trips have become a sad reality, and work without a proper job contract the norm. Ordering texts and not publishing them – and not paying – is no longer an exception. Recurring layoffs – group and individual – reduce editorial teams while new hires are made for other sectors of publishing houses (IT, UX, and marketing). In short, journalism in Poland has become increasingly precarious, a fact most visible in online and print media. As Adam Leszczyński, a journalist for OKO.press and a professor at Warsaw’s SWPS University puts it, one angry precarious journalist can always be exchanged for another, for whom a job at a publication is remuneration enough.

Nevertheless, some publications did not make layoffs or cutbacks during the pandemic, even if they lost some sponsors. *Rzeczpospolita* and the publicly owned Polskie Radio even made official statements about no plan for staff reductions. The situation for most TV channels, especially news channels, even improved. Nielsen Ratings [indicate](#) that average time spent in front of the TV rose by half an hour this March compared to last year.

The politicisation of Poland’s media has been growing ever since PiS came to power in 2015 and amended the law regulating the activities and structure of public media. Appointments to the public media outlets and supervisory institutions (KRRiT – the National Broadcasting Council and the National Media Council) are politicised. The consistently one-sided pro-government bias of the public media was even acknowledged by a study commissioned by the politicised National Broadcasting Council in 2017. The document’s analysis of TVP news programmes found that the channel’s content was too one-sided, noting that TVP1’s *Teleexpress*, a popular news roundup broadcast at

5PM, “gives the impression that Poland is a one-party country.” [According to Gazeta Wyborcza](#), KRRiT hid this damning report until 2019.

Witold Kołodziejski, president of the National Broadcasting Council, says that pro-government media ensure balance for Poland’s broadcast media landscape, particularly in the broadcasting of its three biggest players: TVN, Polsat, and TVP. News programmes broadcast by the latter depict a reality very different from what major private news networks cover, overlooking information which is not convenient for the government in favour of praising its “achievements” and launching meticulously prepared attacks on the opposition.

Little could have changed in this regard over the course of the pandemic. Nevertheless, attacks on TVN (belonging to Discovery, Inc.) intensified. These became so pronounced that on April 17 the TV station finally issued a [statement](#) at the outset of its major evening news programme, Fakty, which remarked: “For several days now, although there are many important topics to cover, TVP has been spending a lot of time attacking our station and TVN journalists... We understand that nobody likes to be criticised, but we are not here to be liked by politicians or party presidents. Unlike state television, we are independent, also financially.”

Although the government presented data concerning the epidemiological situation in daily press announcements, reporting on the pandemic has varied widely.

Public media exclusively framed these data within success stories,

while privately owned and critical media usually broadcasted government’s press conferences with important context, mentioning irregularities or other data which shed a different light on the authorities’ actions.

On the rare occasions when public media did cover a misstep by the authorities, they did so with caveats. These were presented either as a consequence of the previous government’s inaction or mistakes, the fault of the EU or Germany, or placed alongside a success story in Poland or a comparatively worse situation elsewhere. All in all, failures were either presented as victories or became pretexts to attack “enemies of the state,” meaning the opposition, most private media, independent think tanks and NGOs, Germany, or the EU. The latter in particular was a popular target for Polish public media; in March, TVP’s news programme Wiadomości claimed that „Brussels hasn’t developed any effective methods to combat the epidemic. ... It helplessly throws up its arms and watches as the coronavirus takes a lethal toll among the Member States.” Although this line of attack has been voiced by government officials, it is based on a falsehood: the EU has no competence to regulate health-care.

The government provided information about the pandemic on its official websites (the gov.pl domain noted a surge in popularity) and social media channels. Journalists were able to access most recent updates on infections and deaths relatively easily. Nevertheless, independent media outlets, the opposition, and health specialists have accused the government of hiding the real figures for infections and deaths, arguing that it has tried to avoid responsibility by attributing COVID–19 fatalities to pre-existing conditions.

The pandemic coincided with the pre-election campaign for the presidential vote, which was due to be held on May 10. The government invoked the pandemic on April 6 when it passed [unconstitutional amendments to electoral laws](#), [criticised](#) by the OSCE, enabling an election to be held as soon as the authorities please. It is widely agreed that this consideration was why the government did not announce a state of emergency.

The pandemic has changed how newsrooms function. COVID–19 started to dominate the news agenda in March; by the end of May the majority of news content was devoted to the pandemic and related issues. Media critical of the government focus on social distancing measures and scandals, such as [those surrounding state purchases of medical equipment](#). However, other topics are starting to surface again, including optimism about the ending of restrictions.

Most print and online media workers, and not just journalists, have had to work remotely from home. Some publications’ staff had gotten used to this format well before the pandemic, but for others,

the easing of lockdown measures allows them to return to their offices to reset their lost work-life balance.

Some media companies had to resort to state aid, limiting working time and salaries by 20 percent. Still, according to journalists, the actual working day did not get any shorter. Some contracted reporters say that they worked more than before the pandemic.

