



RSF 2020 Index: Eastern Europe and Central Asia – clampdown continues

Behind the lack of any major movement by the countries of Eastern Europe and Central Asia in the latest World Press Freedom Index, there are disturbing signs. The increasing expertise in new technologies that the region's authoritarian or unstable regimes are acquiring could result in more censorship of the media. The regional heavyweights, Moscow and Ankara, continue to set a bad example.

Almost everywhere in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, strongmen are consolidating their grip on news and information. They include Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey (up 3 at 154th), where censorship of the media, especially online media, has been stepped up. Turkey's three-point rise in the Index is just the result of other countries falling, and the decrease in the number of imprisoned journalists following changes to judicial procedure in October 2019 was only temporary. Turkey is more authoritarian than ever. Quoting a communiqué by the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) or the Syrian Democratic Forces, or taking issue with the government's security policies on social media can lead directly to imprisonment. The jailing of six journalists for their coverage of the Libyan crisis – three of them reporters for *Odatv.com*, a website that was shut down – is just one example among many.

Turkey's neighbours, led by Russia (149th), are also persevering in their efforts to control the Internet, using ever more elaborate methods. Russia's "Sovereign Internet" law will allow the government to disconnect the Russian Internet from the rest of the world. The declared aim is to protect Russia from cyber-attacks in the event of conflict. Internet service providers will be required to direct traffic through a centralized system of devices controlled by the state. Even if technical difficulties have so far delayed implementation, the prospect of a Chinese-style scenario is alarming. Large-scale Internet traffic disconnections were trialled during protests in Moscow and Ingushetia.

Russia's zealous media control agency Roskomnadzor, which RSF has included in its list of Digital Predators of Press Freedom, is already totally or partially blocking news sites and social media. Crimea, a news and information black hole since its annexation, is particularly affected.

The closure of the national Internet is already a reality in Turkmenistan (up 1 at 179th), which is second from last in the Index. The few Internet users can only access a highly censored version of the Internet, often in cafés where they have to show ID before connecting. In Tajikistan (161st), the authorities also assumed an Internet access monopoly in 2018. New blocking techniques are being used that sometimes prevent use of a VPN to access the few independent media outlets such as *Asia-Plus*. In Kazakhstan (up 1 at 157th), a country in transition, cuts are becoming more effective, with *Radio Azattyk*, Google and Telegram being favourite targets.

Widespread surveillance

Although the new Kazakh president, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, talks about reform, the authorities have tried to install real-time online monitoring. Last summer, Internet users had to

download and install a “national security certificate” to avoid losing their Internet access. Described as a “trial,” It was finally dropped but “certificates” that have not been uninstalled can still act as spies. On national sovereignty grounds, Moscow has ordered platforms to store the data of Russian users on servers inside Russia, allowing the authorities to spy on journalists and social media users.

The troll armies run by pro-Kremlin businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin and by the Tajik government offer an additional censorship mechanism, spreading fake news and targeting journalists in particular. Even in Georgia (60th), which has the region’s highest ranking, Facebook has closed hundreds of fake accounts posing as media outlets that were involved in a pro-government disinformation campaign. Troublesome media outlets are subjected to cyber-attacks, as in Kyrgyzstan (up 1 at 82nd), whose pluralism is an exception in Central Asia. In January 2020, the authorities refused to investigate a series of DDoS attacks on various websites including *Factcheck.kg* that were clearly a reprisal for their investigative coverage of a major corruption case.

Information harder to access

What with ever longer official response times to requests for information, documents suddenly “classified” to restrict access and denial of accreditation to cover events, reporters for independent media outlets find it hard to access state-held information in most of the region’s countries. This is the case in Azerbaijan (down 2 at 168th) and Belarus (153rd), where denial of access to public events is common. In Kyrgyzstan, important subjects are increasingly discussed behind closed doors, in parliamentary committees, for example, or in places from which journalists are in effect barred, such as trials held in very small courtrooms.

Denial of accreditation to journalists working for foreign media outlets or the threat of rescinding accreditation blocks access to information and encourages self-censorship. The local operations of the US government-funded *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* are especially affected in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan (156th), which has nonetheless risen four places thanks to reforms undertaken since President Islam Karimov’s death in 2016. Some foreign journalists are finding it harder and harder to get accreditation for Russia even if the procedures are officially unchanged. Freelancers working for foreign media outlets now risk being branded as “foreign agents,” a label already placed on some media outlets and leading media defence NGOs.

Growing impunity

At least 37 Russian professional journalists have been killed in connection with their work since 2000. In the overwhelming majority of cases, as in other countries, the investigations have drawn a blank and the instigators have never been identified. At the same time, hate speech is getting more violent. The president of the small Russian republic of Chuvashia publicly called for journalists to be “wiped out.” After *Novaya Gazeta* reporter Elena Milashina was physically attacked during a visit to Chechnya, an information black hole, local TV channels unleashed a wave of hostile propaganda against her, voicing approval of the violence and even calling for her to be killed – all this with complete impunity.

The six-place rise by Ukraine (96th), the region’s biggest, is due more to other countries falling than to any real progress. The hopes raised by Volodymyr Zelensky’s election as president are taking time to realize. The media are as polarized as the rest of Ukrainian society and the prevailing impunity has fuelled an increase in violence against journalists. Nationalist groups in

particular target independent media outlets such *Bellingcat*, which has received death threats. In Armenia (61st), hostility towards journalists, which previously took the form of direct physical violence, is gradually being replaced by judicial harassment. The disturbing increase in prosecutions tends to criminalize journalism and force media outlets to dedicate resources towards a legal defence instead of reporting.

The state itself often sets an example, exploiting vaguely-worded and selectively-applied legislation to convict journalists and bloggers on such charges as extremism or endangering territorial sovereignty. This is the case in Russia, which used radio commentary by the journalist Svetlana Prokopyeva as grounds for adding her to its list of “terrorists.” In Central Asia and in Azerbaijan, the authorities are happy to use bans on inciting social, religious or inter-ethnic hatred in this way.

Excesses in the fight against disinformation

Editorial independence is clearly still a problem when the editorial line of media outlets reflects their owners’ interests in most countries in the region. In Moldova (91st), the media empire built by former billionaire and Democratic Party boss Vladimir Plahotniuc has lost its influence but has been quickly replaced by a media group affiliated to the Democratic Party’s rival, the pro-Russian Party of Socialists. The oppressive influence wielded by pro-government or pro-opposition oligarchs and the accompanying disinformation campaigns result in laws that pose an ever-greater threat to press freedom. In Ukraine, a new bill would criminalize “disinformation” by journalists and create a new body with discretionary powers to verify the accuracy of content. In Armenia, social media users have been arrested on the grounds of combatting fake news and defending the national interest and some ministries have tried to draft anti-disinformation legislation without prior discussion with civil society and the media.

At a time when many independent media are struggling to survive and economic precarity prevents expansion, investigative journalism is barely developing because of a lack of resources. Denied state subsidies and advertising, and with few readers, listeners or viewers, they have also been subjected to a series of fines in Belarus. In Uzbekistan, businesses fear reprisals if they place ads in the independent media, which are meanwhile banned from receiving subsidies from abroad. In Moldova, politicians or their allies control the advertising market. All these restrictions increase the problems for journalists working for independent media, who are paid much less than their counterparts working for the state media.