European Parliament

The impact of coronavirus on media freedom

SUMMARY

Media freedom has increasingly come under the spotlight in recent years. In its 2019 report on media freedom, Freedom House argued that media freedom around the world was coming under growing threat both in democratic and non-democratic countries, whilst in its 2020 edition of the World Press Freedom Index, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) argue that the next decade will be pivotal in ensuring the preservation of media freedom. This threat to media freedom is often attributed to the recent rise of populist and authoritarian governments, with many world-leaders – including leaders of major democracies – increasingly seeming to view free media as an opponent, rather than a fundamental aspect of a free society.

The knock-on effects of such actions can be grave, particularly given the important role that a free media plays in upholding democracy and democratic freedoms. Media freedom and pluralism are part of the rights and principles enshrined in the European Charter of Fundamental Rights and in the European Convention on Human Rights.

As the coronavirus pandemic continues to have significant ramifications for public health, social welfare and the economy, the crisis also presents a significant threat to media freedom. Media freedom proponents have warned that governments across the world could use the coronavirus emergency as a pretext for the implementation of new, draconian restrictions on free expression, as well as to increase press censorship.

In many countries, the crisis has been exploited for just such reasons, with political leaders using it as a justification for additional restrictions on media freedom. In its 2020 World Press Freedom Index, RSF argues that certain governments have used the crisis to impose media restrictions that in ordinary times would be impossible. The Council of Europe (CoE) Platform for the Protection of Journalists has warned that the fresh assault on media freedom amid the Covid-19 pandemic has worsened an already gloomy media freedom outlook.

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- European Union action to protect and boost media freedom

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Background: The current state of media freedom

Media freedom is a core EU value and a cornerstone of democracy. However, as the 2019 Freedom House report[1] states, media freedom across the world has deteriorated over the past decade. According to the report, 28 % of 'non-free countries' have witnessed a decrease in their press freedom score in the last five years. The issue of media freedom is also highly pertinent in democracies, with 19 % of countries designated as 'free countries' also seeing a decline in their press freedom score during the same timeframe. With the important role that a free media plays in providing fair and balanced news coverage, the prospect of reduced media freedom can have a significant negative impact on the quality and reliability of information provided to citizens, which in turn can severely impact upon a population's democratic freedom.