In order to keep distance at work, TV employees were separated into small teams that worked together in shifts. Journalists from TVN24 and Polsat News report that they had fewer shifts per month, but that these shifts were longer and more intensive than before. On average these employees worked a little less than before the pandemic, but retained their salaries and gained all-day catering at work. Meanwhile, radio stations sent many of their journalists to work from home, providing them with professional equipment to guarantee good quality broadcasts.

Outlook: The media market in Poland – and the world – will continue to shift online. Print publications will contin-

ue to close, which will translate into pay cuts and layoffs. Publishers will stake their businesses on cornering a growing online market; retaining a print title will soon become more a matter of prestige than of revenue.

The COVID-19 lockdown has also proven that media workers can be at least as effective from home as from their offices, accelerating newsrooms' transition online.

In general, the Polish government did not need to take advantage of COVID-19 restrictions to gain an advantage over the press. That was achieved well before; simply put, the politicisation of state media cannot progress any further in Poland. It has been completely subordinated to the interests of the PiS government. The only way for the national broadcaster to reclaim its role and rediscover the mission of public media is to achieve political independence; that can only be achieved with a change of government. Nevertheless, after the experience of recent years, Poland's public media will need extensive structural reforms to guarantee its independence from any political interference.

The only way for PiS to expand its present grip over much of the media would be to stage takeovers of private media outlets. In 2018 the owner of Polsat TV, the billionaire Zygmunt Solorz, agreed to make concessions to PiS concerning content on his network. It was [widely believed](#) in media circles that Solorz had agreed to surrender editorial independence due to fears that he could face financial difficulties if his media outlets became too critical. Moreover, in 2019 Newsweek Polska [reported](#) that PiS politicians had proposed a sum well above market value to take over the country's largest private TV channel TVN from Discovery Inc. The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted these plans, but once the EU's multiannual financial framework

is finally decided, the Polish authorities may find themselves with further funds to realise this aspiration. However, attacks on TVN by the pro-government TVP eventually compelled the US ambassador to [publicly defend](#) the channel and its American owner.

As the country gears up for a presidential election, media freedom in Poland will be in the spotlight.

Recent events do not give cause for optimism. In early May, under the guise of social distancing rules, two journalists from *Gazeta Wyborcza* and OKO.press were accused of violating social distancing restrictions while covering a protest outside PiS leader's Jarosław Kaczyński's house in Warsaw. They faced fines of up to 60,000 PLN.

Poland's public media "acts almost exclusively as the mouthpiece of the government and of President Andrzej Duda, who is seeking another term," reads a Reporters Without Borders press release from June 24. Indeed, a [report](#) by Press-Service Monitoring Mediów for June found that 97 percent of all mentions of Duda on the *Wiadomości* news programme were positive; his opponent, Warsaw Mayor Rafał Trzaskowski, received 31 percent fear mentions, out of which 87 percent were negative.

Most private media outlets in Poland can still exercise freedom of speech. However, they have to contend with political attacks and financial woes if they do so. Journalists are precarious victims of this situation. Without a missionary zeal, it is hard to see how professionalism can thrive in circumstances where journalists are deprived not only of a decent wage, but – all too often – of respect.

ROMANIA

A Matter of Trust

Cristina Lupu

Population: 19,405,000 (January 2019 estimate²⁹)

Prime Minister: Ludovic Orban (PNL), since November 2019, reinstated after a hiatus in March 2020.

Government: Minority government of the centre-right National Liberal Party (PNL), confidence and supply support from the centre-right Save Romania Union (USR).

Largest political daily newspapers:³⁰

Libertatea (circulation 29,500, October-December 2019 average), critical of the government, centre-left (owned by Swiss Ringier A.G.)

Adevărul (circulation 4,700, October-December 2019 average), moderately critical of the government, centre-right (owned by Romanian Adevărul holding)

Largest political weeklies:

Weekend Adevărul (circulation 9,600 October-December 2019 average³¹), moderately critical of the government, centre-right (owned by Romanian Adevărul holding)

Newsweek România (circulation approximately 6,000 before pandemic³²), critical of the government, centre-right (owned by the Romanian News International S.A)

Revista 22 (average circulation undisclosed), not critical of the government, right (owned by the Romanian Social Dialogue Group NGO)

Largest online political newspapers:³³

Digi24.ro (940,000 unique users per day), not critical of the government, right (owned by Romanian Campus Media SRL)

Stirileprotv.ro (710,000 unique users per day), neutral stance towards the government, centrist (owned by Romanian PRO TV SRL)

Adevarul.ro (630,000 unique users per day), moderately critical of the government, centre-right (owned by Romanian Adevărul holding)

Status quo: Romania confirmed its first case of COVID-19 on February 26, 2020. On March 16, President Klaus Iohannis decreed a state of emergency, and the country was under a strict lockdown from March 24 to May 14.

Romania's media landscape was already deeply unstable by the time the pandemic struck. The country's media had never fully recovered from the 2008 financial crisis and was affected by political control, deprofessionalisation and by a lack of trust from the public. Most advertising

went to mainstream TV stations. Most media are owned by politicians or people related to the political sphere or by businessmen with interests they want to protect. From outside, the media environment looks very diverse, with a multitude of small media outlets, but the public interest information is scarce – most of them publish press releases or political/businesses controlled information.

