

2019 RSF Press Freedom Index: glimmers of hope amid overall decline in Eastern Europe and Central Asia

The Eastern Europe and Central Asia region maintains its ranking at second from the bottom in the World Press Freedom Index. However, 2018 saw an unusual diversity of changes at the national level. Moscow and Ankara continued to set a bad example, and the region's worst despots behaved even more appalling, but some countries improved their individual ranking, showing that deterioration is not inevitable.

Russia and Turkey, the regional heavyweights, were of course not among those that improved, and instead they maintained their role as pioneers of repression. In Turkey (157th), [the biggest media group was taken over](#) by a pro-government business conglomerate and the grip of repression continued to tighten on the few critical media outlets that remain. The world's most prolific jailer of professional journalists, Turkey systematically resorts to preventive detention and imposes long prison sentences, sometimes as long as [life imprisonment](#). Even RSF's representative, Erol Önderoğlu, has been accused of supporting "terrorist propaganda" just for defending a Kurdish newspaper. Not content with [blocking thousands of articles](#) every year and jailing people for nothing more than a social network "like," Ankara is now trying to bring [online video services under its control](#).

Corruption, a dangerous subject for reporters

Turkey is also the world's only country where a journalist has been the subject of a criminal prosecution in connection with their reporting on the Paradise Papers. Pelin Ünker was [sentenced to 13 months in prison](#) and received a heavy fine. It serves as just one of many examples of how investigative journalism, which the government labels as "destructive" or "anti-patriotic," is [persecuted](#). Corruption in particular has been off limits ever since a scandal almost brought down Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government in 2013.

Investigative journalism is also a major irritant to the regimes in a number of former Soviet countries, where corruption has long been a major problem. Most of the journalists who are in prison in [Russia](#) and [Azerbaijan](#) were covering this dangerous subject. It was after accusing senior officials of embezzlement that former journalist Khayrullo Mirsaidov [was jailed](#) in Tajikistan, and two media outlets that had previously been left alone were [raided](#) in Kazakhstan. While doing similar investigative reporting in Ukrainian, journalists were placed [under surveillance](#) or were [forced to hand over information](#) to the authorities in violation of the principle of the confidentiality of sources.

No reservations about blocking the Internet

Russia (149th) has fallen one place in the Index, and unfortunately with the harassment of independent media growing low positions are in high demand this year. What with an avalanche of [draconian laws](#), [arbitrary arrests](#) and searches, [impunity](#) and [police violence](#), Vladimir Putin has begun his fourth term in the [worst possible manner](#). By trying to [block the encrypted messaging service Telegram](#), despite significant collateral damage, Moscow has demonstrated its determination to achieve a "[sovereign Internet](#)." Pending resolution of the technical obstacles in the way of this goal, the Kremlin keeps tightening its grip on the Internet, the main source of news and information for young Russians, who are increasingly escaping the reach of the country's TV propaganda. Its methods include [censoring search engines](#), blocking censorship circumvention tools, and forcing online platforms to cooperate with the Federal Security Service (FSB).

Internet censorship is now widespread. Blocking critical news sites is the very least that the region's authoritarian regimes do. [As in many countries](#) throughout the world, the [Tajik](#), Kazakh, Azerbaijani and [Ingush](#) authorities no longer hesitate to temporarily disconnect mobile Internet, social networks or instant messaging services in order to rein in protests and reduce media coverage of them.

Affected by political transitions

In a largely ossified region, sudden shifts in Index rankings, especially rises, are rare. [Uzbekistan](#) (up 5 to 160th place) is no longer in the black zone, the mark of a "very bad" situation on the World Press Freedom map. The thaw that began after dictator Islam Karimov's death in 2016 has continued. The journalists who were still in prison have been released and a few media outlets have begun to cover sensitive subjects. But much remains to be done to end the censorship and self-censorship that have prevailed for so long.

The other significant rises are those of Armenia (up 19 to 61st place) and Kyrgyzstan (up 15 to 83rd place) – rises magnified by the fact that this is a very volatile area of the Index. Widely covered in the media and social networks, Armenia's "[velvet revolution](#)" loosened the government's grip on TV channels. Former Kyrgyz President Almazbek Atambayev and his successor withdrew their requests for the imposition of [astronomical damages on critical journalists](#), turning the page on elections that had impacted heavily on the media. However, in the absence of lasting reform, journalists remain exposed to the possibility that the pendulum could swing back.

The imminence of important elections in 2019 sharpened the polarisation in [Ukraine](#) (down 1 to 102nd place) and [Moldova](#) (down 10 to 91st

place), hurting the climate for journalism, encouraging manipulation, and highlighting the influence that oligarchs continue to exercise over the media. This tension is the main reason why these two countries fell in the Index.

Turkmenistan ranked last

More than half of the region's countries are ranked somewhere near or below the 150th position in the Index, and the situation continues to worsen in those that are ranked lowest. [Turkmenistan](#) (down 2 to 180th place) is now ranked last in the Index, below North Korea and Eritrea. This disgraceful performance is the outcome of several years of increasingly ruthless repression in which the authorities have relentlessly persecuted journalists working clandestinely as the correspondents of Turkmen exiled media.

[Tajikistan](#) (down 12 to 161st place) is getting dangerously close to being in the black zone on the World Press Freedom map. Most of its independent media have been forced to close or to relocate abroad. The few that have survived inside the country have to cope with the blocking of their websites and are subjected to constant harassment, which encourages self-censorship. Contrasting with the Uzbek thaw, the deterioration in Tajikistan has made it Central Asia's second worst ranked country.

On the other side of the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan (down 3 to 166th place) continues to persecute the few remaining critical journalists. The crackdown also continues in Belarus (153rd), with [repeated fines](#) being used to punish the correspondents of exiled media outlets, the [blocking](#) of leading news websites, the [harassment](#) of independent publications that had previously been spared, and [tougher legislation](#). Only the fall in the number of arrests from 2017's record level, and the even greater declines in many other countries around the world account for Belarus's paradoxical rise in the Index.

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