

EUROPE AND EX-URSS



DIFFERENCES INCREASE IN EUROPE

European Union more heterogeneous, Balkans facing EU entry challenge

While **Finland** and **Norway** again share first place, **Bulgaria** (80th) and **Greece** (70th) have kept their status as the European Union's bad performers. Targeted attacks and death threats against journalists marked the past year in Bulgaria, where concerns about print media pluralism grew. In Greece, the economic crisis highlighted the fragility of its media while photographers and cameramen covering demonstrations were exposed to conditions resembling war zones. **Hungary** fell 17 rungs to 40th place after adopting a law giving the ruling party direct control over the media and amending its constitution in December. The precedent set by this legislation, adopted with little comment from other EU member states, has further dented the European model's credibility.

France is still in a disappointing position (38th), as concern continues about protection of the confidentiality of sources and the ability of investigative journalists to cover influential figures close to the government. **Italy** (61st), which still has a dozen or so journalists under police protection, has turned the page on several years of conflict of interest with Silvio Berlusconi's departure. But this year's ranking still bears his mark, especially another attempt to introduce a gag law and an attempt to introduce Internet filtering without reference to the courts, both narrowly rejected.

Against the extraordinary backdrop of the News of the World affair, the **United Kingdom** (28th) caused concern with its approach to the protection of privacy and its response to the London riots. Despite universal condemna-

tion, the UK also clings to a surreal law that allows the entire world to come and sue news media before its courts.

The contrast among the three Baltic countries sharpened. **Estonia** (3rd) stayed at the top of the index but **Lithuania** and **Latvia** fell to 30th and 50th respectively as a result of grotesque court rulings and increased interference by the security services. Relations between the government and media have improved somewhat in **Slovakia** (25th) since Robert Fico, who was heavy-handed in his methods and crude in his language with journalists, ceased to be prime minister.

The economic crisis accentuated the Balkan media's problems – use of the media for private or criminal interests, unfair competition in very small markets, and self-censorship by a growing number of badly paid journalists. Judicial officials – many of them poorly trained, allied with the government and often corrupt – seem more interested in harassing the media than ending impunity for those who threaten or physically attack journalists. This was the case, for example in **Bosnia-Herzegovina** (58th), **Montenegro** (107th), **Albania** (96th) and **Macedonia** (94th), which lost 40 per cent of its media with the closure of Plus Produkcija, a company that owned three dailies and the leading privately-owned TV station.

Turkey back to old habits, Azerbaijan and Belarus locked into repression

Turkey continued its descent, this time falling 10 places to 148th. Despite the diversity and energy of its media, 2011 saw a dramatic

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escalation in the judicial harassment of journalists. Under the pretext of combating terrorism, dozens were jailed before being tried, above all in the investigations into the Ergenekon conspiracy and the KCK, an alleged political offshoot of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers Party. The unprecedented extension of the range of arrests, the massive phone taps and the contempt shown for the confidentiality of journalists' sources have helped to reintroduce a climate of intimidation in the media.

In **Russia** (142nd), the media freedom panorama continues to be gloomy. The conviction of a couple for the double murder of Anastasia Baburova and Stanislav Markelov raised hopes but aspects of the case remained unclarified and impunity is still the rule for those who murder or attack journalists. Tougher sentences for such crimes and the decriminalization of media offences were both good news but the impact of these reforms remains to be determined, especially in the absence of an overhaul of anti-terrorist legislation. The unprecedented demonstrations in December 2011 augur a period of uncertainty – while some newsrooms seem to be becoming more outspoken, the state's repressive apparatus has so far been able to cope with the unrest.

After cracking down violently on pro-democracy protests, both **Belarus** (168th) and **Azerbaijan** (162nd) have fallen sharply and are approaching the bottom of the index. Their leaders, Alexander Lukashenko and Ilham Aliyev, are both predators of press freedom and both made the media pay for the way their authority was challenged on the streets – in Belarus, more than 100 journalists and bloggers arrested (and around 30 of them given jail sentences), increased harassment of independent media and deportation of foreign journalists.

Not content with this indiscriminate repression, Belarus' self-styled "Batka" (Father) went on to turn the media into the scapegoat for all of his country's problems. Similar methods were used in Azerbaijan, where special emphasis was put on surveillance of social networks and where netizens were jailed just for issuing online calls for demonstrations. Violence is back in a big way there, with threats, beatings, and abduction of opposition journalists and, for the first time in five years, an Azerbaijani journalist murdered.

No longer the leader in the southern Caucasus, **Georgia** (104th) is paying the price for the violent dispersal of an opposition demonstration in May and the persistent harassment of journalists and bloggers suspected of sympathizing with Russia. **Armenia's** 24-place rise in the index seems spectacular, but in fact it has just gone back to where it was three years ago, before the brutal crackdown after the disputed 2008 elections. The media are nonetheless subject to constant judicial harassment and the size of the damages demanded in lawsuits is intimidating. Self-regulation is a major challenge that still needs to be tackled.

In Central Asia, **Kyrgyzstan** turned the page on a 2010 marked by a cruel dictatorship's violent death throes and inter-ethnic massacres in the south and achieved the region's best ranking (108th). The media freedom situation nonetheless continues to be very fragile, with physical attacks on journalists and repressive initiatives by parliament. It was a bad year in neighbouring **Tajikistan** (122nd), where the authorities continue to brandish the spectre of civil war and radical Islamism to try to gag the independent media.

Kazakhstan's ranking (154th) improved only because so many other countries plunged on the index this year. In reality, in a bid to maintain a facade of stability at all costs, the Kazakh authorities have stepped up their persecution of the few independent voices and are trying to gain control of the Internet. Online content also focused the attention of the dictatorships in **Uzbekistan** (157th) and **Turkmenistan** (177th), which made no progress. The Turkmen public have access only to a highly-censored national Intranet, but the war of information 2.0 has now begun with the few Turkmen online resources based abroad.

Ukraine (116th) rose a few rungs after its all-time low in 2010, marked by journalist Vasyl Klymentyev's disappearance, but the negative's tendencies seen since Viktor Yanukovich's installation as president in February 2010 – return of censorship and many physical attacks on journalists that have gone unpunished – have continued.