Europe faces a disturbing decline in press freedom

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While France climbed 6 places (33rd in the ranking) and Belgium consolidated its place within the top 10 (+2, 7th in the ranking), Reporter Without Borders' (RSF) world ranking, which assesses the situation of journalism annually in 180 countries, and the latest UNESCO world report, both flag a rising climate of hate towards the media.

On the occasion of World Press Freedom Day, and under this year's theme "Keeping Power in Check: Media, Justice and The Rule of Law," United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres reiterated his call for the respect of this essential pillar to democracy and to the guarantee of "peace, justice and respect for human rights throughout the world." He further stressed that "by supporting press freedom, we are defending our right to the truth."

Claimed hostility towards politicians, censorship, murders of journalists, hostage-taking, violent verbal attacks, libel suits, harassment on social networks, media freedom and the physical, psychological and digital security of journalists still encounter major problems in Europe, a situation that remains particularly alarming in early 2018.
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Europe has, for instance, already been shaken by two assassinations in less than five months, in Malta (-18 places, 65th) and Slovakia (-10 places, 27th). Last February, 53-year-old Daphne Caruana Galizia, who was about to publish a series of revelations about corruption and money laundering in the Maltese archipelago, was killed by a bomb placed under her car. In the same month, Ján Kuciak, a young investigative journalist who was also working on tax evasion cases, was found assassinated with his girlfriend, Martina Kušnírová, at their home in the town of Veľká Mača, east of the capital Bratislava.

While Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands, Finland and Switzerland remain at the top of the global rankings, the recent murders of these two journalists has led to a real wake-up call within Europe, until then considered safe for journalists.

Hate speech and anti-journalism

Moreover, many other European countries fell in the ranking, such as Spain (-2 places, 31st), the Czech Republic (-11 places, 34th), Hungary (-2 places, 73rd), Serbia (-10 places, 76th) or Bulgaria (-2 places, 111th). The Czech President Milos Zeman who was re-elected in January for a second term, notably suggested "liquidating journalists", calling them "bastards" and "hyenas" and appeared at a press conference with a fake Kalashnikov on which the word "journalists" was written, according to the RSF report. In France, many political parties such as Jean-Luc Mélenchon's "France Insoumise", Marine Le Pen's "Front National" and right-wing leader Laurent Wauquiez’s "Républicain" party denounce the "media bullshit" of the press and journalists, of which they claim to be the victims.

Faced with this wave of "mediabashing" and the rapid circulation of "fakes news", also very present on social networks and on the Internet, journalism is the target of numerous attacks (530 journalists were murdered worldwide between 2012 and 2016) and of disproportionate restrictions on freedom of expression, according to the UNESCO report.

Within the framework of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda and of the Sustainable Development Goal 16
in support of peace, justice and effective institutions, the Secretary-General calls for renewed efforts to uphold the fundamental right to freedom of expression and freedom of the press.

More information:

World Press Freedom Day website

Video message from the Secretary-General on the occasion of World Press Freedom Day 2018.