



Asociacioni i Gazetarëve të Kosovës
Association of Journalists of Kosovo



THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE ECONOMIC SITUATION OF JOURNALISTS, CAMERAMEN AND PHOTOJOURNALISTS

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Abbreviations

AJK - Association of Journalists of Kosovo

AMPEK- Association of Independent Broadcast Media of Kosovo

LP - Labour Inspectorate

KDI - Kosovo Democratic Institute

KFOS - Kosovo Foundation for Open Society

PCK- Press Council Kosovo

IMC - Independent Media Commission

MFT - Ministry of Finance and Transfers

Introduction

COVID-19 pandemic created a new reality and dynamics in the activity of media employees and the entire media sector in Kosovo. As of 13 March 2020, when the first case of COVID-19 was reported in the country, journalists, cameramen and photojournalists, with the permission of government authorities, continued to work under conditions of general lockdown, despite the risk of coronavirus infection.

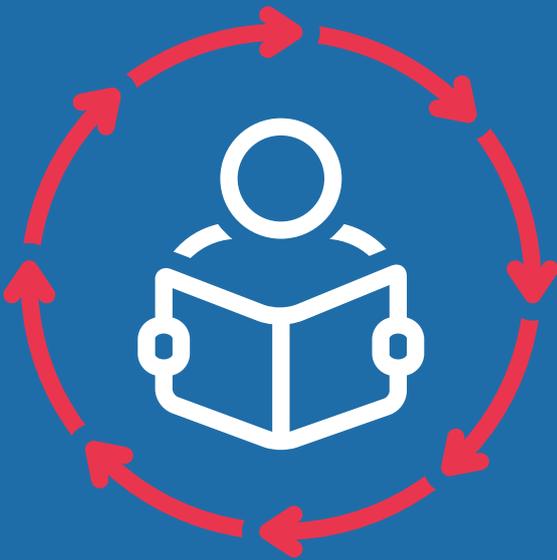
The general economic crisis caused chain impacts in the media sector, leading to a drastic decline in marketing revenues. As a result of general movement restrictions and financial difficulties, publishers suspended the printing and sale of newspapers and began informing the public only through electronic newspapers and portals. This crisis situation led to the aggravation of the economic situation of media employees, causing layoffs and delays in wage cuts by media companies, often in violation of guaranteed labour rights. In addition to financial pressure, journalists, cameramen and photojournalists, during the reporting period of the pandemic, also faced a lack of protection against COVID-19.

This situation highlighted the ongoing structural problems faced by journalists, photojournalists and cameramen in Kosovo, such as their precarious financial position and lack of adequate protection at work.

The purpose of this research report is to present the consequences of COVID-19 pandemic on the economic situation of media employees, focusing on layoffs, pay cuts and delays, the impact of the Emergency Fiscal Package, reporting difficulties and lack of necessary protection equipment against COVID-19. The first part of the report scrutinises the economic situation of media employees during the pandemic, addressing in particular the pandemic consequences in the print media and the overall impact of the Emergency Fiscal Package on the media sector. The second part examines the change in reporting dynamics and the difficulties of media employees in securing appropriate safeguards against COVID-19.



Methodology

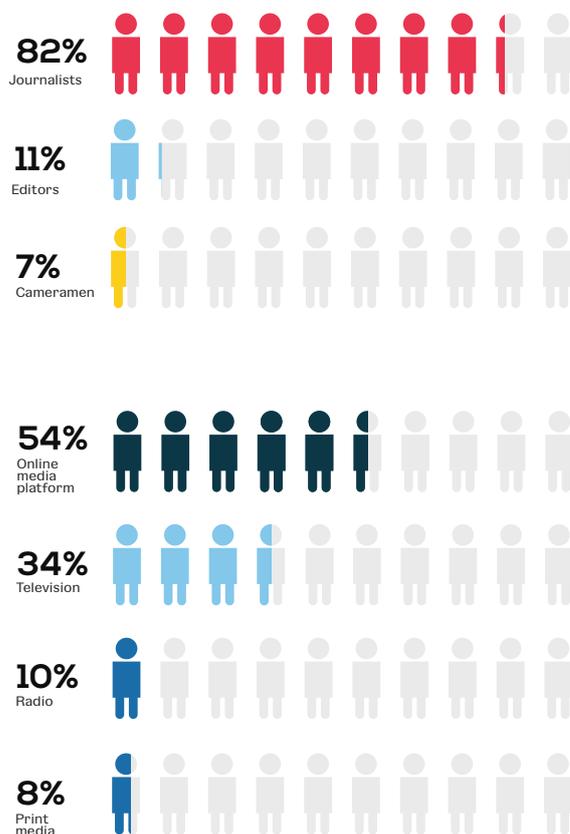


→ Methodology

The research project took place during the period June-September 2020, following the commencement of the third phase¹ to mitigate preventive measures against COVID-19 in Kosovo. The main research methods used to collect primary data were electronic surveys of media employees (journalists, cameramen and photojournalists), and interviews with professionals from the field of media and representatives of institutions and civil society organizations.

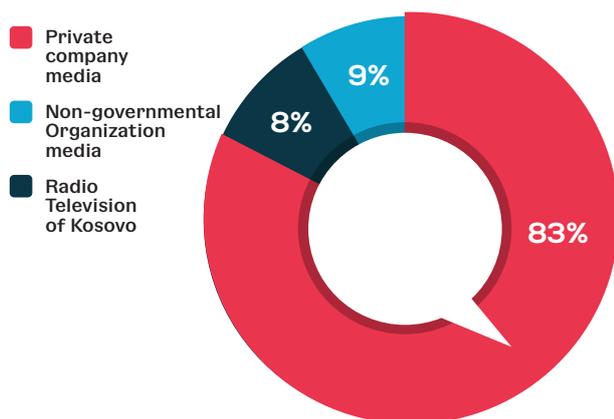
Through the electronic survey, the aim was to achieve a wider collection of experiences from media employees about the pandemic impact on the economy and their work dynamics, from March 13 when the first cases of COVID-19 in Kosovo were confirmed. The survey was compiled through the 'Google Forms' platform, in Albanian and Serbian, and was emailed to over 400 AJK members and various media outlets. Out of a total of 120 media employees who responded to the survey, about 58% of them were women, while 38% were men. The vast majority of respondents (89%) were identified as Albanians, while others as Ashkali, Egyptians, Roma, Serbs and Turks. More than half (52%) of the respondents were aged 25 and 34, while the second most represented age group (28%) of the respondents was 18 to 24 years old. In 66% of respondents,

the highest level of education was bachelor, while in 32% the highest level of education was master. The survey was anonymous but provided respondents with the opportunity to voluntarily share more extensive work experiences with the AJK during the pandemic. Regarding the type of media, the majority (54%) of respondents are employees of online media platforms, 34% of them work in television, 10% in radio, while 8% of respondents work in print media. The vast majority (82%) of them stated that they are journalists, 7% cameramen, while the rest are editors.



