

2026 RSF Index: Press freedom at a 25-year low

For the first time in the history of the Reporters Without Borders (RSF) World Press Freedom Index, over half of the world's countries now fall into the “difficult” or “very serious” categories for press freedom. In 25 years, the average score of all 180 countries and territories included in the ranking has never been so low. Since 2001, the expansion of increasingly restrictive legislative arsenals — particularly those linked to national security policies — has been steadily eroding the right to information, even in democratic countries. The Index's legal indicator has declined the most over the past year, a clear sign that journalism is increasingly criminalised worldwide. In the Americas, the situation has evolved significantly, with the United States dropping seven places and several Latin American countries sliding deeper into a spiral of violence and repression.

“By providing a retrospective of the past 25 years, RSF isn't just looking back; the NGO is looking squarely to the future with a simple question in mind: how much longer are we going to tolerate the stifling of journalism, the systematic obstruction of journalists and the continued erosion of press freedom? Although attacks on the right to information are more diverse and sophisticated, their perpetrators are now operating in plain sight. Authoritarian states, complicit and incompetent political powers, predatory economic actors and under-regulated platforms are directly and overwhelmingly responsible for the global decline in press freedom. Given this context, inaction is a form of complicity. Asserting principles alone is no longer enough. Effective measures to protect journalists are essential and must be seen as a catalyst for change, starting with putting an end to the criminalisation of journalism: the misuse of national security laws, SLAPPs, and the systematic obstruction of those who investigate, expose and name names. Current protection mechanisms are not strong enough; international law is being undermined and impunity is rife. We need firm guarantees and meaningful sanctions. The ball is in the court of democracies and their citizens. It is up to them to stand in the way of those who seek to silence the press. The spread of authoritarianism isn't inevitable.”

Anne Bocandé, RSF's Editorial Director

Five key takeaways from the 2026 RSF World Press Freedom Index:

- The average score for all countries and territories worldwide has never been so low. For the first time in the Index's 25-year history, more than half of the countries on earth now fall into the “difficult” or “very serious” categories for press freedom.
- Out of the five indicators used to assess press freedom worldwide — which assess the economic, legal, security, political and social environments for journalism — the legal indicator has seen the sharpest decline this year.
- The United States has fallen seven places and other countries in the Americas, such as Ecuador and Peru, have plummeted in the ranking.
- Norway holds the top spot for the tenth consecutive year, while Eritrea comes in last for the third year in a row. Post-Assad Syria has seen the biggest improvement

in press freedom of all the countries and territories in the 2026 Index, climbing 36 places in the ranking.

The lowest average score in a quarter of a century

Since RSF began publishing the [World Press Freedom Index](#) 25 years ago, press freedom has been gradually deteriorating. This decline is visible on the Index's map, which turns redder every year. Journalists are still being killed and imprisoned for their work, but the tactics undermining press freedom are evolving. Journalism is being asphyxiated by hostile political discourse towards reporters, weakened by a faltering media economy, and squeezed by laws being used as weapons against the press.

For the first time in a quarter of a century:

- The overall average score of all the countries assessed has never been so low.
- In over half of the world's countries and territories (52.2%), the state of press freedom is categorised as "difficult" or "very serious." This category was a small minority (13.7%) in 2002.
- In 2002, 20% of the global population lived in a country where the state of press freedom was categorised as "good." Twenty-five years later, less than 1% of the world's population lives in a country that falls under this category.

Wars and restrictions on access to information

In some countries, such as **Iraq**, **Sudan** and **Yemen**, recurring armed conflict is the primary reason for this decline in press freedom. Ongoing wars have had a stark impact this year, notably in **Palestine**, where Benjamin Netanyahu's government in **Israel** (which fell -4 places in the Index this year) continues waging war. Since October 2023, more than 220 journalists have been killed in Gaza by the Israeli army, including at least 70 who were slain while carrying out their work. The same is true in **Sudan** (-5) and **South Sudan** (-9).

Elsewhere, the state of press freedom has hardly changed as dictatorial regimes keep it in a deadlock. This is the case in **China**, **North Korea** and **Eritrea**, where journalist Dawit Isaak has been locked up without trial for 25 years. **Eastern Europe** and the **Middle East** are the two most dangerous regions for journalists in the world, as they have been for 25 years. This is reflected in the ranking of Vladimir Putin's **Russia** (172nd), which has continued its war of aggression in Ukraine and remains one of the worst countries for press freedom. **Iran** (-1 place, 177th) also remains near the bottom of the ranking, held back by the regime's own repression and the US-Israeli war on its soil.

