



**MEDIA FREEDOM  
RAPID RESPONSE**

# ***MAPPING MEDIA FREEDOM***

*A FOUR-MONTH SNAPSHOT*



**Monitoring Report**

EFJ – IPI – ECPMF | March 2020 - June 2020

## Content

Introduction.....	3
Country-by-Country Analysis (IPI) .....	14
Bulgaria .....	14
Hungary.....	15
Italy .....	16
Poland.....	17
Slovenia .....	18
Turkey .....	19
Country-by-Country Analysis (EFJ) .....	20
France.....	20
Germany.....	21
Serbia .....	22
Sweden.....	23
United Kingdom.....	24
COVID-19 - Response and Impact (IPI) .....	26
Threats against journalists and media workers at protests and demonstrations (EFJ) .....	30
Conclusion .....	35

## MEDIA FREEDOM RAPID RESPONSE

Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR) tracks, monitors and responds to violations of press and media freedom in EU Member States and Candidate Countries. This project provides legal and practical support, public advocacy and information to protect journalists and media workers. The MFRR is organised by an consortium led by the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF) with ARTICLE 19, the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ), Free Press Unlimited (FPU), the Institute for Applied Informatics at the University of Leipzig (InfAI), International Press Institute (IPI) and CCI/Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa (OBCT). The project is co-funded by the European Commission. [www.mfrr.eu](http://www.mfrr.eu)

## Introduction

The Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR) launched in March 2020 at a moment of unprecedented instability and uncertainty across Europe. The COVID-19 pandemic brought with it a new set of challenges for state and non-state entities to ensure the health, security, rights and economic well being of European populations could be protected. As the pandemic spread across the region, national governments and European institutions moved to respond in a number of predictable and unpredictable ways that continue to highlight the complex interplay of approaches and priorities across the continent. This requirement to react to such a sizable and significant crisis resulted in a plethora of responses, whether through the reallocation of funds, legislation changes, responses to popular movements and even at times, constitutional amendments that reconfigured the relationship between the state and its people. A result of this is that the pandemic, while demonstrating a dangerous and immediate threat to life across Europe, has also reaffirmed the importance of an independent, well-funded and free media to counter disinformation, challenge entrenched power and secrecy and inform the public across Europe. But with this increased need for media freedom has come an increase in the number and severity of threats facing journalists, outlets and media workers across EU Member States and Candidate Countries.

The Media Freedom Rapid Response is a mechanism that tracks, monitors and responds to violations of press and media free-

dom in EU Member States and Candidate Countries. It provides legal and practical support, public advocacy and information to protect journalists and media workers. The MFRR is organised by a consortium led by the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF) including ARTICLE 19, the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ), Free Press Unlimited (FPU), the Institute for Applied Informatics at the University of Leipzig (InfAI), International Press Institute (IPI) and CCI/Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa (OBCT). The project is co-funded by the European Commission.

The project's first four-months of work has seen a wide range of threats against media freedom, including policy-makers and government officials singling out journalists for harassment, the use of vexatious legal action to stifle independent scrutiny, or attacks on media workers by protesters and police officers. The sources of these attacks are as varied as the attacks themselves, with police and state security officials, unknown individuals and protesters, politicians and private companies prominent in an apparent shared goal to undermine a free media and limit the public's right to know. Few countries are spared, of the 33 countries the MFRR covers (including EU Member States, including the United Kingdom, and Candidate Countries), two-thirds have had at least one violation of media freedom uploaded to Mapping Media Freedom from within their borders since the beginning of March 2020.

Mapping Media Freedom is a crowd-sourcing platform that enables anyone to upload details of an attack, threat or media freedom violation in real time to help us visualise and collect information about media freedom across Europe. The European Federation of Journalists (EFJ) and the International Press Institute (IPI), with support from the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF) form the expert network who verifies, analyses and publishes all alerts on the platform. These alerts form the basis of this report, giving a rich qualitative and quantitative data source upon which we can identify and analyse systemic threats to media freedom and trends that need to be addressed, as well as guiding the MFRR's legal, practical and advocacy support for journalists and media workers across the region.

This report compiled by MFRR partners, EFJ and IPI, with support from the ECPMF, analyses and presents a micro- and macro-level diagnosis of the health of the European media landscape over a four-month period from March until the end of June 2020, exploring country-specific threats to media freedom, as well as a region-wide comparative analysis of key trends and themes that require robust and concerted action to stem. In terms of monitoring, to manage workload and benefit from their expertise and network reach, the 33 countries covered by the MFRR are split between IPI and EFJ in the following way:

<i><b>IPI will monitor</b></i>	<i><b>EFJ will monitor</b></i>
Austria	Latvia
Italy	Lithuania
Bulgaria	Estonia
Croatia	Belgium
Cyprus	Luxembourg
Malta	the Netherlands
Czech Republic	Denmark
Poland	Finland
Portugal	France
Slovakia	Germany
Romania	Sweden
Slovenia	United Kingdom
Greece	Ireland
Spain	North Macedonia (CC)
Hungary	Montenegro (CC)
Albania (CC)	Serbia (CC)
Turkey (CC)	

*Note: (CC) refers to Candidate Countries*

*Note: Due to the Transition Period outlined in the withdrawal agreement, for the MFRR, the United Kingdom will be treated as an EU Member State until 31 December 2020*

This allocation will help determine the focus of the country-by-country analysis outlined in this report. However, due to the geographic spread of threats, as well as clusters of threats around specific countries or regions, the country-by-country analysis will highlight a selection of the above countries based on a number of factors including: frequency and severity of threats, threats indicative of a broader trend (further analysed in a later chapter); specific and egregious cases that require analysis, as well as ensuring, where possible, geographic spread across the MFRR region. For a detailed breakdown of every country in the MFRR region, please visit [www.mappingmediafreedom.org](http://www.mappingmediafreedom.org).

This report is structured in four sections. First we will present a visual representation of different datasets from Mapping Media Freedom to present an overall picture of the platform and the broad health of the media environment in EU Member States and Candidate Countries. Following this is a country-by-country analysis divided between IPI and EFJ, which includes specific analysis of a selection of countries within the MFRR region. Following this is a Cross Regional Thematic Comparative Analysis, which interrogates trends that affect media and press freedom across the entire MFRR region, including the COVID-19 pandemic and public protests. This is then followed by a conclusion that brings all analysis together.

# MAPPING MEDIA FREEDOM

## A Four-Month Snapshot

Mapping Media Freedom (MMF) visualises and collates threats to and violations of media and press freedom, while guiding the Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR) to provide advocacy, legal and practical support to at-risk journalists and media workers. This report covers all alerts posted to MMF from 1st March to 30th June 2020 from EU Member States and Candidate Countries. Alerts from 23 countries (two-thirds of the countries within the MFRR region) have been uploaded to MMF, with Turkey (16), Germany (14) and Italy and the UK (both 11 alerts) demonstrating the highest number of threats. These cover a wide range of threats, from physical attacks, legal actions or attempts of censorship.

