

Journalists fight for decent conditions and media freedom in pandemic times

A report from “Building Trust in South East Europe and Turkey” project

Introduction

There can be no media freedom if journalists cannot work in decent conditions. 2020 has been a challenging year for many people from across all walks of life. This is particularly so for essential workers such as journalists. Across Europe, working conditions for journalists decline drastically due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Many have lost their jobs while others have to put their health at risk reporting from the frontline of the health crisis without adequate safety measures and equipment. Some have to adapt quickly to working from home without proper equipment and support of childcare.

This report highlights the challenges faced by journalists in South East Europe (Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Serbia) and Turkey during the Covid-19 pandemic. It shows that the pandemic led to a serious setback on the improvement of journalists’ labour rights and media freedom gained by journalists’ unions and associations in these countries. Media freedom and labour rights violations are on the rise due to lockdown and security measures. It has drained the little resources of these journalists’ organisations setting a bleak future for the working conditions of journalists and media freedom. Nevertheless, these journalists’ organisations have played an important role by pulling their resources to ensure the safety of journalists and provide personal protective equipment, offer counselling, and defend media freedom and the rights of journalists to decent working conditions during this challenging period.

It is worth noting that the thirst of citizens to rely on journalists to provide accurate and unbiased information has grown ever more. There is a growing sense of solidarity among journalists, journalists’ organisations and civil society organisations across the region and in Europe.

Labour Rights

Unfortunately, this period is characterised by a wave of violations of journalists' labour rights across the region. These violations range from overtime work without compensation, salary reduction, to journalists being forced to take unpaid leave. While teleworking has become a common practice, there is a lack of support framework from employers. The already precarious working conditions of freelance journalists have become worse while female journalists have to juggle from work to childcare and housework duties when working from home.

In **Albania**, the journalists' labour rights continue to deteriorate and the pandemic has made the situation worse. Journalists face extra workload without additional payment; their salaries were reduced; there is a lack of professional health insurance. As journalists were not considered essential workers until June, 65% of them were asked to work from home. From the 6,500 media workers in Albania, 30-40% faced reductions in salary by 20-30%. Those on temporary contracts, a very few of them were renewed.

As most of the media outlets are already understaffed, there were no massive job losses at this stage on top of the non-renewal of short-term employment contracts. However, a number of traditional media have only paid 50% of their staff in order to keep all employees employed. But in reality, they are working long hours for 80% pay. Online media and freelance journalists are in the most difficult situation but represent a very little share of the sector.

In **Kosovo**, the precarious conditions of journalists make them vulnerable for further abuse. In general, journalists from the largest mainstream media institutions have more stable conditions with contracts and regular pay. Public Service Broadcaster (PSB) such as RTK also offers permanent contracts. But in private media, journalists often have short-term contracts or no contracts at all. Online media workers have the worst working conditions and are among the most precarious. The lack of financial security and stable contractual relations at work compounds with the "over-supply" of journalists who are freshly graduated from journalism schools made the profession particularly precarious. Journalists demanding improved conditions are often met with threats of being replaced with recent graduates who are willing to work for worse conditions. The situation for the recently graduated is not better as often they enter the market as non-paid interns, for indefinite times and with no guarantee for employment.

The editorial independence is generally low particularly in small media outlets where there is a lack of internal organisational structure. These journalists only have a certain degree of freedom and they have little knowledge about the editorial independence given to them in the media where they work.

In **Montenegro**, the Trade Union Media of Montenegro (TUMM) carried out a survey to analyse the impact of the pandemic on the work of journalists working in online media. The COVID-19 negatively impacted the journalists' work for 86% of the respondents. The reasons were

