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CPI 2023 for Western Europe & EU: Rule of law and political integrity threats undermine action against corruption

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The Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) average score of 65 out of 100 has dropped for the first time in almost a decade in Western Europe and the European Union (EU). Despite remaining the top-scoring region in the CPI, robust anti-corruption measures continue to be undermined by the weakening of checks and balances. The erosion of political integrity contributes to diminishing public trust in countries' ability to tackle the region's ongoing challenges.

The 2023 CPI reveals that anti-corruption efforts have stagnated or declined in more than three-quarters of the countries in the region. Among the 31 countries assessed, only six have improved their score, while eight have declined since 2012.

Several high-ranking democracies, including **Sweden** (CPI score: 82), **Netherlands** (79), **Iceland** (72) and the **United Kingdom** (71), have recorded their lowest-ever scores. Notably, the UK has experienced a six-point decrease over the past five years. **Denmark** (90), **Finland** (87) and **Norway** (84) top the CPI ranking, while the lowest-performing countries, reflecting substantial weaknesses in the rule of law, include **Hungary** (42), **Romania** (46) and **Bulgaria** (45).

Silencing criticism and weakening checks and balances

Weak accountability and political corruption are undermining the rule of law in a region where people are losing trust in their institutions. In the most alarming cases, narrow interest groups have too much control over political decision making. In others, governments are targeting journalists, whistleblowers and other watchdogs.

Over a decade of systemic breach of the rule of law in **Hungary** (42) has created a system where [high-level corruption thrives unsanctioned](#). The [unconvincing implementation](#) of rule of law reforms, coupled with a recent [legislative initiative](#) to silence remaining critics, reveal the government's commitment to protect the status quo.

Despite the adoption of long-overdue legislation on whistleblowing, **Bulgaria's** (45) significant problems with the rule of law and oligarchic influence remain, despite the legislative reform agendas of consecutive governments. The long overdue legislation on whistleblowing was adopted, but [challenges with its implementation](#) are evident.

Italy's (56) proposed amendments to the constitution, if passed, would concentrate power in the executive, weakening parliamentary oversight.

Reporting on corruption is also becoming increasingly challenging for journalists, weakening a vital check on government, due to heightened use of strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPS) or legal intimidation by powerful businesses and politicians in countries such as **Cyprus** (53), **Malta** (51), **Ireland** (77), **Hungary** (42), **Croatia** (50), **Bulgaria** (45), **the Netherlands** (79) and **Poland** (54).

Country to Watch: Poland

Poland's (54) seven-point decline over the last decade showcases systematic efforts by the previous ruling Law and Order (PiS) party to monopolise power at the expense of public interest.

Judicial reforms enabling political appointments and the establishment of mechanisms to investigate and sanction judges have tilted the balance of power and eroded the rule of law in the country. These changes paved the way for subsequent legislative reforms, including those governing employment in public administration or state broadcasters, which set Poland on the path of democratic backsliding.

The PiS government reversed some decisions, such as dismantling the Disciplinary Chamber for judges, only after facing [a daily €1 million EU fine](#), a ruling by the EU Court of Justice deeming judicial reforms in Poland contrary to EU law, and [restricted access](#) to EU recovery funds.

Following the October 2023 elections, the new government has made the restoring of the balance of power and the rule of law among its top priorities. However, with the PiS still exerting significant influence on the institutions, rebuilding them while respecting democratic processes will not be an easy task.

Judicial independence falling short across the region

Weaknesses in judicial systems are creating barriers to accessing justice and preventing courts from effectively limiting government powers. In the worst cases, politicisation of judicial and law enforcement appointments has left abuses of power unchecked.

The EU has highlighted [issues in the appointment judges](#) and the overall quality of the justice system in countries across the region, including **Sweden** (82), **Spain** (60), **Poland** (54), **Croatia** (50), **Malta** (51), **Greece** (49), **Lithuania** (61) and **Ireland** (77).

In **Slovakia** (54), previous [progress in the prosecution of corruption](#) is tainted by the government's controversial [dismissals in the justice sector](#). This was swiftly followed by legislative measures aimed at [closing the special prosecutor's office](#) responsible for combating corruption and reducing criminal sanctions for corruption. If adopted, these changes would significantly undermine the rule of law and democratic stability, fostering an environment of impunity for corruption.

