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# Fifty years of decline – media freedom on the brink of survival



When the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) **published** its annual Global State of Democracy 2025 report on 11 September, the message was clear: media freedom in the world has fallen to its lowest level in fifty years.

This is not a simple statement from another index. It is a quantified trend that affects almost a quarter of the 174 countries **analysed**, with the biggest declines in Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, and Myanmar. Particularly worrying is the decline in South Korea, which was still considered a stable democracy.

This finding is particularly significant not only because it marks the sharpest **decline** in media freedom in the last half-century, but also because it fits into a broader trend documented by International IDEA.

Their Global State of Democracy report has tracked the state of democracy since 2017 and shows that there has been a further decline in each of the previous nine years. In other words, democracy is not just now entering a global crisis but has been in continuous decline for almost a decade.

The media is not an isolated pillar; it is the first point at which a shift in relations between the state, society, and economy becomes visible. Its collapse not only means less information but also weakens the system's ability to maintain trust, stability and predictability.

## When the law becomes a weapon against the media

The first dimension that this trend opens up is the abuse of laws. In the G20 countries, laws on "controlling disinformation" or "protecting national security" are increasingly common and are formally presented as protecting the public interest but in reality serve to restrict critical voices.

The examples vary: from laws that allow the government to block portals without a court

order to regulations that criminalise the spread of "panic" or "false information" without clearly defining what these terms mean.

**It is the new face of authoritarianism: the legal apparatus is used to make criticism more expensive than silence**

The effect is the same: a legal framework is created in which any critical word can be categorised as a threat, and the journalist or editor is turned into a security problem.

When such laws are **combined** with SLAPP suits—strategic lawsuits against public participation that powerful actors use to bleed small newsrooms financially—a system is created in which freedom of expression formally exists but is practically useless.

It is the new face of authoritarianism: no camps are opened, no newspapers are publicly banned, but the legal apparatus is used to make criticism more expensive than silence.

## The economic costs of silence

Restricted media freedom is not only a problem of democratic standards but also has direct economic consequences. Countries that close the media space enter the zone of increased risk for investors.

When information about market conditions, government decisions, or corporate affairs is unavailable or filtered, capital tends to seek safer destinations.

Latin America is an **example** of a region where the decline in media freedom is already associated with an increase in the risk premium. In countries where media control has increased in recent years, there has been a sudden withdrawal of foreign investors, rising interest rates on government bonds and exchange rate instability.

## Investors won't invest if they can't verify information, and citizens won't save if they don't trust the system

In Africa, a similar pattern emerged: wherever governments tried to silence the media, international credit agencies immediately imposed rating corrections, and budgets had to be revised. In other words, media freedom is becoming a new economic variable.

When it decreases, the cost of borrowing increases and confidence in institutions decreases. Investors won't invest if they can't verify information, and citizens won't save if they don't trust the system.

This leads to a vicious circle: repression reduces investment, economic decline increases repression, and all this causes the media space to collapse even more.

## Wars, crises and an invisible price

Media freedom collapses even faster in war zones. Gaza and Ukraine **show** the extent to which information control impairs the credibility of global discourse.

When journalists are denied access or suppressed, numbers and narratives become a field of manipulation. The number of deaths, the extent of the destruction, and the responsibility of the actors — all this becomes a matter of interpretation, not fact.

Under these circumstances, citizens around the world live in a regime of information uncertainty. They do not know whether the images are authentic, whether the data has been verified, or whether the source is credible.

**When the public stops trusting information, it also loses trust in the institutions that publish it**

This creates fatigue, and fatigue leads to apathy. And apathy is the greatest ally of any authoritarian system, because it allows change to take place without resistance.

The cost of this is not only moral but also political. When the public stops trusting information, it also loses trust in the institutions that publish it. This is a process that destabilises even those states that consider themselves immune.

For this reason, countries with weak institutions are not the only ones experiencing a decline in media freedom. The consequences are global.

## Europe and the United States – a mirror of contradictions

When talking about the decline of media freedom, it is easy to focus on developing countries or open autocracies.

But neither Europe nor the USA are immune. On the contrary, it is precisely the contradictions in developed democracies that show how deep this trend runs.

In several European countries, restrictions on protests and the targeting of journalists reporting on demonstrations have become routine. In the United States, actions against whistleblowers and leaking information demonstrate the state's willingness to use legal tools against its own citizens.

**The space for free journalism is narrowing even where it should be safest**

Seemingly insignificant incidents such as the imprisonment of journalists for "obstructing police" or criminal charges against those who publish classified documents are becoming part of a bigger picture.

And this picture shows that the space for free journalism is narrowing even where it should

be safest. This weakens the moral position of the West to criticise others. If there are also fundamental problems at home, then any criticism of Beijing, Moscow, or Ankara loses credibility.

## Media as an indicator of security

The decline in media freedom should not only be considered a question of democracy or the economy but also as an **indicator** of the stability of security. Societies in which journalists have no access to information become vulnerable to manipulation, polarisation and internal conflict.

When the media space is closed, public debate and independent fact-checking disappear, allowing extremist messages to spread unhindered. When information is replaced by propaganda, citizens turn to parallel channels that are often unverified, further weakening trust in institutions.



*Media freedom becomes a new line of defence. If they fall, the likelihood of internal conflict, political instability, and economic collapse increases*

This process has a direct impact on security because it opens up space for radicalisation and violence. In other words, media freedom becomes a new line of defence. If they fall, the likelihood of internal conflict, political instability, and economic collapse increases.

This is not an idealistic thesis but a pragmatic observation: free media is a fuse, and when this fuse blows, the system enters a risk zone.

## A predictable future without predictability

If the trend continues, it can be expected that the decline in media freedom will be the predominant global pattern in the coming years. It will not look like a dramatic collapse but rather a series of small but persistent steps: a new "disinformation" law here, an additional ban on broadcasting protests and a lawsuit against an independent portal there.

Each of these steps will be justified by local circumstances: terrorism, fake news, and protection of public order. But their sum creates a new reality in which media freedom exists only formally. It is a future that is predictable in its direction but not in its dynamics.

This is precisely what is most dangerous: a system in which the rules are constantly changing, but never in the direction of greater freedoms.

For the international order, this means that information asymmetries will increase. States with controlled media will be able to influence perceptions more easily, while those with open media will remain vulnerable to manipulation. Therefore, the balance is shifting in favour of authoritarian actors.

**If the media lose their freedom, societies lose their predictability and the world loses its stability**

Reports like this one from IDEA don't just provide gloomy statistics. They diagnose a world in which media freedom can no longer be taken for granted. The consequences of this decline are felt in the economy, security and politics, as well as on a global level.

It is important to point out that this trend should not be viewed through the prism of nostalgia for times past but as a realistic indicator of future crises. If the media lose their freedom, societies lose their predictability and the world loses its stability.



That is why media freedom today is not a question of ideals but a question of survival. If it is at its lowest level in the past fifty years, it means that we are entering a time when information is a key resource and its control is the most dangerous weapon.