increased workload (45%), difficult working conditions (30%) and reduced wages (15%). Online media editors responded (94%) that the pandemic had a negative impact on their work, mostly due to the uncertain economic situation (47%), but also due to the decline in employee productivity (41%). Teleworking was allowed in almost all media and 88% of respondents stated that they had clear guidelines and instructions. A large number of editors believe that financial assistance to the media could have been greater. We had testimonies from newsrooms that a large number of employees used the right to parental leave, which significantly reduced newsrooms capacity and thus increased the workload of other journalists. Almost two thirds (59%) believe that if the pandemic continues, there will inevitably be a reduction in the number of workers and/or of their wages. Despite the government's announcement to provide financial support to the media sector, TUMM member journalists regularly expressed that they did not receive any financial incentive to work although the amount of workload has increased. As a result, TUMM launched a campaign to highlight media owners, founders of local public broadcasters and Radio-Television of Montenegro (RTCG) who dedicate part of financial support they received to reward journalists.

In **North Macedonia**, the situation for journalists remains the same. The usual breach of labour rights are common practices. Media professionals still experience low salaries, short-term contracts, overtime without financial compensation. It remains difficult to unionise in many media outlets where the owners either directly or indirectly are preventing workers from becoming members of the union. Today, there is only one SSNM representative, not counting the one that was established in the public broadcaster, which was an obligation by the Law. However, there are some specific challenges that were provoked by the pandemic.

This year the attention shifted to the impact of the pandemic on journalists and media workers both economically and in terms of safety. SSNM issued guidelines on journalists' protection and negotiated with the government financial aid for the media that consisted of 100% subsidies of the fringe benefits of the media employees for three months. However, workers who had their salary cuts at the beginning of the pandemic cannot benefit from the subsidy. The subsidy for media companies is conditioned a ban for laying off and returning the salaries on the previous level for those who had a salary cut. SSNM also succeeded in negotiating with the Ministry of Health to offer free flu vaccines for media workers over 50 years old or with chronic disease.

The main challenge is the education on labour rights, but also securing free legal advice. This year, less requests were received partly due to the pandemic and also the increased workload journalists faced and not having energy or time for complaints. The campaign to promote the Fair Contract in online media and the EFJ Charter on working conditions met setback due to the lockdown at the beginning of the year. There was only one collective agreement conducted for the year with state news agency MIA in February.

In **Serbia**, journalists remain precarious with very low pay. Some journalists work for minimum wage and even illegally which is especially visible in smaller communities. They are often engaged in part-time work and have to work in several newsrooms to make a living. There were no major lay-offs except in the provincial public service media, where a total of 88 workers have

not got their temporary contracts extended. Often these journalists were hired through an agency so that they can easily be terminated without notice nor compensation. This practice becomes common due to the lack of subsidy to public service media during the pandemic. There were no layoffs in the public service media of Serbia.

At the beginning of April 2020, IJAS conducted a survey among its members, which aimed to determine what journalists need to do their job smoothly during a pandemic, as well as to reveal the biggest obstacles in their work during the state of emergency. 228 journalists from all over Serbia took part in the online survey. Almost 58% of survey participants said they needed gloves, masks and disinfectants, while 33.9% expressed the need for the ensured safety of digital communications (33.9%) legal aid and support (28.4%) and psychological support (8.7%).

In **Turkey**, the labour rights of journalists are negatively impacted as a result of the pandemic. They include postponement of both collective and individual cases related to unionization, unfair working conditions, increased workload, mobbing increased, insufficiency of ergonomic requirements for teleworking, forcing to take paid annual leave and/or unpaid leave, cutting extra benefits (such as food and travel allowances), income decreased because of short-time working allowance, being forced full-time working by employers despite benefitting short-time working allowance or unpaid leave allowance, insufficiency of the occupational health and safety measures in workplaces, being forced to registered unemployment, changing roles at work.

After the first COVID-19 case was seen in March 2020, most of the journalists working in Turkish printed media have started to telework. While teleworking is now a common practice, the pandemic has led to unfair working hours and conditions in the sector. Nevertheless, a majority of journalists working in television channels remain at work because the nature of work doesn't allow telework. During the beginning of the pandemic, no other measures were taken by employers to protect journalists, except giving them masks. Even though working conditions, and occupational health and safety measures are now better compared to the first few months of the pandemic, the current situation is not satisfactory yet. The most seriously impacted are the freelancers. In Turkey, freelance journalists, who are mostly employed without insurance, are not allowed to join a union because the law does not allow that. So they cannot get an official press card. The pandemic also worsened the situation for women journalists. Challenges of teleworking have put extra burdens on women journalists such as childcare (because of closing schools and kindergarten after March), cleaning and other housework.

