

FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

Croatia

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Croatia is currently in the process of accession to the European Union (EU), which has exerted some pressure on the government to fight corruption and provide the conditions for independent media. As amended in June 2010, the constitution recognizes the right to information as well as freedom of the press. Nevertheless, the state has often tolerated harassment of journalists and used legal action as a weapon against critical media outlets. There was improvement in this area in January 2011, when a Zagreb criminal court dismissed charges brought against journalist Željko Peratović by Interior Minister Tomislav Karamarko. Over the past two years, Karamarko has initiated several cases against Peratović, accusing him of violating the confidentiality of a judicial investigation, defamation, and divulging information liable to disturb the public order. Defamation remains a criminal offense, but it is only punishable by a fine. Hate speech, however, carries a maximum prison sentence of five years.

Despite the country's Act on the Right of Access to Information, journalists continue to find it difficult to request and acquire information, including material that is open to the public domain, from the government. Amendments that expanded the definition of classified information in late 2010 raised further concerns about the law's implementation.

Broadcast licenses are handled by the Croatian Telecommunications Agency, which has been criticized by media analysts for its lack of both transparency and independence from political control. The Croatian Journalists' Association, representing more than 90 percent of the country's journalists, has a code of ethics to which the majority of journalists adhere, and reviews complaints from individuals and institutions. However, it is anticipated that a new body established in 2011, the Council for Media, with a membership of nearly 90 percent of Croatian media outlets, will handle such complaints beginning in January 2012. The council will be able to issue reprimands published in all of the members' outlets, with the goal of enhancing the credibility of the media.

Reporters, especially those covering corruption and organized crime, face harassment and attacks as a result of their work. In many cases, little is done to hold the immediate culprits accountable, let alone the organizers behind the attacks. In June 2011, three years after a brutal beating left journalist Dušan Miljuš with facial injuries, a broken arm, and a concussion, prosecutors withdrew all charges against the two individuals detained in his case due to lack of evidence. In September, in reaction to a story carried by *Večernji List* on illegal party finances and electoral campaigns, police summoned one of the authors, Josip Bohutinski, to testify. When Bohutinski refused to reveal his sources, Prime Minister Jadranka Kosor announced that whistleblowers had to be found and that a thorough investigation would be carried out. In December, journalist Drago Hedl received death threats just one day after accepting an award from President Ivo Josipović for defending human rights. Due to his investigations into war crimes committed during the 1990s, Hedl had been physically attacked, targeted by lawsuits, and repeatedly threatened with death over the years.

2012 SCORES

PRESS STATUS

Partly Free

PRESS FREEDOM SCORE

40

LEGAL ENVIRONMENT

9

POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

16

ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT

15

The state-owned public broadcaster, HRT, is funded by advertising and a license fee. During 2011, journalists working for HRT continued to face considerable pressure from political parties and business groups. HRT is also criticized for censoring and suspending programs without explanation, top-down appointment of editors without professional credibility, public suspension of journalists, lack of transparency, and a lack of respect for professional standards. Over the past three years, the broadcaster has faced serious managerial difficulties. At the end of 2009 and the beginning of 2010, the head of HRT, Vanja Sutlić, and the chief editor of the news programming division, Hloverka Novak-Srzić, were dismissed by HRT's program council after a petition signed by thousands of citizens accused the two of censorship and violation of laws on freedom of expression. However, in July 2010 the program council appointed Novak-Srzić as acting programs director over the protests of several of its members, who tendered their resignations. Furthermore, HRT faced financial problems in 2010 that forced it to shut down its Belgrade bureau.

There are dozens of private television and radio stations, both local and national, and cable and satellite access is common. Many private media owners allegedly hold interests in nonmedia businesses, creating commercial and political pressure that can reduce critical news coverage of the government and influential companies. In an effort to increase the transparency of electronic media ownership, an amendment to the Electronic Media Act was adopted in July 2011. However, transparency of ownership remains an issue for both print and broadcast media. German-owned Europa Press Holdings and Austria's Styria control most of the print media market, in apparent violation of a media law stating that no private owner should be allowed to control a market share of more than 40 percent. Poor economic conditions and a weak advertising market, along with journalists' fear of being laid off, has led to increased self-censorship and hyperproduction, reducing the overall quality of reporting. Many media outlets avoid discussion of government fiscal policy because they fear repercussions in the form of tax claims or increases. In 2011, the Electronic Media Agency notified civil society organizations running nonprofit online newspapers that they will now be subject to an annual tax, threatening the sustainability of such outlets.

The government did not restrict access to the internet, which was used by 71 percent of the population during 2011.

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