

WORLD PRESS FREEDOM INDEX 2015: DECLINE ON ALL FRONTS

The Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index ranks the performance of 180 countries according to a range of criteria that include media pluralism and independence, respect for the safety and freedom of journalists, and the legislative, institutional and infrastructural environment in which the media operate.

Top of the list, as so often, are three Scandinavian countries: **Finland**, which has been in first place for five years in succession, followed by **Norway** and **Denmark**. At the other end of the scale, **Turkmenistan**, **North Korea** and **Eritrea**, in last place, were the worst performers. **France** is ranked 38th (up one place), the **United States** 49th (down three places), **Japan** 61st (down two places), **Brazil** 99 (up 12 places), **Russia** 152 (down four places), **Iran** 173rd (unchanged) and **China** 176th (down one place).

The 2015 World Press Freedom Index highlights the worldwide deterioration in freedom of information in 2014. Beset by wars, the growing threat from non-state operatives, violence during demonstrations and the economic crisis, media freedom is in retreat on all five continents.

The indicators compiled by Reporters Without Borders are incontestable. There was a drastic decline in freedom of information in 2014. Two-thirds of the 180 countries surveyed for the 2015 World Press Freedom Index performed less well than in the previous year. The annual global indicator, which measures the overall level of violations of freedom of information in 180 countries year by year, has risen to 3,719, an 8 percent increase over 2014 and almost 10 percent compared with 2013. The decline affected all continents.

	2013	2014	2015	Diff. 2014/2015
European Union and the Balkans	17,5	17,6	18,6	+5.6%
Americas	30	30,3	30,8	+1.6%
Africa	34,3	35,6	35,9	+0.8%
Asia-Pacific	42,2	42,2	42,6	+0.9%
Eastern Europe & Central Asia	45,3	45,5	46,1	+1.3%
North Africa & Middle East	48,5	48,7	49,2	+1.0%
Global indicator	3395	3456	3719	+7,6%

The European Union-Balkans region is in the lead by far, but nonetheless recorded the biggest fall between the 2014 and 2015 editions. This disturbing trend reflects a two-fold phenomenon: the excesses of some member countries on the one hand and the inability of EU mechanisms to contain them on the other. The region that is bottom of the freedom of information list, North Africa and the Middle East, this year once again contained information “black holes”. Comprising entire regions, these are controlled by non-state groups in which independent information simply does not exist.

THE MOST STRIKING DEVELOPMENTS IN THE 2015 EDITION

THE FALLERS

Andorra (32nd), the sharpest fall, has paid the price for the lack of independence of its media from financial, political and religious interests. It fell by 27 places as a result of the many conflicts of interests and the great difficulty experienced by journalists in covering the activities of Andorran banks, coupled with the lack of any legal protection for freedom of information, such as the confidentiality of journalists’ sources.

In Asia, **East Timor** (103rd) fell by 26 places. The creation of a press council and the adoption of a code of ethics in October 2013 have been a disappointment. In 2014, the government proposed a tough new media law, which has led to widespread self-censorship.

In sub-Saharan Africa, **Congo** (107th) fell 25 places after a difficult year for independent news outlets. The government stepped up its witch-hunt of critical journalists, at times resorting to extreme violence. Journalists who refuse to keep quiet are forced to flee the country or are expelled (<http://en.rsf.org/congo-are-the-congolese-authorities-29-09-2014,47039.html>).

Western Europe saw numerous countries in decline. **Italy** (73rd) fell 24 places after a difficult year for journalists (<http://en.rsf.org/italy.html>) for whom threats from the mafia, among others, and unjustified defamation suits, skyrocketed. **Iceland** (21st, down 13) paid the price of

worsening relations between politicians and media (<http://en.rsf.org/iceland-freedom-of-information-in-decline-19-11-2014,47248.html>). The drop was an alarm call for this “model of democracy”.