87

48

19



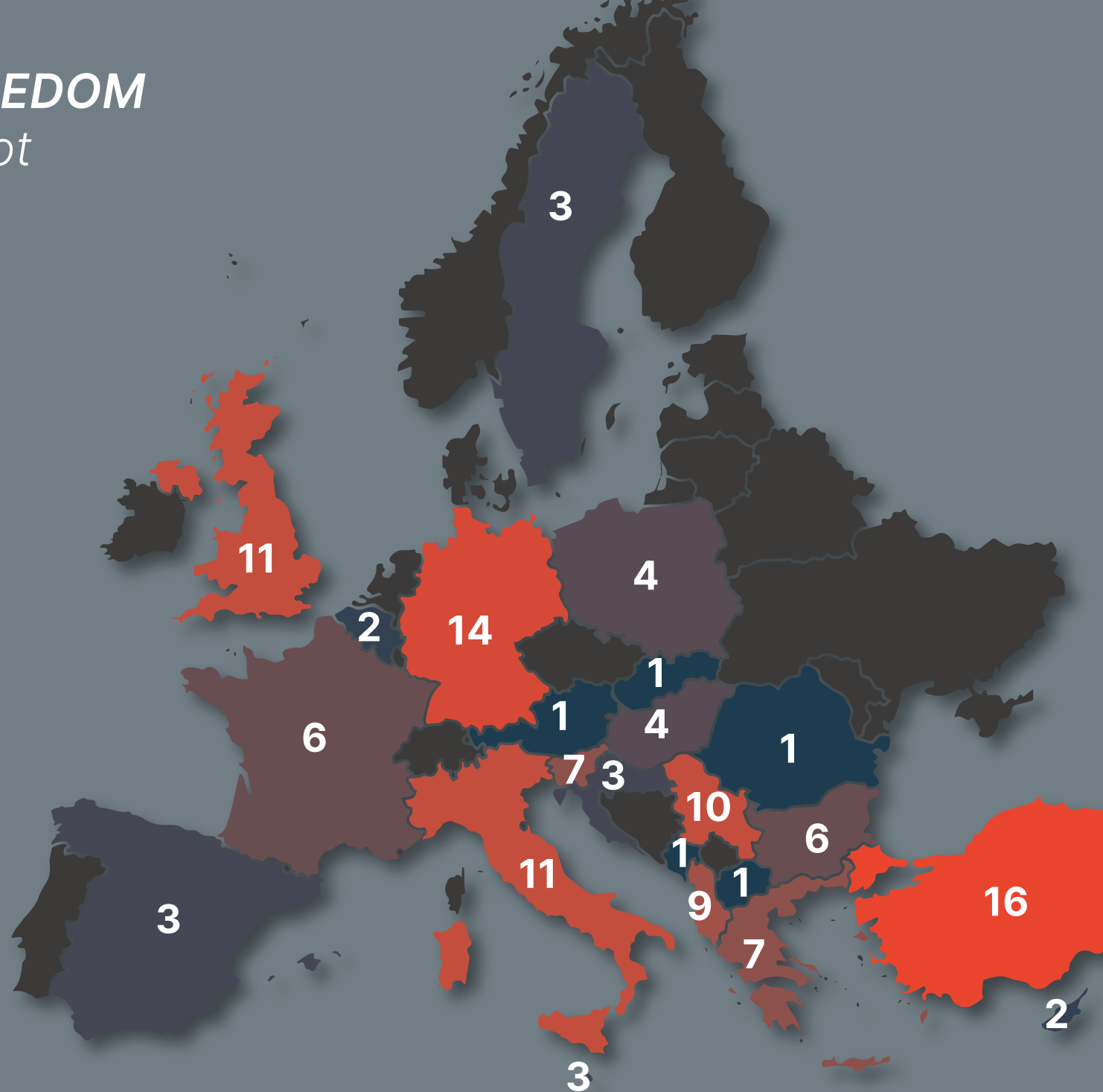
PHYSICAL &  
PSYCHOLOGICAL  
THREAT



LEGAL  
THREAT



CENSORSHIP



\*As one alert can contain a number of incidents or threats of further action, the figures above adds up to more than the total number of alerts

# TYPE OF INCIDENT

March - June 2020

There is no one way journalists and media workers are targeted or attacked across EU Member States or Candidate Countries. There is a range of different types of threats faced by media workers. According to our analysis, the most common type of threat is **Intimidation/Threatening** (59), followed by **Insult/Abuse** (26) and then **Discredit** and **Criminal Charges** (both 17). However, this is only a partial picture. A media professional, as part of one threat, may experience a number of different types of threat at the same time from one or more different actors i.e. Physical assault resulting in injury and Attack/threat to equipment.



\* e.g. blocked websites or no answers to enquiries

\*\*incl. blocked access to events or press conferences

# SOURCE OF INCIDENT

March - June 2020



POLICE /  
STATE SECURITY

27



LEGISLATION

25



JUDICIARY

9



POLITICAL  
PARTY

9



CORPORATION /  
COMPANY

8



PUBLIC  
AUTHORITIES

6



PRIVATE  
INDIVIDUAL(S)

42



CRIMINAL  
ORGANISATION

7



ANOTHER  
MEDIA

4



UNKNOWN  
SOURCE

20

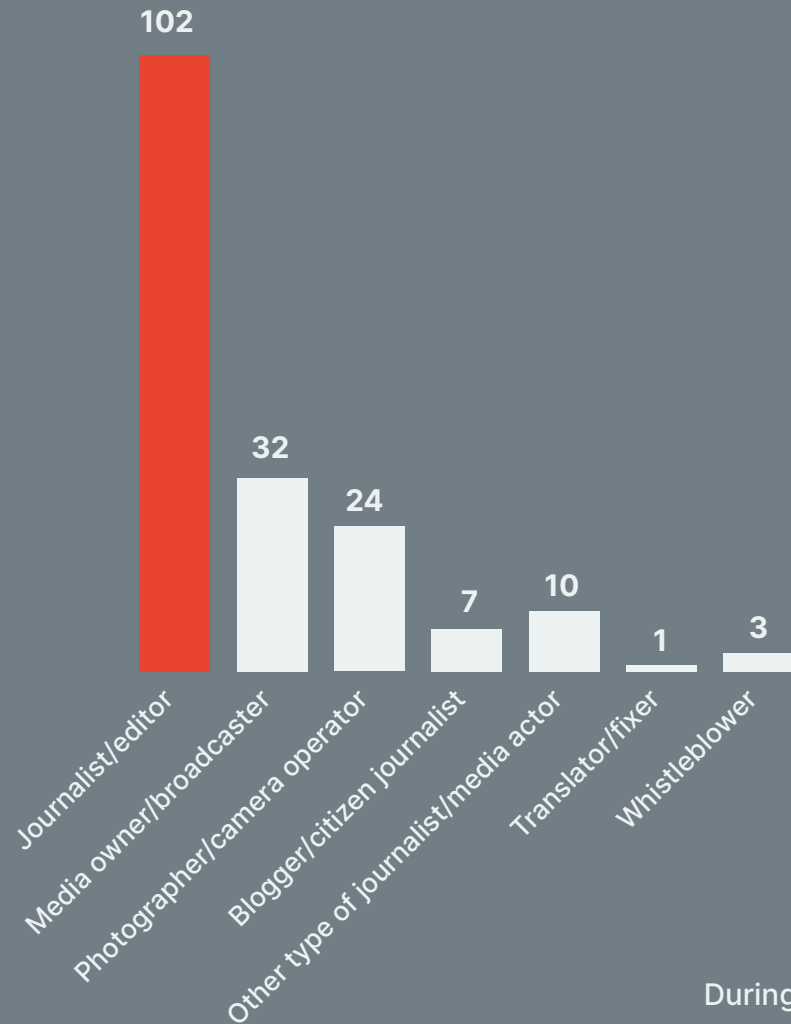


OTHER  
SOURCE

2

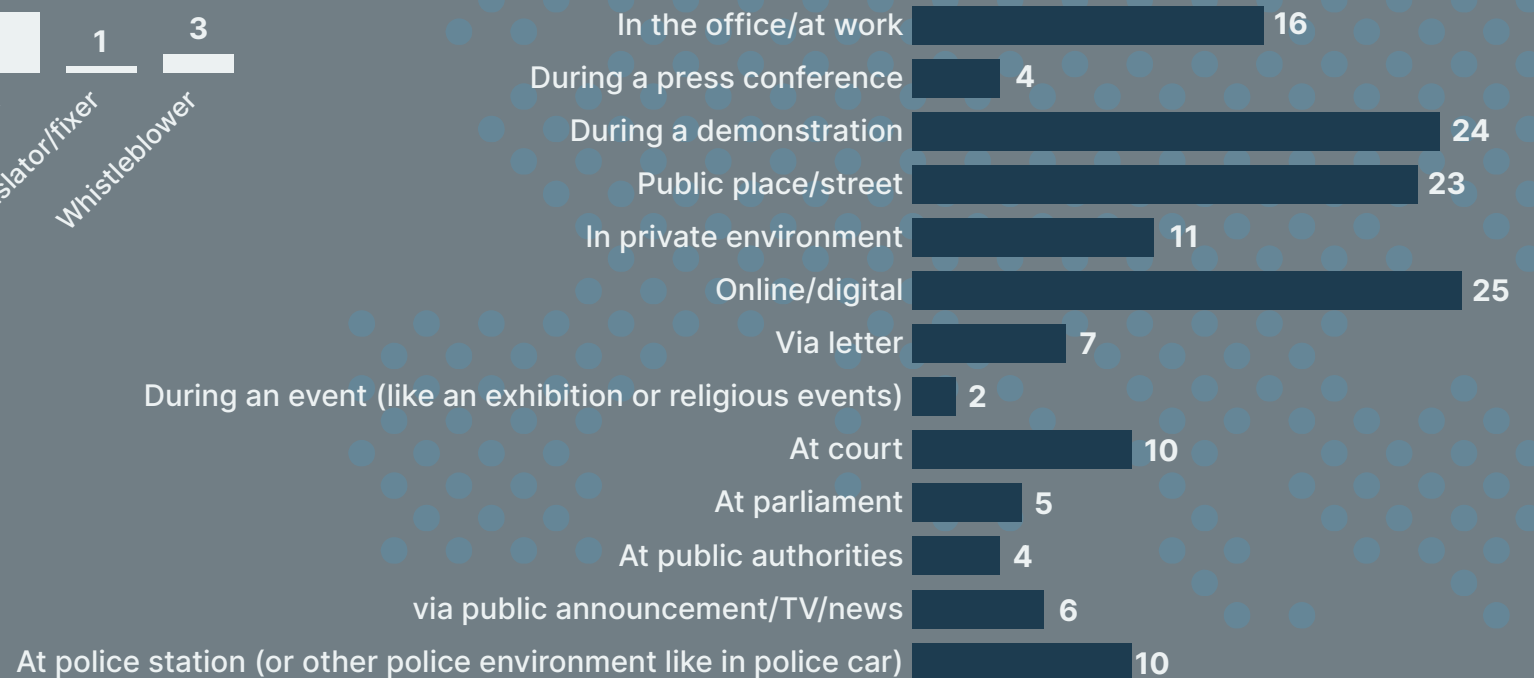
# TYPE OF MEDIA ACTOR

March - June 2020



# CONTEXT OF INCIDENT

March - June 2020





# COUNTRY-BY-COUNTRY ANALYSIS

## (IPI)

### Bulgaria

Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts within reporting period: **6**