The information space in some countries has shrunk over the past 25 years due to political changes and increasingly repressive regimes. This has notably been the case in **Hong Kong** (-122) since Beijing tightened its control on the territory, in **El Salvador**, which dropped 105 places since 2014 and the start of the war on *maras*, or "gangs"; and in **Georgia**, which has dropped 75 places as the crackdown on the press has intensified in recent years.

The steepest fall recorded in the 2026 Index (-37) was **Niger** (120th), underscoring the wider decline in press freedom in the Sahel region seen in recent years as attacks by armed groups and ruling juntas have suppressed the right to balanced information from diverse

sources. In the Middle East, **Saudi Arabia** (-14) is paying the price for the authorities' repeated acts of violence against journalists in 2025, including the execution of [Turki al-Jasser](#). In contrast, the fall of Bashar al-Assad's dictatorship in December 2024 and the subsequent political transition have propelled **Syria** from 177th to 141st place, after years as one of the bottom ten countries in the Index.

The criminalisation of journalism reaches a peak

The Index's legal indicator has seen the most severe decline this year. This **score deteriorated in more than 60% of states** — 110 out of 180 — between 2025 and 2026. This is the case in [India](#), [Egypt](#), [Israel](#) and [Georgia](#). The criminalisation of journalism, which is rooted in circumventing press law and misusing emergency legislation and common law, is proving to be a global phenomenon.

The legal indicator plummets due to the abuse of national security laws

Twenty-five years after the attacks of 11 September 2001 in the United States, expanding the scope of defence secrets and national security has become a means to prohibit coverage of issues of public interest in many countries. This trend, which is particularly prevalent in authoritarian regimes, has also gained traction in democracies and typically goes hand in hand with abusive applications of the law against journalists, notably in the name of combatting terrorism.

Among the countries closed off to the independent press, Vladimir Putin's **Russia** has become a specialist in using laws designed to combat terrorism, separatism and extremism to restrict press freedom. As of April 2026, the country holds 48 journalists behind bars. Those who wish to continue their work have been forced into exile, where they are still unable to escape legal persecution as it [extends](#) well beyond the country's borders. This technique of instrumentalising national security measures can be found in neighbouring **Belarus**, as well as in **Myanmar**, **Nicaragua** and **Egypt**. Until 13 April, Sandra Muhoza was the only woman journalist detained in Africa's Great Lakes region in 2026, [prosecuted](#) in **Burundi** for "undermining the integrity of the national territory," a charge regularly used in the Great Lakes. In **Ethiopia**, four journalists have been locked up for three years on terrorism-related charges.

Even in democratic countries, the legislative noose is tightening around the press. In **Japan** (62nd), state secrets legislation continues to undermine journalists' work, especially as the safeguards for protecting source confidentiality and editorial independence are inadequate. In the **Philippines**, a democracy on paper, terrorism charges have been used as a pretext to silence independent reporters, including journalist [Frenchie Mae Cumpio](#), who was convicted even though the case against her contained no tangible evidence, as revealed by an [RSF investigation](#). In **Hong Kong** (140th), a draconian national security law has allowed the authorities to imprison independent publisher Jimmy Lai, who was recently [sentenced](#) to 20 years in prison, the heaviest ever imposed on a journalist in the territory.

In **Türkiye** (163rd), anti-terrorism laws are not the only kind of legislation used to restrict press freedom. Under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, charges such as "disinformation", "[insulting the President](#)" and "denigrating state institutions" are regularly instrumentalised to repress journalism and imprison media professionals.

In North Africa, **Tunisia** (137th) is no exception to this global trend of legal warfare, also known as “lawfare.” While the country’s [Decree-Law 54](#) on “false information” has effectively criminalised journalism critical of the authorities, the suspension of media outlets and repeated legal proceedings reflect the growing instrumentalisation of the justice system against media professionals.