The public does not pay for journalistic content,

with the exception of some print media that still managed to survive and some new media startups that attract some donations. Local businesses do not invest in advertising, leaving the political sphere to exert control over much of the media through public advertising contracts. All this led to palpable self-censorship in many newsrooms.

Under the state of emergency, Romanian authorities passed decrees limiting freedom of expression and access to information; cut access to websites that were considered to "spread fake news" and tried to control all communication regarding the virus on the central level. On

²⁹ Romanian National Institute of Statistics (https://insse.ro/cms/sites/default/files/com_presa/com_pdf/poprez_ian2019r.pdf)

³⁰ Circulation figures from BRAT (Romanian Joint Industry Committee for Print and Internet) (<https://www.brat.ro/audit-tiraje/cifre-de-difuzare/>)

³¹ Circulation figures from BRAT (Romanian Joint Industry Committee for Print and Internet) (<https://www.brat.ro/audit-tiraje/publicatie/weekend-adevarul/>)

³² Circulation figures provided by Director of Newsweek Romania Sabina Orban

³³ Unique daily users according to BRAT (Romanian Joint Industry Committee for Print and Internet) (<https://www.brat.ro/sati/rezultate/type/site/page/1/c/all>)

March 18, the Permanent Representative of Romania to the Council of Europe declared a partial and temporary withdrawal from the European Convention of Human Rights. The request was not officially communicated to the Romanian public, raising concerns about the Romanian authorities' accountability during the crisis.

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) notes that the country's rulers continued to encourage self-censorship and censorship, routinely subject media to surveillance by the security services, and "gradually turn the media into political propaganda tools." Editorial decisions, it continues, are subordinate to opaque and possibly corrupt ownership structures. For these reasons, Romania ranks 48th of 180 countries in the RSF's [2020 Press Freedom Index](#), down from 47th place the previous year.

Impacts of COVID-19: Online traffic has surged, but Romania's media are in deep financial crisis. Local and print media are particularly badly affected. Businesses affected by the lockdown have stopped advertising, depriving local media of one of their most important sources of income. Interviews taken with local media managers indicate that they have lost from 70 to 80 percent of their advertising budgets since the pandemic began, putting them on the verge of collapse. Even large corporations have stopped advertising; on April 1, Coca Cola [announced](#) that it would cease advertising all its brands for an undetermined period. According to Publicis Groupe Romania, the country's largest communications group, the advertising market lost 39 percent of its business in April 2020 (TV lost 36.6 percent, radio 60.5 percent, and print 60.3 percent). Online media noted a small increase of 0.7 percent. These data only include advertising from local market actors and advertising agencies, and does not include money coming from GoogleAds.

Romania's print publications were ill-prepared for this crisis. The highest selling daily is the tabloid newspaper *Click* (approximately 50,000 copies in October-December 2019), followed by *Libertatea* and *Adevărul*. There is no official data on how the pandemic has affected their circulation, but informal discussions suggest that the drop has been massive. Most Sunday editions were suspended, while several weekly magazines such as *Newsweek România* or *Dilema Veche* stopped their print edition entirely. With

*newspaper kiosks closed, daily sales
dropped to almost zero;*

meanwhile the Romanian postal service, the most important distribution channel for subscriptions, stopped functioning properly. Several local media managers stated that during the lockdown, daily print newspapers reached readers just once a week.

TV audiences surged throughout March and April 2020, then dropped in May. The country's most watched programme in March was the 7PM news on the PRO TV chan-

nel, with a national audience of 2.15 million (or a [12.3 percent share](#) of the total viewing audience). It remained the most popular in April, but its audience had dropped to 1.6 million ([a 9.1 percent rating](#)).

This pattern was also repeated online. In March 2020, traffic to most news websites increased. The website with the largest audience was Digi24.ro, the online portal of the Digi24 TV station, with 16 million unique users. This represented a significant increase from 9.2 million in February. This number fell to 12.3 million in April.

Nevertheless, this new thirst for accurate information did not translate into more income. Some media outlets announced layoffs and salary cuts. The Intact Media Group, which owns the Antena1 and Antena3 TV stations, decided in mid-March to cut all employees' salaries by 20 percent until the end of 2020. Other outlets put their staff on "technical unemployment," making use of the government's emergency offer to cover 75 percent of employees' gross salaries while their contracts are suspended. *Adevărul* took this option for 30 percent of its employees, and *Ringier România* for 15 percent. Although "technical unemployment" was a useful option for many businesses, it put media outlets in a difficult position: they were able to save staff positions, but had fewer journalists available at a time when the public urgently required accurate information. According to the Mediasind Trade Union, in April RealitateaTV opted for [an illegal solution](#) when it sent some employees on "technical unemployment" but still asked them to come to work on a volunteer basis.

The government took several decisions that affected media freedom during the pandemic. The [state of emergency decree](#)

*doubled the response time for
freedom of information requests.*

Journalists should normally receive information, depending on complexity, within 30 days or sooner. Immediately after an emergency situation was declared, some public authorities told journalists [that they would send information in 60 days](#). The authorities also decided that all official information about COVID-19 would be released from Bucharest, making it almost impossible for local journalists outside the capital to verify any information in their communities.

