

Freedom House Report on Media Freedom

PRESS FREEDOM ON A DOWNWARD SLOPE

Safax

October 12, 2004

The US non-governmental and non-profit organization *Freedom House* (established in 1941) publishes regular annual reports on economic, political, social and related (non)freedom in the world. It deals with particular meticulousness with freedom of the press, derived from freedom of opinion and expression, which is considered a fundamental human right. The report for last year is a combination of charts, tables and narratives.

Freedom House uses three general and customary categories to show status: free countries, partly free and not free.

In the introductory charts, of 192 countries in the world and one territory, freedom of the press is enjoyed by 73 countries, or 38 percent; partial freedom of the press is enjoyed by 49 countries, or 25 percent, while 71 countries, or 37 percent, are not free. In terms of population, the parameters are as follows: 1,086,590,000 people, or 17 percent of the planet's population, enjoy freedom of the press; 2,519,700,000 people, or 40 percent, enjoy partial freedom of the press; while approximately an equal number (2,693,600,000 people, or 43 percent) are deprived of free press. Different regions in the world are also shown on chart.

The tabular overview is also interesting and in addition to the three above categories, it also uses rank, rating and status. The rating scale is numerical from 0 to 100, with 0 being the optimum mark and 100 the poorest. Countries enjoying press freedom are placed in the 0-30 range; partly free countries are in the 31-60 group; while countries that are not free are in the 61-100 group.

In the table offering a global overview of press freedom, three countries are on top with an identical rating of eight points: Denmark, Island and Sweden, followed by Belgium, Finland, Norway and Switzerland (9 points), etc. At the very bottom is North Korea (98 points) and above it are Cuba (96), Turkmenistan and Burma (95 points), Libya (94 points), etc.

As for countries in the region, the best ranked is **Slovenia**, in group 37, rating 19, status: free. Countries with partly free status are: **Bulgaria** (earlier had free status), now in group 78, rating 35; **Croatia** is in group 84, rating 37; **Serbia** and **Montenegro** in group 91, rating 40; **Romania** is alone on position 103, rating 47; after it comes **Bosnia-Herzegovina** on position 104, rating 48; followed by Albania on position 105, rating 49; and **Macedonia** in group 111, rating 53. Of all countries in the region (West Balkans), the poorest ranked is Moldova, in group 127, rating 63, status: not free.

Describing the monitoring and research methodology by country, the report says the survey of press freedom in the world does not assess the degree to which the press in any country serves responsibly, reflecting a high ethical standard, and explains that governments often use the issue of responsible press as an argument to control the media. Therefore, the report decided to monitor three key areas: the legal, the political and the economic environment.

Legal environment (carrying 0 to 30 points) implies consistent general and media laws and regulations, with emphasis on constitutional guarantees of press freedom, without restrictive laws jeopardizing press freedom, unhampered access to information, decriminalization of libel and defamation, independent status of regulatory bodies, etc.

Political environment (carrying 0 to 40 points) implies evaluation of the degree of political control over the content of news media, editorial independence irrespective of the ownership status of media companies, existence of official censorship or self-censorship, the ability of both local and foreign reporters to cover the news freely, harassment of reporters by formal or information centers of power, threats against and assaults on journalists, arbitrary detention and imprisonment, etc.

Economic environment (carrying 0 to 30 points) implies the structure and ownership status of media companies, transparency and ownership concentration, costs of establishing media, production and distribution, selective and discriminatory advertising aimed at influencing the editorial policy and orientation of media companies, bribery and corruption, and overall media environment in a country, favorable or unfavorable for the media sector.

The narrative part of the survey, in addition to the introduction, brings interesting issues: Ukrainian media on the eve of fall presidential elections, challenges of media rehabilitation in “free and occupied Iraq,” controversy surrounding international restrictions on press freedom, etc.

Freedom of the press is not just attacked, or non-existent, in authoritarian dictatorships; it is seriously jeopardized even in countries with long democratic tradition, especially after September 11, 2001. Under the pretext of war on terrorism, the US administration passed a number of restrictive laws (new ones are announced), which throw into question certain fundamental American values such as, for instance, the First Amendment to the US Constitution, privacy, freedom of movement, etc. In Europe, Italy was downgraded to the category of party free countries, primarily due to the irresponsible conduct of Prime Minister Berlusconi himself in the field of his media empire (lack of transparency and media concentration). Although enjoying free status, most Western European countries still have not decriminalized libel and defamation, nor do they guarantee protection of sources of information, which at the same time indicates certain flaws in the methodology applied.

News Agency "SAFAX" was set up in 1994 with the purpose of providing specialised news services containing information on events in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as the region of South East Europe. Translated by: K. H. © Media Online 2004. All rights reserved.