



2019 RSF Index: Has a dam burst in Europe?

The decline in press freedom in Europe, as seen in RSF's Press Freedom Index over the past few years, has gone hand in hand with an erosion of the region's institutions by increasingly authoritarian governments. What with murders, attempted murders, and physical and verbal attacks, Europe's journalists are subjected to many forms of pressure and intimidation and increasingly to judicial harassment as well. Europe continues to be the continent that best guarantees press freedom, but the work of its investigative reporters is being obstructed more and more.

The murders of three journalists in [Malta](#), [Slovakia](#) and [Bulgaria](#) in the space of a few months has made the world realise that Europe is no longer a sanctuary for journalists. This is especially true for those who take an interest in corruption, tax evasion and misuse of European Union funds, [often involving the mafia](#), who are among investigative journalists' most dangerous predators.

[Paolo Borrometi](#), a Sicilian journalist who has specialised in covering organised crime, owes his survival to protection from the Italian police, who thwarted a mafia attempt on his life in May 2018. Asked why they had tried to kill him, a detained mafioso replied: "One small death serves as a good lesson to all the others." In Italy (up 3 to 43rd place), around 20 journalists, including Borrometi and Roberto Saviano, are currently protected by police bodyguards day and night. It is therefore all the more disturbing that interior minister, Matteo Salvini suggested that [Saviano's](#) protection could be withdrawn after he dared to criticise the League party leader.

In a steadily worsening security climate, the need for police protection for journalists is even felt in the countries at the top of the Index. In the Netherlands (down 1 to 4th place), two journalists who have specialised in covering criminal gangs are getting full-time police protection, while Sweden (down 1 to 3rd place) has seen a surge in cyber-harassment of journalists who cover organised crime or religious issues.

Threatened by both organised crime and venal officials

Montenegro (down 1 to 104th place), a candidate for admission to the European Union, has seen a surge in serious attacks on journalists, but protecting them does not seem to be a priority. It took several months for the authorities to arrest those responsible for injuring [Olivera Lakic](#), a journalist who investigates crime and corruption, in a shooting attack outside her home in May. [Jovo Martinovic](#), a reporter who specialises in Balkan organised crime,

was sentenced to 18 months in prison in January 2019 despite overwhelming evidence that his contact with criminals was due solely to his research into arms trafficking in the region.

These journalists are targeted because they investigate corruption and trafficking at the international level, between politicians and organised crime, or the misuse of EU funding, as in Bulgaria (ranked 111th, still the lowest in the EU and the whole region). Bulgaria is constantly criticised for its endemic corruption and the ineffectiveness of its judicial system. Its journalists are targeted by both [organised crime and the authorities, who heap abuse on them instead of defending them](#). In September 2018, [the police arrested two journalists from independent media outlets](#) who were investigating the misuse of EU funds.

Corruption-linked harassment

From one end of Europe to the other, journalists are harassed as soon as they shed light on sensitive subjects. In Romania (down 3 to 47th place), the current holder of the EU's rotating presidency, journalists with the [RISE Project](#) investigative website had been looking into the misuse of EU development funding for the past several months. They were harassed by the authorities, who invoked the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) as grounds for making them [reveal their sources](#).

Physical violence is sometimes used to deter investigative reporting. In 2018, [RSF repeatedly denounced](#) a surge in violent attacks against journalists investigating corruption in Serbia (down 14 to 90th place). One of them, Milan Jovanovic, had to flee his home when it was set ablaze in December. The instigator of the arson attack, a mayor who is a member of President Aleksandar Vucic's party, was briefly arrested and [Jovanovic](#) was placed under full-time police protection.

In Malta, which has continued to fall in the Index (down 12 to 77th place), a handful of journalists are trying to continue the work of anti-corruption blogger Daphne Caruana Galizia. They are shedding light on the island state's rampant corruption and money-laundering, despite an oppressive and worrying climate still marked by Caruana Galizia's murder in October 2017. As well as having to live in fear, [they are subjected to intense judicial harassment](#).

Poland, which has fallen in the Index for the fourth year running (down 1 to 59th place), is no exception. After [Tomasz Piatek's prosecution before a military court](#) for revealing the defence minister's links with Russian organised crime, the newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza*'s journalists are now [threatened with the possibility of jail sentences](#) for linking ruling party leader Jaroslaw Kaczyński with a questionable construction project.

Anti-media rhetoric

Another disturbing phenomenon took hold in Europe in 2018 – the adoption of an anti-media rhetoric in democracies. Journalists are being vilified, insulted and threatened by persons at the highest level of the political establishment. One of the countries where this trend is growing is France (down 1 to 32nd place), where Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the leader of La France Insoumise (France Unbowed), said it was “healthy and just” to hate journalists.

In Hungary (down 14 to 87th place), officials in Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's party Fidesz continue to refuse to talk to journalists who are not from "friends of Fidesz" media. A few months ago, Orbán refused to answer questions from the critical TV news channel *HírTV*, dismissing it as nothing more than a source of "fake news." [Some journalists no longer even have the right to address members of the government](#) or ask questions during press conferences.

Criticism of the media is becoming a political weapon that weakens journalism when systematic. To this end, political leaders have had no scruples about using state-owned media that have been turned into propaganda outlets or at least enlisted in their cause. Use of state-owned media to harass journalists is not new, but the practice has been stepped up. In Poland, where the conservative PiS government has turned the public broadcast media into its mouthpiece, questions are being raised about the state-owned *TVP* channel's role in Gdansk mayor Pawel Adamowicz's murder. *TVP* named him [1,800 times](#) in the course of the year, always with the aim of denigrating him. The head of the channel has promised to sue all journalists who try to establish a link between these hate messages and Adamowicz's murder.

From words to acts, a line is crossed

The verbal attacks and threats against media throughout Europe is encouraging acts of violence against reporters in the field. These verbal attacks constitute hatred of journalism and pluralism, and are form of anti-democratic blackmail. Hatred of the media, a leading characteristic of the angry "[Gilets Jaunes](#)" ([Yellow Vest](#)) protests in France, is the most worrying example and has resulted in unprecedented acts of violence and intimidation. A female reporter for *La Dépêche du Midi* was insulted and threatened with rape by a pack of angry protesters in Toulouse in January 2019. In all, several dozen serious incidents have been reported since the start of the protests. There have also been [dozens of cases of police violence](#) and excessive firing of flash-ball rounds, usually against [photojournalists](#).

Aside from threats and intimidation of this kind, more and more journalists are being harassed and worn down financially. In an effective dissuasive tool whose use is growing throughout Europe, journalists are being subjected to SLAPPs (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation), in which the aim is to use the threat of sizeable legal defence costs to silence the targets, rather than obtain actual damages. In France, many journalists have been sued by big corporations such as [Bolloré](#) and Vinci. In response to print and broadcast media reports, Bolloré has brought many defamation suits in France and abroad that circumvent France's 1881 press freedom law.

The technique of threatening to exhaust journalists' financial resources is also widely used in Malta. Caruana Galizia was subjected to all-out judicial harassment until her murder and now the rich and powerful have turned their sights on [The Shift News](#), an investigative website. Despite rising in the Index, Croatia (up 5 to 64th place) is beating all records in this regard. [The Association of Croatian Journalists \(HND\)](#) has registered more than 1,000 lawsuits against journalists and media outlets, most of them by politicians and public figures. Ironically, at least 30 of them were brought by the state-owned TV broadcaster *HRT*.

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