Press conferences were infrequent and most official information appeared in press releases, many of which were released late at night, without the possibility for journalists to ask questions. Meanwhile, whistleblowers were put in a difficult situation as doctors and public servants were threatened with criminal charges if they offered the media any information related to COVID-19, even if it was of public interest. This lack of transparency was compounded by a message sent out by all state officials that people should inform themselves only from official sources. In response, on April 2, 97 news outlets and 165 journalists

signed a [freedom of information request](#) initiated by the Center for Independent Journalism (CIJ) requesting better access to information and transparency. Although the request was not officially answered, the authorities did start to release more information.

The state of emergency decree also included an article on countering the spread of “false information” about the pandemic.

This allowed the blocking of websites without any mechanism for appeal.

The National Authority for Management and Regulation in Communication (ANCOM), a state body which manages communication infrastructure, was tasked with removing such content according to rulings from the Strategic Communication Group (SCG), a task force created at the start of the crisis within the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The identities of the members of SCG and their qualifications were never disclosed, despite inquiries from the media and civil society. Fifteen obscure websites were eventually blocked, but, once the state of emergency was over, ANCOM restored access.

Over the past few months, the news agenda in Romania has been entirely dominated by COVID–19. Journalists say that they have become tired of working on the topic, but that any other subject was ignored by the public. Things started to change due to “news fatigue” in late April and May. Furthermore, although the press card allowed journalists freedom of movement to document stories, the lockdown compelled most journalists to work from home in order to protect themselves, bringing extra challenges in reporting stories and contacting sources.

Some online outlets tried to compensate for their lack of advertising with revenue from Google, risking proliferating clickbait and disinformation to attract visitors. Mainstream media outlets tried to debunk this material, but they faced an avalanche of disinformation from obscure

websites and social media networks. To make matters worse, these dubious sources are being amplified by public figures and politicians. For example, on April 5, a mayor from Iași county [posted on the Facebook account](#) of the City Hall that people should not receive free masks because they were poisoned. In April, Gabriela Crețu, a PSD senator, [voiced support](#) for 5G conspiracy theories during a parliamentary hearing and remarked that COVID–19 was a “big global experiment.”

Thus Romania’s media may also have to fight off an epidemic of disinformation.

Outlook: Romania’s media is, yet again, struggling for survival. Journalists do not see assistance from the EU as a solution to these urgent problems, arguing that any funds from Brussels would take too long to arrive.

In mid-May, the government announced 200 million Lei (40 million Euro) in funding for a campaign to inform citizens about health and safety measures. As it was also intended as a helping hand to the media, the initiative was warmly welcomed by most outlets. However, there were exceptions: newer media organisations and NGOs such as the Center for Investigative Journalism (CIJ) voiced concern that these new funds would not reach those outlets worst hit by the crisis. The fact that TV stations are to receive [55 percent of the funds](#), compared to just five percent for local media, has raised suspicions.

That matters because Romania is due to hold local and parliamentary elections later this year. The government’s funding initiative could affect newsrooms’ credibility. In a country where advertising contracts from the state are a soft but effective way to influence the media’s conduct, it could hardly be otherwise. Censorship or self-censorship connected with advertising from public funds was cited by journalists and media managers as one of the most common places they faced in a [report published by CIJ](#) in March 2020. For all the changes the post-pandemic era may bring, it seems that some things will stay the same.

SERBIA

“The Funniest Virus in the World”

Žarka Radoja

Population: 7,186,862 (2011 census)³⁴

Prime Minister: Ana Brnabić (SNS) since June 2017

Government: In formation after June 21 parliamentary elections, which saw another victory for the ruling right-wing Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and its coalition partners, which include the Social Democratic Party of Serbia (SDPS) and five other left- and right-populist parties.

Largest political daily newspapers:³⁵

1. *Blic*, supportive of the government, right-wing tabloid (owned by the Swiss-German Ringier Axel Springer Group)
2. *Informer*, supportive of the government, right-wing tabloid (owned by the Serbian Insajder Tim DOO)
3. *Večernje Novosti*, supportive of the government, right-wing (owned by the Serbian Novosti AD)

Largest political weeklies:³⁶

1. *NIN*, critical of the government, centrist (owned by the Swiss-German Ringier Axel Springer Group)
2. *Nedeljnik*, critical of the government, right-wing (owned by the Serbian NIP Nedeljnik DOO)
3. *Vreme*, critical of the government, centre-right (owned by the Serbian NP Vreme)

Largest online political newspapers:³⁷

- Blic.rs (1,199,197 average daily visitors), right-wing tabloid news site (owned by the Swiss-German Ringier Axel Springer Group)
- Kurir.rs (1,059,211 average daily visitors), supportive of the government, centre-right (owned by the Serbian Adria Media Group)
- Telegraf.rs (591,777 average daily visitors), supportive of the government, right-wing (owned by the Serbian Internet Group DOO)

Status quo: Serbia confirmed its first case of COVID-19 on March 6.