Between March and June 2020, MFRR partners monitored several concerning physical attacks and legal threats against journalists in Bulgaria, where the situation for the safety of journalists remains problematic under the government of Prime Minister, Boyko Borisov and his ruling GERB party. Judicial threats and attacks against members of independent media outlets have also continued during this period. In a country where corruption and collusion between the media, politicians and oligarchs is widespread, investigative journalists probing alleged corruption face a particularly challenging climate.

As part of its COVID-19 state of emergency decree in March 2020, the government sought to [amend the penal code](#) and introduce prison sentences for spreading what it deemed “fake news” about the outbreak with up to three years in prison or a fine of up to €5,000. That part of the emergency bill was quickly vetoed by the President, Rumens Radev. However, the IMRO, a Bulgarian nationalist party, submitted another bill to parliament on 19 March which, if passed, would hand authorities greater powers to suspend websites for disseminating “internet misinformation.”

Recent months have seen several incidents of intimidation or violent attacks against Bulgarian

journalists. On 17 March, Bulgarian newspaper editor, Slavi Angelov was [left unconscious](#) in the street after being attacked by masked men armed with metal pipes outside his home in the capital city, Sofia. The country’s Interior Ministry confirmed the beating was “related to his work”. Both [IPI](#) and [EFJ](#) produced statements calling on authorities in the Bulgarian capital, Sofia to ensure a quick and transparent investigation was conducted to identify those responsible. On 23 April, three people were arrested and charged with the attack.

On 18 June, investigative journalist, [Nikolay Staykov](#) began receiving threatening phone calls as part of what he called a “coordinated” campaign of harassment he believes was linked to an ongoing investigative documentary about alleged state corruption. On 20 May, another investigative journalist, [Dimitar Petzov](#), was arrested on charges of illegal drug possession. Petzov has questioned the legitimacy of his arrest and accused the local authorities of framing him. Meanwhile, [Ivo Prokopiev](#), one of Bulgaria’s biggest newspaper publishers and owner of the Economedia group, faced [criminal charges in a fraud case](#) which press and media freedom organisations warned may have been a politically motivated attempt to silence his outlet’s critical reporting on the government. On 28 June, Prokopiev was eventually acquitted.

### Hungary

Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts within reporting period: **4**

Of all countries in Europe, the COVID-19 crisis had arguably the biggest effect on media freedom in Hungary. Existing challenges were [exacerbated](#) and new issues emerged as the government of Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán pursued tighter information control and intensified its now decade-long campaign to discredit and undermine critical journalism. In the background, meanwhile, [new criminal legislation](#) against the spreading of “false” or “distorted” information, passed during the state of emergency, caused uncertainty and self-censorship among media outlets and actors. To make matters worse, independent media in Hungary already face a precarious financial situation, a result not only of the lockdown but also of years of state-led market manipulation that has starved critical media of advertising revenue while propping up a pro-government media empire.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also given cover for attacks against journalists, media workers and press cartoonists. The Hungarian far-right political party, Our Home Movement and the ruling Christian Democratic People’s Party (KDNP) also announced that they would sue cartoonist [Gábor Pápai](#) for alleged blasphemy due to a cartoon representing the Chief Medical Officer at the National Centre for Public Health and member of the Government’s “Coronavirus Task Force”, Cecília Müller facing Jesus Christ as he is crucified on the cross saying “...His underlying condition caused dependence.”

The Hungarian response to the pandemic and its impact on media freedom did not stop at the country’s national borders. During the crisis, media outlets across Europe and the US were [approached](#) by Hungarian ambassadors based in their countries and other state officials calling on them to apologise for their critical coverage of the country’s response to COVID-19.

Meanwhile, in another blow to media pluralism in Hungary, on 25 June the country’s Constitutional Court [ruled](#) that a government decree which prevented the Competition Authority from examining the legality of the merger of over 470 media outlets that created the pro-government media conglomerate, KESMA was legal.

During this time, MFRR partners produced several individual advocacy responses to different threats to the media in Hungary. IPI raised [repeated concerns](#) about the draft “fake news” laws, hosted two separate [webinars](#) with Hungarian journalists and media experts, and produced an [in-depth report](#) about the effect of the pandemic on independent media. EFJ meanwhile also hosted a [webinar](#) on the topics and issued several statements on [emergency powers](#), new [editorial rules](#), and [growing pressure](#) on the independent Index.hu website. As part of the MFRR, ECPMF [commissioned and published](#) an expert legal opinion, available in English and [Hungarian](#), about the government’s legal response to the pandemic and how it threatens the already-fragile state of media freedom in Hungary.



## Italy

Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts within reporting period: **11**

In the reporting period, an alarming number of physical attacks and threats of violence were documented in Italy. Attacks and death threats from organised crime and mafia groups remained common. Far right protests led to violence against journalists and media workers covering demonstrations, while high tensions during the COVID-19 pandemic led to isolated attacks against journalists by members of the public. In the background meanwhile, Italy's outdated criminal defamation laws continued to pose a serious pitfall for media outlets and journalists alike.

Many of the cases the MFRR documented in Italy during this period were directly connected to journalists' reporting on the COVID-19 situation. On 23 March, a journalist and a camera operator working for the Livorno edition of *Il Tirreno* newspaper were insulted and [threatened](#) while reporting on life under COVID-19 measures. Days later, a photojournalist working for *La Stampa* was harassed and had his SD card [stolen](#) while documenting a COVID-19 protest in Turin. *La Repubblica* journalist Salvo Palazzolo faced [persistent threats](#) after writing an article about the mafia using the COVID-19 crisis to increase its influence in certain districts of Palermo. In other instances, journalists were [threatened and physically attacked](#) by local business owners, [threatened](#) by mafia groups in Naples, or caught up in protests and [attacked](#) by members of extreme far right groups. In April, the MFRR also documented two separate [arson attacks](#) carried out by suspected

mafia groups on the property of journalists in southern regions. In March, Carlo Verdelli, chief editor of one of Italy's most respected newspapers, *La Repubblica*, was placed under [police protection](#) after receiving repeated threats from neo-Nazi groups. On other occasions, the threats came from foreign government officials. In April, the spokesman of Russia's Defence Ministry sparked a press freedom row after he publicly criticized Italian newspaper, *La Stampa* and issued a [veiled threat](#) against its reporter over an article about COVID-19 aid. In June, Neville Gafà, a former director in the office of the Maltese Prime Minister, issued a [threat](#) against well-known Italian journalist Nello Scavo on social media, tweeting: "stop your dirty business. If not, we will be stopping you."

To address these threats, members of the MFRR organised a virtual fact-finding mission to speak with Italian journalists and media associations. From this meeting, the MFRR decided to [urge](#) the country's Constitutional Court to abolish prison sentences as one crucial step towards reforming Italy's defamation laws, as well as call for an overhaul of the country's civil defamation laws to protect journalists from abusive litigation and [SLAPPs](#). In a [major step forward for press and media freedom](#), the Court ruled in favour of ultimately scrapping prison sentences for criminal defamation, giving the Parliament until June 2021 to pass necessary reforms. If they miss this deadline the court will themselves rule to abolish prison sentences for criminal defamation.