The European Union (EU) is not exempt from such tendencies. Earlier this year, the Association of European Journalists (AEJ) voiced concern over the decline in media freedom that has occurred within the EU in recent years, and called on Europe's political leaders to do more to reverse the trend, in order to protect and reinforce media freedom and uphold the Union's long-held commitment to a free press. Outside the EU, independent media have come under pressure in democracies such as Israel, India and the United States of America in recent years, where journalists critical of the government have been intimidated, threatened and scapegoated by government politicians and their supporters. Perhaps less surprisingly, non-democratic countries such as China and Russia have been implementing further restrictions, such as increased censorship and state control, on press freedom over the past few years. In a number of countries across the world, increasing concern about mis- and disinformation has been used to make 'unjustified arrests or pass repressive laws that primarily aim to silence political dissent and limit freedom of speech and expression', according to a 2019 report published by the Oxford Technology & Elections Commission.
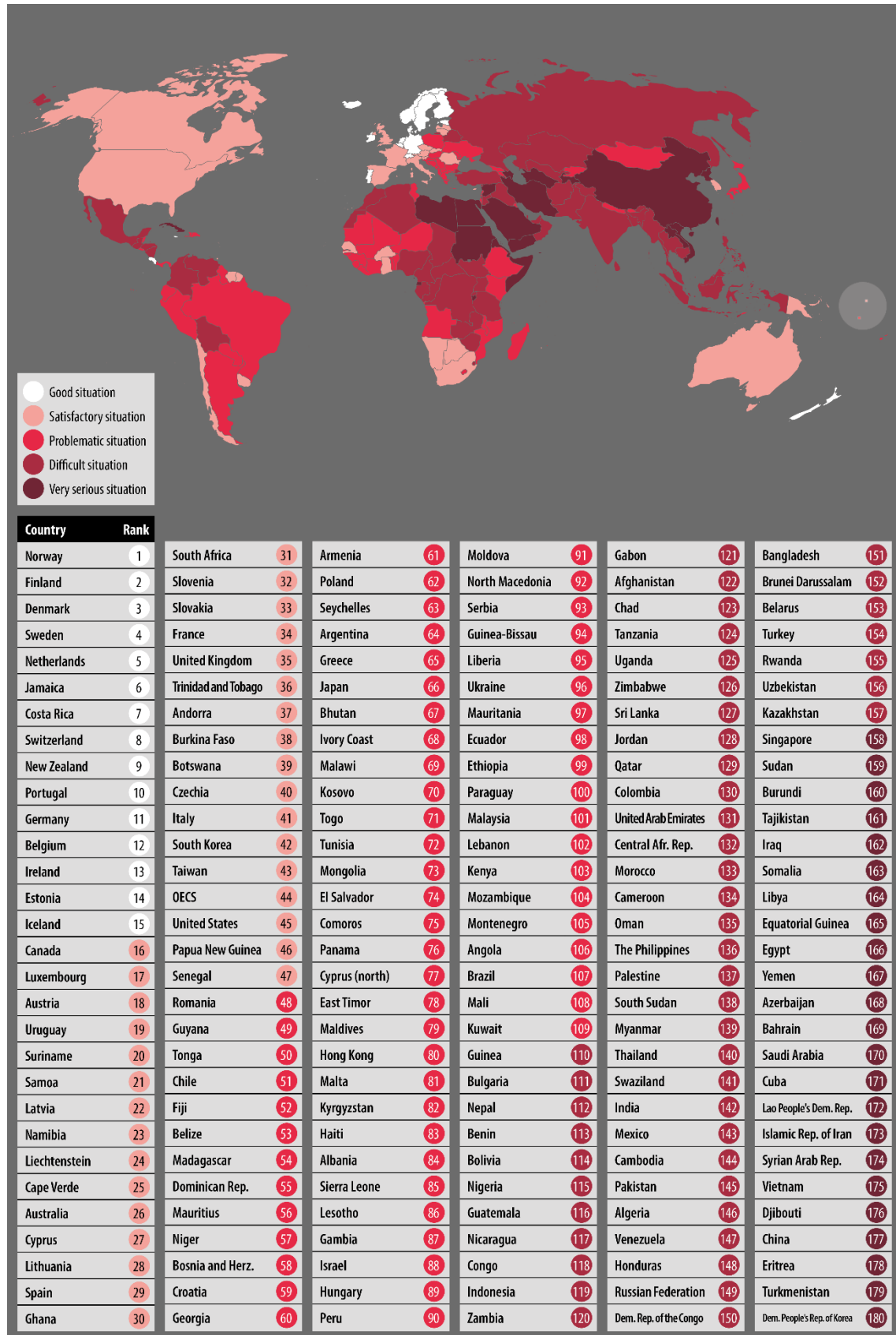
Impact of coronavirus on media freedom

As the examples above show, media freedom around the world was under serious threat even prior to the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the crisis has further exposed systemic weaknesses in a number of countries, where governments and world leaders appear to have used the situation as an opportunity to implement a further crackdown on media freedom under the pretence of a concern for national security. In some cases, intense information suppression, narrative control and disinformation campaigns – often carried out in conjunction with highly visible, staged global health assistance – seem to be aimed at covering up government failures and conveying the message that authoritarian nationalism is the most viable answer to the pandemic, as well as that societies must choose between freedom and security. So far, the International Press Institute (IPI) has recorded over 130 instances of media freedom violations across the world during the crisis. At the launch of its 2020 annual report on 29 April 2020, the Council of Europe (CoE) Platform for the Protection of Journalists, voiced concern that the 'fresh assault on media freedom amid the Covid-19 pandemic has worsened an already gloomy outlook.'

