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Press Freedom Index 2015
European model's erosion

Europe has been drifting downwards in the press freedom index for years. It held steady in last year's index but, overall, it fell again in the 2015 index although the Nordic countries continued to hold the top positions. This general decline reinforces concern about the sustainability of the "European model."

Slippage at the top

Finland (1st), **Norway** (2nd) and **Denmark** (3rd) continued to head the index but their performance scores fell. In Finland, growing competition drove media groups into mergers in order to be able to lay off staff. As a result, there was an inevitable decline in the volume of media content available to the public. A collateral effect of the reduction in the number of newsrooms was a loss of independence.

Ranked 2nd in last year's index, the **Netherlands** fell to 4th position in the 2015 index as a result of direct violations, including attacks on journalists during a demonstration and a decline in relations between journalists and institutions. A salient example was a ban, adopted in September, on filming inside parliament without an explicit agreement by parliamentarians.

The Netherlands' fall allowed **Norway** to return to the top three, where it has usually been since the index was created in 2002. Nonetheless, concerns persist about the capacity of Norway's media to tackle sensitive or important subjects. The media are free but how are they using their freedom? A Médecins Sans Frontières campaign highlighted a disturbing lack of coverage of international crises by the Norwegian media.

In **Denmark**, two journalists who exposed a public health scandal were fined in October 2014. It reflected poorly on a county that has been debating freedom of expression since 2005. Their lawyer accused the authorities of persecuting the "messenger" instead of addressing the problem raised by the journalists.

European mechanisms unable to stop erosion of pluralism

Government interference in the media is a reality in many European Union countries. It is facilitated by the concentration of media ownership in ever fewer hands and a lack of transparency about ownership. Media regulatory bodies are sometimes manipulated to suppress media outlets. This is a major problem in **Hungary** (65th, -1), where the Media Council – whose president is appointed by the prime minister – meddles in editorial policy. The EU has not managed to contain this problem.

The EU's failure to recognize the media as an exception in its competition legislation is another problem. The dominant positions of the major media groups and the obstacles to entering a struggling market pose direct threats to media pluralism. Pluralism is a leading EU principle that appears in treaties, but European law makes no real distinction between a news organization and an import-export firm.

Ironically, competition rules also fail to disqualify the Hungarian reforms that make it possible to withdraw the licences of media outlets, although this runs counter to the free market principles that are so dear to the EU.

The EU has no rules on the allocation of state aid to the media. The allocation of state advertising is not regulated either, although it is an effective way to put pressure on media outlets, especially at the local level. In **France** (38th), for example, *Le Ravi*, a satirical magazine known as the "Marseille *Charlie Hebdo*," lost around 40,000 euros in public funding in 2014 as a result of a decision by the local authorities that had all the hallmarks of a punishment. *Le Ravi* may not be able to survive without the funding.

Finally, the EU does not require those who run state media to be appointed in a transparent manner or state media to be independent of the politicians in power. This leaves room for abuses. In **Italy** (73rd), the way the state-owned national radio and TV broadcaster *RAI*'s executives are appointed makes it possible for the ruling coalition to exercise a degree of control over its editorial policies. Augusto Minzolini, the head of *RAI 1*, the leading public TV channel, said in 2009 that it did not cover then Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's "personal" problems. RAI's current president, former Bank of Italy director Anna Maria Tarantola, was appointed to the position in 2012 by then Prime Minister Mario Monti.

Populist pressure on media

Several European countries that are ranked in the 30th to 70th range of the index betray an inability to climb out of what has been called "Europe's soft underbelly." Since the 2007 financial crisis, EU member countries have been beset by growing difficulties including rising unemployment and declining purchasing power. This is an ideal breeding ground for populist movements that blame the crisis on the elites and accuse the media of being part of the "system."

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban has continued to hound the independent media, turning his wrath on the *RTL* media group in 2014 by imposing a tax on advertising that directly targeted its TV stations. Thanks to a widely-supported campaign, the Internet managed to avoid a regressive tax on data consumption designed to reduce the impact of independent reporting, which has found a refuge online in recent years.

France's far-right National Front (FN), which now claims to be the country's leading political party, has distinguished itself by barring certain journalists from its events. This is not surprising from a party that announced a "media plan" designed to "*attack journalists to death.*" And it is not just the far right in France that has shown hostility towards journalists. They are often targeted during demonstrations, both by demonstrators and sometimes by police.

In **Italy** (73rd), Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement (M5S) has no equal when it comes to information control. It strictly regulates the ability of its parliamentary representatives to give interviews, and seems to want to control journalists as well, vilifying them when they try to maintain their independence. Grillo has accused journalists of prostituting themselves and has barred the national media from some of his meetings.

Troubled Europeans: Greece, Bulgaria, Italy and Luxembourg

Greece (91st) ended a 60-place fall that began in 2009 because the government finally seemed to take appropriate measures to combat the neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn, which has no qualms about using violence against journalists. But the police still enjoy complete impunity when they target reporters. If Greece did not rise in the index, it was due above to the failure to fill the gap left by state broadcaster *ERT*'s sudden closure in 2013. Many employees have resigned from *ERT*'s successor, *New Hellenic Radio, Internet and Television (NERIT)*, since its first president's departure. Syriza has promised to revive *ERT*.

The demonstrations and acts of violence against journalists that marked 2013 in **Bulgaria** (106th) were followed in 2014 by a wave of panic triggered by wrongdoings in the banking sector. In response to the public's loss of confidence in their banks, the government rushed through a law turning the banking sector into a fortress. The Financial Oversight Commission, a government agency, has in practice been turned into a media cop. Imposing fines and ordering journalists to reveal their sources, it clearly betrays a government desire to silence media that dare to point out problems in banks and the regulatory system.

A disturbing increase in violence against journalists in **Italy** (73rd) has revived media concern about the mafia, which is still on the Reporters Without Borders list of Predators of Media Freedom. Twelve journalists are currently getting police protection, according to Ossigeno per l'Informazione. Reporters Without Borders' two Italian "Information Heroes," Lirio Abbate and Giuseppe "Pino" Maniaci, have been among the leading targets. Maniaci's two dogs were found hanged at his home a few days after his car was torched. The fight for freedom of information in Italy is also been played out in the courts. Ossigeno per l'Informazione reported 129 abusive defamation suits during the 12 months ending mid-October 2014, a 53 percent increase on the preceding 12 months.

Luxembourg (19th), which was in the news in late 2014 because of the LuxLeaks revelations about the government's tax avoidance deals with hundreds of multinationals, relapsed to its 2009 level (20th) after a year that saw a mix of hope and frustration. The positive signs for journalism in the Grand Duchy in 2014 included the creation of an investigative journalism prize. But the close links between government, business sector and media increasingly obstruct journalists' work.