

RSF's 2018 Index: Journalists are murdered in Europe as well

The European model's erosion, a trend visible in RSF's most recent Indexes, has continued in the 2018 Index. The region has been shaken by two murders, as well as by threats to investigative reporters and unprecedented verbal attacks on the media. Even the countries at the top of the Index are affected by this alarming climate.

The traditionally safe environment for journalists in Europe has begun to deteriorate. Two murders in the space of five months, the first in Malta and the second in Slovakia, have capped a worrying decline for the continent's democracies.

Malta plunged 18 places to 65th in the Index. Journalist and blogger Daphne Caruana Galizia's targeted car bomb death lifted the veil on the judicial harassment and intimidation to which journalists are routinely subjected in the island state. Caruana Galizia had been threatened for years and at the time of her death was the target of 42 civil suits and five criminal cases. Slovakia, down 10 places to 27th, is still reeling from the murder of a 27-year-old investigative reporter who had been covering corruption and the mafia.

Anti-media rhetoric from politicians

Political leaders are increasingly the source of the verbal attacks and harassment that create a hostile climate for journalists. In Slovakia, relations between the media and (now former) Prime Minister Robert Fico were marred by frequent incidents. He called them "filthy anti-Slovak prostitutes" and "idiotic hyenas" and often sued them. In the Czech Republic (down 11 places to 34th), President Milos Zeman brandished a dummy Kalashnikov inscribed with the word "journalists" at a press conference, after previously calling journalists "manure" and "hyenas" and suggesting they should be "liquidated" while standing alongside Russian President Vladimir Putin.

In Hungary (down two places to 73rd), Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has accused Hungarian-born US billionaire philanthropist George Soros of supporting independent media outlets in order to "discredit" Hungary in the international public's eyes, and has branded him public enemy No. 1. The climate in Serbia (down 10 places to 76th) has become more fraught since Prime Minister Aleksandar Vucic was elected president in 2017. He uses the pro-government media to intimidate journalists, who are accused of "treachery" and of being "spies in foreign pay."

In Albania (down one at 75th), Prime Minister Edi Rama attacked journalists in autumn, calling them "ignorant," "poison," "charlatans" and even "public enemies." In Croatia, an EU member state since 2013 that is up five places to 69th, the new liberal-conservative HDZ-HNS ruling coalition says it considers press freedom to be of prime importance. But the growing influence of hate speech, which is proving hard to curb, is a source of concern. Politicians have not sufficiently condemned the verbal violence against journalists that has invaded the public arena.

Spreading to the rest of Europe

This sickening atmosphere is not limited to central Europe. Political leaders elsewhere have resorted to this rhetoric, which is not just unpleasant but also dangerous for journalists. In Austria, the leader of the far-right populist FPÖ party accused the public radio and TV broadcaster ÖRF of spreading lies. In Spain (down two at 31st), the October independence referendum in Catalonia exacerbated tension and created an oppressive atmosphere for journalists, with harassment on social networks fuelled by the intemperate language used by Catalan officials about journalists who do not support independence.

France (up six at 33rd) is no exception. “Media bashing” by politicians peaked during the 2017 election campaign and some still resort to denigrating journalists whenever they are in trouble. Claiming that media in the pay of centrist President Emmanuel Macron’s party were orchestrating a campaign to discredit him, Jean-Luc Mélenchon of the left-wing France Unbowed party wrote in his blog that “hatred of the media and their presenters is fair and healthy” and voiced support for right-wing leader Laurent Wauquiez’s condemnation of “media bullshit.” France’s six-place rise in the Index despite this hostile climate was due partly to the exceptional falls of some of its European neighbours.

Troublesome investigative reporters

As well as being threatened and insulted by certain European leaders, journalists are also exposed to the hostility of the criminal groups operating in Europe, which particularly dislike reporters who investigate unscrupulous businessmen and track the cross-border tentacles of their operations.

Physical attacks and death threats against journalists by criminal groups are especially common in Bulgaria (down two at 111th). This current holder of the EU rotating presidency has fallen from 36th position in 2006 to what is by far the worst position of any EU country in the 2018 Index.

In Italy (up six to 46th), ten investigative reporters are currently getting round-the-clock police protection because of death threats and because covering a mafia ring or criminal groups can prove fatal. In Montenegro (up three to 103rd), veteran investigative reporter Jovo Martinovic spent 14 months in prison after contacting a drug trafficker while researching a story. In Poland, which has continued its fall in the Index (down four at 58th), anti-corruption reporter Tomasz Piątek was threatened with imprisonment after exposing the defence minister’s murky links with Russian organized crime.

Legislative changes

Another emerging trend is for public broadcasting to be threatened by reforms, as in Switzerland (up two at 5th), where the “No Billag” initiative to abolish licence fee funding for the state radio and TV broadcaster was overwhelmingly rejected in a referendum.

Government interference is the source of the threat in other countries. This is the case in Croatia, where the government continues to meddle in the state radio and TV broadcaster HRT; in Montenegro, where the ruling party has taken control of the public broadcaster RTCG; in Slovakia; and in Spain, where journalists at state-owned TVE demonstrated against their management and against TVE’s biased coverage of the Catalan referendum.

In France, an announced bill to combat fake news during elections is the subject of much debate. Some see it as a threat to press freedom, others as an attempt to defend “quality journalism.” Under a new law in Germany (up one place at 15th), the authorities can impose heavy fines on social networks that fail to remove hate speech promptly after it has been reported. As well as encouraging excessive data blocking, it has been used as a model for oppressive laws in other countries, including Russia and the Philippines. Other recent laws

have caused concern because they include provisions on whistleblowers and penalize the media's use of leaks.

There was virtually no improvement in the United Kingdom's disappointing ranking in the Index (40th). Theresa May's government pursued its heavy-handed approach towards the media, usually in the name of national security, implementing the draconian Investigatory Powers Act, repeatedly threatening to restrict encryption software and announcing plans for other disturbing measures.

Problems at the top, too

The decline in the environment for journalists did not spare the Nordic countries, which traditionally respect press freedom the most. In Finland (down one at 4th), where a crisis already dented the admired state broadcaster Yle's reputation in 2016, police searched a well-known newspaper journalist's home in bizarre circumstances in December 2017, prompting concern that the confidentiality of her sources was violated.

Norway (1st) has topped the Index for the second year running, followed – as it was last year – by Sweden (2nd). The past year in Denmark (down five at 9th) was overshadowed by the death of 30-year-old Swedish journalist Kim Wall aboard a submarine whose Danish owner is now being tried for her murder.

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