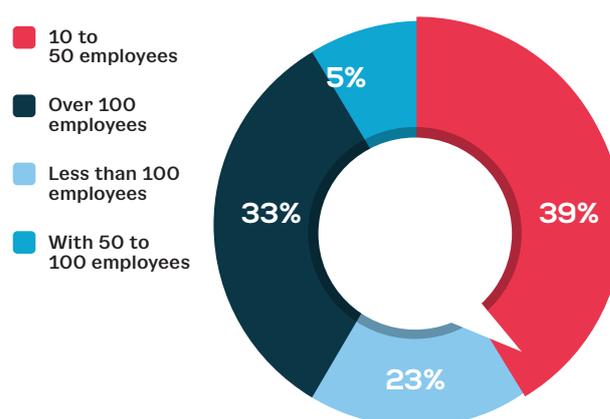
1. Easing of measures against COVID-19 to begin tomorrow", Lajmi, 31 March 2020, <https://lajmi.net/n eser-fillon-faza-e-trete-e-lehtesimit-te-masave-ndaj-covid-19/>.

Methodology



According to the level of geographical media operation, 69% of survey respondents said they work in national media, 17% in regional media, and 14% in local media. The vast majority of respondents (83%) work in private media companies, 9% of them in non-governmental media organizations and almost the same (8%) in the only public media in the country, Radio Television of Kosovo. Regarding the division of media according to the number of employees, 39% of respondents responded that they work in media companies that have from 10 to 50 employees, while 33% of them in media that have over 100 employees. 27 respondents or 23%, stated that they work in media, which have less than 10 employees, while only 5% of respondents in media with 50 to 100 employees.

As part of the research, 14 interviews were conducted - seven with media professionals and representatives of relevant institutions and civil society organizations, as well as with journalists from various media. Most of the journalists selected for interview reported continuously during the pandemic, while one of them was fired during that period. Although AJK contacted a larger number of media employees who lost their jobs during the pandemic, they refused to participate in the research because they feared it could affect the lawsuits initiated by them.



Due to the circumstances caused by the pandemic, some of the interviews were conducted through virtual communication applications, while others respecting the protection measures against COVID-19.

In addition to conducting surveys and interviews, AJK contacted some of public institutions and civil society organizations requiring relevant data and information for research. Also, secondary data and existing publications were consulted about the overall impact of COVID-19 in Kosovo, which is also reflected in the media sector and the work of media employees.

The research data refer to the time period from 13 March, when the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in the country until the end of the interview process, at the beginning of September. The survey was accessible online to media employees during July and therefore respondents' responses reflect their experiences from the onset of the pandemic in the country to the end of July. In research, the term media employee refers to journalists, photojournalists and cameramen, as categories represented by AJK.



Economic
situation of media
employees during
COVID-19





Economic situation of media employees during COVID-19

The media sector in Kosovo did not remain isolated from the overall economic downturn in the country as a result of the global COVID-19 pandemic. According to the Ministry of Finance, in the lockdown period (March-May 2020), Kosovo's budget revenues decreased by 28.2%, compared to the same period of the previous year 2019 ². According to a realistic calculation scenario, it is considered that the economic downturn could affect the structural unemployment in Kosovo to increase by 23%, while by the end of the year, by 31.3% ³.

As of March, the number of jobseekers registered with the Employment Agency multiplied by about 40 times ⁴, reaching 37,392 as of April. This number during the first quarter in 2019 was only 6,882 ⁵.

In the private media, the general economic crisis was manifested by an immediate reduction of marketing revenues, and consequently by the cessation of printing of newspapers for an indefinite period, reduction of salaries and dismissal of media employees.

Imer Mushkolaj, Chairman of the Press Council of Kosovo (PCK), emphasizes that COVID-19 pandemic caused a chain effect in the media sector, making the overall economic downturn of businesses to be reflected in the reduction of the number of advertisements in the media space, and consequently in the reduction of media revenues during this period. According to him, this impact is best reflected by the suspension of the printing of daily newspapers, since the beginning of the pandemic in the country. "Currently in Kosovo, no newspaper is published. So, if you go to a kiosk today you will not find any daily newspaper, out of four that were printed and went on sale before the pandemic started." ⁶, Mushkolaj said

The cost of technical preparation, printing and distribution, the complete restriction of movement of citizens and the closure of points of sale in the first months of the pandemic, made the publishers of newspapers stop placement on the market of daily newspapers: Bota Sot, Epoka e Re, Koha Ditore and Zëri.

2. GAP Institute, Impact of COVID-19 pandemic in Kosovo budget, p.10, June 2020. https://www.institutigap.org/documents/31153_Ndikimi%20i%20pandemis%C3%AB%20ne%20Buxhet.pdf.

3. Edison Jakurti, "The potential impact of COVID-19 on unemployment in Kosovo: an analysis through scenarios", S'bunker, 13 August 2020, <https://sbunker.net/teh/90603/ndikimi-i-mundshem-i-covid-19-ne-papunesi-ne-kosove-nje-analize-permes-skenareve/>.

4. This high increase of registered jobseekers may also be a result of measure 15 of the Emergency Fiscal Package, which provided for a payment of 130 euros for citizens registered as jobseekers.

5. GAP Institute, Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the labor market, p.7, June 2020, https://www.institutigap.org/documents/97205_covid_tregu_punes.pdf.

6. Imer Mushkolaj, interview by AJK, 3 July 2020.

Economic situation of media employees during COVID-19

Managers of “Koha Ditore” continued to publish the newspaper only in electronic form, offering it free of charge to the readers, until at the end of June when they started printing only Sunday edition⁷. Other newspapers continued to work online, with journalists mostly working from their homes⁸. COVID-19 pandemic aggravated the already difficult position of the print media, not only in Kosovo but all over the world. It is considered that this global situation may mark the final stage of contraction of the print media, requiring a rethinking and restructuring of its functioning⁹. Dren Gërguri, a lecturer in the Department of Journalism at the University of Prishtina, considers that in Kosovo the pandemic has only accelerated the dynamics of declining sales of print newspapers, which did not have financial stability even before the pandemic.

