

## RSF's 2018 Index Historic decline in press freedom in ex-Soviet states, Turkey

The former Soviet countries and Turkey continue to be at the forefront of the worldwide decline in press freedom. Almost two-thirds of the region's countries are ranked somewhere near or below the 150th position in the Index. The region's overall indicator has sunk almost as low as that of Middle East/North Africa, the region that is last in the ranking by region.

### Regional power-houses set bad example

Press freedom in Russia and Turkey has sunk to levels that are without precedent in more than three decades, a decline that is all the more worrying because of the influence that these two countries exert on the surrounding region.

The [world's biggest prison](#) for professional journalists, Turkey (157th) has managed to fall another two places in the past year, which saw a succession of mass trials. After more than a year in provisional detention, [dozens of journalists](#) have begun to be tried for alleged complicity in the July 2016 [coup attempt](#). The first sentences to be handed down have included [life imprisonment](#). The [state of emergency](#) in effect for nearly two years in Turkey has allowed the authorities to eradicate what was left of pluralism, [opening the way](#) for a constitutional reform consolidating President Erdogan's grip on the country. The rule of law is now just a fading memory. That was confirmed by [the failure](#) to carry out a constitutional court ruling in January 2018 ordering the immediate release of two imprisoned journalists.

Russia's ranking is unchanged at 148th only because of the overall decline in press freedom worldwide. Russia's negative factors score has risen yet again, as it has steadily in recent years. More journalists and bloggers [are detained](#) now in Russia than at any other time since the Soviet Union's fall. With the leading media already largely [controlled](#) by oligarchs "loyal" to the Kremlin, the pressure is now growing on independent media and [investigative journalists](#).

In response to an [increase in protests](#) and in the run-up to the 2018 presidential election, the Russian authorities [tightened](#) their grip on the Internet, harassing instant messaging services and imposing a new legislative straitjacket on search engines and tools for circumventing censorship. The climate of impunity encourages more [physical attacks](#) on journalists and makes the [threats](#) received by independent media outlets all the more worrying. Virtually all critical voices have been purged from [Chechnya](#) and [Crimea](#). But that has not prevented Moscow from portraying itself as an alternative model internationally.

### Despots get more despotic

Driven by paranoia or encouraged by the worldwide questioning of democratic standards, the region's worst despots continue to tighten the screw. Already at or near the bottom of the Index, they have managed to do even worse this year with complete impunity.

It would have been hard for Turkmenistan, which was already third from the bottom at 178th, to fall any lower but its negative factors score has risen in line with its [increased persecution](#) of the few remaining independent journalists. Azerbaijan (163rd) and Kazakhstan (158th) have both fallen one place. Not content with finding ever new pretexts for detaining journalists, Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev has [blocked](#) access to the main independent news websites and has [stepped up](#) harassment of journalists who try to resist from exile. After [silencing](#) the last opposition media outlets, his Kazakh counterpart [signed](#) a law in December 2017 that makes investigative reporting almost impossible.

The respite is well and truly over in Belarus (down two places at 155th). An increase in opposition protests was accompanied by a new crackdown. At least 100 journalists were briefly [arrested](#) in 2017 and more than 60 were [convicted](#) of working for media outlets based abroad. Tajikistan (149th) has not budged in the 2018 Index but that is little consolation after its dramatic 34-place fall in the 2016 Index as a result of its [eradication](#) of pluralism. The media are now reduced to singing the praises of "Leader of the Nation" Emomali Rakhmon.

The region's only country to rise significantly in the Index was Uzbekistan (165th), which climbed four places while its negative factors score (66.11 in 2017) fell by more than five points. After [taking charge](#) of one of the world's most oppressive regimes in December 2016, Shavkat Mirziyoyev began to address his predecessor's ultra-authoritarian heritage and to free some of the imprisoned journalists, [including](#) Muhammad Bekjanov, the one held the longest (18 years). The trend has [accelerated](#) since the start of 2018, after the period covered by this Index, but much remains to be done. The media are still largely controlled, the main independent news websites are still blocked and two journalists [were arrested](#) in 2017. Their fate will serve as a test.

### **No more refuge for persecuted journalists?**

Higher up the Index, only Georgia (up three at 61st) and, to a lesser extent, Ukraine (up one at 101st) have risen. The significance of Georgia's small rise is undermined by the volatility of this section of the Index. Ukraine saw fewer abuses in the past year, but where it now seems to be stuck in the Index is disappointing after the promises of the 2014 revolution. The [oligarchs' grip](#) on the leading media outlets, [impunity](#) for physical attacks on journalists and the [excesses](#) of the "information war" with Russia are still key challenges.

Kyrgyzstan (98th) is still an exception in Central Asia because of its media pluralism, but its nine-place fall reflects [serious concern](#) for press freedom's future. Independent media have been harassed and astronomic fines imposed for "insulting the head of state." Armenia (80th) and Moldova (81st) both fell one place due to [concern](#) about access to state-held information in the first and excesses in the fight against propaganda in the second.

The increasingly frequent arrests of journalists in exile is another source of concern. Uzbek journalist [Ali Feruz](#) was detained in Russia for six months before being deported to Germany. An [Uzbek journalist](#), an [Azerbaijani journalist](#) and a [Kazakh blogger](#) were all briefly arrested

in Ukraine. Azerbaijani journalist Afgan Mukhtarly was [abducted](#) in Georgia, where he lived in self-imposed exile, and was forcibly [returned](#) to Azerbaijan. The Ukrainian and Georgian governments must not abandon the region's dissident exiles, who will have nowhere else to go for refuge.

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