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Embargoed until 20 April 2021 at 04:00 GMT

2021 World Press Freedom Index: Journalism, the vaccine against disinformation, blocked in more than 130 countries

The 2021 World Press Freedom Index compiled by Reporters Without Borders (RSF) shows that journalism, the main vaccine against disinformation, is completely or partly blocked in 73% of the 180 countries ranked by the organisation.

The new World Press Freedom Index, which evaluates the press freedom situation in 180 countries and territories annually, shows that journalism, the main vaccine against the virus of disinformation, is totally blocked or seriously impeded in 73 countries and constrained in 59 others, which together represent 73% of the countries evaluated. These countries are classified as having “very bad,” “bad” or “problematic” environments for press freedom, and are accordingly identified by the colours black, red or orange on the World Press Freedom map.

The Index data, which measure curbs on access to information and obstacles to news coverage, confirm attempts and measures to block journalism. The relevant indicator shows a dramatic deterioration. The coronavirus pandemic has been used as grounds to block journalists’ access to information sources and reporting in the field. Will this access be restored when the pandemic is over? The data shows that journalists are finding it increasingly hard to investigate and report sensitive stories, especially in Asia, the Middle East and Europe.

The 2021 Edelman Trust barometer reveals a disturbing level of public mistrust of journalists, with 59% of people polled in 28 countries saying journalists deliberately try to mislead the public by reporting information they know to be false. But in reality, journalistic pluralism and rigorous reporting serve to combat disinformation and “infodemics” – information manipulation and rumour.

“Journalism is the best vaccine against disinformation,” RSF secretary-general Christophe Deloire said. “But unfortunately, its production and distribution are too often blocked by political, economic, technological and sometimes even cultural factors. In response to the virality of disinformation across borders, on digital platforms and on social

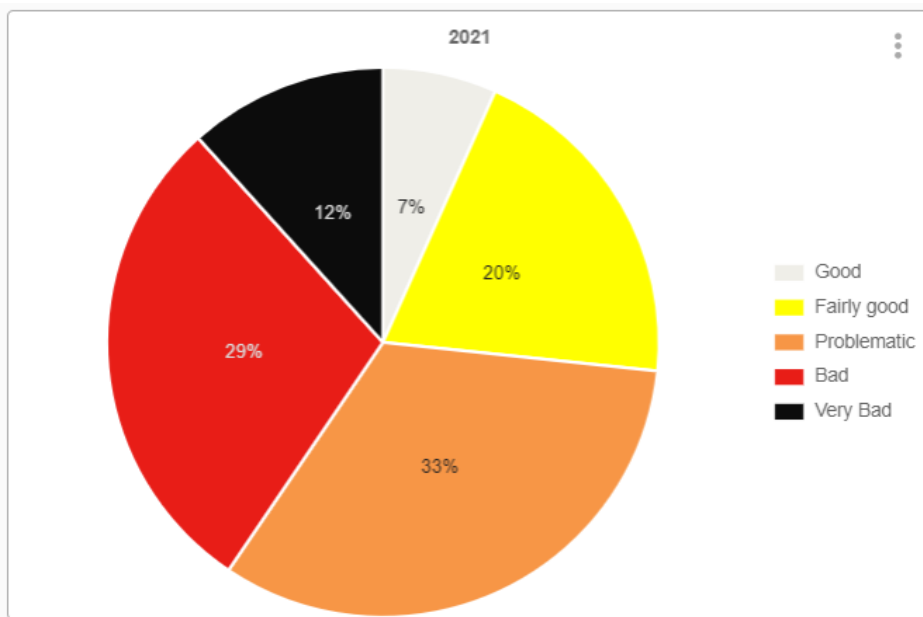
media, journalism is the main way to ensure that the public debate is based on a diverse range of established facts.”

