



2020 RSF Index: Europe's journalists face growing dangers

More and more of the continent's journalists are suffering the consequences of a decline in the rule of law, assaults, online threats and financial troubles.

Press freedom is high on the agenda of the new European Commission, appointed in 2019, in accordance with [recommendations](#) published by Reporters Without Borders (RSF) during the campaign for the European elections. Europe was shaken by a series of serious abuses, including murder, carried out against journalists and now is the time for it to focus on the battle for press freedom. RSF welcomes the action plan announced by the European Commission Vice-President for Values and Transparency, Věra Jourová, which provides for strengthening media freedom, making social networks more accountable and protecting the democratic process. However, it is regrettable that the EU enlargement portfolio, crucial for integrating the countries of the Western Balkans, was attributed to the commissioner from Hungary, one of the EU's most repressive governments.

If the new EU institutions place such importance on press freedom, it is because the danger of backsliding is fully recognized. The drift towards [authoritarianism](#) has strengthened in Hungary, where Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has assumed full powers indefinitely, using the coronavirus epidemic as a pretext. Anyone convicted of publishing fake news faces a prison term of up to five years. This provision gives Hungarian courts and the political authorities another means of putting pressure on independent media. The government had earlier established [control over](#) most of the media with the formation of the Central European Press and Media Foundation. The allocation of government advertising to media outlets regarded as loyal is another means of pressure. The election of members of the ruling party Fidesz to the Media Council, the broadcasting watchdog, further strengthened the government's control over the media. This explains **Hungary's** two-point decline in the 2020 Index to 89th.

In **Poland** (down three at 62nd), which lost three places this year, the government's control over the judiciary has adversely affected press freedom. Some courts use article 212 of the penal code which allows [sentences](#) on journalists of up to a year in prison on defamation charges. Up to now judges have only imposed fines but the damage has been done and an underlying climate of self-censorship has now come to the surface.

In southern Europe, a crusade by the authorities against the media is very active. In **Bulgaria** (111th), which remains in the region's lowest position, an attempt by the public radio management to [suspend](#) the experienced journalist Silvia Velikova, a government critic, has highlighted the lack of independence of Bulgaria's public broadcasting media and the hold some political leaders have over their editorial policy.

EU candidate countries **Montenegro** (105th) and **Albania** (84th) each fell two places after a year which saw journalists detained on the pretext of the fight against disinformation, and instances of legal harassment exemplified by the Kafkaesque trial of investigative reporter [Jovo Martinovic](#).

During the same period, many abuses directed against reporters in the Balkans went unpunished. In **Serbia** (93rd), down another three places in the 2020 Index, those who set fire to the house of the investigative journalist [Milan Jovanovic](#) have yet to be convicted in court.

The fight against impunity for violence against journalists has made progress in two EU countries. In **Slovakia** (up two at 33rd), where those alleged to be behind the murder of Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová have been brought to trial, the country has moved up in the Index for the first time in three years, while in **Malta** (down four at 81st) the investigation into the murder of the journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia is finally [making progress](#), although journalists there are still coming under intense judicial pressure.

Verbal and physical attacks

Journalists also face violence by police officers as well as by demonstrators. In **France** (down two at 34th), for example, many journalists were injured by flashball rounds and teargas grenades fired by the police during the [“yellow vest”](#) protests, and were assaulted by angry protesters. This phenomenon has become more widespread throughout Europe as a result of hate campaigns and declining trust in journalists on the part of the public. In **Spain** (29th), the worrying electoral breakthrough by [the far-right VOX](#) party and attacks against journalists by its supporters came on top of violence carried out by [pro-independence demonstrators](#) in Catalonia. In **Austria** (down two at 18th), **Italy** (up two at 41st) and **Greece** (65th) the far right regularly attacks reporters on the ground in a growing climate of hostility towards [migrants](#).

Reporters have even lost their lives in the course of their work, as in the case of journalist [Lyra McKee](#) from Northern Ireland, who was shot dead as she covered rioting in the city of Derry. Her death was the third murder of a journalist in Europe in three years, after those of Daphne Caruana Galizia in Malta and Ján Kuciak in Slovakia.

Online harassment and surveillance

Online threats such as harassment and surveillance undermine the work of journalists throughout the continent, even in countries where freedom is held in high regard. Online harassment is growing in **Norway** (1st), which nonetheless holds on to its top position in the Index, as well as **Finland** (2nd) and **Estonia** (down three at 14th). This new threat led to **Sweden's** drop in the rankings (down one at 4th) and the **Netherlands** (down one at 5th), which led to the automatic promotion of **Denmark** (up two to 3rd) into the top three.

In Scandinavia, the most aggressive harassment of journalists comes from China and Iran, while Baltic reporters are targeted by Russian trolls.

Challenges to the confidentiality of sources are another threat facing journalism in Europe. In **Germany** (up two at 11th), the government has proposed measures that would criminalize the handling of [leaked data](#), as well as a draft bill allowing the intelligence services to hack into computers and smartphones and to intercept encrypted communications without judicial oversight.

In **Romania** (up two at 48th), which has already chalked up a series of violations of freedom of information, the new EU General Data Protection Regulation has been subverted to permit the authorities, as well as companies and individuals, to deny journalists access to information and to prosecute news organizations that publish investigative stories.

Financial crisis

Throughout Europe, financial difficulties have led to the concentration of media ownership, and consequently new threats to journalism. In **Latvia** (up two at 22nd), which has maintained its high position in the Index, the oldest commercial television channel fired 30 journalists after a change of ownership. The purchase of Central European Media Enterprises (CME) by the company of Petr Kellner, the wealthiest man in the **Czech Republic** (40th), has aroused concerns in several Eastern European countries where CME controls a number of influential television stations.

Throughout Central and Eastern Europe, broadcast journalism has been undermined by constant attacks by governments on the editorial independence of public media outlets. Examples are the radio station BNR in **Bulgaria** (111th), [TVP](#) in **Poland** (down three at 62nd) and the state [broadcaster RTVS](#) in **Slovakia** (up two at 33rd), where journalists still come under pressure from management, despite the progress of the country in other fields.

Things have also deteriorated in Western Europe, where new financial management methods among public broadcasters show little regard for freedom of information. In **Luxembourg** (17th), some members of the editorial staff at the public broadcaster staged an unprecedented revolt, accusing the government of interfering in the way it is run. In **Belgium** (down three at 12th), journalists held a march - unseen before - in protest against a lack of resources caused by budget cuts, which contributed to its three-point drop in the Index.