

FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

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Bulgaria

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The constitution provides for freedom of speech and of the press, and the government generally respects these rights in practice. Defamation is punishable by large fines, and government officials have filed suits against journalists, but the courts tend to favor press freedom in such cases. In April 2011, the parliament passed legislation prescribing up to four years in prison for the instigation of hatred, discrimination, or violence based on race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, sexual orientation, marital or social status, or disability. The law was criticized by press freedom advocates for failing to define terms like "discrimination" and criminalizing speech that does not intentionally incite violence; it was adopted without prior public debate. The law on freedom of information is considered fairly strong, but state institutions often find ways to obstruct information requests. Other legislation passed in April reduced journalists' access to an important official registry of private companies' contracts and activities. The broadcasting regulatory body has been accused of politicization, corruption, and other irregularities when making licensing decisions.

Media outlets express a diverse range of public and political views, in most cases without government interference. However, officials occasionally restrict press freedom regarding sensitive issues of national identity. In January 2011, security agents seized the small press run of a news bulletin that urged ethnic Macedonians to register as such in a forthcoming census. In April, Bulgarian authorities barred a group of Macedonian journalists from entering the country to cover a commemoration of an Ottoman-era historical figure claimed by both nations. Most media coverage of the October 2011 presidential and municipal elections was not balanced or objective, partly due to electoral code provisions requiring that nearly all campaign-related content on public stations be purchased by the parties or candidates. Paid content also prevailed in private media.

Reporters continue to face pressure and intimidation aimed at protecting economic, political, and criminal interests. Impunity for crimes against journalists remains the norm, encouraging self-censorship. In a rare exception, former Bulgarian president Petar Stoyanov was fined in February 2011 for slapping a journalist in 2009. Bombings struck the offices of the weekly *Galeriya* in February and the vehicle of television journalist Sasho Dikov in October, though no one was injured in either attack. Those and other explosions during the year appeared to target critics of the government at sensitive times for Bulgaria's relations with the European Union, drawing speculation that they were designed to discredit the ruling party. Separately, beginning in September, reporter Miroluba Benatova of the private television station bTV was the target of a stream of threats and insults, mostly online, over her descriptions of anti-Roma protests that were triggered by a hit-and-run accident in the village of Katunitsa.

Two of the three leading national television stations, bTV and Nova TV, are owned by foreign companies. The third is state-owned Bulgarian National Television (BNT), which benefits from both state subsidies and advertising

2012 SCORES

PRESS STATUS

Partly Free

PRESS FREEDOM SCORE

36

LEGAL ENVIRONMENT

11

POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

15

ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT

10

revenue. BNT and Bulgarian National Radio do not display a strong political bias, but observers have cast doubt on their editorial independence. Foreign media firms have also played an important role in the print and radio sectors, although at least three important newspapers—in addition to bTV—changed hands during 2010 as some companies reduced their regional holdings in a difficult economic climate. Print circulation has fallen sharply in recent years. Financial weaknesses leave many Bulgarian-owned media vulnerable to the direct or indirect influence of business groups or political parties, and ownership is not always transparent. An increasing number of media outlets have been acquired by the New Bulgarian Media Group, a company with close ties to the Movement for Rights and Freedoms political party. Economic difficulties also force many journalists to engage in corrupt practices or take second jobs. The advertising market has reportedly contracted by more than a third since 2008, raising the importance of public funds. State agencies collectively represent the second-largest source of advertising revenue in print media and are particularly important for local outlets. The private sector is far more prominent in broadcast media advertising.

Many traditional media outlets have established a presence on the internet, which is not restricted by the government and was accessed by about 51 percent of the population in 2011. Access in rural areas remains limited.

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