For Flutura Kusari, a media lawyer, the pandemic revealed all the existing structural problems in the field of journalism, especially the precarious financial position of media employees in Kosovo. She points out that the main economic consequences of COVID-19 for media employees were layoffs and pay cuts and delays. “Journalists in Kosovo, in addition to being paid little and often the level of their salaries is completely inconsistent with the benefits of media managers, have faced delays and pay cuts during this period more than ever”¹⁰, Kusari said.

The change in the employment relationship and salaries of media employees after the outbreak of the pandemic is also reflected in the results of AJK online survey. While for the period before the pandemic, 22 out of 120 respondents had answered that their monthly salary was from 130 to 250 euro, their number increased to 38 after the outbreak of the pandemic. Meanwhile, the number of media employees who declared to have been paid over 250 euro, after the pandemic has decreased. Out of 24 respondents who said they were paid between 260 and 350 euro before the pandemic, in the post-pandemic period, their number dropped to 20. The number of media employees paid from 360 to 500 euros was also reduced, from 35 before the pandemic to 30 after it. 21 respondents stated that before the pandemic they were paid from 500 to 650 euro, while after the pandemic, their number dropped to 17. Even the number of those paid more than 650 euro has decreased, from 18 before the pandemic to 15 after it. These figures show that the pandemic affected more media employees with lower salaries, affecting the increase in the number of those receiving the minimum wage from 130 to 250 euro. A significant number of media employees stated in the survey that the salary reduction was a consequence of the forced reduction of working hours and the financial difficulties of the media where they work.

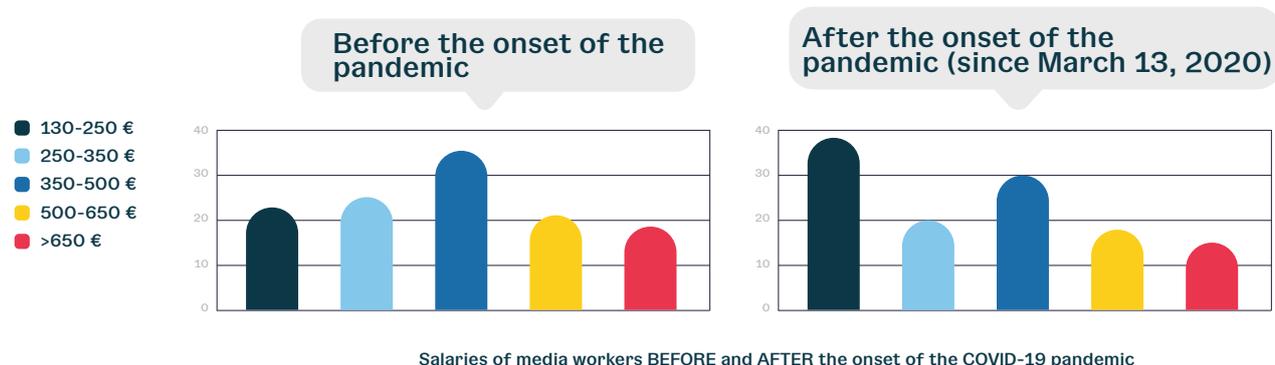
7. Sunday on Koha Ditore again in the hands of readers Koha Ditore, 28 June 2020, https://www.koha.net/arberi/227540/e-diela-me-koha-ditore-serish-ne-duarte-lexuesve/?fbclid=IwAR3e4cMmssbjQfJ1mWhnsuZShHkrWp6gbeVaWrVOuobFATGaFGytwK3BQ_I.

8. Besnik Boletini, “Consequences of the pandemic in the print media”, Kosova Live, June 2020, <https://www.kosovalive360.com/pasojat-e-pandemise-ne-mediat-e-shkruara/?fbclid=IwAR29uWqOncbyYuKBrwuLvO6E3Q6VBti4-SSAwC5nr0bC7okazKILaFhLzEY>.

9. Roy Greenslade, “Why our newspapers might not survive the contagion of coronavirus”, The Guardian 12 April 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/commentisfree/2020/apr/12/newsprint-coronavirus-newspapers>

10. Flutura Kusari, interview by AJK, 18 June 2020.

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While 113 respondents responded that before the pandemic they worked full time (40 hours per week), this number was reduced to 103 when asked about their employment relationship after the outbreak of the pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, only one media employee was reported to be working part-time, while after the pandemic the number rose to nine. Similarly, after the pandemic, the number of freelance media employees increased from four before the pandemic to six. Also, two respondents stated that after the outbreak of the pandemic they are unemployed, while this number was zero in the period before the pandemic.

Niman Racaj, Director of the Legal Department of the Independent Media Commission (IMC), stressed that in ongoing conversations with

media representatives since the beginning of the pandemic, this institution received requests for exemption of media from paying the license fee, due of the financial difficulties they faced during the pandemic. IMC forwarded the same request in the first months of the pandemic to the Ministry of Finance and Transfers, which manages the budget collected from the payments of this fee. “We as an institution have considered this request as the only opportunity to support the media, considering that the payment of license fee at this time may pose a financial burden for them”¹¹, Racaj said. However, the Ministry of Finance did not approve the request for exemption from the payment of the fee referring to the Law on the Independent Media Commission, where this fee is defined as a legal obligation for media service providers¹².

11. Niman Racaj, interview by AGK, 14 July 2020.

12. Law on the Independent Media Commission, no. 04 / L-44, article 26, <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDetail.aspx?ActID=2809neni>.

Economic situation of media employees during COVID-19

Racaj added that after receiving the response from the Ministry, IMC did not have legal authority to take any actions in this regard and that this could be done only if the Assembly of Kosovo would amend the relevant law. Furthermore, due to the absence of the IMC Internal Commission during the pandemic period, it was not possible for this institution to make a decision on the temporary suspension of the fee payment, which according to the set deadline had to be done in June. However, Racaj said that IMC has tried to be more flexible regarding this deadline, understanding the delay in fee payments until mid-July. Among other things, Racaj mentioned that due to financial difficulties during the pandemic, some local televisions stopped broadcasting frequently, because they could not afford the cost of equipment maintenance, thus continuing only with cable broadcasting.

