

Media freedom trends 2018: Turkey

Over the last two years, media freedom in Turkey has deteriorated rapidly. Although the EU expressed support for the government in the face of the failed military coup in July 2016, it is now concerned about respect for fundamental values in Turkey.

Media crackdown in the aftermath of the failed 2016 military coup

On 15 July 2016, a military coup staged in Turkey failed, leaving 290 people dead and 1 700 injured. Since then, Turkish political life has become more polarised in response to the coup, but also in the context of the war in Syria, in which Turkey is a key player.

In the aftermath of the coup, the government launched a large-scale [purge](#) of the state administration, army, and business and media sectors. This purge was aimed both at possible supporters of [Fethullah Gülen](#), accused by the Turkish authorities of having been behind the coup, and at alleged supporters of the [PKK](#) (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê) the Kurdistan Workers' Party, listed by the EU as a terrorist organisation. Since 2013, [Freedom House](#) has ranked Turkey's press as 'not free'; it noted in its 2017 report that the situation is deteriorating continuously. So far, [more](#) than 60 000 people accused of being Gülen followers have been detained. The government has purged or suspended 150 000 government employees.

In the first four months after the coup, 130 [journalists](#), media workers and writers were arrested, of whom 64 were subsequently released. A European Parliament resolution noted that detained journalists had been 'denied the right of access to a lawyer' and were 'being kept in inhumane conditions in which they are being threatened and mistreated'. In addition, the closure of more than 100 media outlets and companies left more than [3 000](#) journalists unemployed.

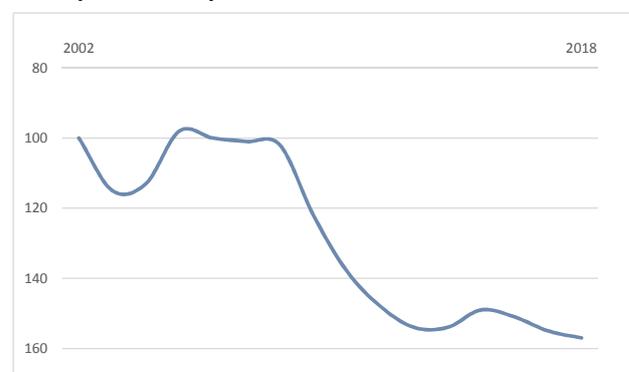
This purge continued in the wake of the constitutional referendum in April 2017, which increased the powers of the president. The process, as well as the results, were criticised by the referendum observation mission sent by the [Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe](#) (OSCE). Nevertheless, the situation of independent journalists did not improve after the referendum.

The independence of the media

In the past, the media landscape in Turkey was [more](#) pluralistic and lively, with newspapers and TV channels representing different views and conducting investigations. Since 2015, less and less space has been left for this plurality of views. Companies close to the ruling AKP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi – Party for Justice and Development) have taken control of more independent outlets, such as the Dogan holding company (including [Hürriyet](#) – Turkey's largest daily newspaper, [CNN Türk](#) and the Dogan News Agency). According to [Reporters Without Borders](#), this represents a major shift in the media landscape, because independent and sometimes critical newspapers such as [Cumhuriyet](#) have a rather small reach. Another independent outlet, of pro-Kurdish orientation, [Özgürlükçü Demokrasi](#), has been bought by a company close to the government, sparking concerns from the [Committee to Protect Journalists](#).

In addition, a new [law](#) was passed on 21 March 2018 to increase state control over the internet. In recent years, activists have developed their activities on the internet, as an alternative to the more tightly controlled traditional media landscape. For example, the

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



Data source: [Reporters Without Borders](#), 2018.

Directorate for Religious Affairs, the Diyanet, publicly attacked the [show](#) of sex-cult leader, Adnan Oktar, who mixes theological discussions with belly-dancing women. After [banning](#) Wikipedia on the grounds of national security protection, Oktar's case has been [used](#) to further tighten control over the internet. According to the law, the already powerful Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK) will be tasked with allocating licences for online broadcasting. The OSCE Representative for Freedom of the Media [pointed](#) at the possible impact on freedom of expression, and regretted that his comments have been ignored by the Turkish government. The new law will affect all service providers, be they video-on-demand services, social networks or blogs. In January 2018, 300 people were [detained](#) because they criticised the Turkish military operation in Afrin, Syria. In April 2018, the government launched [investigations](#) into 242 people on account of government-critical publications on their social media accounts.

The difficult situation of journalists

In the aftermath of the failed military coup of 2016, a number of journalists were accused of threatening national security by revealing documents linked to Turkish operations in Syria or of having links with Gülen. In April 2018, the Stockholm Centre for Freedom [denounced](#) the situation of 200 journalists arrested, 59 convicted and 140 wanted and forced to live abroad.

The European Court of Human Rights [ordered](#) the liberation of two journalists: Mehmet Altan and Şahin Alpay. A number of journalists have been released, such as the German, [Deniz Yücel](#), who had been detained without charges for a year, or Cumhuriyet editor-in-chief Murat Sabuncu and investigative reporter Ahmet Şik who were in pre-trial detention for a year. After the failed coup, 17 journalists from Cumhuriyet, one of the most outspoken opposition newspapers, were arrested and accused of terror propaganda. Another worrying trend concerns the non-application of judicial decisions of release. For the [second](#) consecutive year, the number of jailed journalists has hit a historic high.

What is the EU doing?

In its [2016 Turkey report](#), the European Commission found that Turkey is at an early stage in its preparation for accession when it comes to freedom of expression, the media and internet. The Turkish President regularly [states](#) that full membership remains a key objective of Turkey's foreign policy. The EU is now [divided](#) on the future of accession. Some Member States, such as France, have openly proposed replacing membership with a [special](#) partnership; some have publicly opposed full membership, while others continue to support the process of accession.

In recent years, relations between Brussels and Ankara have deteriorated, even if cooperation in the field of migration has remained high on the agenda since the [EU-Turkey statement](#). In March 2018, the EU and Turkey met in Varna (Bulgaria) to discuss future challenges. Following the summit, European Council President Donald Tusk [declared](#) 'we are concerned that some of the methods used undermine fundamental freedoms and the rule of law in Turkey'.

European Parliament position

In [October](#) 2016, Parliament called for the immediate release of journalists being held without proof of criminal activities, and stressed that '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', underlining 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'. In [2017](#), the European Parliament reiterated its position on a temporary freeze of accession talks with Turkey. It also strongly condemned the serious backsliding and violations of freedom of expression and the serious infringements of media freedom, including the disproportionate banning of media sites and social media. In [February](#) 2018, the European Parliament declared its concern over the closure of more than 160 media outlets by executive decree under the state of emergency, and condemned the political pressure on journalists, expressing serious concern at the monitoring of social media platforms and the shutdown of social media accounts by Turkey's authorities.