## Poland

Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts within reporting period: **4**

The press and media freedom situation in Poland remains concerning. With COVID-19 and a postponed presidential election dominating headlines, domestic and foreign media were publicly attacked by members of the administration, while the one-sided, pro-government reporting of the public broadcaster TVP underscored yet again the [loss of its independence](#). In the background, leading critical outlets faced sustained legal harassment by the ruling party and its affiliates, while the issue of Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPP) remains a constant threat.

At the end of June, the MFRR [reported](#) that Poland's second-biggest daily newspaper, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, had received over [55 legal threats](#) as a result of its work since 2015. These cases include civil defamation actions and alleged infringement of personal interests by several actors both within and linked to the government. A number of these actions target the newspaper itself, the paper's publisher, the editor-in-chief of *wyborcza.pl*, and a number of individual journalists. At the height of the COVID-19 lockdown, two media workers for the newspaper also faced action from police. On 8 May, Paweł Rutkiewicz, a *Gazeta Wyborcza* reporter in Warsaw, was [arrested](#) by police for allegedly breaking social distancing rules while covering an anti-lockdown demonstration in the city. Separately, a petition

for punishment of photojournalist [Wojciech Jakub Atys](#) was submitted to a court by the Warsaw Żoliborz Police Station for allegedly breaking lockdown measures. In March, *Gazeta Wyborcza* journalist [Katarzyna Włodkowska](#) was also warned that articles she published about the investigation of the 2019 murder of Paweł Adamowicz, the mayor of Gdańsk, were not legal. In a separate legal case, on 14 April journalists Wojciech Cieśla and Julia Dauksza were [sued](#) by Polish clothing company LPP over an article they published online in *Newsweek Poland* about the company's policies on the distribution of protective COVID-19 masks. The company also sued *Newsweek* editor Aleksandra Karasińska and the magazine's publisher, Ringier Axel Springer Polska.

Meanwhile, comments made by Jarosław Kaczyński, leader of the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party, following July's presidential election, suggest that PiS may again seek a so-called "repolonisation" of the Polish media landscape, after foreign-owned media in Poland published articles critical of PiS-backed candidate, Andrzej Duda. The comments raise fears that Poland may seek to follow in Hungary's footsteps, after Viktor Orbán's regime successfully drove out foreign media owners in the country, replacing them with pro-government cronies before amassing them into the KESMA government-controlled conglomerate.

## Slovenia

Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts within reporting period: **7**

During the last four months, MFRR partners observed a clear deterioration in press and media freedom under the new coalition government led by the Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) under Prime Minister, Janez Janša. The central element here has been a concerted attempt by members of the new administration, which entered office in March 2020, to undermine and discredit the work of the public broadcaster, Radiotelevizija Slovenija (RTVS).

Soon after entering office, the Prime Minister took to social media to [publicly accuse](#) the public broadcaster of spreading lies about the government and issued a veiled threat over its funding. Weeks later, the government's official website published a statement signed by the Prime Minister entitled "[war with the media](#)", calling the press no longer a force for good. This confrontation with the public service media continued on 8 June, when the prime minister [accused the broadcaster](#), again on social media of trying to "overthrow" his government. Interior Minister Aleš Hojs [called](#) for journalists and media professionals who reported from the scene of anti-lockdown protests to face criminal prosecution. Investigative journalist, Blaž Žgaga was also [targeted with hate speech](#) and death threats after raising a freedom of information request about the emergency powers taken by the government.

These vocal attacks have also been followed by physical threats against journalists. On 1 June, Eugenija Carl, an RTVS journalist, received an envelope addressed

to her containing a [threatening handwritten note](#). On 31 March, a TV crew from RTVS was [verbally abused](#) and threatened by an unidentified individual as they were reporting on the COVID-19 lockdown. In addition to public comments, Janša's SDS party has also moved to exert greater influence over RTVS's executive bodies. In late June, the Slovenian Ministry of Culture prepared to publish [proposed changes](#) to the RTVS Act, the Audiovisual Media Services Act, and the Slovenian Press Agency Act. If approved, the amendments would financially weaken the public broadcaster and allow far greater government control over the management of public service media.

Throughout this period, MFRR partners have responded with numerous individual and joint statements. As part of the MFRR, IPI [raised concerns](#) about the growing hostility that has led to attacks on journalists in Slovenia and later [called on the government](#) and Janša to lead the way in reducing insults and threats. EFJ also [condemned](#) the "war with the media" article on the government website. The MFRR partners also signed a [joint letter](#) to European leaders raising concerns about the death threats received by respected investigative journalist, Blaž Žgaga.

## Turkey

Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts within reporting period: **16**

Between March and the end of June 2020, Turkey registered the highest number of alerts on Mapping Media Freedom. Nearly 100 journalists remain behind bars as part of a widespread repression of the media that began following the 2016 attempted coup and this has only widened since. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the government of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan used the health crisis to further crack down on dissent and critical voices. Meanwhile, journalists in Turkey continued to be targeted and detained for their reporting and continue to face violations of their rights in court.

On 25 March, journalist Tugay Can of local news outlet İz Gazete was [accused](#) of "creating fear and panic amongst the public" over an article reporting health workers' COVID-19 positive tests in two districts in İzmir. Two other journalists, Mustafa Ahmet Oktay and Eren Sarıkaya from Bartın-based Halk Newspaper and Pusula Newspaper, were [taken into custody](#) over similar reports published about the spread of the virus. Mezopotamya News Agency (MA) correspondent Ahmet Kanbal was also [accused](#) of "inciting hatred and enmity" in a news report about COVID-19 safety measures in a hospital. Other journalists were [called to testify](#) over social media posts reporting on the spread of the virus. Kurdish journalist Nurcan Baysal was also summoned to the police station over articles in which she questioned the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic in cities in the Kurdish-majority southeast.

During this time, Turkish authorities continued to use media regulators to shut down outlets broadcasting critical or sensitive topics. In April, the Radio and Television High Council (RTÜK) issued [three different broadcast bans](#) against Fox TV over an anchor's critical comments on the state's COVID-19 policies. The same month, RTÜK also [banned and blocked](#) broadcasting within Turkey of Diyalog TV, a channel established and based in Northern Cyprus. Turkish newspaper Evrensel was later given a 45-day [advertising ban](#) by the Turkish Public Advertising Agency (BİK) over a column it published – a record length for a public ad ban on a newspaper so far in Turkey.

The same month, Odatv Ankara bureau news editor, Müyesser Yıldız and Ankara correspondent of TE11, İsmail Dükel were taken into police custody during early morning raids on their homes on [allegations](#) of "military espionage". Journalist Metin Uca was also [sentenced](#) to 14 months and 17 days in prison for "insulting a public officer on duty" in a tweet he posted about an election result forecast. Other journalists were threatened with arrest and [accused](#) by top government officials of having "terrorist sympathies" and [arrested](#) for "inciting hatred" for mocking President Erdoğan on social media. On 8 March, journalist Zeynep Yağmur Kaya was [detained](#) while she tried to document a crackdown by police on a banned feminist march in Istanbul. A day later, Turkey formally [requested the extradition](#) of Turkish journalist Levent Kenez from Sweden (see later analysis of Sweden).

Despite calls from IPI and other press and media freedom groups, Turkey refused to release the nearly 100 journalists it continues to hold in prison despite the health risk posed by COVID-19 in spaces like jails. Worse still, the Turkish Government

announced the release on parole of up to 100,000 prisoners, but excluded political prisoners and journalists.

## COUNTRY-BY-COUNTRY ANALYSIS (EFJ)

### France

Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts within reporting period: **6**

A significant number of the threats for journalists and media workers in France follow a number of Europe-wide trends, such as the expansion of the use of Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) to restrict media freedom, as seen with the threats of legal action brought against journalist, [Inès Léraud by the agro-giant, the Chéritel group](#), as well as threats emerging from protests or demonstrations. In terms of covering protests, as has been seen in other countries in the region (see thematic analysis below), the source of threats is split between unknown individuals participating in the protests and different state bodies, including, in the case of France, police officers and the legislature.

On 17 May, while covering a demonstration organised by La Ligue du Midi, a right-wing extremist group in Montpellier, freelance journalist [Ysis Pecq working for Agence France Presse \(AFP\)](#) was first obstructed from doing her job before having her phone

stolen. When her phone was returned, all of her photos and videos of the protests had been deleted.

Threats of this manner increased when on 15 June, three journalists working for [France 3 Bourgogne on the outskirts of Dijon](#) were attacked by a group of fifteen individuals after retreating to their car when threatened by men on a scooter holding what looked “like a kalashnikov”. The group surrounded the journalists’ car and proceeded to attack it with baseball bats and bottles leaving one of the journalists injured from broken glass.