Global restrictions on media freedom due to coronavirus

Across the world, the 'infodemic' that has accompanied the pandemic has required efforts to combat disinformation and misinformation campaigns regarding the virus, including campaigns that can elicit fear, incite violence or spark unrest. Against this background, on 3 April 2020, CoE Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović, regretted that 'some governments are using this imperative as a pretext to introduce disproportionate restrictions [on] press freedom … . Particularly in times of crisis, we need to protect our precious liberties and rights'.[2] The 2020 World Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders (RSF) underlines that the pandemic is exacerbating already existing threats to media freedom. The 2020 edition shows 'a clear correlation between suppression of media freedom in response to the coronavirus pandemic, and a country's ranking in the Index'. In both China (177th) and Iran (down 3 at 173rd), news of the Covid-19 outbreaks

was heavily censored. RSF warns that authoritarian governments take advantage of the exceptional circumstances to 'impose measures that would be impossible in normal times' ('shock doctrine').

Figure 1 – Freedom of the press worldwide

Legend:
- Good situation
- Satisfactory situation
- Problematic situation
- Difficult situation
- Very serious situation

Country	Rank	Country	Rank	Country	Rank	Country	Rank	Country	Rank	Country	Rank
Norway	1	South Africa	31	Armenia	61	Moldova	91	Gabon	121	Bangladesh	151
Finland	2	Slovenia	32	Poland	62	North Macedonia	92	Afghanistan	122	Brunei Darussalam	152
Denmark	3	Slovakia	33	Seychelles	63	Serbia	93	Chad	123	Belarus	153
Sweden	4	France	34	Argentina	64	Guinea-Bissau	94	Tanzania	124	Turkey	154
Netherlands	5	United Kingdom	35	Greece	65	Liberia	95	Uganda	125	Rwanda	155
Jamaica	6	Trinidad and Tobago	36	Japan	66	Ukraine	96	Zimbabwe	126	Uzbekistan	156
Costa Rica	7	Andorra	37	Bhutan	67	Mauritania	97	Sri Lanka	127	Kazakhstan	157
Switzerland	8	Burkina Faso	38	Ivory Coast	68	Ecuador	98	Jordan	128	Singapore	158
New Zealand	9	Botswana	39	Malawi	69	Ethiopia	99	Qatar	129	Sudan	159
Portugal	10	Czechia	40	Kosovo	70	Paraguay	100	Colombia	130	Burundi	160
Germany	11	Italy	41	Togo	71	Malaysia	101	United Arab Emirates	131	Tajikistan	161
Belgium	12	South Korea	42	Tunisia	72	Lebanon	102	Central Afr. Rep.	132	Iraq	162
Ireland	13	Taiwan	43	Mongolia	73	Kenya	103	Morocco	133	Somalia	163
Estonia	14	OECS	44	El Salvador	74	Mozambique	104	Cameroon	134	Libya	164
Iceland	15	United States	45	Comoros	75	Montenegro	105	Oman	135	Equatorial Guinea	165
Canada	16	Papua New Guinea	46	Panama	76	Angola	106	The Philippines	136	Egypt	166
Luxembourg	17	Senegal	47	Cyprus (north)	77	Brazil	107	Palestine	137	Yemen	167
Austria	18	Romania	48	East Timor	78	Mali	108	South Sudan	138	Azerbaijan	168
Uruguay	19	Guyana	49	Maldives	79	Kuwait	109	Myanmar	139	Bahrain	169
Suriname	20	Tonga	50	Hong Kong	80	Guinea	110	Thailand	140	Saudi Arabia	170
Samoa	21	Chile	51	Malta	81	Bulgaria	111	Swaziland	141	Cuba	171
Latvia	22	Fiji	52	Kyrgyzstan	82	Nepal	112	India	142	Lao People's Dem. Rep.	172
Namibia	23	Belize	53	Haiti	83	Benin	113	Mexico	143	Islamic Rep. of Iran	173
Liechtenstein	24	Madagascar	54	Albania	84	Bolivia	114	Cambodia	144	Syrian Arab Rep.	174
Cape Verde	25	Dominican Rep.	55	Sierra Leone	85	Nigeria	115	Pakistan	145	Vietnam	175
Australia	26	Mauritius	56	Lesotho	86	Guatemala	116	Algeria	146	Djibouti	176
Cyprus	27	Niger	57	Gambia	87	Nicaragua	117	Venezuela	147	China	177
Lithuania	28	Bosnia and Herz.	58	Israel	88	Congo	118	Honduras	148	Eritrea	178
Spain	29	Croatia	59	Hungary	89	Indonesia	119	Russian Federation	149	Turkmenistan	179
Ghana	30	Georgia	60	Peru	90	Zambia	120	Dem. Rep. of the Congo	150	Dem. People's Rep. of Korea	180

