RSF 2021 Index: No antidote to disinformation, media control virus in Eastern Europe and Central Asia

The Covid-19 pandemic's lasting impact on press freedom, unprecedented crackdowns on reporters covering protests, and a war in the Caucasus, in which at least seven journalists were injured and reporting was obstructed, all helped to keep Eastern Europe and Central Asia in second from last position in the 2021 Index's ranking of regions.

A dangerous fever swept some countries in Eastern Europe and Central Asia that for the most part were already suffering from information suppression syndrome. Three of them experimented with a radical treatment for silencing journalists – total Internet shutdowns with the help of cyber-security software, provided in some cases by international tech companies such as Israel's Allot and Canada's Sandvine.

This was the case in the Caucasus, in **Azerbaijan** (down 1 at 167th) during the war in the autumn of 2020 in Nagorno-Karabakh, a territory disputed with **Armenia** (down 2 at 63rd). It was the case in **Kyrgyzstan** (down 3 at 79th) after the disputed parliamentary elections in October 2020, although this is Central Asia's best-ranked country. And it was the case in **Belarus** (down 5 at 158th), where the Internet was completely inaccessible for three days after the controversial results of the presidential election were announced, and then intermittently in the following months. According to the #KeepItOn coalition, which monitors Internet shutdowns, the Internet was shut down for a total of 121 days from August to December 2020 in Belarus.

Belarus (down 5 at 158th)
Regional crackdown champion
With censorship, mass arrests, harassment and violence,journalists working for independent media were specifically targeted by the police following the fraudulent presidential election on 9 August 2020. Arrested while covering protests or to prevent them from covering protests, journalists were initially given short "administrative" jail sentences on spurious grounds. The authorities later began to bring criminal charges against them that were punishable by several years in prison, and to conduct sham trials chaired by politically pliable judges. In their determination to crush all independent journalism, the police also began harassing its defenders, especially the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ), RSF's local partner.

Government lies, information monopoly

The most visible symptoms of governmental mendacity were seen in **Turkmenistan** (down 1 at 178th), the only country in the world, aside from North Korea, to still deny any Covid-19 presence in its territory, although the president himself popularised the use of liquorice and a traditional plant, harmel, as protection against an astonishing "pneumonia" wave. In this Central Asian country that has remained near the bottom of the Index year after year, there is no vaccine against the regime's disinformation. Independent domestic media are non-existent and just a few journalists operating clandestinely manage to funnel scraps of information to exile media outlets based abroad.

The total censorship imposed by some governments was accompanied by a contagious desire to control information to varying degrees in all of the region's countries. In **Russia** (down 1 at 150th), the independent media fought for months, despite a great deal of harassment, to report the reality of the Covid-19 pandemic and to combat the government's claims and

erroneous figures. In December 2020, Moscow finally acknowledged a coronavirus death toll that was three times the official figure. Not content with suppressing online articles by using the disinformation law in effect since 2019, the authorities beefed it up by means of a series of amendments.

Following the Russian model, other governments used the need to combat disinformation about Covid-19 as grounds for imposing additional curbs on press freedom. They included **Tajikistan** (down 1 at 162nd), an authoritarian Central Asian state where the cure was worse than the disease. Any "false" or "inaccurate" information about serious infectious diseases appearing in the media or on social media became punishable by a fine of up to twice the minimum monthly wage or 15 days in prison. The aim was clearly to make journalists self-censor any information about the pandemic that did not come from official sources – such as the death tally kept by a group of local activists that was much higher than the official figure.

Even countries that are normally less inclined to censor tried to create a state monopoly on pandemic-related information. In Armenia, the proclamation of a public health state of emergency was accompanied by draconian measures, including a requirement for the media to quote only government sources. In response to the ensuing outcry and protests by journalists, the controversial rules were softened and finally scrapped a few days later.

As well as the desire to monopolise information manifested in almost all of the region's countries, some national or local authorities also restricted access to the information they provided. In **Moldova** (up 2 at 89th), for example, the health ministry's press conferences at the height of the coronavirus crisis were conducted without any interaction with journalists. And according to the Independent Journalism Centre, the time taken by state agencies to respond to information requests tripled. The situation finally improved in mid-2020 after a campaign on social media.

Lockdown curbs, public animosity

Lockdown measures and social distancing rules provided authorities with additional grounds for obstructing journalists' work. In Russia, some reporters were arrested for alleged social distancing and lockdown violations while covering protests. In **Kazakhstan** (up 2 at 155th), a *KTK TV* crew was arrested for allegedly violating the state of emergency law while covering working conditions in a hospital in a western city. They finally got off with a warning after being placed in quarantine for two weeks although the law specifically allowed journalists to continue working during the pandemic.

It wasn't just governments that harassed journalists. The pandemic and the ensuing lockdowns fuelled social tension and expressions of animosity towards the media, especially when health crises coincided with elections. Reporters were attacked by unidentified individuals in at least seven of the region's countries. They included **Ukraine** (down 1 at 97th), where journalists were attacked by exasperated local businessmen and passers-by. The Institute for Mass Information logged more than 170 physical attacks in Ukraine, representing three quarters of the press freedom violations registered in the country.

Of all these sombre developments, the most disturbing for the future of press freedom in Eastern Europe and Central Asia is the evolution in Russia, the region's leader, towards a political model involving ever greater repression of independent journalists and media. Aside from the increasingly restrictive legislation, the police have never cracked down so extensively and systematically on journalists as they did in their efforts to prevent coverage of the protests in support of Kremlin opponent Alexei Navalny. After the pandemic is over, press freedom in the region could be tested by a wave of social and political protests, and by responses from governments infected with authoritarianism.