

## FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

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# Latvia

[Latvia](#) | [Freedom of the Press 2012](#) | [- Select year -](#)

Latvia's constitution protects freedoms of speech and the press, and the government generally upholds these rights in practice. Libel remains a criminal offense. While in previous years journalists rarely faced criminal prosecution, in 2011 Aleksandrs Mirskis, a member of the European Parliament, charged journalist Gunta Sloga with libel for publishing a report that questioned the merit of his military experience. Sloga was acquitted in July after a long trial, but Mirskis appealed the judgment, and at year's end the case was pending before the Riga Court of Appeals. If the verdict is overturned, Sloga could face a fine, compulsory labor, or imprisonment. Tolerance for varying opinions on controversial issues related to the Second World War is still a challenge. In August, Latvian journalist Ruslan Yefimov was sentenced to 60 hours of community service for defending the Soviet deportation of Latvians, Lithuanians, and Estonians in 1941. Yefimov pleaded guilty to "justifying genocide and crimes against humanity." In February, the Ministry of Defense introduced amendments to a draft law on states of emergency that would allow the government to block internet and other data-transfer systems, including television and radio broadcasts, postal correspondence, and publishing houses, during declared states of emergency. The draft was endorsed by the cabinet in July, but it had not been passed in the parliament by year's end.

The Law on Freedom of Information provides detailed rules on access to public information. After considerable debate, the parliament adopted a law on electronic mass media in 2010 that requires at least 65 percent of broadcast programming to be in Latvian, the country's only official language, despite the presence of a large Russian-speaking minority.

Political parties have been known to exert influence over the media. In January 2011, a popular anchorman and producer at TV5, Oļegs Ignatjevs, was fired after being warned several times by his superiors about criticizing the powerful Harmony Center party. TV5, which had recently been purchased by Andrejs Ēķis of the For a Good Latvia party, insisted that Ignatjevs was let go for reasons related to downsizing. A monitoring team from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) concluded that during the September 2011 parliamentary elections, Latvian media overall provided balanced and neutral coverage, even though some outlets have been accused of showing bias in nonelection periods.

In recent years, journalists and media outlets have occasionally been harassed or attacked. Investigative journalist Grigorijs Nēmcovs was gunned down in April 2010 in an apparent contract killing. Police were not able to identify any suspects by the end of 2011. There was an increase in raids and data thefts targeting media outlets that had criticized government officials or agencies during the year. Editor Leonīds Jākobsons of the internet news site *Kompromat*, known for its investigative reporting on corruption issues, was arrested in December on charges of illegally obtaining electronic communication data. A month earlier, he had published e-mail correspondence between Riga mayor Nils Ušakovs of Harmony Center and Alexander Hapilov of the Russian embassy, suggesting that the former was engaging in corrupt

## 2012 SCORES

### PRESS STATUS

# Free

### PRESS FREEDOM SCORE

# 27

### LEGAL ENVIRONMENT

# 6

### POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

# 12

### ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT

# 9

activities and espionage. Before his arrest, police had raided Jākobsons's apartment and confiscated computer equipment, including servers that hosted *Kompromat*. Jākobsons claimed that his website was subsequently hacked by the Department of Defense and Security and its content deleted, but police refused to investigate. In May the Latvian Corruption Prevention and Combating Bureau (KNAB) raided the offices of several media outlets, including the daily paper *Neatkarīgā Rīta Avīze* (Independent Morning Press); its parent firm, SIA Mediju Nams; and the offices of Viesturs Koziols, the majority shareholder of the media company SIA Dienas mediji. *Neatkarīgā Rīta Avīze*'s data were also seized during the raid. While KNAB claimed that the raids were a part of a corruption investigation of various firms that had advertised with the affected media houses, critics accused the anticorruption bureau of seeking revenge for media criticism of its disorganization and inefficiency.

Latvian media are relatively diverse and competitive, offering a wide range of political viewpoints. The main national television stations include two public channels—LTV 1 and LTV 7—and the commercial channels LNT and TV3. A number of privately owned radio and television outlets operate on a regional basis. Programming for the country's large Russian-speaking population is available on traditional and cable television networks. The print media, which include a large number of both Latvian and Russian-language papers, are independent and privately owned. Foreign companies, including Scandinavian firms, own or control a considerable portion of Latvia's print and broadcast media.

In response to recent scandals that have exposed Latvia's inadequate legislation on media ownership transparency, in September 2011 the parliament adopted an amendment to the Law on the Press and Other Mass Media that requires full disclosure of the beneficiaries of media enterprises, including websites. Outlets must now list their beneficiaries in the Register of Enterprises.

Latvia discontinued analog terrestrial broadcasting in June 2009 to make way for the switchover to digital broadcasting. Critics accused the Ministry of Transport, which oversaw the change, of failing to consult adequately with the public and interested parties. Moreover, the state-owned telecommunications company Lattelecom won a tender that year for the right to control digital terrestrial broadcasting in the country until 2013. Media companies argue that this allows Lattelecom to charge unreasonably high rates for transmission, negatively affecting competition and increasing the rates paid by consumers. Due to complaints filed by Lattelecom's competitors and other interested parties, the government announced that it would restructure the bidding process after Lattelecom's mandate expires.

The media environment continues to suffer from the effects of the economic downturn that started in 2008. Declining advertising revenues have caused media outlets' budgets to shrink, resulting in the increasing tabloidization of news and the use of recycled content. Some media have engaged in "hidden advertising," effectively disguising paid material as news content. KNAB received some 30 complaints of hidden campaign advertising during the September 2011 parliamentary elections. The Law on Preelection Campaigning prohibits political advertising that does not clearly identify itself as such or indicate who paid for it. The global economic downturn also caused a drop in newspaper and magazine subscriptions. Some print media are facing extinction as more and more readers turn to online sources for news and cultural information.

The government does not restrict access to the internet, which was used by an estimated 72 percent of the population in 2011.

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