

Press release

May 3, 2022

EMBARGO until May 3, 2022 // 6AM (Paris - GMT +2)

The European Union caught between two extremes

In Europe, while Norway (1st) remains at the top of the World Press Freedom Index, the region shows significant disparities, and conditions on both extremes have evolved considerably. Estonia (4th) and Lithuania (9th) – two former Communist states – are now among the top ten, while the Netherlands (28th) no longer is. And Greece (108th) has replaced Bulgaria (91st) in last place in Europe.

These developments and disparities reflect three main trends. First, the return of journalist murders in the EU: **Giorgios Karaivaz**, in Greece, and **Peter R. De Vries**, in the Netherlands, were gunned down Mafia-style in the centre of two European cities. Those responsible for the murders of **Daphne Caruana Galizia** in Malta (78th) and **Jan Kuciak** in Slovakia (27th), carried out before 2020, have still not been convicted. However, these two countries have made some progress in the fight for justice and in press freedom reforms.

In addition, journalists – falsely equated with the government – have faced virulent hostility from protesters against public health measures aimed at tackling the coronavirus. In Germany (16th), France (26th), Italy (58th), and the Netherlands, journalists were physically attacked, and they faced insults and threats of all kinds throughout the continent.

Finally, some EU and neighbouring governments have intensified draconian laws against journalists, especially in Slovenia (54th), Poland (66th), Hungary (85th), Albania (103rd), and Greece. Serbia (79th), for its part, scored points in the fight against impunity. And the governments of the Czech Republic and Bulgaria loosened their grip on the press following changes in government. The United Kingdom (24th) set itself apart in the case of Wikileaks publisher **Julian Assange**, by paving the way for his extradition to the United States (42nd) after more than two years of legal proceedings. RSF has fought for the Assange case not to become a dangerous precedent for journalism and press freedom around the world.

European institutions have started to implement protective measures for journalists and press freedom, and they have launched proceedings against Hungary (85th) for violating European law. Yet they have banned media that disseminate Russian propaganda in the context of the invasion of Ukraine (106th) launched by Vladimir Putin without an appropriate legal framework, which risks being a pretext for retaliatory actions against the European media.

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Heightened repression in Eastern Europe and Central Asia

Reporters killed and injured in the field, a level of censorship not seen since the Soviet period, massive disinformation... In Eastern Europe, beyond the human tragedies, the war waged by Russia (155th) against Ukraine is creating devastating consequences for press freedom in the region. As many as five journalists and media workers have died as a result of gunfire during the first month of the Russian offensive, which began on 24 February 2022. The Russian military has deliberately targeted news sources in territories it occupies and has tried to coerce the local media's cooperation. In Russia itself, the government has taken complete control of news and information by establishing extensive wartime censorship, blocking the media, and pursuing non-compliant journalists, forcing many of them into exile. This began in 2021, after the toughening of the law on media as "foreign agents" and after prosecutions linked to the coverage of now-imprisoned dissident Alexei Navalny's fate.

This control of information does not stop at Russia's borders. The Kremlin is imposing its vision of the war on some of its neighbours, especially in Belarus (153th), where independent journalists continue to be persecuted for their work since the controversial presidential election of 9 August 2020, and where more than 20 media workers are languishing in prison. Alexander Lukashenko did not hesitate to divert a plane, on 23 May 2021, to arrest an opposition journalist who had gone into exile. A growing number of media outlets are being labeled "extremist", and reading and sharing their content on social networks is subject to criminal prosecution.

The media in the Caucasus are sometimes blocked by the Russian regulatory agency when the government finds articles unacceptable. And Central Asian governments pressure media to provide more "neutral" coverage of the conflict. In Turkmenistan (177th), one of the world's most closed-off countries, and always near the bottom of the Index, the media – all controlled by the government – ignore the war.

In Turkey (149th), the "hyper-presidency" of Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his authoritarianism are accompanied by a denial of freedom of the press and interference in the judicial system. Even if the courts tend to imprison when Erdogan demands it, some judges have recently come out against "this repression that goes too far": journalists have been acquitted of abusive charges such as "insulting the president", "belonging to a terrorist organisation", or "propaganda". Judicial review now takes precedence over the imprisonment of journalists. In July 2021, for the first time since the state of emergency was declared, journalists mounted a massive protest over the brutal arrest of *AFP* photo-journalist **Bülent Kiliç**.

Over a two-year period, two journalists were murdered in Turkey : **Güngör Arslan**, editor-in-chief of *Ses Kocaeli*, on 19 February 2022, and **Hazim Özsu**,

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presenter of a programme on *Radio Rahmet FM*, gunned down in Bursa in March 2021 by one of his listeners. The alleged murderer was arrested six days later.