Source: EPRS, based on Reporters Without Borders, 2020.

Russia and China

The implications of the Covid-19 crisis for media freedom have been felt in all corners of the globe, no more so than in some of the world's major geopolitical powers. In countries such as Russia and China, where notoriously strict media censorship laws were already in place, the pandemic has provided the opportunity to restrict media freedom further. In Russia, the Kremlin has been quick to order the removal of 'fake news' regarding the country's response to the pandemic, with a number of independent media organisations being forced to take down articles critical of the government or face fines or imprisonment. A dedicated 'fake news' division was formed in the Kremlin's coronavirus task force, and another group was set up under Russia's Investigative Committee to counter alleged disinformation. As of 1 April 2020, anyone who spreads false information about Covid-19 risks fines of up to €23 000 or prison terms of up to five years. Media outlets risk fines of €118 000 for disseminating disinformation. On 22 April 2020, Russia's Supreme Court specified that the punishments also apply to people who 'not only use mass media and telecommunication networks, but also speak at meetings, rallies, distribute leaflets and hang posters'. In Chechnya, President Ramzan Kadyrov issued death threats against Russian journalist Elena Milashina over her reporting about human rights violations in Chechnya under the pretext of combating the pandemic.

The Chinese government has also ramped up press censorship in the wake of the virus. China expelled a number of American journalists from the country after they reported on the potential economic impact of Covid-19 on the Chinese economy (Beijing argued that the decision was retaliation for the US decision to reduce the number of Chinese nationals allowed to work for China's state-run media in the USA). Similarly, Chinese whistleblowers, including citizen journalists who contradicted the official Chinese government position during the early stages of the coronavirus pandemic, appear to have been either silenced or detained outright by the authorities. Accompanying its domestic suppression of information about the outbreak, Beijing launched a global disinformation campaign – including a wave of conspiracy theories – to restore its image both at home and abroad, export the blame for the outbreak and distract from its own failings.

India and the United States of America

Other major geopolitical powers have also seen escalating attacks of media freedom since the emergence of Covid-19. Indian journalists have been forced to toe the government line on the pandemic, with the Indian Supreme Court ordering the media to also include the 'official' government version of Covid-19 developments in the country in March 2020. Meanwhile, in the United States, President Trump has used the crisis to escalate his attacks on the US media, accusing them of both downplaying the seriousness of the pandemic and exploiting the crisis in order to hurt the President politically. In what can be seen as attempts to distract from his own missteps during the crisis, his allegations during coronavirus press briefings that journalists 'truly do hurt our country' are further increasing concern about the consequences of his attempts to undermine 'truth and consensus in a deeply divided country'.

Other parts of the world

The impact of coronavirus on media freedom in major economic and geopolitical powers should not be the only cause for concern. A number of other countries have also launched new, stringent restrictions on domestic media. In many cases, there appears to be a worrying trend where countries with already strict censorship laws are using the crisis to introduce even more stringent restrictions.

Asia

- In Turkey, President Erdogan is attempting to use the crisis as a way of removing the few remaining opposition media outlets that exist in the country, accusing them of 'waging a war against their own country'. Turkey has also introduced further restrictions on social media, arresting numerous users for making 'provocative' posts regarding Covid-19.