Despite the impact of the pandemic, TGS continues to unionise journalists in the sector. Hence, the union has obtained authorisation to start the negotiation process for collective bargaining in two media companies this year.

With the claim of fighting against the negative impacts of COVID-19 in the economy, the ruling party AKP has enforced several legal regulations, supposed to protect employees. The most

important ones are the short-time working allowance and unpaid leave allowance. According to the Turkish Employment Agency (İŞKUR), nearly 3.5 million workers are currently receiving a short-time working allowance and 2 million 45 thousand workers are getting unpaid leave allowance. While the short-time working allowance causes a decrease in the incomes of employees, unpaid leave allowance allows employers to place employees on unpaid leave – who, in reality, are already dismissed. Millions of people are forced to survive on 39 Turkish liras (\$4.95) a day because of unpaid leave allowance. Many media outlets have benefitted from the short-time working allowance during the pandemic but journalists did benefit little from it.

The impact of the pandemic on the journalists' organisations

The impact of the pandemic on journalists' unions and associations in the region can be characterised as going from bad to worse. Most of these organisations are already under great financial and political struggle, the pandemic has drained the little resources they have to meet the increasing challenges facing journalists. Most of them have to scale back their operation by cutting staff and redirect their resources to focus on helping journalists to meet the immediate challenges. With a lot of commitment and determination, these organisations lend their support to journalists and enable them to carry their duties to inform the citizens in a difficult time. This is evident with the increase of membership in most of the organisations. The sense of solidarity is intensified by the pandemic among journalists, journalists' organisations, civil society organisations, which has helped foster cooperation.

The journalists' association APJA in **Albania** forecasts a stagnation in the membership. The workforce of the association will remain on a voluntary basis. Many informative meetings are being held with members online. The long-term challenge that APJA has been the same for years: reaching financial sustainability while recruiting new members.

The operational capacity of AJK in **Kosovo** has greatly reduced due to the lack of staff. The staff was reduced as of March from three full-time to only one full-time staff. The lockdown has made it impossible to hire new staff. However, AJK recorded an increase in membership during the pandemic, which is the direct consequence of the high number of attacks and threats against journalists. AJK offers the membership for free to journalists who have very low salaries. As the association is mainly project-funded, the main challenge is to reach financial stability in order to meet structural costs and human resources. Without these, it would be impossible to fulfil its mission to improve journalists' labour rights in the country.

During the pandemic, TUMM in **Montenegro** dedicated its operational resources to helping members facing the crisis. For the first time, TUMM launched a pilot campaign with the aim to raise awareness of young people about the importance of trade unions. It resulted in an increase of young members (14 students and young journalists) who expressed their desire to

become full members in the future. The COVID crisis has also brought new labour rights topics such as teleworking and work-life balance. An increase in online harassment of women journalists has been recorded. New services will probably be proposed in the future, including psychological support in online harassment cases.

In **North Macedonia**, SSNM faces challenges in recruiting and organising so-called new union's groups in the media. Dozens of new members have joined the union, but left (without paying membership). There is a stagnation in terms of membership compared to last year. In terms of operational capacity, the staff was reduced as of February from two full-time to one full-time only. The lockdown has made it impossible to hire a new person. However, this was mostly compensated with bigger engagement of members of SSNM especially of the Executive board. The resources at this time are stable, however, not enough for a more dynamic organisation. SSNM operates mainly thanks to projects, while membership fees are used for administrative costs. Reaching financial sustainability and developing unions branches in media outlets are the two mid-term objectives.

