

Europe - Central Asia

Press freedom in Europe overshadowed by war in Ukraine

Systemic censorship in the East

In 2022, the war in Ukraine allowed the Kremlin to begin a final “purge” of the Russian media landscape. Systemic censorship and the forced exodus of independent Russian and foreign media outlets have freed up space for the dissemination of coordinated propaganda by pro-government media. The ban on Western social media has benefitted Telegram, a platform whose users in [Russia](#) (164th) have more than doubled in one year. It is the method that independent media most use to circumvent censorship, but it has also been invaded by Putin’s propaganda networks, with some Telegram channels even tracking the movements of foreign journalists regarded as spies.

In [Ukraine](#) (79th), the Kremlin's propaganda apparatus is deployed at great speed whenever the Russian forces conquer new territory – TV channels are jammed, Ukrainian media are replaced and local journalists are hunted down. Journalists have much more freedom in the free zone, despite the turmoil in the news media, the difficulties associated with covering a country at war, and reporting restrictions that, for the most part, are proportionate to the situation. The war and the spirit of national unity have reduced the hold of the oligarchs on the media and have reduced pressures that were due to divisions.

The Russian invasion overshadows the entire region, especially [Belarus](#) (157th), which is now under Russia’s thumb. The Index has been impacted by a marked deterioration in the press freedom situation in Central Asia, with a remarkable 50-place fall by [Kyrgyzstan](#) (122nd).

Delicate balance between freedom and security in the West

The war in Ukraine has also affected western Europe, which often struggles to find a balance between security and freedom. Several countries have restricted journalistic work on “national security” grounds. In [Greece](#) (107th), [spying on journalists](#) by the intelligence agencies and by means of the Predator spyware represented the biggest press freedom violation in the European Union in 2022 and explains why Greece has the lowest ranking of any EU country in the 2023 Index. In [Albania](#) (96th), the prosecutor’s office imposed [disproportionate restrictions](#) on journalistic coverage of a cyber-attack of Iranian origin. In the [United Kingdom](#) (26th), where Julian Assange is still jailed pending extradition, investigative journalism is threatened by a national security bill that lacks protective measures. In [Latvia](#) (16th), the media regulator arbitrarily [revoked](#) an independent Russian channel’s media licence. In [Finland](#) (5th) two journalists were [convicted](#) of revealing state secrets while new legislation in [Sweden](#) (4th) undermines the confidentiality of journalists’ sources.

Despite these troubling issues, the disparities in the rankings of EU member countries have declined significantly. There are twice as many EU members that have risen in the Index as there are that have fallen. At the same time, the EU is discussing [unprecedented legislation](#) that would establish common press freedom standards. And the rise in the Index by most of the EU's eastern members has been accompanied by a realisation that independent reporting can serve as a rampart against Kremlin propaganda. [Serbia](#) (91st), where pro-government media disseminate Russian propaganda, suffered the biggest fall (down 12) in the EU-Balkans region.