Threats at protests do not come from protestors alone. Covering a healthcare workers’ protest in Paris for [Line Presse, Stéphanie Roy](#) required hospitalisation for an injury sustained when a grenade was fired into her legs by police officers. The ability to identify or differentiate journalists from protestors is a recurring threat in a number of alerts from France. [Journalist Alexandre Reza Kokabi was arrested with 28 Extinction](#)

[Rebellion activists](#) for “obstructing air traffic” while he covered the protest at Orly Airport for Reporterre. After being questioned twice by the Orly and Pontoise police, he was finally released 10 hours later but he remains under suspicion. When reporting on protests cannot be restricted as directly as an arrest, the legislative have, through a proposed bill, attempted to establish a requirement for all media outlets and professionals to make “law enforcement agency personnel unidentifiable when broadcasting

or publishing images in the media.” As debate about the accountability of police officers and security services spread across the globe, sparked by the murder of George Floyd by police officers in the US, this piece of legislation would instead frustrate calls for greater transparency and accountability, while severely hindering the ability of journalists and media workers to scrutinise the behaviour of police officers, gendarmes, soldiers or customs officials.

### Germany

Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts within reporting period: **14**

In the reporting period which runs from March to the end of June 2020, Germany is the EU Member State with the highest number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts. While this may be due to the strength of the MFRR’s networks in this country this clearly represents a deterioration of press and media freedom that requires further monitoring and analysis. Since the start of 2020, Germany has been the venue of a number of public protest movements, covering many different political ideologies or focal issues, including those organised by far-right and extremist organisations. Out of the 14 alerts, seven of them took place during protests, eight refer to physical or verbal threats, and four to legal threats and harassment. Right-wing extremists are the source of the threats in four cases since the start of March.

What is most evident from the alerts uploaded on the Mapping Media Freedom platform is the hostility expressed towards journalists and media workers which reveals a low re-

gard for the profession and an assumption towards political biases. In the space of eight days, between 1 May and 9 May 2020, four separate attacks on journalists and media workers in Berlin and Dortmund were recorded. This included two attacks at a May Day protest in Berlin, where a camera crew and bodyguard of the [ZDF satirical news show, “heute show”](#) were attacked, which resulted in four individuals requiring hospitalisation, as well as another case where an employee of a television crew was allegedly punched by a police officer. On 6 and 9 May at two anti-lockdown protests in Berlin and Dortmund, an [ARD camera team](#) was attacked in front of the Reichstag building and a journalist working for [WDR](#) was attacked by right-wing protesters in Dortmund. Attacks against journalists and media workers continued throughout the monitoring period, including defamatory insults being hurled at [MDR journalists in Leipzig](#) and the assault of two [Welt journalists in Göttingen](#) who were preparing for a live broadcast.

Further to the threats connected to protests, there emerged a continued threat of far right extremism targeting or intimidating journalists and media workers in Germany. Reported to the public on 5 May, nine editorial offices of German media outlets were among the recipients of [death threats sent by a right-wing extremist group](#), who signed the letters with the pseudonym, “musicians of Staatsstreicherchester”, alongside ‘sieg heil’ and ‘heil Hitler’ and a threat that “there is enough ammunition to liquidate each of them”. In June, a [ZDF TV crew were attacked](#) while reporting on the trial of a right-wing extremist, Sven Liebich. Around 15 people verbally and physically attacked the award-winning reporter, Arndt Ginzel and his camera operator, while also attempting

to damage their equipment and prevent their coverage of the high-profile court case in Berlin.

The tension between media professionals and the police was particularly high in June when the Tageszeitung published an opinion piece entitled “Abolition of the police - All cops are incapable of working”. Referring to police officers, the police future and structural racism, the satirical piece was targeted by a threat of legal action by [Interior Minister Horst Seehofer](#). While he ultimately backtracked, the police trade union, GdP has filed a complaint both against [the newspaper](#) and [the journalist](#). This affair is listed in three alerts on the platform.

## Serbia

Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts within reporting period: **10**

The press and media freedom situation in Serbia is of great concern to the MFRR. With COVID-19, the free flow of information was seriously impacted with four alerts recording government [attempts](#) or actual restrictions on the publication of information related to the pandemic. The most visible example was the new format of [press conferences](#) when the virus was at its peak. Under the pretext of ensuring the safety of reporters, journalists were strictly limited to questions sent in writing ahead of the daily briefing, with no interaction or possibility to ask follow-up questions. In addition, a journalist was [detained](#) and deprived of her mobile phone and laptop for a number of hours after revealing chaotic conditions and mismanagement of

the situation in a local hospital in Novi Sad.

The government control over information created an environment where journalists challenging the official narrative on the virus were seen as “[acting against the interests of the State](#)” or as “[COVID-19 friends](#)”. No less than eight alerts document harassment and psychological abuse such as smear campaigns and online bullying against journalists critical in their reports of the government’s handling of the crisis. Further to this, three journalists received death threats. It is important to note that alongside unknown citizens, media outlets close to the government participated in these shameful campaigns.

Tension grew further as the month of June was marked by the parliamentary elections that were initially planned in April. MFRR partners were concerned in particular about the safety of a number of investigative journalists. The Crime and Corruption Reporting Network (KRIK) was targeted twice

## Sweden

Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts within reporting period: **3**

While the number of threats to emanate from Sweden during the reporting period is lower than other countries highlighted in this report, the nature and target of these threats require specific attention. All three alerts relate to journalists, media workers and press cartoonists who live and work in Sweden, but originate from another country and for whom threats made against them also traverse national borders, both within and without Europe. On 23 April, the body of Sweden-based Pakistani journalist, [Sajid Hussain Baloch](#) was discovered in the Fyris River, outside Uppsala after being reported missing the month before. A spokesperson for the police, Jonas Eronen told the media: “The autopsy has dispelled some of the suspicion that he was the victim of a crime,” While the police closed the preliminary investigation on 15 July, there remains a series of unanswered questions as to whether this was connected to his work.

On 20 April, a cartoonist of Palestinian origin, [Mahmoud Abbas](#), who works for Al Jazeera and is based in Sweden, published a cartoon about the collapse of international oil prices during the COVID-19 pandemic. The following day he received a torrent of

for investigations about [criminal groups’ connection](#) to the police and politicians in the Balkans, as well as friends of the [Prime Minister’s son](#). One case of physical violence against a journalist on assignment was reported on election night on [21 June](#).

online abuse via social media platforms, including death threats against himself and his family, insults and hate speech. Some users referred to him as a “terrorist”, while personal information about his family and his location in Sweden was also shared, with many pseudonymous accounts calling on Swedish authorities to revoke his right to live and work in Sweden.

Turkish journalists based outside Turkey have not been spared from the country’s clamp down on media freedom, with the Turkish Government using extradition requests to target a number of journalists across Europe. On 9 March 2020, Turkey formally requested the extradition of Turkish journalist, [Levent Kenez](#) from Sweden, where he is living in exile. The requests stated that Kenez singled out judge, Kemal Selçuk Yalçın and prosecutor, Can Tuncay as targets for terrorist groups in his reporting for Turkish-language news website, TR724 about a court’s decision to hand down aggravated life sentences to six journalists and media workers on charges of attempting “to destroy the constitutional order.” Sweden has not confirmed whether it will approve or deny this request.



The nature of each of these threats highlight the precariousness of those working in exile or as refugees, the specific threats that are present when they continue their work from another country, as well as the requirement

## United Kingdom

Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts within reporting period: **11**

The United Kingdom remains a source of great concern for the safety of journalists and in particular of women journalists. Four cases uploaded to the Mapping Media Freedom platform refer to threats against female journalists who have been subjected to racist, misogynistic and sexualised comments in relation to their work. Two journalists experienced substantiated threats to their safety and that of their children, including death threats and threats of sexual violence. In the case of [The Mail journalist, Amy Fenton](#), the severity and scale of the threats required police protection, as well as a temporary relocation, which has led, at the time of writing, to Amy Fenton still living outside her county with her young child.

One year after the murder of Lyra McKee, Northern Ireland was back in the MFRR's focus as it was clear that journalists continue to run the risk of attacks from organised crime gangs and paramilitary organisations. Sunday World journalist, [Patricia Delvin](#) and her family have also been threatened with abuse that was "sectarian and misogynistic in nature", which included threats of sexual violence against her infant son. This follows threats made by an individual who signed off a threat with the name of neo-nazi terrorist organ-

of host countries to both offer protection that best suits the journalist's need and be able to resist external or diplomatic pressure to protect media freedom.

ization, 'Combat 18'. A further alert on the Mapping Media Freedom platform in May reported credible threats made against an undisclosed number of journalists working for Sunday World and Sunday life newspapers who were informed by the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) that the [South Antrim Ulster Defence Association \(UDA\)](#), a loyalist paramilitary organisation involved in serious crime, were planning to target them with physical attacks and a car bomb. The MFRR reacted with a joint [statement](#) calling on the PSNI to fully investigate the threats and the Governments in Stormont and Westminster to prioritise the protection of journalists.

