

The state of freedom of expression in Europe

Various indicators are used to measure the level of freedom of expression in different countries. For example, the World Press Freedom Index compiled by Reporters Without Borders measures the freedom of the press in 180 countries, while Freedom House's index gives an extensive description of the level of freedom in the world.

RSF = Reporters Without Borders: the World Press Freedom Index

WJP = World Justice Project: the Rule of Law Index

FH = Freedom House: the Freedom in the World Index

Finland

- Freedom of the press (RSF) 2.
- Freedom of expression (WJP) 0.89
- Freedom of expression and belief (FH) 16/16

Media publications are traditionally independent and free from political pressure or censorship. However, journalists experience threats and harassment because of their work. Reliable media are challenged on social media platforms, where fake news and threats are allowed to spread. There is little restriction on the freedom of expression of individuals, and the authorities are not known to monitor the communication of individuals in any inappropriate ways. The authorities' right to monitor private messages has been extended since the 2017 terrorist attack in Turku. Freedom of speech is threatened by hate speech, and the European Commission has reprimanded Finland for its inadequate legislation to criminalise hate speech.

Sweden

- Freedom of the press (RSF) 3.
- Freedom of expression (WJP) 0.85
- Freedom of expression and belief (FH) 16/16

The first country in the world to enact the Press Act (1766) and the Freedom of the Press Act (1776). Sweden has a press ombudsman who monitors the ethics of the media. The media operate independently but their ownership is concentrated. There is an atmosphere of openness, but

journalists have faced increased levels of harassment and intimidation in recent years. Other countries, such as China and Hungary, have also attacked Swedish journalists and journalists based in Sweden for reporting on human rights and the Covid situation in those countries. Freedom of speech is threatened by hate speech, and the European Commission has reprimanded Sweden for its inadequate legislation to criminalise hate speech.

Germany

- Freedom of the press (RSF) 13.
- Freedom of expression (WJP) 0.85
- Freedom of expression and belief (FH) 14/16

The media are mainly free and independent, and people are free to publish their opinions. Journalists face harassment on social media, and, especially in 2020, many journalists were subjected to physical attacks when reporting on right-wing demonstrations against Covid restrictions. Surveillance technologies are more commonly used, and the police can spy on WhatsApp chats in the context of criminal investigations. Germany's legislation against hate speech is one of the strictest in Europe. Glorification of Nazism and the denial of the Holocaust are also prohibited by law. A racist article published on social media can result in fines of up to EUR 50 million, and social media companies are obliged to remove such content within 24 hours of it being flagged. This has also resulted in the deletion of thousands of messages that do not contain hate speech.

Estonia

- Freedom of the press (RSF) 15.
- Freedom of expression (WJP) 0.79
- Freedom of expression and belief (FH) 16/16

Individuals have the right to express political opinions without fear of control or punishment. In principle, people support the free press, but several journalists were attacked by ministers in 2020. Ministers have failed to inform the media about official affairs and have threatened to cut funding. Journalists have been prevented from reporting on socially significant court cases. Freedom of speech is threatened by hate speech, and the European Commission has reprimanded Estonia for its inadequate legislation to criminalise hate speech.

Spain

- Freedom of the press (RSF) 29.
- Freedom of expression (WJP) 0.72
- Freedom of expression and belief (FH) 14/16

The press writes from a wide range of perspectives and reports on corruption. However, private ownership and political interference threaten the independence of the media. The far right has targeted harassment campaigns at journalists, and polarisation in society is weakening people's trust in the media. Journalists have been prevented from reporting on the pandemic and the refugee situation.

Very little is done to prevent disinformation from spreading. Individuals can express themselves quite freely, but anti-terrorism laws make it possible to restrict political commentaries and satirical writings. The restrictions, criticised by organisations such as Amnesty International, have been aimed especially at those critical of decision-makers and the monarchy.

France

- Freedom of the press (RSF) 34.
- Freedom of expression (WJP) 0.71
- Freedom of expression and belief (FH) 14/16

France has a long history of promoting freedom of expression. The media operates freely and mainly avoids sharing political views. Media ownership is, however, highly concentrated, and the atmosphere towards journalists is hostile, especially on social media. The atmosphere is relatively open even if different notions of freedom of expression have resulted in heated debates in recent years. Freedom of expression and religious intolerance have been debated in connection with events such as the Charlie Hebdo attack.

Italy

- Freedom of the press (RSF) 41.
- Freedom of expression (WJP) 0.69
- Freedom of expression and belief (FH) 15/16

Despite the growth of digital media, traditional media and print newspapers have maintained their popularity. Freedom of the press is guaranteed by the constitution, but journalists are subjected to violence and threats, especially by criminal organisations and the mafia. Several reporters are held under 24-hour police protection. In the early stages of the Covid pandemic, the transmission of information from the state to the media was restricted. The biggest problem during the pandemic has been Covid 19 denialists, who have threatened and physically attacked journalists reporting on the situation. In Italy, hate speech is an aggravating factor when deciding on punishment if it concerns ethnic origin, nationality or religion, but the proposal to include sexual and gender minorities was not approved.

Poland

- Freedom of the press (RSF) 64.
- Freedom of expression (WJP) 0.62
- Freedom of expression and belief (FH) 14/16

The public media are under heavy state control and have been involved in influencing public opinion during elections. The government is working to make privately owned media "more Polish" and to censor their content. Journalists have resigned from state-owned media due to the attempts at censorship, and journalists have been actively stopped from working; some have even been arrested. Private media, NGOs and academics face hate speech and smear campaigns. The government has

harassed researchers, especially those who write things about World War II and the Holocaust that the government does not approve. A third of municipalities in Poland have declared themselves opponents of “LGBTQI+ propaganda”, and activists have been arrested for displaying rainbow flags.

Hungary

- Freedom of the press (RSF) 92.
- Freedom of expression (WJP) 0.48
- Freedom of expression and belief (FH) 10/16

The freedom of the press enshrined in the constitution is being restricted by political measures. Most media have fallen into the hands of the government and Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. Funding for private media has been limited, and media have been taken over by the government, closed down and sold to pro-government investors. The Covid pandemic has resulted in further restrictions on the operations of the press. Journalists and their sources have been pressured into self-censorship and prevented from obtaining information at the risk of imprisonment. The authorities also seek to restrict the right of universities and NGOs to express their views and criticisms. The Hungarian Parliament passed legislation in summer 2021 that restricts freedom of expression, prohibiting sharing any LGBT content with minors.

What is the EU doing to promote freedom of expression?

Individuals' right to freedom of expression is protected by the European Convention on Human Rights (1950, Article 10), which is overseen by the European Court of Human Rights. The European Union has taken measures such as calling on some EU countries to criminalise hate speech, threatening to settle the matter in the European court if they refuse.