In South America, **Venezuela** (137th) fell 20 places. The National Bolivarian Guard (national army) opened fire on journalists during demonstrations (<http://en.rsf.org/venezuela-soldiers-target-three-journalists-16-05-2014,46298.html>), although they were clearly identified as such. In **Ecuador** (108th, down 13), the promising Organic Law on Communication soon revealed its limitations. (<http://rsf.org/supercom/en.html>) Forced corrections became a means of institutional censorship.

Journalists working in **Libya** (154th, down 17 places) have lived through a chaotic period since the fall of Gaddafi, during which Reporters Without Borders recorded seven murders and 37 kidnappings of journalists. Faced with such violence, more than 40 people working in the media decided to leave the country in 2014. Reporting on the activities of the militias that have carved up the country is an act of heroism (<http://en.rsf.org/libya-libya-still-extremely-dangerous-14-10-2014,47108.html>).

In **South Sudan** (125th, down 6 places), gripped by civil war, the radical polarisation and constant harassment of news organizations caused it to fall down the rankings. Press freedom was suspended “because of civil war”, as a Reporters Without Borders headline said in July last year (<http://en.rsf.org/south-sudan-media-freedom-on-hold-in-south-11-07-2014,46620.html>) on the third anniversary of the country’s birth.

Pressure on independent media continued to intensify in **Russia** (152nd, down 4), with another string of draconian laws, website blocking (<http://en.rsf.org/russia-how-far-will-the-crackdown-on-13-03-2014,46003.html>) and independent news outlets (<http://en.rsf.org/russia-lenta-ru-website-is-latest-13-03-2014,45996.html>) either brought under control or throttled out of existence. The repressive climate encouraged some local despots to step up their persecution of critics.

In the Caucasus, **Azerbaijan** (162nd, down 2) suffered an unprecedented crackdown on critics and registered the biggest fall in score among the index’s 25 lowest-ranking countries. With media freedom already limited by one-sided regulation (http://en.rsf.org/IMG/pdf/running_scared_ipga_report_2012.pdf) and control of the advertising market, the few remaining independent publications were either collapsing under the impact of astronomic damages awards or were simply closed by the police. The number of journalists and bloggers who were jailed turned Azerbaijan into Europe’s biggest prison for news providers.

In the Americas, the **United States** (49th, down three places) continues its decline. In 2014, the *New York Times* journalist James Risen came under government pressure to reveal his sources. Although the Obama administration backed away in that case, it continues its war on information in others, such as WikiLeaks (<http://en.rsf.org/united-states-leaked-documents-show-how-us-20-02-2014,45907.html>).

THE RISERS

There are few of these. **Mongolia** (54th) rose 34 places, the Index’s biggest jump. It had few violations in 2014, while the benefits of legislation on access to information began to be seen. Problems remain, however, including on the legislative front, but there has been a clear improvement.

Tonga (44th), which held its first democratic elections in 2010, strengthened its position thanks to an independent press, which has established its role as a counter-weight to the government. The Polynesian nation has risen an enviable 19 places.

The long-running political crisis in **Madagascar** (64th) came to an end with the election of Hery Rajaonarimampianina as president in January 2014 and the departure of the information minister. This democratic transition eased the previous polarisation and boosted the country by 17 places. Yet some subjects remain taboo, such as the financial monopolies in the hands of leading political figures.

In Europe, **Georgia** (69th, up 15) continued to rise for the third year running and is now close to where it was before the 2008 war. It is enjoying the fruits of reforms undertaken after a change of government through elections, but it continued to be handicapped by the extreme polarization of its news media.

In 86th place, **Ivory Coast** (up 15 places) continued to emerge from the political and social crisis that plunged the country into full-scale civil war in 2010. The results are still mixed in a country where the broadcasting sector is expected to be opened up in 2015, although there are some fears that this might usher in institutional censorship.

Nepal (105th) was up 15 places thanks to a drop in violence by the security forces against journalists, especially at demonstrations. This improvement remains to be confirmed in 2015.