The authorities in Belgrade initially gave mixed messages. This was “the funniest virus in the world,” said the pulmonologist Branimir Nesterović during a press conference at the Presidency on February 26. But two weeks later, on March 13, the government formed the COVID-19 Infection Disease Crisis Response Team with Dr. Nesterović as a member. Two days later they imposed a state of emergency and one of the strictest lockdowns in Europe.

Serbia’s fight against the coronavirus coincided with the start of the pre-election campaign

on March 4; President Aleksandar Vučić had scheduled parliamentary elections for April 26. Several opposition parties declared a boycott, citing corruption and a lack of democratic freedoms. Freedom House’s latest Nations in Transit report, Serbia left the category of democracies entirely and is now classified as a hybrid regime. This followed five years of consistently negative indicators for governance.

As the Associated Press noted in March, “Vučić has an almost total grip on Serbia’s mainstream media. Pro-government tabloids regularly blast his critics as foreign stooges or criminals without allowing them to respond.” At that point, Serbia’s rating in Reporters Without Borders’ (RSF) World Press Freedom Index had dropped 14 places – from 90th in 2019 to 93rd of 180 in the 2020 RSF index.

Impacts of COVID-19: Serbia officially ended its state of emergency on May 7. It had lasted 52 days, over which there were several serious challenges both to press freedom and the financial security of the media.

The pandemic has further undermined the already waning significance of Serbia’s print media. Stevan Ristić, the acting President of the Management Board of the Serbian

³⁴ <https://www.stat.gov.rs/sr-latn/oblasti/popis/popis-2011/>

³⁵ Rankings provided by IPSOS Serbia, based on data collected over the first five months of 2020

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Website visitor data courtesy of Geminus Audience, accessed May 2020 (<https://rating.geminus.com/rs/tree/32>)

[Media Association](#), says that unofficial data show that the daily newspapers, with the exception of *Danas*, have seen a drop of between 35-50 per cent in circulation during the crisis.

Although each publisher maintains its own rankings of the country's best-selling newspapers, these are unreliable, says Zoran Sekulić, former president of the Management Board of the Media Association and head of the FoNet news agency. "What is reliable, however, is the continuous cumulative decline in the circulation of daily newspapers in Serbia, which today, according to information from several sources, is about 400,000 a day, unlike four years ago when it was more than 700,000," he continues.

Meanwhile TV stations with nationwide coverage, as well as online news portals, have increased their audiences. According to Vladimir Radomirović, president of the Journalists' Association of Serbia (JAS), this crisis has demonstrated the importance of public broadcasters.

As the

country has had no official financial auditing system for media outlets for several years

the financial health of the press can only be established through unofficial data. However, the grim consequences for Serbia's advertising market due to the pandemic could have meant serious knock-on effects.

"Advertisers fell into a state of hibernation in the first weeks of the crisis; it was impossible to estimate the depth and duration of the crisis. Many businesses have suffered a severe blow, so the question is when and to what extent advertisers will return. Additional jobs, such as organizing various events, from forums to business conferences have disappeared", says Ristić. Sekulić adds that the advertising market has also been a tool of political control over the media: "The general impression is that advertising budgets in all types of media, mainly through agencies, are distributed not only by market, but also by political suitability. They are a potential field of serious corruption."

Nonetheless, the pandemic has already seen more direct examples of interference with the press. On March 28, a decree was passed which gave the government control over information flows during the pandemic. It was invoked for the [arrest of Ana Lalić](#), a journalist for Nova.rs, on April 1. Lalić had been working on a story about the lack of medical equipment during the epidemic and the Crisis Response Team's decision to bar journalists from live participation in daily press conferences (they are now permitted only to send questions by email in advance).

The president of the Independent Journalistic Association of Serbia (IJAS) Željko Bodrožić says that the pandemic has highlighted the extent to which nearly all media outlets, particularly national TV networks, are under the control of the ruling authorities and how endangered independent journalists and media outlets really are.

"They used the state of emergency to further intimidate and humiliate professional and critical journalists..."

they dragged [Lalić] through the tabloid mud in a few days, presenting her as a bad journalist and a foreign agent. During the state of emergency, the already humiliated journalists have been humiliated even more," stresses Bodrožić.

While Serbia's media outlets may have been informative during the pandemic, part of them did not provide sufficient analysis nor effectively hold the government to account. Such were the [findings of research by the BIRODI monitoring organisation](#), which notes that national TV networks did not broadcast debate about current events and gave next to no airtime to opposition figures. Serbia's governing coalition took up [91 percent](#) of broadcasts devoted to political actors, according to the Centre for Research, Transparency, and Accountability (CRTA).

Journalists have been prevented at every turn from holding the authorities to account. As soon as the Crisis Response Team decided on April 10 to only accept questions at its press conferences by email, more than 95 percent of journalists surveyed believed that the answers provided were generic and lacked the data they needed. Some 58 percent were in favour of boycotting the press conferences, according to a [survey made by IJAS](#) on April 24.

Sekulić adds that his newsroom was the first to boycott the online press conferences.

"FoNet sent three questions by email. An answer to the first, about those infected in prisons, was received, but the second question about the possible infections among aviation workers was completely overlooked. Answers to the third question were promised a day later, but then nothing concrete was answered," recalls Sekulić. "Reporting solely on the basis of television recordings, has put media outlets at a disadvantage."