In order to address the aggravated economic situation of audiovisual media, the Association of Independent Broadcast Media of Kosovo (AMPEK), a few days after the outbreak of the pandemic, addressed a list of requests for financial assistance to the Government of Kosovo. The requests, which were drafted before the approval of the Emergency Fiscal Package, articulated, among other things, the need for support for salaries of media employees, imposing the loan moratorium, the termination of tax obligations to the state, as well as the reimbursement of rental expenses. The calculation of the monetary value needed to meet the requirements was based on the annual financial reports of

the audiovisual media, provided by the IMC. “After the pandemic outbreak, we mobilized immediately, making a list of demands and scheduling a meeting with the Government on 16 March. With the help of the IMC, we managed to make an estimate of the financial needs of the audiovisual media, based on their annual budgets submitted to the IMC, and we then submitted that estimation to the government”¹³, said Ardita Zejnullahu, Director of AMPEK. Although some of AMPEK’s requests were addressed through the Emergency Fiscal Package, Zejnullahu considers that it would be fairer to provide more specific assistance to the media sector, given the important role of this sector for public information. In July, AMPEK held another meeting with the Government to include audiovisual media requests in the government plan for the Economic Recovery Package.

During the pandemic period, specific media support was provided by the Kosovo Foundation for Open Society (KFOS), through the creation of an emergency fund that provided grants to private media and non-governmental organizations. Emergency grants aimed at mitigating the economic consequences of the drastic decline in advertising revenues for private media, considering it important to “maintain the plurality of the media setting, especially during times of lockdown when fair and accurate reporting had become even more important”¹⁴. Out of 41 media outlets that applied, 15 of them benefited from the call for grants.

13. Ardita Zejnullahu, interview by AJK, 3 July 2020.

14. Lura Limani, Program Coordinator at KFOS, email communication, 27 July 2020.

Media employees and the Emergency Fiscal Package

On 30 March 2020, the Government approved the Emergency Fiscal Package¹⁵, to provide short-term financial assistance for crisis management, subsidizing private sector enterprises, social scheme beneficiaries and employees severely affected by COVID-19 pandemic. Among the main measures included in the Package were: double payment for beneficiaries of social schemes, coverage of salary and rent costs for private sector enterprises, additional salaries for categories of employees exposed to risk in the public and private sector, financial support for municipalities, culture and citizens registered as unemployed¹⁶.

Under the Emergency Fiscal Package, the media were included in the category of businesses, being given the right to benefit from measures 1.3, 1.10 and 1.14, which provided for the coverage of employee salary costs in the amount of 170 euro for the months of April and May, covering the rental amount up to 50% for these two months, providing financial liquidity and support of 130 euro for the media that register employees with a contract of employment of at least one year during the pandemic emergency period¹⁷.

However, in the first days after the adoption of the Package, there was a lot of uncertainty about the inclusion of media, media employees

and how they would benefit from emergency financial support. Prior to the approval of the Package, AJK made efforts to contact the Ministry of Finance and Transfers (MFT) to find out about the support provided to media employees by requesting the necessary inclusion of journalists, photojournalists and cameramen, but no response was received from the MFT. Following the adoption of the Package, AJK requested the MFT to clarify the measures and procedures through which the media and media employees could benefit, considering this essential to prevent possible layoffs of media employees¹⁸.

According to the data received from MFT in June 2020, there was a total of 111 companies whose activity is related to the publication of newspapers, television broadcasting, portal sites and news agencies, which have benefited from the first point of measure 1.3, accepting salary coverage in the amount of 170 euro for a total of 1,349 media employees, for the months of April and May. According to the data, the total number of media that have applied for this measure was 123, implying that 12 media outlets were denied the request by MTF, to benefit from measure 1.3. Whereas, 27 media companies out of a total of 28 that had applied, have benefited from 130 euro provided under measure 1.14, for a total of 60 media employees, who are registered for the first time with an employment contract of at least one year by the employer during the pandemic period.

15. "The Fiscal Emergency Package is approved, 9 million euro more than proposed", Koha Ditore, 30 March 2020, <https://www.koha.net/arberi/215483/miratohet-pakoja-emergjente-fiskale-9-milione-euro-me-shume-se-qe-ishte-propozuar/>.

16. Government of the Republic of Kosovo, "Decision No. 01/19", 30 March 2020, <https://kryeministri-ks.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Vendimi-i-Qeveris%C3%AB-nga-Mbledhja-e-19.pdf>.

17. Association of Journalists of Kosovo, "MFT confirms: media employees are included in the emergency package", 3 April 2020, <http://agk-ks.org/mft-konfirmon-punetoret-medial-jane-te-perfshire-ne-pakon-emergjente/>.

18. Association of Journalists of Kosovo, "Journalists, cameramen, photojournalists, and other media employees to be included in the Government Emergency Package", 31 March 2020 <http://agk-ks.org/gazetaret-kameramanet-fotoreporteret-dhe-punonjesit-tjere-medial-gjithsesi-te-perfshihen-ne-pakon-emergjente-te-qeverise/>.

Economic situation of media employees during COVID-19

REQUESTS							Approvals		
Measures	Code	Activity	No. of businesses	No. of Employees	No. of businesses	No. of Beneficiaries			
3a	5813	Publication of newspapers	6	300	5	294			
3a	6020	Television broadcast activities	47	658	44	615			
3a	6312	Web portals	47	249	41	201			
3a	6391	News agency activities	23	246	21	239			
Total:			123	1453	111	1349			
14	5813	Publication of newspapers	1	4	1	4			
14	6020	Television broadcast activities	11	30	10	26			
14	6312	Web portals	7	15	7	15			
14	6391	News agency activities	9	17	9	15			
Total:			28	66	27	60			

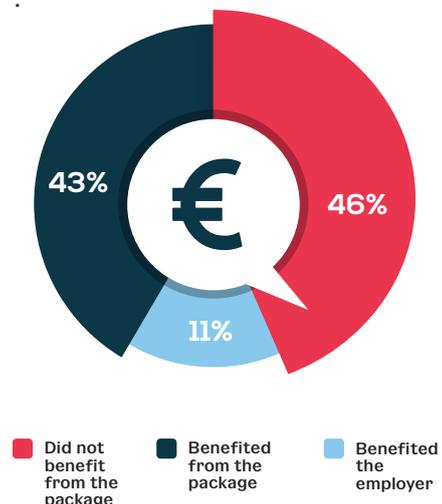
Source: Ministry of Finance and Transfers, June 2020.