Tunisia (126th) rose seven places, a relative increase although in absolute terms the country stagnated. However, the fact remains that political stabilisation in 2014 had benefits for news and information. On the other hand, the number of attacks on journalists remains too high and the implementation of measures to ensure freedom of information has been long in coming.

A cause for satisfaction was **Brazil** (99th, up 12 places), which rose above the symbolic 100 mark thanks to a less violent year in which two journalists were killed compared with five in the previous year.

Still in the Americas, **Mexico** (148th) managed to pull itself up four places. In November, which is not included in the 2015 Index, journalists were attacked during demonstrations (<http://en.rsf.org/mexico-another-14-journalists-injured-in-25-11-2014,47270.html>) about the disappearance of 43 trainee teachers in the southwestern state of Guerrero. Reporters Without Borders recorded three cases in Mexico of journalists killed as a direct result of their work, compared with two in 2013.

2015 INDEX: REASONS FOR THE WORRYING DECLINE

Conflicts proliferated in 2014: the Middle East, Ukraine, Syria and Iraq... All warring parties without exception waged a fearsome information war. The media, used for propaganda purposes or starved of information, became strategic targets and were attacked, or even silenced.

See the analysis: "News control - powerful weapon of war" (<http://index.rsf.org/#!/themes/news-control-weapon>)

Non-state groups follow no laws and disregard basic rights in pursuit of their own ends. From Boko Haram to Islamic State, Latin American drug traffickers and the Italian mafia, motives may vary but their *modus operandi* is the same – the use of fear and reprisals to silence

journalists and bloggers who dare to investigate them or refuse to act as their mouthpieces.
See the analysis: “Non-state groups: tyrants of information” (<http://index.rsf.org/#!/themes/non-states-groups-tyrants-of-information>)

Stretching sacrilege prohibitions in order to protect a political system is an extremely effective way of censoring criticism of the government in countries where religion shapes the law. The criminalization of blasphemy endangers freedom of information in around half of the world’s countries. When “believers” think the courts are not doing enough to ensure respect for God or the Prophet, they sometimes take it upon themselves to remind journalists and bloggers what they may or may not say.

See the analysis: “Blasphemy: political use of religious censorship” (<http://index.rsf.org/#!/themes/blasphemy-political-use-of-religious-censorship>)

Can journalists be seen as the common enemy of protesters and police alike at some demonstrations? This is the sad conclusion of Reporters Without Borders this year. 2014 saw an increase in violence towards reporters and netizens covering demonstrations.

See the analysis: “The growing difficulty of covering demonstrations” (<http://index.rsf.org/#!/themes/demonstrations-becoming-hazardous>)

The European Unions recorded a bigger decline in 2015 than in the 2014 Index, exposing the limits of its “democratic model” and highlighting the inability of its mechanisms to halt the erosion. The EU appears to be swamped by a certain desire on the part of some member states to compromise on freedom of information. As a result, the gaps between members are widening – EU countries are ranked from 1st to 106th in the Index, an unprecedented spread.

See the analysis: “European model’s erosion” (<http://index.rsf.org/#!/themes/european-union-model-erosion>)

Democracies often take liberties with their values in the name of national security. Faced with real or spurious threats, governments arm themselves routinely with an entire arsenal of laws aimed at muzzling independent voices. This phenomenon is common to both authoritarian governments and democracies.

See the analysis: “National security” – spurious grounds (<http://index.rsf.org/#!/themes/national-security-spurious-grounds>)

These authoritarian governments are in Eastern Europe, Africa, Asia and also the Middle East. Most are headed by cartoon characters come to life who would be laughed at if they did not exercise total control over news and information. In 2014 they further tightened the grip they have had on the media for many years. Among the lowest-ranking 20 countries in the 2015 Index, 15 performed even worse than they did in the 2014 edition.

See the analysis: “Regimes seeking ever more information control” (<http://index.rsf.org/#!/themes/regimes-seeking-more-control>)