The United Kingdom was not spared by the COVID-19 pandemic and its negative impact on the way journalists accessed information and reported on the ground. Four alerts refer to threats that occurred in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak, from reporters being [banned from attending](#) official daily COVID-19 briefing due to their critical reporting on the Government's response to the pandemic, to the extension of the time limit within which public bodies in Scotland are required to reply to [Freedom of Information requests](#). Two cases of physical attacks against

journalists on assignment were recorded in [Edinburgh](#) and London.

Like Germany, the United Kingdom has been the venue of a number of public protest movements notably in the context of COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter demonstrations, including counter protests organised by right wing groups. Two [Australian journalists](#) were attacked by an individual yelling 'Allahu Akhbar, who grabbed Nine News Europe correspondent, Sophie Walsh and made stabbing motions during a Black Lives Matter (BLM) protest in London on 3 June. However, the number of threats to journalists from right-wing 'counter' protesters dwarfed those from BLM protesters. On 13 June, a number of journalists were attacked or threatened at a [far-right protest outside the Houses of Parliament](#), where an Italian journalist and photographer, Corrado Amitrano had his nose broken, requiring hospital treatment, and was verbally attacked as police brought him to safety. Another photographer was hit as protestors hurled barricades at the police, and three reporters had their mobile phones knocked out of their hand whilst they were filming. The following day in Leeds, a reporter from [Yorkshire Live](#) was threatened and doused in beer by a group of counter-demonstrators opposing a Black Lives Matter protest.

# CROSS-REGIONAL THEMATIC COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

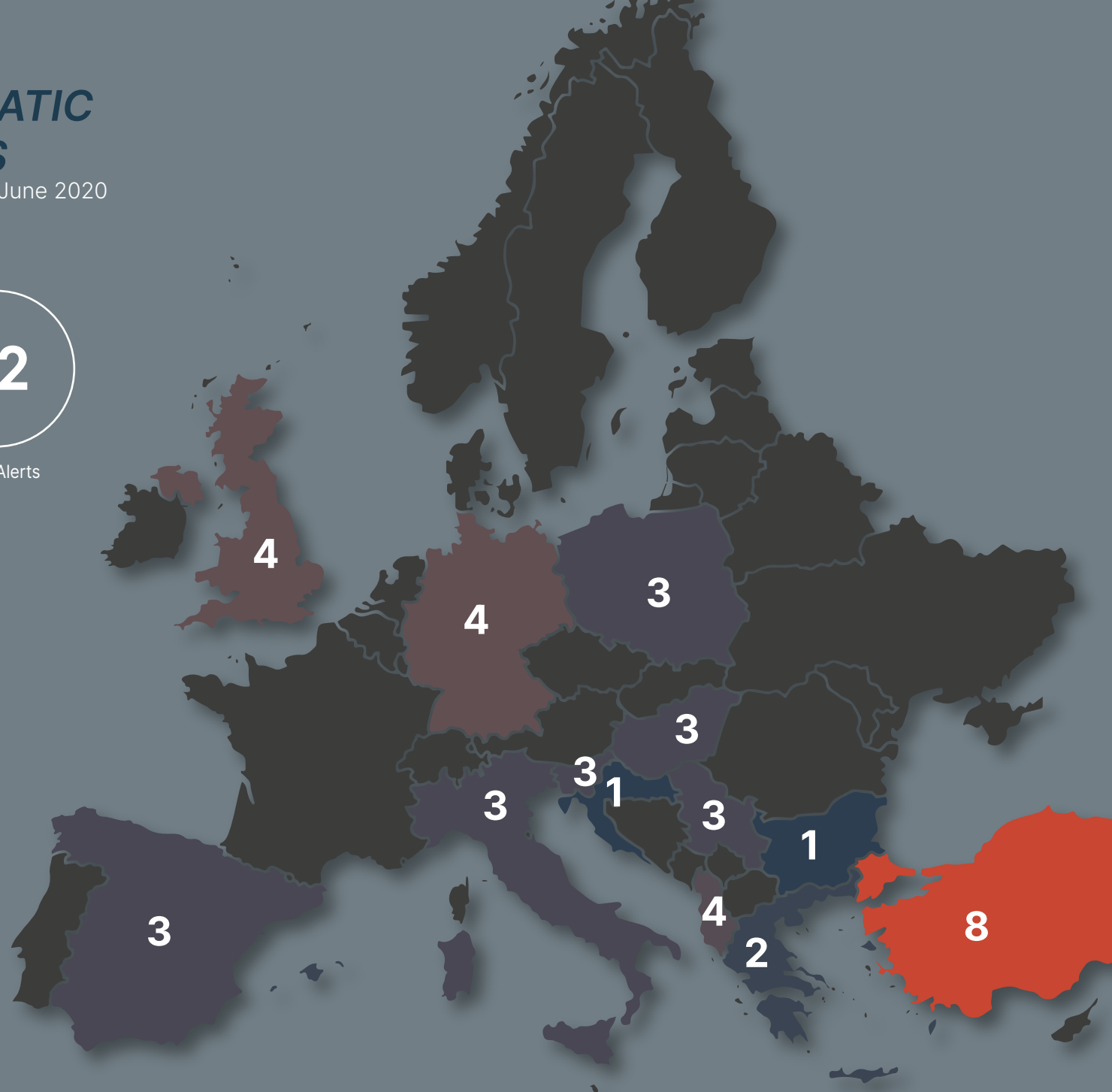
March - June 2020

## COVID-19 - Response and Impact (IPI)

Few global events in the last few decades have had such an immediate and significant effect on press and media freedom as the COVID-19 pandemic. As the health crisis worsened, borders shut and states of emergency were implemented, several EU Member States and Candidate Countries moved quickly to control the media narrative, intensifying existing pressures in problematic countries while creating myriad novel challenges in others. In total, aided by [IPI's global COVID-19 press freedom tracker](#), MFRR partners documented press freedom violations linked to the coronavirus in 13 of the EU's 34 different Member States and Candidate Countries. These included new laws on "fake news", restrictions on access to information and physical attacks on journalists seeking to cover various aspects of the pandemic, including demonstrations. Meanwhile, government efforts to combat the spread of the pandemic, such as increased surveillance, pose a potentially serious threat to the ability of journalists to protect their sources and conduct their work free from the state's roving eye.

42

MMF Alerts



While in some cases government actions restricting the work of the press and the media may have reflected a misguided attempt to steer the flow of information for public health reasons, other states actively sought to take advantage of the health emergency to push through emergency legislation seriously eroding press and media freedom. Both of these developments stand in diametric opposition to the media's crucial role in delivering valuable health information, debating the strategies to combat the health crisis, and managing fundamental societal shifts brought on by the pandemic, including the most significant (even if in many cases temporary) rollback of fundamental rights in generations.

By chance, the first few months of the MFRR overlapped almost exactly with the spread of COVID-19 and the fundamental changes to politics and society that accompanied it. This meant that almost from day one of the project, the [MFRR reacted immediately to monitor the quickly changing situation within EU Member States and Candidate Countries](#), many of which were among the hardest hit in the world by the virus. As well as reacting swiftly to individual threats and violations, this meant simultaneously trying to analyse the larger trends and shifts in politics and policy in individual states, regions and the bloc as a whole.

The most serious threats were observed in states with existing authoritarian tendencies such as Hungary, where the pandemic has been exploited to grab more powers and tighten control over information. Orbán's Fidesz party, [passed](#) a new law criminalising the spreading of "false" or "distorted" infor-

mation which undermines the authorities' fight against COVID-19 with fines and up to five years in prison. The move followed renewed rhetoric by Fidesz and its allies smearing media articles critically examining the government's preparedness and actions during the crisis as "fake news". The Hungarian authorities also sought to control the narrative by blocking independent journalists' access to official information, as well as to healthcare workers.

While this case of government overreach was by far the most controversial, other EU Member States with poor records on media freedom, such as [Bulgaria](#) and [Romania](#), passed a number of emergency decrees that affected freedom of expression, sparking warnings from MFRR partners. Elsewhere, Candidate Countries such as [Serbia](#) moved to control reporting and impose restrictions on journalists' access to information, including by seeking to prevent healthcare workers from speaking to journalists investigating the country's preparedness to combat the pandemic. Meanwhile, IPI also [documented](#) at least eight different EU Member States and Candidate Countries which moved to suspend or extend the deadlines for authorities to respond to freedom of information (FOI) requests, including Spain, Scotland and Italy. In other cases, governments moved reflexively to do away with press conferences or restrict them to certain media outlets or publications. Many backtracked after extensive criticism.