- In March 2020, the Philippines passed an emergency powers bill that criminalises the spreading of 'false information' regarding Covid-19. Similarly, in April 2020, Cambodia implemented an emergency law that granted the government even stronger control over the country's press and social media platforms.

The Middle East

- Journalists in Iran who have accused the government of being dishonest with respect to its Covid-19 response have been consistently persecuted and threatened by security officials, whilst the Saudi Arabian government has threatened fines and even imprisonment for journalists who promote 'fake news' regarding the virus.

Africa

- In April 2020, Algeria criminalised the spreading of 'false news' that harms national unity. In March 2020, the Egyptian government expelled a Guardian reporter from the country after she questioned the accuracy of government figures on Covid-19. Media freedom violations linked to the pandemic have also been evident in Kenya, Zimbabwe, and numerous other countries.

The Americas

- In March 2020, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro enacted legislation that restricts the media's access to government information during the coronavirus emergency, infringing upon the freedom of the Brazilian media. Also in March, the interim Bolivian President signed a decree criminalising disinformation or creating 'uncertainty' about Covid-19, whilst the Honduran government imposed emergency restrictions on freedom of expression in the country.

Wider implications of media freedom restrictions

Besides the obvious implications that restrictions on media freedom can have for democracy and freedom of expression, the coronavirus crisis has also highlighted the potential public health ramifications of increased censorship. During the early stages of the coronavirus outbreak, officials from the Chinese government worked to suppress information regarding a 'SARS-like coronavirus' that had emerged in Wuhan.

Many observers – including frontline hospital staff based in Wuhan – have argued that the Chinese government's initial decision to censor information regarding Covid-19 severely inhibited medical professionals'
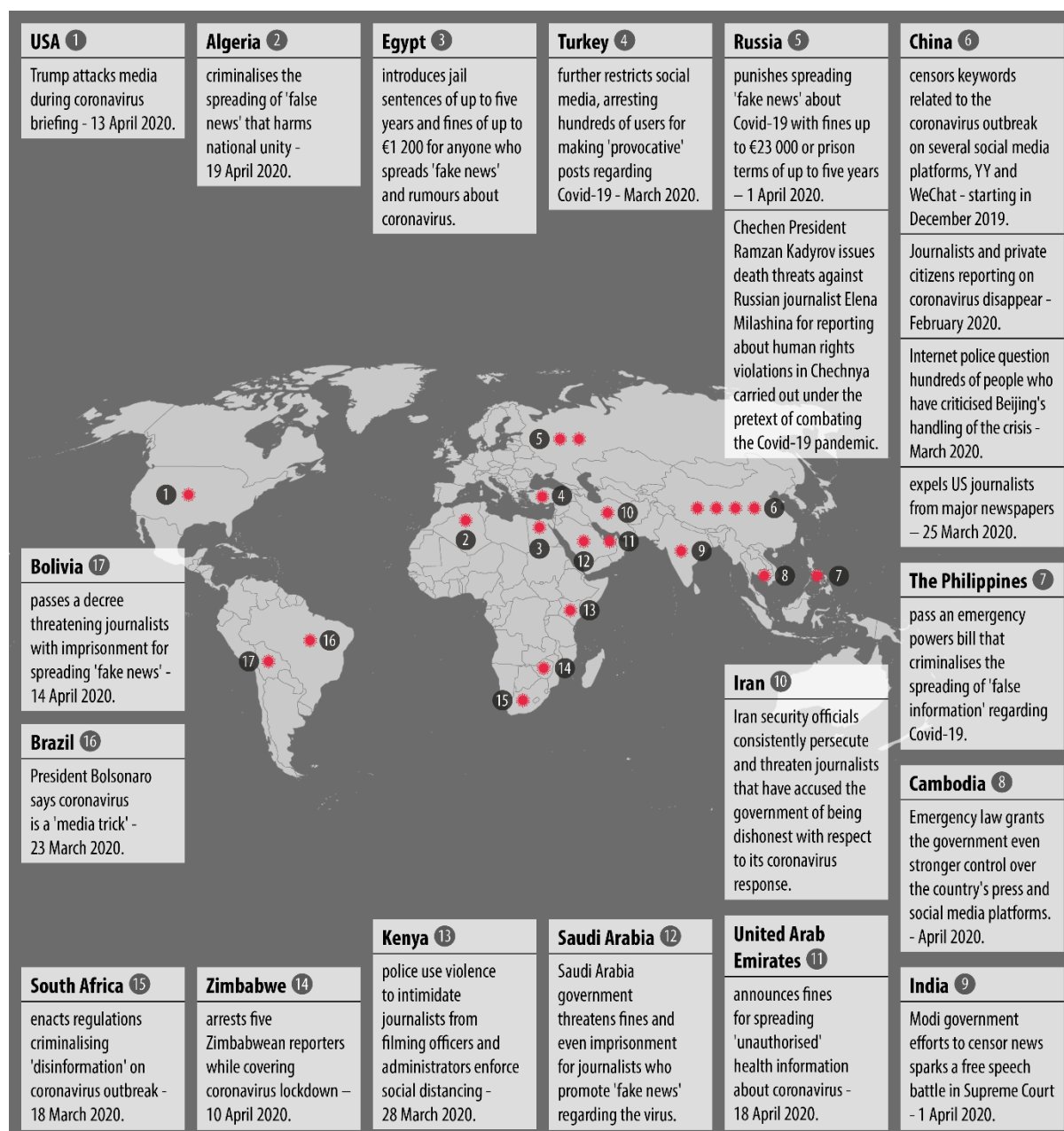
Initial government censorship relating to Covid-19