Economic situation of media employees during COVID-19

From the data for measure 1.14, it is understood that a significant number of media employees who worked without employment contracts benefited from this measure, by being registered as full-time employees during the pandemic period. In the online survey, the majority (84%) of the surveyed media employees answered that they had a contract before the outbreak of the pandemic, 10% of them or 12 employees stated that they did not have an employment contract, while 6% of respondents refused to answer for that matter. AJK has consistently emphasized¹⁹ the problem of lack of employment contracts for media employees, considering that this is a violation of the Labour Law and creates a state of financial uncertainty for media employees.

In the survey, 43% of 120 employees stated that they had received support from the Fiscal Emergency Package, 55 (46%) of them said that they had not benefited in any way from the Package, while others responded that the employer had benefited. The main form of assistance received was salary compensation in the amount of 170 euro determined under measure 1.3 of the Package.

Experts in the field of media consider that this form of support was not enough for media employees during the pandemic period. Flutura Kusari highlighted that in the first months after the breakout of the pandemic, cases were identified when the coverage of salaries in the amount of 170 euro, made media employees accept the reduced monthly salary for the same amount, with the reasoning of employers that the rest will be compensated by the Government²⁰. This issue becomes even more concerning when knowing that due to the swapping process of governments, there were delays in the execution of payments provided in the Package, which were finalized only in the second week of August.²¹ According to a research conducted by KDI on the implementation of the Emergency Package, the Government of Kosovo executed only 45% of the total amount of the Package by July 17. In particular, up to that time, measure 1.3 was realized only 42%, while measure 1.14 on 31%²².



19. Association of Journalists of Kosovo, Indicators for the level of media freedom and security of journalists 2018, p.7, December 2018, <http://agk-ks.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Treguesit-e-nivelit-te-lirise-se-mediave-dhe-sigurise-se-gazetareve-Kosova-2018.pdf>.

20. Flutura Kusari, interview by AJK, 3 July 2020.

21. Ministry of Transfers and Finance, "The Ministry of Finance notifies citizens and businesses that it has executed the first set of payments under measure 3 (a) of the Emergency Fiscal Package", 10 August 2020, <https://mf.rks-gov.net/Page.aspx?id=1,2,955>.

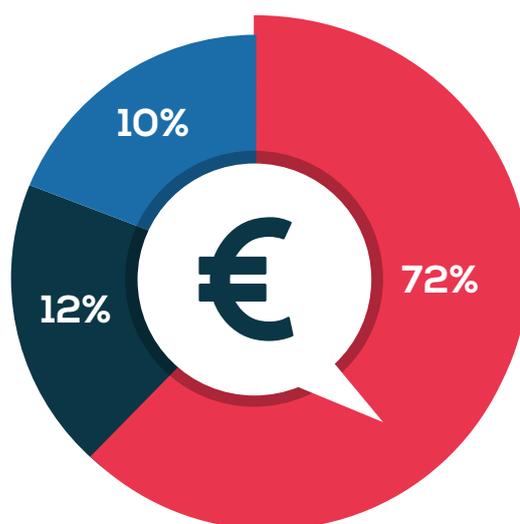
22. Kosovo Democratic Institute, Emergency Fiscal Package: Brief Analysis, p.14, 2020, <http://kdi-kosova.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/50-Analiz%C3%AB-e-Shkurt%C3%ABr-e-Pakos-Fiskale-Emergjente-ALB-02.pdf>.

Economic situation of media employees during COVID-19

Kusari also estimated that given the ongoing reporting in the pandemic where journalists, cameramen and photojournalists directly endangered their health, they should have been included in the Package under the category of essential staff, such as medical staff, Police, KSF and Customs personnel, who have received additional payment for work during the months of lockdown. “[Journalists] have so much been exposed to the infection that there is no sound logic that could justify why journalists have not been included among the essential staff,” Kusari said. Asked about this, the then Prime Minister, Albin Kurti had stated ²³ that the possibility of including media employees as essential staff in future planned Packages would be considered, which did not happen due to the political developments that followed.

In the AJK online survey, the majority of respondents (72%) fully agreed that media employees who worked during the pandemic should be included in the Emergency Fiscal Package as essential staff; 10% of them partially agreed, while 12% did not agree at all with this assessment. Journalist Bujar Vitija from the electronic newspaper Shneta, who

continuously reported from the University Clinical Center of Kosovo during the pandemic, said that media employees, especially those who worked in the field, should have been included in the category of vulnerable employees. “A journalist who receives news at the Infectious Diseases Clinic, or goes to a municipality where the virus is present and has contact with infected people, is in direct danger. We are talking about a situation where media employees are at risk because they practice their profession to inform citizens.”²⁴, Vitija added.



■ Fully agree ■ Partially agree ■ Do not agree

“Media workers who worked during the pandemic should be included in the Emergency Fiscal Package as essential workers.”

23. “Kurti admits that there is no support for journalists in the Government Emergency Package”, Lajmi, 10 April 2020, <https://lajmi.net/kurti-e-pranon-se-ska-mbeshitetje-per-gazetaret-ne-pakon-emergjente-te-geverise/>.

24. Bujar Vitijaj, interview by AJK, 3 July 2020.

During the process of providing financial support under the Package, some media reacted ²⁵ noting that MTF tended to treat them unequally. Imer Mushkolaj, Chairman of PCK said that “some of our members have publicly complained that they have not yet received financial support. This may also have been due to the lengthy verification process. However, in no case should there be a selective approach to the assistance provided to the media, despite the critical attitudes they may have towards the government” ²⁶. For Flutura Kusari, this situation tends to “discipline the media through utilization of public money”²⁷ Being asked about this in the online survey, out of 120 media employees, 37% fully agree that not all media were treated equally and impartially during the selection process for the benefit of the Package; 17% of them partially agree with this assessment, while 24% have no opinion on this issue. On the other hand, 8% of respondents agree, while 15% of them do not agree at all with such an assessment.

The case of the media company “Zëri”

Among the most concerning cases of violation of labour rights and economic consequences in the media sector during COVID-19 pandemic, was the layoff of over 20 media employees of the company “Zëri”. At the end of March, AJK was informed by the dismissed employees that without any warning and contrary to the legal deadlines set by the Labour Law ²⁸, their employment contract was terminated by the employer. AJJK has reacted to this case ²⁹ considering it as “arbitrary and inadmissible” and has asked the Labour Inspectorate to consider it as soon as possible. For Flutura Kusari, this case represents the most serious case of COVID-19 economic impact on media employees in Kosovo. We have seen cases, such as that of “Zëri”, where a large number of journalists, including two pregnant women, have been fired and this is the most serious economic consequence that can happen to a journalist during this crisis” ³⁰ she said.