During this period of intense activity and co-operation, MFRR partners produced an array of new [advocacy tools](#), formed new working groups, published dozens of indi-

vidual and joint reactions and statements, commissioned [legal opinions](#), organised [online events](#), webinars and high level meetings, and coordinated with journalists and associations in almost every EU Member State and Candidate Country in order to monitor, evaluate, and push back against efforts to restrict media coverage around the pandemic. This discussion and dialogue and the geographic scope of knowledge between MFRR members allowed monitoring organisations to identify and publish dozens of alerts to the [Mapping Media Freedom](#) platform, creating an important database of threats, while establishing a clearer picture of the emerging health crisis and efforts by states to control the media narrative. This data also helped inform the creation of several policy documents and were used as the foundation of [numerous MFRR briefings](#) to the both the European Commission and European Parliament Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE). These documents also provided a synthesis of continent-wide changes and helped policymakers understand developing issues and flash points. For the most egregious of these threats to press freedom, such as those observed in Hungary, MFRR partners were on the front line of international advocacy efforts from the outset and organised important events to bring the issue to the attention of the international media and wider world. This work in first underlining the [values and principles](#) of media freedom that states should abide by during the pandemic, and then the combined pressure against those whose policies or actions undermined them, had a significant impact in informing EU policymakers, ensuring measures affecting the

press were proportionate, and ensuring national governments abided by international democratic standards.



# CROSS-REGIONAL THEMATIC COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

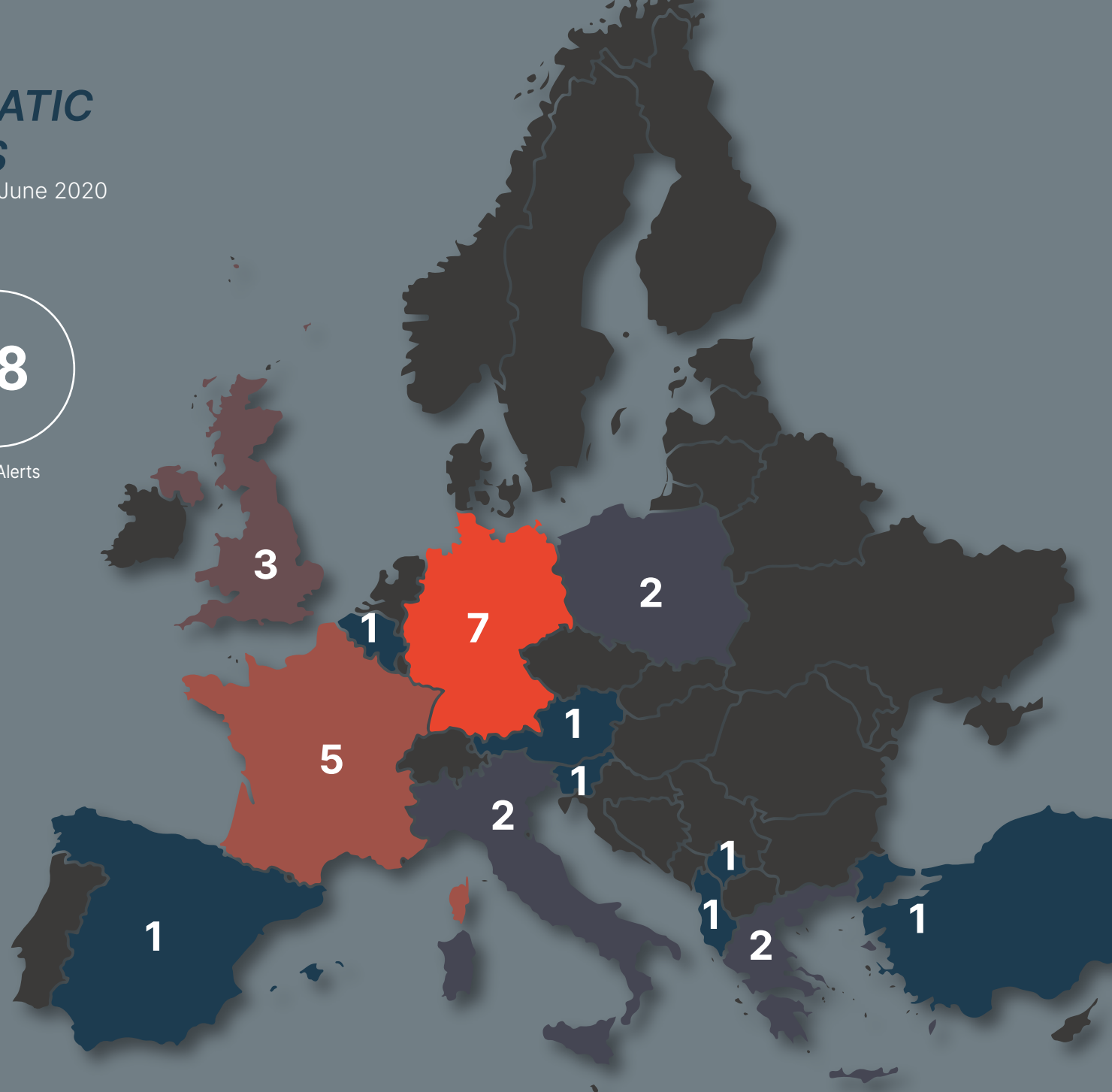
March - June 2020

## ***Threats against journalists and media workers related to protests and demonstrations (EFJ)***

While protests and demonstrations remain a complex and challenging situation for journalists and media workers to operate in, they oftentimes represent situations most in need of independent and robust media investigation and coverage. It is a worrying trend that has been monitored over the last few years that journalists and media workers are increasingly at risk of physical and verbal attacks while covering demonstrations. Threats emerge from a range of different actors, including police officers or security services charged with maintaining the peace and groups of demonstrators. Alerts (28 in total) posted on the platform show journalists and media workers in 13 countries, including Germany (7 alerts), France (5 alerts) and United Kingdom (3 alerts) were at-risk or threatened for their presence at protests or for their role as a journalist. In total, 45 journalists and media workers were attacked between March and June during and related to demonstrations and protests in EU Member States and Candidate Countries. In most cases they were clearly identified as media professionals.

28

MMF Alerts



This analysis includes the 24 alerts which happened during a demonstration plus 4 which were closely related to demonstrations and protests.

The first four months of the MFRR has been punctuated by popular protest movements taking place in cities, towns and villages across Europe. These are organised for a range of issues including government responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, legacies and the contemporary impact of structural racism, climate justice, domestic or cross-border corruption scandals, abuses of power or party political movements. While the organising principles for these protests may be divergent, the threats to journalists and media workers are alarmingly consistent. [According to analysis developed by IPI](#), as part of the MFRR, a range of threats against journalists and media workers in Italy, Germany, Poland and Slovenia occurred at protests related to the COVID-19 pandemic (or the state's response to it); in the United Kingdom and Belgium at Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests; and, in Germany, France, Spain, Italy and the United Kingdom at rallies organised by far-right political and extremist groups. Further to this, journalists and media workers in Greece were subjected to threats of violence for covering the refugee and migrant crisis. A number of other rallies in Montenegro, Albania, France, Germany and Austria have also resulted in threats to journalists and media workers in the period between March and June 2020. While the nature of the threats differ, including everything from violent attacks and verbal harassment and threats, to laws criminalising both protest and the activities of journalists covering these movements, this represents a significant threat to press and media freedom, while also isolating protest movements from external scrutiny or solidarity from broader communities and networks.

### ***Extreme cases of physical violence***

A majority of the alerts (17) from protests or demonstrations highlighted physical assaults, in some cases resulting in injuries. Some of the alerts reveal extreme violence against journalists and media workers who required hospitalisation. This can severely impact the journalist's mental and physical health, their ability to inform the public and can encourage other journalists or media workers to self-censor and avoid carrying out their work due to the increased risks and inadequate support mechanisms available to them. At the beginning of May, a number of protests across Germany resulted in threats or attacks against journalists and media workers. This included an attack on a [ZDF TV crew](#) filming a satirical news programme in Berlin on 1 May, by approximately 20 people, which resulted in five journalists being injured, four of which requiring hospitalisation. The danger of crowds and coordinated attacks at protests was also documented in a number of threats to journalists in France. When journalists working for [France 3 Bourgogne](#) were violently attacked by a group of armed individuals, this prevented them being able to broadcast their report to the public. Alongside the physical and mental wellbeing of the journalists and media workers, attacks at protests can disrupt and prevent independent press coverage being broadcast or completed. This can at times be self-defeating for the protest itself, targeting a mechanism that can increase public awareness of an issue of social and public interest, while also discouraging further media attention or coverage.

