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CPI 2021 FOR WESTERN EUROPE & EUROPEAN UNION: TROUBLE AHEAD FOR STAGNATING REGION

With an average score of 66 out of 100, the Western Europe and European Union (EU) region still tops the CPI, but progress there has stagnated. A worrying new normal is fast being established, as accountability and transparency measures neglected or rolled back [during the COVID-19 pandemic](#) remain unrestored, and [public trust](#) falls in the wake of [procurement scandals](#).

Even top performers are showing concerning signs of backsliding, and the region continues to be rocked by corruption revelations – including exporting corruption to other parts of the world. The long-term consequences of inadequate anti-corruption action are already evident in **Hungary** (CPI score: 43) and **Poland** (56), with concerns that **Slovenia** (57) will soon join them.

Denmark (88) has been joined by **Finland** (88) at the top of the CPI, followed by **Norway** (85) and **Sweden** (85). **Bulgaria** (42), **Hungary** (43) and **Romania** (45) remain the worst performers in the region.

NO COUNTRY UNTOUCHED

Two years into the COVID-19 pandemic, and despite early [warnings](#), Europe continues to use the crisis as an excuse for stagnating anti-corruption efforts and troubling decisions. Accountability and transparency measures are also being neglected or rolled back.

Cyprus (53) has seen a continuation of the [‘golden passports’](#) scandal, while the **UK** (78) government was embroiled in the various [public contracting](#) and [‘sleaze’](#) scandals – the latter emerging after this year’s CPI data was collected. **Germany’s** (80) [face masks procurement scandal implicating MPs](#) and **Slovenia’s** (57) decline in [media integrity](#) and [freedom of peaceful assembly](#) also call the region’s clean image into question.

In the **Netherlands** (82), the Court of Audit (NCA) [lodged a formal complaint](#) against the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport after finding irregularities in nearly 3 per cent – amounting to 5 billion euros – of total obligations in the ministry’s COVID-19 spending. The objection was later withdrawn after the ministry presented an action plan for making improvements in its financial management.

Country to watch: Slovenia

With a score of 57, Slovenia has reached a historical low.

Following the establishment of a relatively solid anti-corruption framework, it has been exposed that the government neglected the enforcement of [existing rules](#) ensuring transparency, efficiency, and equal treatment of providers in public procurement during the pandemic.

Simultaneously, there has been pressure on independent oversight bodies, [threats to freedom of peaceful assembly](#) and [disproportionate limitations on the right to protest](#) – recently intensified through a [lawsuit against an organiser of anti-government protests](#). The Slovenian government has engaged in [a smear campaign](#) against the country's public media outlets and restricted payments to the Slovenian Press Agency, bringing it to the [brink of collapse](#). Most recently, the announcement of [fundamental changes](#) in the news and political programming of public broadcaster TV Slovenia has raised concerns among journalists and the public about political influence on management.

To reverse this dangerous trend and address [citizens' distrust in the government](#), Slovenia needs to embed citizen participation and consultation into all levels of decision-making, strengthen its independent ethics and oversight bodies, update its outdated Resolution on the Prevention of Corruption, [transpose the EU whistleblowing directive](#) and replace the Government's Integrity Programme - which ran out in 2019.

WHEN CORRUPTION IS IGNORED, HUMAN RIGHTS AND DEMOCRACY SUFFER

Across the region, executive powers are being used to bypass important accountability mechanisms meant to keep corruption in check. On top of the corruption scandals in the **UK** (78), judicial independence and respect for the rule of law are now under strain following government [plans to curtail court powers](#). In **Portugal** (62), a new national [anti-corruption strategy](#) fails to cover political parties or the Bank of Portugal.

The repercussions of ignoring excessive political control over the judiciary and the resulting deterioration in the rule of law can already be seen in the region. **Poland** (56) has harshly restricted [women's rights](#) and [LGBTQI+ rights](#).

Hungary (43) has severely [curbed freedom of expression](#) and the ruling Fidesz party has extended its influence over all branches of power, using its parliamentary supermajority to grant the [government the power](#) to restrict fundamental rights during a state of emergency and further curtail the ability of independent institutions to keep the executive under control. Meanwhile, recovery aid funds were awarded in an untransparent way, with businesses and municipalities close to the government [benefiting the most](#).