This is a common complaint: 47 percent of participants in the same IJAS survey sent questions to the Crisis Team. Of the 187 they sent, just 30 were answered. That's a success rate of 16 percent, before considering the content of the responses.

Journalists have complained that government agencies have generally become less accessible and responsive during the pandemic.

A [survey](#) published in April by Local Press, an organisation analysing local media in Serbia, found that 41 percent of editors and journalists stated that information from local government institutions has become harder to get. More than half (54 percent) of those polled noted that these institutions favoured certain media outlets when offering information. Other journalists even had problems leaving the house: another survey [from IJAS showed](#) that there was an insufficient number of work permits during the ban on movement (37.6 percent of journalists cited this as the main obstacle to their work).

Journalists have been no safer when they have been able to move freely. “Compared to the period before the State of emergency, where we recorded 12 attacks and 11 pressures in a twice as long period of time, during the state of emergency we had an increase in verbal and physical attacks by 70 percent in just 47 days and an almost 150 percent increase in general pressure. In 20 cases, pressure and threats came from government officials”, says a representative of IJAS.

Outlook: In a country where press freedoms have been steadily eroding for years, the COVID–19 pandemic has provided the authorities with further means to undermine what remains of Serbia’s free press. Economic instabilities could complete the job for them; many freelance journalists, particularly in the regions, have lost their clients. As coronavirus cases reached some newsrooms, staff journalists ended up working from home.

However, as even Serbia’s journalistic associations do not have information about media staffing cuts during the pandemic, the precise scale of layoffs may never be known.

Dragana Čabarkapa, President of the Union of Journalists, states that around 30 employees of *Večernje Novosti* have been furloughed. Ristić adds that at the start of the lockdown, rumours circulated that some publications paid their staff 70 percent of their usual salaries.

On March 29, the Media Coalition [sent proposals](#) to the Government of Serbia to mitigate the consequences of the economic crisis. “Although our hopes are not great, we still believe that the state will help, especially the local and print media”, stresses Bodrožić. Indeed, on April 10, the government passed a decree providing fiscal incentives for small and medium sized businesses which gave notice to 10 percent of their employees or less.

“The economic crisis that is coming to us could kill the media, especially local and independent outlets”, says Ristić, adding that though there has been some discussion about media support funds, nothing has yet materialised. Ristić adds that the EU delegation’s [call for applications for Serbian media funding](#), usually made in February, has yet to be announced. “It’s no secret that several important independent media outlets are surviving on that grant,” he notes.

Serbia’s general elections, originally scheduled for April, were held on June 21. President Aleksandar Vučić declared a landslide victory for his SNS party, which preliminary results indicate has won 60 percent of the vote. Much of the opposition boycotted the election in protest, and only two other parties managed to enter parliament. Observers from the Centre for Transparency and Accountability (CRTA), a Serbian NGO, [declare](#) that the 2020 election was the worst they have witnessed in the country since 2016.

When a photojournalist from *Južne Vesti* took a photo of an unknown group of people holding lists of names and addresses loitering around a polling station in Niš, [he was verbally abused](#). Incidents like this suggest that for Serbian journalism, these election results represent continuity – and potentially not for the better.

SLOVENIA

Anatomy of a Victory

Primož Cirman

Population: 2,095,861 (January 2020 estimate³⁸)

Prime minister: Janez Janša (SDS), since March 2020

Government: Coalition government led by the right-wing Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS), with the liberal centrist Modern Centre Party (SMC) and two smaller centrist and conservative parties.

Largest political daily newspapers:³⁹

Delo (circulation 19,674, July-September 2017), not critical of the government, centrist (owned by the Slovenian FMR Holding)

Večer (circulation 26,717, October-December 2017), critical of the government, centre-left (owned by the Slovenian ZHT Invest Ltd.)

Dnevnik (circulation 21,036, October-December 2017), critical of the government, centre-left (owned by the Slovenian DZS Group, Austrian Styria AG holds a 25 percent share)

Largest political weeklies:⁴⁰

Reporter, critical of the government, right-wing (owned by the Slovenian citizen Tara Milikić)

Mladina, critical of the government, left-wing (majority owned by the Luxembourg York Offshore Global Finance BDH)

Demokracija, very supportive towards the government, right-wing (majority owned by the Hungarian Ripost Ltd., SDS political party holds a minority share)

Largest online political newspapers:⁴¹

24ur.com (UU month: 950,767), critical of the government (owned by the Slovenian ProPlus company)

siol.net (UU month: 794,115), not critical of the government (owned by the Slovenian Telekom Slovenija DD)

rtvslo.si (UU month: 763,347), varying stance towards the government (owned by public broadcaster Radio-televizija Slovenija)

Status quo: Slovenia confirmed its first case of COVID-19 on March 4. Within a week, the number of confirmed infections rose to 50; the government declared an epidemic on March 12. The pandemic did not come as a shock, neither to Slovenia's media nor society in general. As the country borders Italy, the coronavirus media coverage for more than a week before the first case was confirmed in Slovenia. On May 15, the government declared that the epidemic in Slovenia had ended — the first European country to do so.