For example, President Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil (down 4 at 111th) and President Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela (down 1 at 148th) promoted Covid-19 remedies whose efficacy has never been demonstrated in medical research. Fortunately, investigative journalism by media outlets such as Brazil’s *Agência Pública* and in-depth stories by Venezuela’s few remaining independent publications were able to counter their claims with the facts. In Iran (down 1 at 174th), the authorities tightened their control over news coverage and stepped up trials of journalists in order to be freer to minimise the number of Covid-19 deaths. In Egypt (166th), President Sisi’s government simply banned publication of any pandemic figures aside from those provided by the health ministry. In Zimbabwe (down 4 at 130th), the investigative reporter Hopewell Chin’ono was arrested shortly after helping to expose overbilling by a company supplying medical equipment to combat Covid-19.

Biggest movements in the Index

Norway is ranked first in the Index for the fifth year running even though its media have complained of a lack of access to state-held information about the pandemic. Finland has kept its second place while Sweden (up 1 at 3rd) has recovered the No. 3 position, which it yielded last year to Denmark (down 1 at 4th). The 2021 Index therefore clearly confirms the success of the “Nordic model” in upholding press freedom.

The World Press Freedom map has not had so few countries coloured white – indicating a country situation that is at least good if not optimal – since 2013, when the current evaluation method was adopted. This year, only 12 of the Index’s 180 countries (7%) can claim to offer a favourable environment for journalism, as against 13 countries (8%) last year. The country to have been stripped of its “good” classification is Germany (down 2 at 13th). Dozens of its journalists were attacked by supporters of extremist and conspiracy-theory groups during protests against restrictions imposed to combat the pandemic.



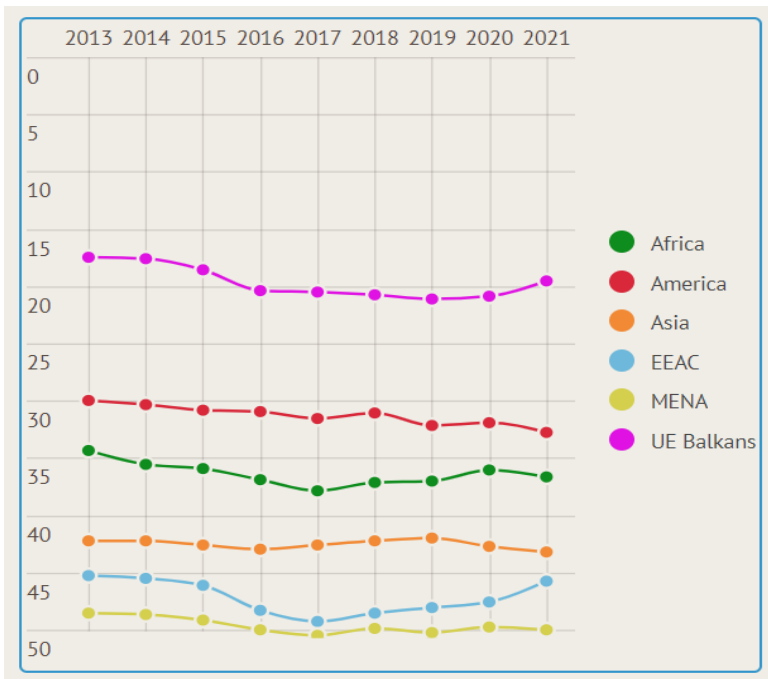
The press freedom situation in Germany is nonetheless still classified as “fairly good,” as it is in the United States (down 1 at 44th), even if the last year of Donald Trump’s presidency was marked by a record number of assaults against journalists (around 400) and arrests of journalists (130), according to the US Press Freedom Tracker, of which RSF is a partner. As a result of falling four places, Brazil joined the countries coloured red because their situation is classified as “bad”. Insults, vilification and orchestrated public humiliation of journalists have become trademarks of President Bolsonaro, his family and closest allies. It shares the “bad” classification with India (142nd), Mexico (143rd) and Russia (down 1 at 150th), which deployed its repressive apparatus to limit media coverage of protests in support of Kremlin opponent Alexei Navalny.