Only five EU Member States have adopted [new legislation to transpose the EU directive](#) on whistleblowing in time, weakening citizens' ability to speak out against corruption and putting people's human rights at risk.

REAPING THE REWARDS OF ANTI-CORRUPTION REFORMS

Despite overwhelming stagnation in the region, some countries are strengthening their anti-corruption efforts.

Estonia (74) has gained 10 points since 2012 and continues to take positive steps forward through a comprehensive anti-corruption plan for 2021-2025 and [new guidelines](#) on lobbying, revolving doors and conflicts of interest. Nevertheless, the country is not free of those taking advantage of the COVID-19 crisis, as seen in the high-level corruption allegations that [brought down the government](#) exactly a year ago or the healthcare workers placed [under investigation](#) for selling vaccination certificates.

Significant improvers in the past decade also include **Italy** (56, up from 42 in 2012) and **Greece** (49, up from 36 in 2012), who have reaped the rewards of anti-corruption reforms. Even so, these countries remain among the region's low-scorers. Legislative gaps need to be urgently filled for [lobbying](#) and beneficial ownership in Italy and access to information and party financing in Greece.

Slovakia's (52) progress stands out among its immediate neighbours. The country's success stems from improved whistleblower protections, [greater transparency](#) in selecting high-ranking officials, and the increased independence and stronger performance of the [judiciary](#) and police in investigating former high officials for corruption offences. For this improvement to become sustainable, the government should reinforce the independence and professionalism of prosecuting bodies and police and implement existing transparency standards in [all public appointments](#).

Undermining anti-corruption efforts at home and abroad

Despite leading the CPI, a lack of national [enforcement in Europe](#) is allowing [corruption to be exported](#) and human rights violated globally.

EU Member States continue to drag their feet on implementing [EU anti-money laundering legislation](#), and on closing the loopholes that still remain in this important new law. Member States also need to get behind an [ambitious proposal](#) to establish a [new EU anti-money laundering agency](#). The explosive release of the [Pandora Papers](#) last year also served as a stark reminder that corporate secrecy enables oligarchs, human rights abusers and billionaires, allowing them to secretly move suspicious wealth offshore through luxury property purchases – including in France and Monaco.

Meanwhile, in **Iceland** (74), reports recently emerged that major fisheries company Samherji used dirty tactics to intimidate journalists and citizens who were reporting that the [company bribed foreign officials](#) in Namibia and Angola.

Country to watch: Austria

With a score of 74, Austria is losing ground at the top of the Index.

After some years of progress and while [not yet statistically significant](#), the country's slow decline in points sends a warning signal to established democracies about the dangers of neglecting anti-corruption efforts.

The government has delayed implementing the national anti-corruption [strategy under cover of COVID-19](#), while concerns were raised about the government's initial [response to the pandemic](#) and politicians who have sidestepped or challenged the [rule of law](#), the judiciary and [public prosecutors investigating corruption](#).

The media's close relationship with the government also came under scrutiny when allegations broke in October 2021 that (now former) Chancellor Sebastian Kurz [used public money](#) to bribe journalists and pollsters on his way to becoming chancellor.

The Council of Europe's Group of States against Corruption has also noted Austria's lack of anti-corruption efforts and recently [found that](#) the government had satisfactorily dealt with only two of its 17 recommendations made in 2017. As investigations continue into Kurz and his allies, the new chancellor must rebuild trust in the government and drive forward the country's neglected anti-corruption strategy.

Going forward: The rocky road from emergency to recovery

Whether the EU will successfully emerge from the pandemic [greener, more digital, and more resilient](#) will depend on whether the bloc makes good on its own commitments.

Member States need to transpose the [EU Whistleblowing directive](#), fully implement the [EU Anti Money Laundering Directive](#), establish [public beneficial ownership registers](#), and end the systemic weaknesses that are allowing cross-border corruption schemes to go undetected.

At the same time, the EU must strengthen its [anti-corruption measures](#) to prevent the large influx of pandemic recovery funds from being plagued by fraud and corruption and act to [protect the rule of law](#) and democracy from undue abuses of power within the EU.