Slovenia's media landscape was in a delicate situation when the pandemic struck. In 2008, the **total circulation**

of the country's daily newspapers stood at 260,000, with 1.17 million readers at 16.6 percent of all advertising contracts. By 2017, the last year for which data are available, that number barely exceeded 120,000 copies. It is likely to have declined further since.

The majority of Slovenia's media outlets are owned by local businessmen or financial holdings. They have been

generally unwilling to compensate outlets' financial losses with shareholders' capital

or further investment, while digital revenue has proved insufficient.

This has greatly increased the vulnerability of the press to economic and political pressure, exercised mostly through PR and lobbying agencies.

The country's small advertising market is dominated by PRO Plus, a company which owns commercial TV stations POP TV and Kanal A. These stations constitute 70 percent of Slovenia's TV market, and **received significant discounts**

³⁸ Estimate of the Statistical Service of the Republic of Slovenia (<https://www.stat.si/StatWeb/en>)

³⁹ Dailies' circulation data provided by the Slovenian Advertising Chamber, collected in 2017 and published in 2018, the last year for which such data are publicly available.

⁴⁰ Weeklies' circulation data not collected; these are the only weekly political magazines in Slovenia of any significant scale.

⁴¹ Unique users per month (April 2020) provided by the Slovenian Advertising Chamber, commissioned by the Slovenian Online Media Currency monitoring tool (<https://www.moss-soz.si/>). The latter uses undisclosed weighting to determine website viewership statistics.

on advertising contracts. However, the national monopoly regulator's September 2014 decision that PRO Plus abused its power over the advertising market was overruled by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in 2018. Meanwhile, the social status of journalists has deteriorated. Between 2012 and 2015, just 25 journalists were hired by private media outlets in Slovenia, while layoffs of newsroom staff have become commonplace. The use of part-time contracts and other forms of freelance collaboration has increased.

The concentration of media ownership, as well as the use of lawsuits and smear campaigns to intimidate journalists, were raised by Reporters Without Borders in their [2020 Press Freedom Index](#), in which Slovenia ranks 32nd of 180 countries (up from 34th place in 2019).

Impacts of COVID-19: The COVID-19 pandemic has compounded this dire economic situation. According to one estimate from an anonymous source with close knowledge of the situation, the media's advertising revenues have been slashed by a third after private companies went out of business. Public broadcaster RTV Slovenija lost three million Euros of advertising money during the crisis. The lockdown was a major obstacle to the distribution of newspapers.

"Distribution problems, mostly with print, will have a profound effect on newspapers' long term future: it is very likely that these three 'dry' months when very little was sold on the newsstands will cause immense financial problems to the already cash-starved print media," says Marko Milosavljevič, Associate Professor at the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia's capital.

Confronted by the crisis, media outlets have laid off staff, forcing journalists into the government's special COVID-19 job retention scheme or cutting their salaries by 10 to 20 percent. *Večer* added a paywall to its website, the last of Slovenia's major newspapers to do so. "We had to cancel many events... media companies have no more space to manoeuvre after years of restructuring... This liquidity shock has struck the heart of editorial offices," says Matija Stepišnik, editor-in-chief of *Večer*.

"Paradoxically, all this happened while the consumption of news was rising, and had been much higher than in months prior to the crisis. However, an increase in clicks or reading time didn't help most Slovenian media," emphasises Milosavljevič.

Thus Slovenia's media urgently needs systemic and sustained support, in the form of subsidies or advertising contracts from state-owned companies. However, given the authorities' relationship with the media, this is a doubtful prospect.

The start of the epidemic in Slovenia coincided with Janez Janša's return to power as prime minister on March 13. Janša and his right-wing Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS)

have never hidden their disdain for the media. Over the course of his political career, Janša has referred to the press as "fake news" and described journalists as "used prostitutes" and "agents of the deep state." As leader of the opposition, Janša advocated ending the licence fee for RTV Slovenija.

In recent years the SDS has built its own media network with the [support of businessmen](#) tied to Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. Investigative journalists have revealed that media companies owned or controlled by SDS have [received almost five million Euros](#) of Hungarian money. These media outlets, which include Nova24 TV, the weekly magazine *Demokracija*, and several online tabloids, follows Orbán's example: their editorial line is strongly anti-migrant and fiercely hostile to "globalists", the philanthropist George Soros, and any critics of Janša or the SDS. Several key figures from this media network are now members of government: Aleš Hojs, former president of the board of Nova24 TV, is now Slovenia's Interior Minister.

In this context, some analysts believe that Janša and the SDS saw the pandemic as

an opportunity to further undermine critical media outlets.

As Milosavljevič puts it, the crisis gave them "a licence to kill."

By far the largest journalistic development during the pandemic was the release on April 23 of an [investigation into a corruption scandal over state procurement](#) of masks and other protective equipment. The investigation revealed that figures from Janša's government had intervened in favour of domestic suppliers while falsely claiming that Slovenian law prevented them from ordering such equipment from abroad.

