

Eastern Europe and Central Asia – Press Freedom Index 2013

Stagnation in Eastern Europe and Central Asia

Outside the European Union, freedom of information is in a state of collapse. Within its borders, Hungary and Greece have slumped. The Balkans remain rooted in the repressive practices of the past.

The status quo was maintained in many of the countries in the European Union. Sixteen were listed among the top 30. At first sight, this was encouraging, but it concealed the slow erosion of the European model as a result of inconsistencies and worrying developments among the other 11 countries, some of which fell below 80th place.

The legislative haemorrhage that began in 2011 continued unabated in 2012, notably in Italy where the decriminalization of defamation has not yet been achieved and where institutions make dangerous use of “gagging laws”. The Romanian parliament has not given up its attempt to achieve “balanced information”. The effects of stagnating advertising and budget cuts, which constantly undermine the business model, are also starting to be felt. **France** (up one to 37) has marked time pending progress on the good intentions voiced by the new government.

Hungary (down 16 to 56th) is still paying the price of repressive legislation, which has had a palpable effect on how journalism is practised. However, more worrying is the fall of **Greece** (down 14 to 84th), whose journalists operate in a disastrous social and professional atmosphere. Exposed to popular anger and continually facing violence on the part of both extremists and the police, reporters and photojournalists must now cope with the ultra-violent neo-Nazi activists of the Golden Dawn party. The country has moved closer to **Bulgaria** (up two to 87th), whose promises of reform came to nothing and where the Internet ceased to be a safe place for freelance journalists.

For **Croatia** (up four to 64), due to join the EU in June this year, and **Serbia** (up 17 to 63rd) the picture is mixed. Legislative reforms have brought an improvement, but it should not be forgotten that there are still many obstacles to overcome and old habits that are harmful to independent journalism still linger. **Albania** (down six to 102nd), **Montenegro** (down 6 to 113th), and especially **Macedonia** (down 22 to 116th) bring up the rear of the index for the Balkans with the same sorry record: judicial harassment based on often inappropriate legislation, the lack of access to public data, physical and psychological violence against those who work in news and information, official and private advertising markets used as a tool, the grey economy's hold over vital parts of the media. All are obstacles to the right to report the news and people's right to know it. Following the dangerous examples of Hungary and Italy, the Macedonian parliament is preparing to “legalize censorship”, continually blowing hot and cold towards a profession that is often out on its own.

Race to the bottom by Eastern Europe and Central Asia

Bad models for the region

Despite a varied and lively media, **Turkey** (down six to 154th) lies in an unworthy position as the regional model which it aspires to be. In the name of the fight against terrorism, democratic Turkey is today the world's biggest prison for journalists. The state's paranoia about security, which has a tendency to see every criticism as a plot hatched by a variety of illegal organizations, intensified even more during a year marked by rising tension over the Kurdish question. Will the announcement of reform of the anti-terrorist laws, promised many times but always rejected, and the resumption of talks between the authorities and rebels of the Kurdish PKK, lead to a genuine change in approach?

Russia (down six to 148th) set a tone of increased repression in the former Soviet Union in 2012. Opposition protests on an unprecedented scale showed civil society to be more vocal than ever. The state responded with a wholesale crackdown: re-criminalization of defamation, tighter control of the Internet, making foreign funding of human rights organizations a crime. This marked start of a new era in relations between the state and society that presents huge challenges for freedom of information.

Just as it assumed the rotating chairmanship of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) **Ukraine** (down 10 to 126th) set the worst record for the media since the Orange Revolution in 2004. The chronically high level of violence towards journalists hit a new peak, while impunity remained total. Such an unhealthy atmosphere served only to increase the vulnerability of independent news outlets to ever-stronger pressure.

Kazakhstan (down six to 160th) reached a turning point in 2012. President Nursultan Nazarbayev's government, forging ahead with its policies of repression, moved closer to the ultra-authoritarian model of its neighbours in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. The year saw assassination attempts, arrests and intimidation aimed at independent journalists, ending with the outright closure of the main national opposition news organizations.

Tajikistan (down one place to 123rd), struggling to catch up with its neighbours in the cyber censorship stakes, recruited an army of volunteers to monitor the Internet and blocked independent news sites as well as Facebook with increasing frequency.

Azerbaijan and Belarus: return to the status quo

The rise of **Azerbaijan** (up six to 156th) and **Belarus** (up 11 to 157th) offers little cause for celebration. It represents a partial return to the status quo before 2011's violent crackdowns on protest demonstrations. Dozens of journalists were arrested and beaten up, pushing the two dictatorships towards the bottom of the index. But the horizon is still obscured by the shadows cast by the huge egos of Alexander Lukashenko and Ilham Aliyev. Independent journalists and netizens remain at great risk in carrying out their duty of keeping the public informed. In Azerbaijan, the noose tightened around what remained of the opposition media and several journalists languished behind bars without trial in appalling conditions. The year 2013 began with fresh arrests and widespread violence, which point to a further downward slide in the next index.

Bottom of the list: Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan remain a nightmare for journalists

In **Uzbekistan** (down seven to 164th) and **Turkmenistan** (unchanged at 177th), there is little change from one year to the next. The sinister dictatorship of Uzbek President Islam Karimov refined its control of the Internet, maintained a stranglehold on the media and kept a dozen journalists in prison in appalling conditions. The official proclamation of a multi-party system and freedom of expression brought no changes whatsoever to the totalitarian rule in Turkmenistan which, as in previous years, rubbed shoulders with North Korea and Eritrea in the world index. Triumphantly “re-elected” with 97 percent of the vote in February 2012, Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, who owns most of the country’s media outlets and now has the official title of “protector” of the nation, has pressed forward with the establishment of his own personality cult.

Leading group dispersed but face common challenges

Despite their wide dispersal in this edition of the index, **Moldova** (down two to 55th), **Armenia** (up three to 74th), **Georgia** (up 4 to 100th) and **Kyrgyzstan** (up two to 106th) have a number of things in common. These countries enjoy broad media pluralism and a low level of state censorship, but they still face important challenges concerning media independence and the working environment of journalists. The latter are often in the firing line in highly polarized societies and treated as easy prey by a variety of pressure groups.