

Media freedom trends 2017: Turkey

The freedom of the media in Turkey has dramatically deteriorated since the failed military coup of July 2016. Moreover, the number of media workers in jail has raised concerns from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the European Union (EU) and the Council of Europe.

Background: main trends in 2017

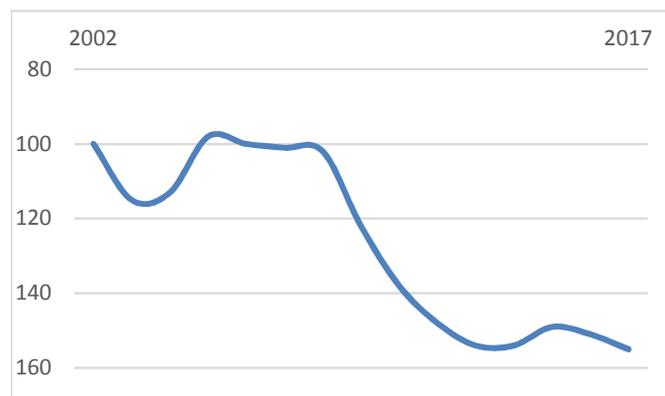
The aftermath of the failed military coup

In the past year, concerns have increased as Turkish political life has become more polarised by the response to the failed military coup of July 2016. In the aftermath of the coup, the government launched a large-scale [purge](#) of the state administration, army, and the economic and media sectors. This purge was aimed both at possible supporters of [Fethullah Gülen](#), accused by the Turkish authorities to have been behind the coup, and alleged supporters of the [PKK](#) (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê) the Kurdistan Workers' Party, recognised by the EU as a terrorist organisation. Since 2013, [Freedom House](#) has ranked Turkey's press as 'not free' and noted in its 2016 report that the situation has been deteriorating at an alarming rate.

Purges and state of emergency

In his 2017 [report](#) on Turkey, the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe noted that Turkey regularly violated [Article 10](#) of the European Convention on Human Rights, on freedom of expression, and that 258 out of 619 Court of Human Rights judgments related to this article concern Turkey. The scale of these purges has been criticised by the [Council of Europe](#). Freedom of speech and information has been particularly under attack since July 2016. Merely a subscription to [Zaman](#), a newspaper linked to the Gülen movement, can be considered by the police as proof of possible [links](#) to a terrorist organisation. The [Law on the Fight against Terrorism](#) relies on vague wording and enables [pressure](#) to be put on media outlets. The post-coup 'state of emergency' enables the police to detain suspects for 30 days without a hearing. The numbers of purged individuals is difficult to assess, but more than 140 000 persons have seen their passports [cancelled](#), 100 000 individuals have been officially [suspected](#) of terrorist links, 71 000 detained, 41 000 arrested, 35 000 investigated and released. Freedom of speech and information has been reduced through the shutting down of 66 newspapers, 28 TV channels, 19 magazines, 36 radio stations, 26 publishing houses and 5 news agencies. Reporters Without Borders notes that most media [owners](#) depend on public contracts. Around [2 000](#) journalists have lost their jobs because of the purges. 19 journalists and employees of the opposition newspaper [Cumhuriyet](#) were arrested in November 2016 for alleged links with the Gülen movement and the PKK. These arrests sparked protests from the [OSCE representative on freedom of the media](#). The European Court of Human Rights decided to examine on a priority basis applications filed by [jailed](#) journalists, and the European Commission [deplored](#) in 2016 that 'criminal legislation on defamation against the state, its institutions, employees or other symbols of statehood is extensively used against journalists, lawyers and users of social media critical of the government'.

Figure 1 – Turkey freedom of the press ranking according to Reporters Without Borders. Global rank (180 states)



Source: Reporters Without Borders, [2017](#).



The impact of the April 2017 referendum

A number of journalists have been [arrested](#) in the wake of the April 2017 referendum on the constitution. Foreign journalists are also prevented from working and even [jailed](#) before expulsion, like the Italian journalist Gabriele del Grande.

Number of journalists in jail

Several international NGOs provide estimates of the number of journalists in jail in Turkey. As of 1 April 2017, the [Stockholm Centre for Freedom](#) estimated that 228 journalists are currently in jail in Turkey, the highest number in the world. Among them, 194 are awaiting trial and none has been convicted. [Reporters Without Borders](#), using a different counting method, assesses that more than 100 journalists are currently in prison. The European Centre for Press and Media Freedom [estimates](#) that 155 journalists and media workers are currently deprived of liberty, of whom 155 have been arrested since July 2017.

Current challenges

The situation in Turkey after the 2017 referendum on the constitution remains difficult to predict. Either the consolidation of the system will bring more predictability, and President Erdogan will appease society and resume constructive dialog with the opposition and the Kurds in Turkey, and with international organisations like the Council of Europe and the EU, or the purges will continue in order to prevent any possible opposition in the country. The arrest on 26 April 2017 of 600 new persons suspected of links with Gülen, and the [suspension](#) of 9 000 police officers the following day, does not [indicate](#) any break in the wave of repression.

In its 2016 [report](#), the European Commission noted serious backsliding since 2015. According to the Commission, legislation and practice does not comply with the case law of the European Court of Human Rights, and 'ongoing and new criminal cases against journalists, writers or social media users, withdrawal of accreditations as well as closure of or appointment of trustees to numerous media outlets are of serious concern'. Therefore, the current challenges are to ensure that freedom of information, a key element of a vibrant democracy, is embedded in solid rule of law in Turkey. In order to foster EU values, the enlargement process remains the main means of EU leverage if Turkey confirms its willingness to join. In addition, in April 2017, the Council of Europe decided to re-open the [monitoring](#) process for Turkey, the end of which was a precondition for EU accession talks.

What is the EU doing?

The European Commission [assesses](#) that the country is at an early stage in preparation for accession regarding freedom of expression, the media and internet. In August 2016, the High Representative/Vice President of the European Commission, Federica Mogherini, [declared](#) that 'renewed considerations to introduce a bill to parliament to reinstate the death penalty; continued restrictions on the freedom of expression, including social media, with further closures of media outlets and arrest warrants against journalists, including the editor-in-chief of *Cumhuriyet* newspaper and several members of its staff; and most recently the arrest of the co-chairs of the country's second largest opposition party, HDP, as well as the detention of several of its Members of Parliament are extremely worrying developments'.

What is the European Parliament doing?

In [January 2015](#), the European Parliament condemned a rise in the number of arrests of journalists, expressed 'its concern over backsliding in democratic reforms, and in particular the government's diminishing tolerance of public protest and critical media' and underlined 'the importance of press freedom and respect for democratic values for the EU enlargement process'. In [October 2016](#), the Parliament acknowledged that 130 journalists, media workers and writers have been arrested since the coup, of whom 64 have been released, and noted that 'detained journalists have been denied the right of access to a lawyer and are being kept in inhumane conditions in which they are being threatened and mistreated'. It also pointed out that the closure of more than 100 media outlets and companies left 2 300 journalists unemployed. The Parliament called for an immediate release of journalists being held without proof of criminal activities, and stressed that 'the journalists should not be detained on the basis of the content of their journalism or alleged affiliations, including in cases where charges are brought against them, and underlines the need to ensure that pre-trial detention remains an exception'. In [November 2016](#), the Parliament noted that the 'Turkish Government's repressive measures under the state of emergency are disproportionate and in breach of basic rights and freedoms protected by the Turkish Constitution', and called on 'the Commission and the Member States ... to initiate a temporary freeze of the ongoing accession negotiations with Turkey'.