In December 2019, the Director of the emergency department at Wuhan central hospital, Ai Fen, notified her colleagues about a potential 'SARS-like coronavirus' seen in one of her patients.

That day, Wuhan's health commission warned Ai not to disclose information about the disease, to avoid panic.

Two days later, Chinese officials issued Ai with an official warning for 'spreading rumours' about the virus.

Whistleblowers who tried to warn people about the virus were gagged and/or detained by authorities, whilst social media posts on the virus were removed.

ability to suppress and contain the virus. Meanwhile, media watchdog Reporters Without Borders (RSF) have suggested that the existence of a free press in China could have helped to prevent the virus outbreak from spiralling out of control and becoming the global pandemic we have today.

Figure 2 – Coronavirus - What threat to freedom of speech? Selected examples

USA ❶	**Algeria** ❷	**Egypt** ❸	**Turkey** ❹	**Russia** ❺	**China** ❻
Trump attacks media during coronavirus briefing - 13 April 2020.	criminalises the spreading of 'false news' that harms national unity - 19 April 2020.	introduces jail sentences of up to five years and fines of up to €1 200 for anyone who spreads 'fake news' and rumours about coronavirus.	further restricts social media, arresting hundreds of users for making 'provocative' posts regarding Covid-19 - March 2020.	punishes spreading 'fake news' about Covid-19 with fines up to €23 000 or prison terms of up to five years – 1 April 2020.	censors keywords related to the coronavirus outbreak on several social media platforms, YY and WeChat - starting in December 2019.

Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov issues death threats against Russian journalist Elena Milashina for reporting about human rights violations in Chechnya carried out under the pretext of combating the Covid-19 pandemic.

China (continued): Journalists and private citizens reporting on coronavirus disappear - February 2020.

Internet police question hundreds of people who have criticised Beijing's handling of the crisis - March 2020.

expels US journalists from major newspapers – 25 March 2020.

Bolivia ❶⑦
passes a decree threatening journalists with imprisonment for spreading 'fake news' - 14 April 2020.

Brazil ❶⑥
President Bolsonaro says coronavirus is a 'media trick' - 23 March 2020.

The Philippines ❼
pass an emergency powers bill that criminalises the spreading of 'false information' regarding Covid-19.

Iran ❿
Iran security officials consistently persecute and threaten journalists that have accused the government of being dishonest with respect to its coronavirus response.

