

FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

Lithuania

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Lithuania's constitution provides for freedoms of speech and the press, and those guarantees are respected by the government in practice. According to the criminal code, libel and defamation are punishable by fine or imprisonment. In the spring of 2011, online journalist Gintaras Visockas was convicted of libel and fined €10,000 (\$12,400) for an article in which he allegedly suggested that former presidential candidate Česlovas Ježerskas was controlled by the KGB during the Soviet period. Because he could not pay the fine, Visockas was sentenced to 40 days in jail. He subsequently filed an appeal at the European Court of Human Rights.

The Law on the Provision of Information to the Public and the Law on the Right to Obtain Information from State and Local Government Institutions regulate access to public information. In June 2009, Lithuania, along with 11 other European countries, signed the Council of Europe's Convention on Access to Official Documents, which establishes the right to request information held by public authorities at no charge. However, continuing restrictions on information disclosures have prevented these measures from being properly enforced in practice. In June 2011, a new Law on the Provision of Information to the Public took effect, with provisions barring discriminatory media content with respect to sexual orientation. An earlier draft of the legislation had barred the mention or promotion of homosexuality.

Media freedom advocates remain concerned about the 2009 Law on Protection of Minors against the Detrimental Effect of Public Information, which limits or bans a wide range of content considered harmful to young people, including the promotion of bad hygiene, sexual intercourse, gambling, certain forms of hypnosis, and a number of other practices. No prosecutions under the law have been reported. In March 2011, the law was amended to ban information considered harmful to children—including information that challenges traditional concepts of the family or marriage—from public places accessible to minors.

There were no reports of attacks or threats against journalists in 2011. Lithuania's media freely criticize the government and express a wide variety of views.

In addition to the public broadcast media, dozens of independent television and radio stations are available nationally, regionally, and locally, including the main commercial television stations LNK, TV1, and BTV. More than 300 privately owned newspapers—such as the dailies *Lietuvos Rytas*, *Vakaro Žinios*, and *Respublika*—publish in Lithuanian, Russian, and a few other languages. Media ownership has undergone increased concentration over the last several years, with purchases of outlets by both domestic firms and foreign companies, mainly from Scandinavia. In 2009, the Lithuanian bank Snoras became the top shareholder in the country's largest media group, Lietuvos Rytas, which owns the newspaper of the same name.

A U.S. diplomatic cable released by the antisecrecy organization WikiLeaks in June 2011 revealed new information on the extent of corruption in media

2012 SCORES

PRESS STATUS

Free

PRESS FREEDOM SCORE

23

LEGAL ENVIRONMENT

5

POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

9

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9

advertising in Lithuania. Major newspapers such as *Respublika* and *Lietuvos Rytis* had allegedly threatened politicians with negative coverage to obtain advertising revenue, according to the document. The cable also indicated the ease with which politicians could buy positive press coverage. Media outlets responded defensively to these accusations; *Respublika* owner Vitas Tomkus sued Lithuanian Union of Journalists chairman Dainius Radzevičius for defamation in October merely because he made references to the WikiLeaks cable in his blog.

The global financial crisis of late 2008 had a major impact on the country's media market, with many outlets cutting staff and salaries and a number of periodicals ceasing publication. However, the rapid decline in advertising revenues slowed as the country's economy began to recover in 2010 and 2011.

Lithuanians are increasingly turning to online news sources at the expense of traditional media. About 65 percent of Lithuanians used the internet in 2011, and the government does not limit access. A proliferation of online hate speech aimed at Jews and Roma has been reported, but according to the European Journalism Centre, inaction by law enforcement officials has left local nongovernmental organizations—specifically the Tolerant Youth Association—with the task of addressing the problem.

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