In **Serbia**, the journalists' union (SINOS) and association (IJAS) face more demands from journalists due to the state of emergency during the pandemic. Journalists face restriction and the union and association have to react and provide support. When it comes to legal advice, we provided legal advice to more than 100 journalists just in two months of the state of emergency and the number reached 200 by the end of November. The organisations also provided guidelines on safe reporting during the pandemic to journalists, editors and managers. Protective gear – masks, disinfectant etc. – were secured and distributed to journalists through cooperation with the different organisations (national and international). Press vests for media professionals were also provided for journalists covering the protests in July.

On a positive note, the pandemic made journalists realised the important role of journalists' unions and associations in enforcing their right. IJAS recruited around 84 new members in 2020 due to the need for media workers to have professional protection during the time of crisis. Nevertheless, due to the economic hardship of journalists, not many can afford to pay the membership fees or they pay little. Therefore, it results in a lower membership income than the previous year even though the number of members has increased.

Future challenges due to the pandemic are:

- Reduced ability to communicate directly with members in person for recruiting.
- The impaired mental health of journalists due to poor working conditions
- Providing protective equipment for journalists
- Advocating for changes in the relevant legislative framework for media and journalists
- Threats in the online space and challenges posed by artificial intelligence

In **Turkey**, TGS has increased its operational capacity to face the negative impacts of the pandemic in the media sector. In this context, the union focuses more on collaboration and solidarity with other journalists' associations and press freedom advocacy groups. The union also has close ties with members of parliament who are former journalists to lobby for the

improvement of the rights of employees in the media industry. In view of the pandemic, the union has reviewed its strategies to achieve the following objectives:

- increase both national and international solidarity with another journalist associations and press freedom advocacy groups,
- increase unionisation in workplaces,
- expand legal supports for journalists and training activities for journalists, including the unemployed, and communication faculty students,
- collaborate with international union organisations to improve journalists' economic and social rights.

The TGS Academy, which was created to foster skills of employed and unemployed media workers as well as students, has organised over 50 activities with more than 3.000 attendees during the last 12 months. Since March 2020, all events within the Academy have been held online.

Media Freedom

The economic and social rights of journalists are an inseparable part of press freedom in general. Thus, media freedom in the region faces the same downward trend. These governments abuse the emergency and lockdown measures for Covid-19 in order to curb media freedom. Unlike other European countries, journalists in the region are not considered essential workers and are prevented from doing their jobs. Journalists not only face hostility from governments and authorities, they also face attacks and threats. A rapidly increased number of attacks was recorded during this period.

For a period of two months in **Albania**, the government did not allow more than two persons on air in a studio at the same time to respect social distancing measures. It imposed two large fines on a critical TV channel (TV Ora News) for not respecting this rule. These fines were followed by a request to stop further television broadcasting, which was eventually dropped after a few days. Other TV channels had just received a warning to fines.

Journalists faced restrictions on the ground as they were not considered as essential workers. The government was very hostile towards journalists. In a social media video, Prime Minister Edi Rama accused the media of doing more harm than the Covid-19 virus. No financial support was given to the media.

Etilda Gjonaj, the Minister of Justice in Albania, proposed changes in the Criminal Code concerning criminalisation and punishment of defamation. Fines for defamation are planned to be heightened and the responsibility is extended not only to journalists but also to editors and

editors-in-chief. This proposal also contains provisions for fines and imprisonment for making photomontages without permission. According to media reports¹, this category also includes memes. If a person creates such a montage without saying that it is a montage, or damages a person's reputation, one risks up to one year in prison. Prime Minister Edi Rama has [denied](#) that the government is planning to pass these amendments on memes.

Another worrying development is the government's determination to proceed with the anti-defamation package. So far none of the associations or media organisations have been consulted.

The media freedom situation in **North Macedonia** has improved in recent years, but the pandemic is curbing any further progress. The main problem remains media ownership connected with political parties or centers of powers, low level of transparency of the institutions. Also self-censorship is still an important issue provoked both by the fear of losing the job (connected with the mentioned ownership), but also due to an increased number of attacks against journalists in 2020 (14 journalists received verbal threats compared to only 4 cases in 2019).