25. Berat Buzhala, “Clarification regarding about 150 employees of Gazeta Express and Television 7, and for the general public”, Facebook, 11 May 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/berat.buzhala/posts/10157074402701479>.

26. Imer Mushkolaj, interview by AJK, 3 July 2020.

27. Flutura Kusari, interview by AJK, 18 June 2020.

28. Labour Law, No. 03 / L-212, Article 71, <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDocumentDetail.aspx?ActID=2735>.

29. Association of Journalists of Kosovo, “Dismissal of media employees by the newspaper ‘Zëri’ completely unacceptable, 2 April 2020, <http://agk-ks.org/agk-plotesisht-i-papranueshem-largimi-i-punonjesve-medial-nga-gazeta-zeri/>.

30. Flutura Kusari, interview by AJK, 18 June 2020.

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A journalist, who wanted to remain anonymous, who was part of the company Zëri from March 2019, indicated that she had received the layoff notification via e-mail, just two days before her employment was terminated, likewise her colleagues³¹. Although she had a contract of employment until December 2020, she was dismissed on the employer's reasoning that COVID-19 pandemic had aggravated the already aggravated financial situation of the media company "Zëri". "Recently, with the spread of the coronavirus and the imposition of emergency health measures, when the distribution of the newspaper is stopped, we have come to the conclusion that we need to close some of the job positions," said the email sent to employees fired by media owners. She confesses that even earlier the employer had not complied with the obligations of the contract, by not paying salaries regularly.

Through AJK, at the beginning of April, the dismissed employees, who worked in different sectors of the company "Zëri", received legal assistance from the legal advisor at the Democratic Institute of Kosovo (KDI), Florent Spahija, for drafting complaints addressed to the employer. After the complaints sent for

violation of the Labour Law, the two pregnant journalists were reinstated to their jobs by the company "Zëri", while the other employees were recognized the right to an additional salary.³² "Only the complaints of two journalists who were pregnant have been granted, as the law prohibits such dismissal of pregnant employees who have an employment contract," Spahija said. According to him, among those who left were journalists who had worked for more than ten years in the medium "Zëri", thus gaining the right to an employment contract for an indefinite period³³, who have not been reinstated to work following the complaints.

Eight of the dismissed employees, by legal support from KDI³⁴ initiated a lawsuit in the Basic Court of Prishtina, considering that the employer's decision is illegal. They demand reinstatement to work and compliance with the contracts they had. Since April when the lawsuit was initiated, the Basic Court has not convened a hearing and the case has not proceeded yet³⁵.

31. Anonymous, interview by AGK, 17 August 2020.

32. Florent Spahija, interview by AJK, 3 July 2020.

33. Labour Law, No. 03 / L-212, article 10, <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDocumentDetail.aspx?ActID=2735>.

34. Democratic Institute of Kosovo, Employees' benefits from the Emergency Package, p. 7, April 2020, <http://kdi-kosova.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/P%C3%ABrfitimet-e-pun%C3%ABtor%C3%ABve-nga-pakoja-emergjente.pdf>.

35. Florent Spahija, interview by AJK, 6 July 2020.

Economic situation of media employees during COVID-19

The same employees sent a request for review of the case to the institution of Labour Inspectorate. Valon Leci, Director of the Department of Finance and General Services, also acting Chief Inspector at the time of the pandemic, confirmed that the Labour Inspectorate had received complaints from some media employees against a media company regarding dismissal and violation of their right to wages ³⁶. “The Inspectorate initiated an inspection process in that media and will find out if there are any violations. The official report and decision will be issued by the inspector in charge of the case”, Leci said. He underlined that the increase in the volume of work of this institution due to the pandemic on the one hand, and the small number of inspectors, on the other hand, may delay the treatment of this case because, according to him, the most priority cases are considered those which have to do with the health of employees at work

At the beginning of September, AJK also contacted the Chief Inspector, Ekrem Kastrati, who replied via email that “no decision has been made yet on this case, the case is under procedure, in the first instance” ³⁷.

According to him, the decision is expected to be taken within September, however he did not provide more information about the case. It is concerning for AGK the fact that even after more than five months since the dismissal of media employees, the Labour Inspectorate has not taken a final decision in this case.

36. Valon Leci, interview by AJK, 2 July 2020.

37. Ekrem Kastrati, communication via email, September 10, 2020.



**Reporting during
the pandemic
and the safety
of media
employees**





Reporting during the pandemic and the safety of media employees

The government decision adopted in March to ban the movement of citizens³⁸ did not include media employees, who were allowed to continue their professional activity throughout the period of lockdown, being required only to keep their identification employment cards³⁹. This enabled journalists and other media employees to report continuously, keeping citizens informed of the pandemic and political developments in the country and beyond, but at the same time exposing them to the greater risk of COVID-19 infection.

For Flutura Kusari, the reporting of journalists from the beginning of the pandemic was qualitative, especially when taking into account the conditions in which they worked during that period and the general conditions in the media sector in Kosovo. “It has been exemplary reporting with some insignificant exceptions. The media have as far as possible fulfilled their primary responsibility for confirming

the news,”⁴⁰ she said. Dren Gërguri, a lecturer in the Department of Journalism at the University of Prishtina, is of the same opinion, who during the pandemic covered the media scene in Kosovo and the region, especially the phenomenon of fake news.⁴¹ He considers that “the main media were generally correct. There was misinformation spread on social networks mainly by unverified sites, but the good thing was that the journalists’ reporting was accurate. They did not rush to provide information, considering the effect that misinformation can have in those circumstances. Therefore, this period has served to understand the important role of journalists in society.”⁴² During this health crisis, independent and professional journalism around the world was considered essential⁴³ in combating the spread of the virus and what has been called “disinfodemy” - dissemination of pandemic-related misinformation - through the reporting of scientifically verified information.

38. Government of the Republic of Kosovo, “Decision No. 01/15”, 23 March, <https://kryeministri-ks.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Vendimet-e-Mbledhjes-s%C3%AB-15-t%C3%AB-t%C3%AB-Qeveris%C3%AB-s%C3%AB-Republik%C3%AB-s%C3%AB-Kosov%C3%ABs.pdf>.

39. Association of Kosovo Journalists, “Movement of journalists and other media employees not restricted, they need to have need to have a work ID with them”, 24 March, 2020 <http://agk-ks.org/gazetareve-dhe-punonjesve-tjere-medial-nuk-u-kufizohet-levizja-me-vete-ta-kene-id-ne-e-punes/>.