Physical violence is often accompanied by insults and verbal abuses (14 cases) and

sometimes attacks on journalistic property (11 cases) which can make it difficult or impossible for the professionals to continue to do their job on the spot.

### ***Far-right extremist groups particularly hostile to journalists***

While many of the violations documented between March and June 2020 were linked to the COVID-19 pandemic (see COVID-19 section) and the opposition movements (anti-lockdown or anti-government protests), journalists also faced threats while covering Black Lives Matter (BLM) demonstrations and the right-wing protests that emerged to counter them. While alerts in Belgium and the United Kingdom were connected to BLM protests, these were dwarfed by the threats coming from right-wing counter protests, especially in Germany, France, Spain, Italy and the United Kingdom. Data shows that these gatherings were conducive to threats against media professionals and especially when organised by far-right political parties or extremist groups with many alerts highlighting the dangerous nature of such events for journalists and media workers. In these cases, the types of threats deployed included the threat of or actual physical attacks, in a manner that sought to both restrict media scrutiny of the protest movement, single out individual media professionals or demonise the profession at large.

This dynamic can be seen in the threats from protests in Spain, Germany, France, Italy and the UK, where violence, or the threat of violence, was deployed to target journalists

and their equipment (aiming for cameras or knocking phones out of a journalist's hands) in a manner to prevent coverage or intimidate the journalist from follow up or future reporting. This chilling or intimidation tactic can also be seen in the verbal harassments and threats facing journalists in Europe. For example, in Italy, a group of demonstrators chanted slogans [comparing journalists to 'terrorists'](#) and threw stones, bottles and firecrackers at a TV crew while they were carrying out interviews.

As much of these actions took place after the journalist or media worker identified themselves as journalists, the targeting of journalists for their work cannot be ignored or ruled out.

### ***Disproportionate police violence and legal measures against journalists***

As highlighted above, private individuals (in 15 cases), but also the police (in 10 cases) deployed to maintain public safety together constitute the main sources of the threats. In a [statement](#) published in [May](#) and updated in [July](#), due to the scale of the issue, MFRR partners denounced the increased violence against media professionals at protests and in particular the use by police forces of non-fatal firearms, tear gas and aggressive crowd dispersal tactics which can result in serious injuries as documented by the platform<sup>1</sup>.

Violence deployed by police officers or security services can be seen to fall in a number of discrete categories inline with a per-

<sup>1</sup> Recommendations for national authorities and police officers include training on proportionate and lawful responses to better protect journalists in the performance of their duty.

ceived motivation behind these attacks. A number of attacks on journalists and media workers by police officers have prevented or attempted to prevent documentation of police action. This was clearly on show in the cases of a [Gazeta Wyborcza reporter](#) who was arrested by police while covering an “illegal” anti-lockdown demonstration, [Jeremy Audouard](#) who was arrested by Belgian police for filming the arrest of a protestor, [Elvis Hila](#) who was detained for reporting on the demolition of alleged illegally constructed buildings in Lezha, northern Albania and [Veliša Kadić](#) in Montenegro, who was pepper sprayed, asked to delete footage and detained after filming an arrest. In this manner any threats to journalists from police officers can be seen as an attack on the public’s right to know and ability to independently scrutinise the behaviour and actions of the police service.

Further to this, a number of threats appear to arise from police officers failing to differentiate their responses to journalists and media workers from violent protesters, even after the journalists identify themselves as such or are clearly identifiable as media professionals. [Stéphanie Roy](#) in Paris was injured by a grenade fired indiscriminately by a police officer into a crowd due to provocative actions by other protesters. This issue does not always result in violence. French police officers did not differentiate between climate protesters and a [Reporterre journalist](#) covering the protest at Orly airport when they arrested participants. This resulted

in Alexandre Reza Kokabi being held for 10 hours on charges of “obstructing air traffic”, for which he remains under suspicion. The responsibility to journalists and media workers of police officers, when stationed at protests or demonstrations is two-fold; ensuring all media professionals are protected from threats emanating from protesters, while also ensuring they do not threaten, intimidate, attack or commence legal proceedings against journalists and media workers solely for doing their jobs. In many countries, this responsibility has been neglected and from our analysis is a source of much needed improvement by the relevant state bodies across the MFRR region.

Alongside threats of arrest, interrogation and detention, examples demonstrate that legislatures across the MFRR region have attempted to restrict the ability of journalists and media workers to cover protests and demonstrations. Attempts to restrict by law the dissemination of images of police officers in action have been tabled in [France](#) providing for a maximum fine of €15,000 and a one-year prison sentence and the Slovenian Interior Minister, [Aleš Hojs](#) called for journalists and media professionals who reported from the scene of anti-lockdown protests to face criminal prosecution. If these proposed amendments were approved they would greatly restrict the ability of journalists to safely cover protests, while also encouraging other states facing similar situations to follow suit.

## Conclusion

The first four months of the MFRR project (March to June 2020) coincided with the rapid spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe, which was accompanied by new state efforts to control the media narrative, underscoring the importance of the MFRR’s monitoring work. This first MFRR quarterly report reveals a continued press freedom backslide both in countries with existing autocratic tendencies – such as Hungary and Turkey – many of which took advantage of the pandemic to further restrict the press’s work, as well as in countries where threats are more complex and diffuse, such as in Slovenia, where the independence of the public broadcaster is under threat. The developments in Slovenia, as well as renewed rhetoric around the “repolonisation” of the media in Poland has once again raised alarms about media independence and the spread of the “Orban model” to nearby EU Member States and Candidate countries.

Meanwhile, this first period of MFRR monitoring has shown a worrying trend of physical attacks on journalists, especially in the context of covering demonstrations, such as those of far-right responses to the Black Lives Matter movement or protests against COVID-19 measures. A number of these attacks took place in countries with traditionally strong press freedom records, such as the UK and Germany. These also demonstrated the complex and dangerous landscape of protests for journalists and media workers, where the sources of threats can emanate from both groups of anonymous and unknown protesters, as well as the police deployed ostensibly to maintain the

peace, as well as opportunistic policy-makers seeking to limit scrutiny and public engagement on issues of public and social interest.

The initial phase of the pandemic saw a sudden increase in individual media freedom violations as states sought to control the media narrative or impose new restrictions on the press under the pretext of the health emergency. With the pandemic far from over, and with many of the long-term political, legal and economic effects now only beginning to be felt, in addition to monitoring new violations, MFRR’s work will now necessarily turn to analysing the long-term impact of media restrictions on the public’s right to information. The same goes for the impact of public protest movements on media freedom. As protest movements across Europe show few signs of abating concerted analysis, advocacy, legal and practical support and high-level policy work is required to ensure both the right to free assembly and media freedom are protected, including the ability of journalists and media workers to work safe from the threats of harassment, incarceration or violence.

Through the individual expertise of its consortium partners and their networks across the continent, the MFRR’s monitoring continues to form a clearer picture of the long-term impact of these and connected issues on press and media freedom in EU Member States and Candidate Countries. Its advocacy meanwhile will ensure that democratic values are upheld and any temporary restrictions on the media are proportionate, measured, and necessary. At a time when

the free flow of information, trusted and independent reporting, and high quality watchdog journalism are more essential than ever, the institution of press and media freedom across the MFRR region must be robustly defended.

Despite the emergence of COVID-19 as a new threat to media and press freedom, the MFRR remains focused on closely following other serious threats to journalism in Europe, including the enduring issue of impunity. The murder trial of Slovak journalist, Ján Kuciak is expected to come to a close in the near future, while the fight continues to ensure justice for Malta's Daphne Caruana Galizia.

While only four months in, the MFRR is seeing, and has documented examples of, a complex and ever changing media landscape where threats to media freedom are seldom from one identifiable source alone, use the same set of tools to target, attack or censor media professionals or require the same uniform response to counter. Where we see a consolidated media environment we see the potential threat of pervasive censorship, where there are unaccountable police officers or security services we see potential threats during protests or other flashpoint occasions, where we see the demonisation of journalists, or the embedded assumptions of political biases, we see

the fertile soil for harassment, threats and physical violence. As the project continues we will build and strengthen the foundation of our analysis and as a result our ability to counter threats, address trends directly and reach out to support at-risk journalists and media workers across the EU Member States and Candidate Countries.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons  
Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

© MFRR 2020