

REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS'
2013 WORLD PRESS FREEDOM INDEX



STAGNATION IN EASTERN EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA

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** (57th, +4) where the decriminalization of defamation has not yet been achieved and where institutions make dangerous use of “gagging laws”. 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 (56th, -16) is still paying the price of repressive legislation that has had a palpable effect on how journalism is practised. However, more worrying is the fall of **Greece** (84th, -14), 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** (87th, -7), whose promises of reform came to nothing and where the Internet ceased to be a safe place for freelance journalists.

For **Croatia** (64th, +4), due to join the EU in June this year, and **Serbia** (63rd, +17) 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** (102nd, -6), **Montenegro** (113rd, -6), and especially **Macedonia** (116th, -22) 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** (154th, -6) 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 (148th, -6) 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** (126th, -10) 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 (160th, -6) 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 (123rd, -1), 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: partial return to the status quo

The rise of **Azerbaijan** (156th, +6) and **Belarus** (157th, +11) 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** (164th, -7) and **Turkmenistan** (177th, 0), 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 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** (55th, -2), **Armenia** (74th, +3), **Georgia** (100th, +4) and **Kyrgyzstan** (106th, +2) 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.

(To be continued in next issue)

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