Long-standing rule of law issues persist in **Spain** (60), with judicial independence perceived as [falling short](#). At the centre is the urgent need for reform of the party quota system of judicial appointments, which has led to a five-year standoff of appointments to the General Council of the Judiciary.

In **France** (71), Minister of Justice Éric Dupond-Moretti has been indicted on suspicion of using his ministerial role to settle disputes with magistrates with whom he had clashed during his time as a lawyer. The special court made up of members of parliament [found him not guilty](#). Dupond-Moretti remained in office throughout the trial.

Judges and prosecutors have reportedly faced [increased threats](#) from organised crime groups in the **Netherlands** (79).

In **Malta** (51), a recent [European Parliament resolution](#) called on the Maltese authorities to step up investigations into possible instances of former public officials attempting to conceal evidence and obstruct investigations and judicial proceedings of the murder of investigative journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia.

More positively, **Estonia's** (76) rise in the CPI has been fuelled by key reforms bolstering the independence of the judiciary and promoting transparency. Notably, the introduction of shared oversight of court administration and [stronger integrity standards in the judiciary](#).

Integrity in politics still not up to scratch

Measures to curb undue influence in public decision making continue to fall short, eroding citizen trust in the rule of law. Political integrity scandals persist, shaping politics across the region and highlighting the need to strengthen rules regarding conflict of interest, ethics standards, and lobbying transparency.

Portugal (61) was plunged into a political crisis when [Prime Minister António Costa resigned](#) following the arrest of his chief of staff as part of the corruption probe 'Operation Influencer' into suspected influence peddling in the government's management of lithium mining and hydrogen projects. Stronger lobbying regulations should be a priority after years of delay.

In **Germany** (78), issues of nepotism came to light when a senior official in the [Economy Ministry resigned](#) following the appointment of a close friend as the head of the Energy Agency.

The **UK** (71) continues to backslide with a two-point decline, marked by persistent lobbying scandals and instances of abuse of public office for private gain. The absence of an appointed [Anti-Corruption Champion for the prime minister](#) over the past eighteen months and the [emerging details](#) about the handling of COVID contracts have done little to restore confidence. Weaknesses in **Norway's** (84) trust-based system were brought to light following a string of [conflict of interest scandals](#) leading to the [resignation of high-profile ministers](#).

An opportunity to set stronger standards

In a welcome step, last year the European Commission proposed an [anti-corruption package](#) to bolster the tools available for EU member states to combat corruption. The package includes a dedicated anti-corruption directive, which would harmonise legal rules across EU member states against corruption offences, increase criminal sanctions and expand the measures available to law enforcement for the investigation and prosecution of corruption.

The region is at a crossroads in restoring public trust. In the year ahead, the [EU Institutions must take the opportunity](#) to raise standards and better enforce its own rules to step up its efforts against corruption.

Country to Watch: Greece

With a three-point decline, **Greece** (49) is facing a rule of law crisis that is damaging the country's gains in the CPI over the past decade. The fallout from the government's alleged illegal wiretapping of journalists and opposition politicians, attacks on press freedom, and [weak judicial independence](#) have contributed to [the sharpest decline in the rule of law](#) in the EU.

Concerns mount regarding government overreach in the 'Predatorgate' spyware scandal, with [reports](#) of members of the independent watchdog investigating the case being threatened and witnesses being blocked.

Greece is the EU's worst-performing country in the [World Press Freedom Index](#). The use of SLAPPS to silence journalists is commonplace, hindering the media's ability to report on corruption cases. This is confounded by a concentration of private media ownership with close ties to the political elite.

Greece made a promising move by establishing the National Transparency Authority in 2019, but governing appointments are [selected by the government](#). The position of governor has been vacant for more than one and a half years, whilst members of the Governing Council recently resigned amidst [scandal allegations](#). To halt the decline, the government needs to guarantee the protection and safety of journalists, strengthen legislative regulations on lobbying and political party finance, and maintain an independent anti-corruption authority.