40. Flutura Kusari, interview by AJK, 18 June 2020.

41. Dren Gërguri, “Media in Kosovo during COVID-19 period”, Portalb, 29 May 2020 <https://portalb.mk/686503-media-ne-kosove-gjate-periudhes-se-covid-19/>.

42. Dren Gërguri, interview by AJK, 23 July 2020.

43. Open Society Foundations, “How COVID-19 Threatens Independent Journalism”, June 2020, https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/explainers/how-covid-19-threatens-independent-journalism?utm_medium=referral&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_



Photo: Ridvan Slivova

Jehona Zhitia, RTK journalist, who has covered the health sector for a long period of time, at the same time the first reporter from the premises inside the Infectious Diseases Clinic of UCCK during COVID-19 crisis, states that the pandemic was a new and unfamiliar situation during her experience as a journalist. Working long hours since the beginning of March, Zhitia reported all the time from the UCCK premises where patients with COVID-19 were treated or laboratory tests were performed. As a result, she became infected with the coronavirus in August. Zhitia stressed the lack of necessary protective equipment for media employees, especially those who visited pandemic outbreaks and needed several pairs of protective equipment during a working day. “Since the beginning of the pandemic, journalists from various media outlets have discussed what to do to get the protective equipment, and we each had the same concern that we will have to provide them by ourselves.

44. Jehona Zhitia, interview by AJK, 07 September 2020.

After this, the editorial office started providing them to RTK, but not in sufficient quantities. This has been problematic,”⁴⁴ Zhitia said.

According to her, it was even more difficult to provide the necessary protective clothing to enter the UCCK clinics. Except for the first time when protective clothing was provided to her by the Infectious Diseases Clinic, Zhitia points out that other times she was forced to provide it through unofficial channels. “Those general clothes, overalls, hats, protective glass, gloves, masks cost around 30 euro, which means that for me, the cameraman and the engineer who performed the live broadcast, it cost about 100 euro. “None of us were in a comfortable financial position to buy them and that was not our obligation.”⁴⁵, said Zhitia, while pointing out the difficulties of getting them through informal connections.

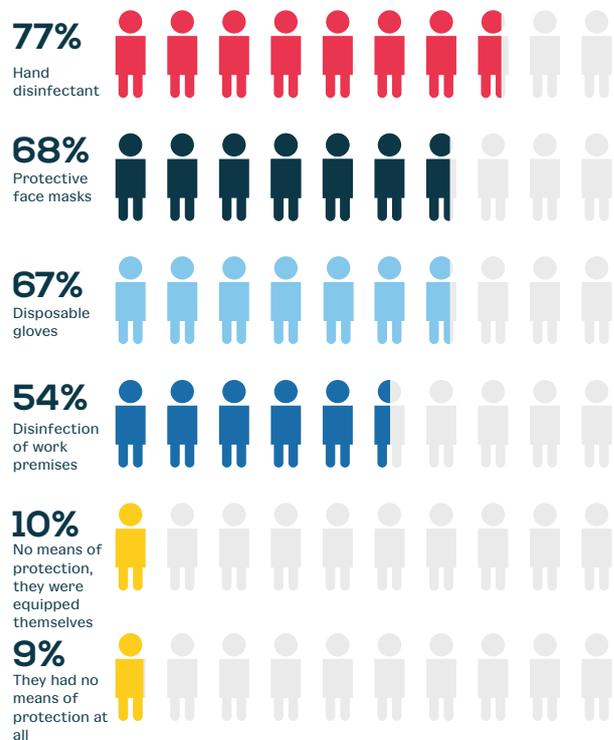
45. Ibid.

Reporting during the pandemic and the safety of media employees

Express journalist Gentiana Hasani had the same experience while reporting from UCCK premises, who considers that the relevant health institutions or media outlets should have provided protective equipment for media employees. “To enter the clinics where COVID-19 patients are hospitalized, you have to buy all the protective equipment yourself. There is the will but not the financial capacity for journalists to enter the clinics and convey the real situation to the public”⁴⁶, Hasani said. She pointed out that the media outlet where she works has reasoned that due to the greater financial difficulties during the pandemic, it was not able to reimburse all the expenses of the media employers for providing the necessary means of protection during the reporting.

Adelina Ahmeti had a better experience in this aspect⁴⁷, a journalist at BIRN Kosova, who said that the media outlet where she works provided the media employees with all protective equipment in a timely manner, including the protective clothing needed to report from areas with a high risk of infection, such as UCCK clinics. “From the beginning, we were equipped with protective clothes which are necessary in the Infectious Diseases Clinic or other facilities where there are infected. “They were very necessary when we went out on the field, and we did not have that problem because all [protective equipment] was provided from the very beginning,” Ahmeti said.

In the online survey, 77% of media employees stated that their employer provided hand sanitizers, 68% said they were provided with face masks, and almost the same (67%) responded that they received gloves for one use by the employer. Also, slightly more than half of the respondents (54%) responded that the workplace was disinfected. On the other hand, 10% of the respondents stated that they were not provided with any protective equipment by their employers and also said that they provided themselves with the necessary protective equipment for reporting during the pandemic, while 9% of them said that they had no protective equipment at all.



46. Gentiana Hasani, interview by AGK, 18 August 2020.

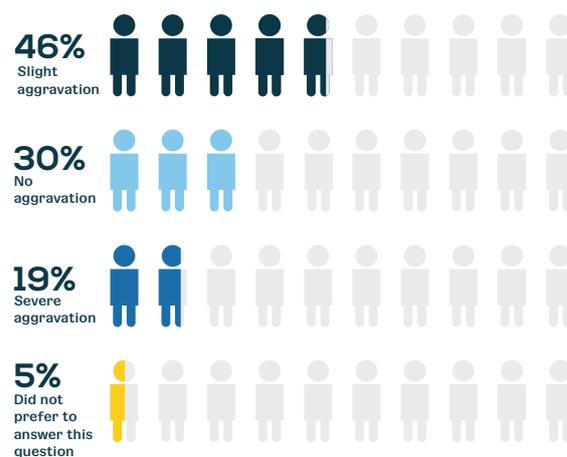
47. Adelina Ahmeti, interview by AJK, 16 July 2020.