During the state of emergency in **Serbia**, a number of regulations were adopted that impacted the work of journalists, including restrictions on movement, a ban on covering important public events and others. Although some of the harmful provisions were later repealed, the fact that they were in direct conflict with the Constitution and relevant laws imposes the need for careful consideration of the consequences they had when it comes to the work of journalists and the quality of the information in general.

When it comes to the safety of journalists, there has been an increase in incidents to the detriment of journalists in relation to the period preceding the state of emergency, but also in relation to the same period last year (March - April, 2019). In the period from the introduction of the state of emergency on March 15 to May 6, a total of 47 cases of incidents against journalists were recorded. Among them, 32 cases of pressure and 15 cases of various forms of attacks on journalists. Out of the 15 attacks, there were two (2) threats to life, two (2) detentions as a form of physical threat to journalists, seven (7) verbal threats, two (2) physical attacks on journalists and two (2) attacks on property. A paid campaign on various Google services against a female journalist due to critical reporting during the state of emergency was also recorded.

In the period before the introduction of the state of emergency, in twice the time period (100 days), 12 attacks and 11 pressures were recorded, and during the state of emergency, in only 47 days, the attack rate increased by 70% and pressures by almost 150%. The number of attacks and pressures on journalists continuing in the same manner and numbers of incidents

¹ <https://albaniandailynews.com/news/albania-may-make-memes-punishable-by-law>
<https://www.balkanweb.com/ndryshimet-ne-kodin-penal-kushdo-qe-publikon-meme-do-ndeshko-het-parashikohet-deri-ne-1-vit-burg/>

against journalists until 1 December is 168 (27 physical attacks, 47 threats, ten attacks on property, 87 pressure) according to IJAS data. The number of physical attacks and attacks on property has more than doubled because of the protests which took place in July in many cities in Serbia when more than 25 journalists were attacked or their property was destroyed or an attempt was made to confiscate the equipment. Meanwhile, another problem for journalists work during the state of emergency was the fact that institutions were closed and access to information was denied.

Journalists in **Turkey** often face arrest, detention and violence because of weak press freedom standards and unfavourable political environment in the country. In April, the government passed a bill that allows freeing as many as 90,000 prisoners to prevent the spread of the coronavirus in overcrowded prisons. However, journalists and human rights defenders behind bars were not considered. There are still 70² jailed journalists and media workers. At least 40 journalists were under investigation because of their reports and 20 of them were detained since March 2020. Union lawyers have visited 28 media workers in prison since January 2020. In the light of press freedom advocacy, TGS has given legal support for about 115 employees in the media sector since January 2020.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Sadly, the report has painted a harsh reality for journalists in Western Balkan and Turkey. The situation is crying out for urgent support for both journalists and committed journalists' organisations working to defend the rights of journalists. Despite the strong fighting spirits and solidarity among journalists, these organisations urgently need financial and practical support from governments and institutions. Most importantly, journalists shall be regarded as essential workers across Europe.

Through the project, representatives of journalists' organisations in these countries have made the following recommendations and calls:

- Urgent financial support from governments and the EU to media and journalists;
- EU to provide financial support for long-term projects in promoting labour rights and union recruitment in the media sector;
- Need for an awareness raising campaign in the region about working conditions of journalists during the pandemic;
- Need for union capacity building to strengthen skills on campaigning and communications;
- Unions reaching out to young and future journalists;

² See TGS website: <https://tgs.org.tr/cezaevindeki-gazeteciler/>

- Address the mental health and safety of journalists impacted by the pandemic;
- Mitigate legal and physical attack on journalists through monitoring and practical support;

This report is produced by the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ) together with the following participating journalists' unions and associations.

Association of Professional Journalists of Albania (APJA)

Association of Journalists of Kosovo (AJK)

Trade Union Media of Montenegro (TUMM)

Trade Union of Macedonian Journalists and Media Workers (SSNM)

Journalists' Union of Serbia (SINOS)

Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia (IJAS)

Journalists' Union of Turkey (TGS)



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