

RSF 2021 Index: EU struggles to defend values at home

Europe continues to be the most favourable continent for press freedom but violence against journalists has increased, and the mechanisms the European Union established to protect fundamental freedoms have yet to loosen Viktor Orbán's grip on Hungary's media or halt the draconian measures being taken in other central European countries.

The entire European continent has been fully engaged in combatting the Covid-19 pandemic but only some of its countries – including the three at the top of the Index, **Norway** (1st), **Finland** (2nd) and **Sweden** (down 1 at 3rd) – can claim to have defended press freedom with the energy needed to ensure the media environment is adequately supported. Although reliable information is essential for combatting the virus, violations of the right to inform and be informed were evident in several European countries. Hungary's Viktor Orbán managed to complete his country's adaptation of an alternative European model that dispenses with press freedom altogether (see box below).

Disinformation and official secrets

In both the east and west of the continent, new legislation limiting the right to inform has facilitated arrests and detentions of journalists. Several countries have tried to limit the impact of information on sensitive subjects including the pandemic. In **Serbia** (93rd), for example, news website reporter Ana Lalić was [arrested at her home](#) late at night after covering a hospital's battle with Covid-19 without taking account of a decree putting a government unit in charge of disseminating all information about the virus. In **Kosovo** (down 8 at 78th), KoSSev news website editor Tatjana Lazarević was [arrested arbitrarily in the street](#) while covering the pandemic's impact.

Migration has also proved to be a sensitive subject within the European Union. In **Greece** (down 5 at 70th), authorities [arrested journalists](#) in an often violent manner to prevent contact with migrants. [Various forms of obstruction](#) were used by authorities in the Canary Islands in **Spain** (29th) to restrict coverage of migrants, including withholding information about people who had been rescued at sea and their arrival points on the islands, using physical obstacles to hamper photography and the introduction of additional security regulations.

There was a different kind of setback for journalism in the **United Kingdom** (down 2 at 33rd), where a judge based her [decision not to extradite](#) WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange to the United States on the potential threats to his mental health rather than the need to protect public interest journalism and free speech. Her decision not to release Assange and leave him in Belmarsh high-security prison, where his physical and mental health continues to worsen, was an additional blow.

Countries that block journalism

Hungary (down 3 at 92nd) Coronavirus coverage blocked

Emergency legislation in force in Hungary since March 2020 – which was renamed without any change to its scope – continues to [criminalise “fake news”](#) about the coronavirus and to block access to information. Journalists and their sources suffer from its [chilling effect](#) and from a ban on reporting in hospitals. When around 30 news media called for this information blockade to be lifted in an open letter in March 2021, the government [refused](#) and accused independent media of spreading disinformation, which is subject to criminal penalties. Foreign media have also been the target of an [intimidation campaign](#). Independent media outlets censored by Viktor Orbán’s government include *Index*, a news website from which [almost all the journalists resigned](#) after it was taken over by allies of the prime minister, and *Klubrádio*, a radio station that was [stripped off its broadcast frequency](#) on a minor administrative pretext. The EU, for its part, seems powerless. The sanctions procedure against Hungary for violating the rule of law has not progressed and a newly-created mechanism making access to EU funding conditional on respect for the rule of law takes no account of press freedom.

Hungary’s unabashed political decision to throttle free speech and press freedom is a source of inspiration to certain other EU members and sets a bad example to EU accession candidates. [State-owned media](#) in neighbouring countries are the leading victims of such aggressive policies. Some have been turned into [government propaganda outlets](#), such as *TVP* in **Poland** (down 2 at 64th), while others say they have been deprived of state funding if they refuse to toe the government line, such as the news agency *STA* in **Slovenia** (down 4 at 36th). Privately-owned media are exposed to tax, commercial and legislative pressure, as seen in Poland’s “repolonisation” of the media, which has so far included a proposed tax on advertising income, the acquisition of local media by a state-controlled company, and the proposed [political regulation of social media](#). Some EU accession candidates have used judicial pressure: the government of **Albania** (up 1 at 83rd) [took control of two independent TV channels](#) on the grounds that their owner had been charged with drug trafficking, while in **Montenegro** (up 1 at 104th), investigative reporter Jovo Martinović has [continued to be prosecuted](#) on similar, trumped-up charges.

Impunity making journalism dangerous

A lack of justice for crimes of violence against journalists – a problem not limited to the southeast of Europe – can have a chilling effect on journalists. Impunity has been especially flagrant in **Slovakia** (down 2 at 35th), where the trial of those accused of murdering the investigative reporter Ján Kuciak resulted in the [acquittal](#) of the businessman accused of ordering his murder. In **Malta** (81st), just one alleged hitman was [convicted](#) in 2020 for journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia’s murder. Interminable judicial proceedings contribute to impunity: the convictions of four people accused of murdering Serbian newspaper publisher Slavko Ćuruvija in 1999 were overturned by a Belgrade appeal court in 2020, 21 years after his murder, requiring a retrial. The inability or reluctance of states to protect threatened journalists contributes to the perception of danger. In **Bulgaria** (down 1 at 112th), Nikolay Staykov was given police protection only after a [public appeal](#) by RSF.

Hate and incomprehension

Investigative journalists are not the only targets of violence; reporters covering demonstrations are also targeted. Many reporters have been physically attacked by members or supporters of extremist and conspiracy-theory groups during protests against coronavirus restrictions, especially in [Germany](#) (down 2 at 13th) and [Italy](#) (41st). In other countries, [especially Greece](#), reporters have been the victims of police violence and arbitrary arrest that have restricted coverage of law enforcement operations during demonstrations. In **France** (34th), similar press freedom violations took place, above all during protests against a [new set of regulations for policing demonstrations](#) and against a so-called [“global security” bill](#) that would restrict the publication of photos and video footage of police officers.

Police violence has also been seen in eastern EU countries, especially [Poland](#), where several journalists were harassed or arrested during anti-government protests, and Bulgaria, where the authorities went so far as to [refuse to investigate](#) a case of police violence against freelance journalist Dimiter Kenarov. The growing trend for abuses against journalists has been confirmed in [Serbia](#), which aspires to join the EU. The various press freedom violations have contributed to a sharp deterioration in the EU/Balkans Abuses indicator. Acts of violence have more than doubled in the region, compared with a 17% deterioration worldwide.