As a way to reduce the risk of COVID-19 infection, journalists also practised conducting interviews and receiving information remotely, through telecommunications. In the online survey, 53% of media employees stated that they used this form of work during the pandemic, in order to avoid frequent physical contact. Fitim Gashi, a journalist with the KOHA Group, who worked from home for the first two weeks of the pandemic, said that during that time a reorganization of daily work was needed. “The parties were contacted mainly via email, telephone, and other communication platforms. Even the monitoring of the work of the Assembly is done only online, making it impossible for us to directly obtain the positions of the Assembly members. “In many cases, in the areas where the conferences took place, protective measures were not provided and there was overcrowding of the halls where journalists were supposed to be present.”⁴⁸, said Gashi, who followed the political developments in the country during that period. Fatmir Menekshe, journalist at the local radio “Romano Avazo” in Prizren, also said that as a preventive measure against COVID-19, most of the shows were realized through phone calls: “Except for the last shows when the measures were mitigated and we were able to stage them on the studio together with the guests, most of the shows were performed through phone calls”⁴⁹.

From the beginning of the pandemic in the country, in March, AJK through two donations distributed protective equipment such as masks, disinfectants and gloves to more than 500 media employees. The first donation⁵⁰ granted by KFOS was distributed in mid-April in order to provide immediate assistance with protective equipment to media employees

working in the field. About 36 local and national media across the country benefited from this donation.⁵¹ The second donation provided by the Kosovo Insurance Association (KSS), was distributed by AJK in August to about 30 national and local media outlets operating in Pristina. Through the public announcement, before the distribution of donations, AJK informed all media about the possibility of obtaining protective equipment, ensuring that they are distributed based on the needs of field media employees in each medium.

According to data from the online survey, in addition to exposure to the risk of infection, the work during the pandemic period also aggravated the mental health of media employees. 19% of survey respondents stated that reporting during the pandemic greatly aggravated their mental health condition and 46% of them said that they experienced a slight aggravation of mental health during this period, causing a total of 65% of respondents to experience aggravation of mental health due to reporting during the pandemic. On the other hand, 30% of media employees responded that the work during the pandemic did not affect their mental health, while the rest of the respondents did not prefer to answer this question.



48. Fitim Gashi, interview by AJK, 30 July 2020.

49. Fatmir Menekshe, interview by AJK, 27 July 2020.

50. AGK will distribute protective materials to 313 field journalists, cameramen and photojournalists”, Kallxo 14 April 2020, <https://kallxo.com/lajm/agk-do-te-shperndaje-materiale-mbrojtese-per-313-gazetare-kameramane-dhe-fotoreportere-te-terrenit/>.

51. Association of Journalists of Kosovo, “AGK together with the KPS distribute 15 thousand masks and over 3 thousand 300 disinfectants for journalists, cameramen and photojournalists”, 7 August 2020, <http://agk-ks.org/agk-se-bashku-me-shsk-ne-ndajne-15-mije-maskadhe-mbi-3-mije-e-300-dezinfektues-per-gazetare-kameramane-dhe-fotoreportere/>.

Conclusion

Economic crisis in Kosovo caused by COVID-19 pandemic had a chain impact on the media sector. The general decline in economic activity in the country from mid-March, led to a decrease in media revenues from marketing, aggravating their financial situation. This situation was manifested by the ban on publication of daily newspapers, the layoff of media employees, reduction of salaries and delays in their allocation, revealing entirely the existing problems faced by the media sector in the country.

Layoff of over 20 media employees from the media company “Zëri” was one of the most illustrative and serious cases of the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the economy of media employees. Termination of their employment contracts without prior notice, contrary to the Labour Law, with the reasoning of the media company that the pandemic has aggravated the financial situation, constitutes a violation of the labour rights of these media employers. The fact that even after more than five months, the Labour Inspectorate has not made a final consideration of this case, shows that the violation of the rights of media employees is not treated with priority by the relevant institutions in the country.

On the other hand, the Emergency Fiscal Package, although including the media as beneficiaries in some of the short-term

measures, did not qualify media employees who worked during the lockdown period as essential staff, failing to provide additional financial support likewise some of the other categories of employees, despite their exposure to the risk of infection. Moreover, delays in the distribution of funds to cover part of the salary led many media employees to receive reduced salaries, on the grounds that employers would compensate the rest by government support.

Except for the impact on the economy of media employees, COVID-19 pandemic also changed the dynamics of media operation. Many of the shows and contacts for access to information took place through online platforms, in an effort to respect the required physical distancing measures. Reporting from pandemic outbreak sites exposed journalists to a direct risk of infection, forcing them to face often lack of necessary pandemic protective equipment. During the quarantine period, while most social activities were suspended, the work of media employees proved that fair and accurate reporting is even more important in times of crisis, such as the one with COVID-19.

Recommendations

- The Labour Inspectorate should prioritize the monitoring and recording of violations of the labour rights of journalists, cameramen and photojournalists. In particular, the Labour Inspectorate should review as soon as possible all cases of violation of the labour rights of media employees during COVID-19 pandemic.
- Media companies must comply with all their obligations and labour rights of journalists, cameramen, and photojournalists defined by the Labour Law, such as monthly salary, working hours, contract duration, protection of the health of media employees, and providing safety at workplace. During COVID-19 pandemic, media companies must provide all necessary coronavirus protective equipment to journalists, photojournalists and cameramen who report during this period.
- The Basic Court of Prishtina should initiate as soon as possible the hearings for adjudication of lawsuits submitted by the media employees for dismissal during the pandemic.
- Journalists, cameramen and photojournalists should use all existing mechanisms, such as the Labour Inspectorate, Ombudsperson, Agency for Free Legal Aid, and the Association of Journalists of Kosovo, to report violations of labour rights.

Annex 1. List of persons interviewed

First and last name	Position/organization	Date of interview
Adelina Ahmeti	Journalist/BIRN	16.07.2020
Anonim	Journalist/Voice	17.08.2020
Ardita Zejnullahu	AMPEK / Director	17.07.2020
Bujar Vitia	Journalist/Shneta	10.07.2020
Dren Gërguri	Department of Journalism, UP/Assistant	23.07.2020
Fatmir Menekshe	Journalist/ Radio Romano Avazo	27.07.2020
Fitim Gashi	Journalist/ KOHA Group	30.07.2020
Florent Spahija	KDI/Legal Officer	06.07.2020
Flutura Kusari	Media Lawyer/ECPMF	18.06.2020
Gentiana Hasani	Journalist/T7	18.08.2020
Imer Mushkolaj	PCK/Director	03.07.2020
Jehona Zhitia	Journalist/RTK	07.09.2020
Niman Racaj	IMC/ Director of Legal Department	14.07.2020
Valon Leci	Director of the Department of General Services and Finance/ Labour Inspectorate	02.07.2020