The investigation was conducted by Tarča, an investigative show broadcast by RTV Slovenija. It is believed to have increased tensions between the state broadcaster and the SDS government, which became even more determined to take control of committees which supervise RTV Slovenija's managerial and editorial decisions. This is part of a wider push by the SDS to appoint loyalists to positions of influence in media outlets, as shown by the April 1 appointment of a new editor at Siol.net, one of the country's three most popular national news portals, owned by the state Telekom company.

These developments have led to increased pressure on the media. On April 7, just three weeks into the pandemic, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs [published an official note on the Council of Europe's website](#) warning about "communist structures" in Slovenia's media sector. On May 11, Janša then published an essay entitled "[The war with the media](#)" on the government's official website.

Janša himself is an avid user of Twitter, where he frequently attacks journalists and [claimed on March 22](#) that they have underestimated the severity of the epidemic, thereby aiding its spread.

While the Tarča investigation demonstrates that journalists have had some successes in holding the government to account, the authorities set up several obstacles to journalists' work. On March 20 they [banned journalists](#) from physically attending press conferences; they were only allowed to ask questions through an intermediary, via national television (RTV Slovenija) broadcasts. On March 17, citing technical problems, the authorities [temporarily ceased inputs of new data](#) into the ERAR online app. The app, which registers transactions of state institutions and state-owned companies, was only restored after public outcry. Finally, [new "anti-corona" laws](#) passed on March 29 temporarily suspended the seven day deadline by which ministries and other state institutions are obliged to provide public information to journalists. This was discovered only after several ministries violated the deadline and filed complaints to the Information Commissioner.

Slovenia's journalists have struggled to receive information from the government.

Media outlets were unable to get detailed information on the dynamic of COVID-19 infections or on measures taken to limit the virus in nursing homes. To this day, the government has not revealed the basis on which it introduced or abandoned protective measures such as limiting public movement between Slovenia's municipalities. This lack of information has made it hard to interrogate or inde-

pendently verify the government's claims to have defeated the virus.

Outlook: Despite the surge in media consumption during the pandemic, Slovenia's media landscape remains brittle, and it cannot be guaranteed that many publications have the resources to weather the coming economic storm. Worryingly, the Ministry of Culture has already withheld the majority of subsidies it had granted to media outlets as part of a "pluralisation" drive announced in 2019, citing spending cuts. "The minister of culture has refused to pass any measures to help Slovenia's journalists, and there is no sign of any financial support or other measures being planned for the future," notes Milosavljević. Such funds are a lifeline for many local media.

By several accounts, state-owned companies are facing increasing pressure not to advertise in national media. Analysts now believe that the pandemic could mark a golden age for Janša's media apparatus. "There are already cases of state advertising funds being channelled to these media outlets at the expense of others," adds Milosavljević.

Slovenia's journalists cannot know what the new normal will bring. Bizarrely, despite the epidemic officially being declared over, pubs, bars and shopping malls are still not permitted to keep or sell newspapers due to alleged risks for public health. "These places are major subscribers of newspapers. This is a clear and symbolic sign of priorities," warns Stepišnik.

Furthermore, there have been indications that Slovenia will pass a new law on media in the autumn. Its content is unknown, but it is reasonable to expect that pressure on the media will intensify. As Stepišnik puts it: "There's no dialogue with the government. We are left alone."

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n-ost

n-Ost is a Berlin-based media NGO and journalists' network. It works to strengthen foreign reporting by facilitating transnational research, educating journalists, and bringing together media workers with diverse perspectives into a conversation about themselves and the world. n-Ost distributes reports, analyses, and crucial context from multiple Eastern European countries to publications, institutions, and private enterprises.

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A LOCKDOWN FOR INDEPENDENT MEDIA?

Effects of the COVID–19 pandemic on the media landscape and press freedom in Central and Southeast Europe



Journalists across Central Eastern Europe (CEE) and South Eastern Europe (SEE) noted a surge of public interest in their work. However, this thirst for new information has not translated into a rise in financial stability for the media providing it. The crisis has demonstrated that existing business models are vulnerable and funding mechanisms woefully inadequate. The advertising market has nearly collapsed, with serious repercussions for all media formats without wealthy benefactors. This potentially makes media outlets more dependent on state advertising contracts, therefore vulnerable to different forms of political pressure. Media funded by wealthy individuals appear in a better position to survive, though such ownership models can have negative consequences for editorial independence.



In several countries, government press conferences were moved online; questions often had to be provided in advance, and some journalists were refused access. Digital press conferences offered officials new ways to avoid scrutiny. Several governments issued decrees which directly or indirectly gave officials full control over public information. Emergency laws put journalists at legal risk when reporting critically. These decrees impacted the right to freedom of information; some doubled the permitted response time to requests. Authorities took the fight against “fake news” into their own hands, empowering themselves to block sites deemed guilty of spreading it, often with little oversight. Restrictions on “scaremongering” or spreading “misleading” information were similarly elastically defined.



Thanks to early lockdowns and border closures, CEE and SEE largely avoided repeating the scenarios seen in wealthier countries such as Britain, France, Germany, and Italy. But the economic consequences of the pandemic will be no less grave in this region and a second wave is also unpredictable. As several elections are scheduled across the region in coming months it is reasonable to expect that the subtle economical and political pressure on the media in the region will intensify.

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