China (177th), which continues to take Internet censorship, surveillance and propaganda to unprecedented levels, is still firmly anchored among the Index’s worst countries, those coloured black on the World Press Freedom map. Immediately below China is the same trio of totalitarian countries that are always in the last three places. Two are Asian: Turkmenistan (up 1 at 178th) and North Korea (up 1 at 179th). And the third is African: Eritrea (down 2 at 180th). Regardless of their continent, these countries maintain absolute control over all news and information, enabling the first two to claim they had no Covid-19 cases and the third to maintain complete silence about the fate of 11 journalists who were arrested 20 years ago, some of whom have allegedly been held in metal containers in the middle of a desert.

The country that fell most in the 2021 Index was Malaysia (down 18 at 119th), where the problems include a recent “anti-fake news” decree allowing the government to impose its own version of the truth. Big falls were also registered by Comoros (down 9 at 84th) and El Salvador (down 8 at 82nd), where journalists struggle to get state-held information about the government’s handling of the pandemic. Most of the 2021 Index’s

biggest rises are in Africa. Burundi (up 13 at 147th), Sierra Leone (up 10 at 75th) and Mali (up 9 at 99th) have all seen significant improvements, including the release of four journalists with the independent Burundian media *Iwacu*, the repeal of the law criminalising press offences in Sierra Leone and a fall in the number of abuses in Mali.

Index region by region



Regional violation scores

Europe and the Americas (North, Central and South) continue to be the most favourable continents for press freedom, even though the Americas registered the biggest deterioration in its regional violations score (up 2.5%). Europe registered a sizeable deterioration in its “Abuses” indicator, with acts of violence more than doubling in the European Union and Balkans, compared with a 17% deterioration worldwide. Attacks against journalists and arbitrary arrests increased in Germany (13th), France (34th), Italy (41st), Poland (down 2 at 64th), Greece (down 5 at 70th), Serbia (93rd) and Bulgaria (down 1 at 112th).

Although the deterioration in the “Abuses” score was less in Africa, it continues to be the most violent continent for journalists, and the Covid-19 pandemic fuelled the use of force to prevent journalists working. In Tanzania (124th), President John Magufuli called the virus a “western conspiracy,” suggested that Tanzania had kept it at bay “by force of prayer,” and imposed an information blackout on the pandemic before dying in March 2021.

In the Asia-Pacific region, the censorship virus spread beyond China, in particular to Hong Kong (80th), where the national security law imposed by Beijing seriously threatens journalists. Australia (up 1 at 25th), experienced a disturbing variant: in response to proposed Australian legislation requiring tech companies to reimburse the media for content posted on their social media platforms, Facebook decided to ban Australian media from publishing or sharing journalistic content on their Facebook pages.

The Eastern Europe and Central Asia (EECA) region kept its second-from-last position in the regional rankings, in part because of events in Belarus (down 5 at 158th), where journalists were subjected to an unprecedented crackdown in an attempt to cover up the massive street protests in response to the presidential election result.

There has been no significant change in the Middle East & North Africa (MENA) region, which has kept its last place in the regional rankings. In Algeria (146th) and Morocco (down 3 at 136th), the judicial system is being used to help silence journalists, while the Middle East's most authoritarian countries – Saudi Arabia (170th), Egypt (166th) and Syria (up 1 at 173rd) – have taken advantage of the Covid-19 pandemic to reinforce their methods for gagging the media and to reaffirm their monopoly on news and information. In this region, still the toughest and most dangerous for journalists, the pandemic had just exacerbated the problems of a press that is already in its death throes.

RSF's global indicator – its measure of the level of media freedom worldwide – is only 0.3% lower in the 2021 Index than it was in 2020. The past year's relative stability should not however divert attention from the fact that it has deteriorated by 12% since this measure was created in 2013. /