Cambodia ❽
Emergency law grants the government even stronger control over the country's press and social media platforms. - April 2020.

Kenya ❶③
police use violence to intimidate journalists from filming officers and administrators enforce social distancing - 28 March 2020.

Saudi Arabia ❶②
Saudi Arabia government threatens fines and even imprisonment for journalists who promote 'fake news' regarding the virus.

United Arab Emirates ❶①
announces fines for spreading 'unauthorised' health information about coronavirus - 18 April 2020.

India ❾
Modi government efforts to censor news sparks a free speech battle in Supreme Court - 1 April 2020.

South Africa ❶⑤
enacts regulations criminalising 'disinformation' on coronavirus outbreak - 18 March 2020.

Zimbabwe ❶④
arrests five Zimbabwean reporters while covering coronavirus lockdown – 10 April 2020.

Selected examples of pressure on and restrictions to media freedom across the world, linked to coronavirus. Source: EPRS based on International Press Institute tracker on press freedom violations, CPJ, others.

European Union action to protect and boost media freedom

The European democracy action plan, due to be presented later this year, will work specifically to address the issue of media freedom and media pluralism, seeking to help preserve and protect democracy. In March 2020, the EU also announced that it was making €5.1 million available for several projects that help to support 'freedom and pluralism in the media sector'. This includes the 'Europe-wide rapid response mechanism' (RRM), led by the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF), which works to detect and prevent violations of press and media freedom, as well as helping to reverse the deterioration of media freedom seen within the EU. Similarly, the 'cross-border investigative journalism fund' run by the International Press Institute (IPI) will work to support investigative journalists in Europe, including candidate countries, to uphold media freedom. The March announcement also saw the EU's media pluralism monitor (MPM) – which helps

to 'identify potential risks to media pluralism' in EU Member States and selected candidate countries – renewed for 2021.

Moreover, the EU action plan on human rights and democracy 2020-2024 envisages stepping up efforts to integrate the protection of human rights, democracy and the rule of law into all areas of external action, in the face of negative trends such as the rising intimidation of journalists and threats to independent media.

The EU's response to coronavirus-related threats to media freedom

In the face of the threat posed to media freedom by Covid-19, the EU has been vocal in stressing the importance of maintaining media freedom and democracy throughout the crisis. Addressing the aforementioned threats against a Russian journalist in Chechnya, on 24 April 2020, the European External Action Service called on Moscow to 'condemn and investigate threats made by the Chechen government authorities against journalist Elena Milashina, and to ensure her safety'.

In a European Parliament resolution adopted on 17 April 2020, Members stressed that disinformation about Covid-19 is a major public health problem, that all people should have access to accurate and verified information and that a free independent and sufficiently funded media is necessary for democracy. On 31 March 2020, European Parliament President David Sassoli stated that 'Nobody can be allowed to use this pandemic to undermine our freedoms', echoing his 26 March 2020 warning that 'democracy cannot be suspended in the midst of such a dramatic crisis'.

ENDNOTES

[1] This briefing cites, among other sources, media freedom rankings from international media watchdogs, such as the Press Freedom Index of Reporters Without Borders (RSF) and the Freedom of the Press Index of Freedom House. The rankings should be seen as providing indications only. For a detailed analysis of the value and limitations of international media freedom rankings, see Germany's public international broadcaster Deutsche Welle's guidebook on media freedom indices. It assesses that Freedom House's methodology reflects the organisation's 'neo-liberal predisposition'.

[2] Mijatović echoed a March 2020 joint statement issued by the monitors for freedom of expression and freedom of the media for the United Nations, the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights, and the Representative on Freedom of the Media of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, in which they highlighted the shared concern that 'false information about the pandemic could lead to health concerns, panic and disorder'. They however warned that 'content take-downs and censorship may result in limiting access to important information for public health and should only be undertaken where they meet the standards of necessity and proportionality. Any attempts to criminalise information relating to the pandemic may create distrust in institutional information, delay access to reliable information and have a chilling effect on freedom of expression.'

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