

Close-up on... Europe and former USSR

There is little change at the head of the index this year. Aside from Canada and New Zealand, the top 20 countries are all European. None of the European Union's 27 members is outside the top 60. Europe's bad boy, Bulgaria (59th), trailed behind the others because of its failure to deal firmly with corruption and violence that is both gangland and political in origin. Italy (44th) and Spain (36th) also received mediocre rankings due, in the former, to a poor overall climate and to mafia threats and violence, and in the latter, to the fear imposed by the Basque armed separatist group ETA.

France (35th) has for the past two years held the European record for police and court interventions linked to the confidentiality of journalists' sources, with five searches, two preliminary indictments and four summonses. The arrest of Guillaume Dasquié of Geopolitique.com by the Directorate for Territorial Surveillance (DST), an intelligence agency, and the arrest of an Auto Plus reporter, accompanied by raids on his home and office, show that the confidentiality of sources is not always adequately protected in the "land of human rights."

The most significant development in the former Soviet periphery is the deterioration in the Caucasus, where two of its three independent countries - Armenia (102nd) and Georgia (120th) - had major problems and introduced states of emergency. Several journalists fell victim to the sudden outbreak of war in Georgia.

The countries of Central Asia continue to lag far behind, with Uzbekistan (162nd) and Turkmenistan (171st) coming in the last 20 along with Belarus (154th). The situation in Russia (141st), where the press continues to be subject to violence and harassment, has been changed little by Dimitri Medvedev's election as president.