Abusive lawsuits and pressure on public media

The decline in the legal indicator this year is also explained by the rise in strategic litigation against public participation — abusive lawsuits known as SLAPPs — used against journalists, whether in **Bulgaria** (71st) or **Guatemala** (128th), the country with the emblematic case of José Rubén Zamora. In **Indonesia** (129th), **Singapore** (123rd) and **Thailand** (92nd), political and business elites also exploit a legal system that fails to sufficiently protect the press. These legal abuses also occur in relatively high-ranking countries, such as **France** (25th).

Public policies have failed to provide a structural solution to the array of challenges — be they physical or legal threats — faced by journalists around the world. In more than 80% of the countries analysed, protection mechanisms are seen as non-existent or ineffective. Although the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA) guarantees the independence and sustainability of media outlets — particularly public service outlets — within the European Union, it is regularly [undermined](#) by national legislative projects, as was the case in **Hungary** (74th) under Viktor Orbán’s outgoing government, and also in better-ranked countries such as **Slovakia** (37th), **Lithuania** (15th) and the **Czech Republic** (11th).

The American continent grapples with political violence and security challenges

US falls apart under Donald Trump

Since 2022, the drop in the overall ranking of the 28 countries in the Americas (-14 points) is similar to the decline seen in the world’s two most dangerous regions for journalists, **Eastern Europe–Central Asia (EEAC)** and the **Middle East–North Africa (MENA)**. Despite some improvements in recent years, as seen in **Brazil** (52nd), the recent history of press freedom in the Americas has been shaped by the rise in violence perpetrated by two offenders: organised crime and political actors.

US President [Donald Trump](#) has turned his repeated attacks on the press and journalists into a systematic policy, pushing the **US** down to 64th place (-7). The detention of Salvadoran journalist [Mario Guevara](#), who was later deported, has contributed to the deterioration of an already tense security environment marked by [police violence](#). The drastic cuts to the US Agency for Global Media (USAGM) [workforce](#) had global repercussions, leading to the closure, suspension and downsizing of international broadcasters such as *Voice of America* (VOA), *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL)* and *Radio Free Asia (RFA)* in countries where they were some of the last reliable sources of information.

Presidents Javier Milei and Nayib Bukele — Donald Trump’s most vocal supporters in Latin America — have taken their cue from the White House in their approach to the media, with

unsurprisingly similar results. Javier Meili's **Argentina** (-11) and Nayib Bukele's **El Salvador** (-8) have recorded significant declines, notably linked to the deterioration of these countries' political and social indicators, reflecting a rise in government hostility towards and pressure on the press.

Latin America in decline

In countries where organised crime kills, Index rankings fall drastically. This is the case in **Ecuador** (125th), which has dropped 31 places since Darwin Baque and [Patricio Aguilar](#) were murdered in 2025. The same year, **Peru** (144th, -14) was impacted by the murder of four journalists. Guarantees for press freedom in **Venezuela** remain deeply uncertain despite the [release](#) of detained journalists earlier in the year. Finally, **Cuba** (160th) is undergoing a profound [crisis](#) that is forcing the few remaining independent journalists to operate underground, and **Nicaragua's** (168th) media landscape lies in [ruins](#), characterised by systematic repression and a lasting collapse in working conditions for journalists.

Methodology

Read the [methodology](#) behind the 2026 RSF World Press Freedom Index in full.

As with all rankings, RSF updates its methodology to stay in step with the times. These improvements are carried out with a committee of experts made up of internationally renowned academics and researchers.

For this edition, the comparative analysis of 25 years of rankings, from 2002 to 2026, spans several periods. The methodology and thresholds at which a country's press freedom situation is considered "good," "satisfactory," "problematic," "difficult" or "very serious" have evolved, initially on a frequent basis and then twice more in 2013 and 2022 — years when the methodology was significantly overhauled. To compare the years prior to the 2013 overhaul with the present day, we have standardised the thresholds between 2002 and 2022. During this period, the scoring system was reversed, with 0 indicating a good situation and 100 indicating a poor one. To enable comparison and projection using a common scale with the post-2022 rankings, the scores have been recalibrated onto an ascending scale where 100 is considered the highest value.

The 2022 methodological overhaul has made the Index easier to understand, with more readable, detailed scores, by introducing five different indicators — political, legal, economic, sociocultural and security-related — that make it possible to pinpoint the various types of threats to press freedom around the world.