

FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

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Macedonia

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Press freedom conditions deteriorated in 2011 due to the declining legal environment, including increased government control over regulatory bodies and the pretrial detention of a leading opposition-oriented media owner in a politically fraught tax case. As part of the same case, the country's most popular television station and three affiliated newspapers were forced out of business.

The Macedonian constitution includes basic protections for freedoms of the press and expression, but government representatives do not uphold them impartially. In March 2011, the parliament passed an amendment to the country's lustration law that expanded its scope from public officials to journalists and other professionals, meaning journalists will be investigated for past service as police informants. Journalists remain subject to criminal and civil libel charges, though imprisonment has been eliminated as a punishment. Over 100 libel cases against journalists were ongoing in 2011, with some resulting in significant fines. The large number of cases continues to hinder freedom of expression and encourage self-censorship. The law on open access to public information is unevenly and selectively enforced. Collection of fees used to finance the Broadcasting Council, which regulates television and radio outlets, and Macedonian Radio and Television (MRTV), the public broadcaster, has improved in recent years, but they remain in need of sustainable, independent funding. In July 2011, the parliament passed legislation—rapidly and without consultation—that increased the size of the Broadcasting Council from 9 to 15 members, with all of the new members to be named by government-controlled entities. Enforcement of media regulations, including rules on ownership transparency, is weak, and the licensing process is subject to undue political and economic influence. A new journalists' trade union was formed in December 2010, but its president was arbitrarily dismissed in July 2011 after being pressured to cease her union activities by the private Alsat-M television station.

Most private media outlets are tied to political or business interests that influence their content, and state-owned media tend to support government positions. The government of Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski and its media allies has shown growing hostility toward critical news outlets. The situation worsened significantly in 2011 as the authorities pressed forward with a tax evasion case against Velija Ramkovski, the owner of four opposition-oriented outlets: A1 TV, the country's leading television station, as well as the newspapers *Špic*, *Vreme*, and *Koha e Re*. Ramkovski and 13 associates had been arrested in late December 2010. Their trial, which began in May, was ongoing at the end of 2011. Ramkovski and seven other defendants remained in detention throughout the year, reportedly under difficult conditions; the rest were moved to house arrest after one detainee suffered a miscarriage in February. The bank accounts of Ramkovski's news outlets were frozen in January 2011, and they finally ceased operations in July, as the authorities demanded payment of roughly \$14 million in alleged tax debt. The government

2012 SCORES

PRESS STATUS
Partly Free

PRESS FREEDOM SCORE
54

LEGAL ENVIRONMENT
16

POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT
21

ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT
17

rejected international proposals to allow the outlets to pay their debts in installments and remain in business. A1 TV's frequency license was revoked on July 30 without the prior approval of the Broadcasting Council, which violated the legally defined procedure, according to Reporters Without Borders. Progovernment media supported the tax case against Ramkovski and his outlets, and in September progovernment reporters disrupted a European Parliament hearing to which rival journalists and press freedom activists had been invited.

There have been occasional cases of physical harassment of journalists and media outlets. Past death threats and other forms of intimidation have not been prosecuted.

Macedonia has a large number of broadcast and print outlets for its population, but the closure of Ramkovski's media group gave progovernment media—including the public MRTV and several private television stations and newspapers—a dominant position in the market. Ownership is fairly concentrated, and rules against partisan owners and cross-ownership of broadcast and print outlets are not enforced. A number of outlets, such as Sitel TV and Kanal 5, are run by relatives or close associates of elected officials. The main foreign media company in the country, Germany's WAZ Media Group, was preparing to sell its three dailies to local businessmen at the end of 2011. One of its papers, *Utrinski Vesnik*, suffered staff cuts and strikes during the year. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) ended its Macedonian and Albanian-language radio services in 2011, but Qatar's Al-Jazeera launched a new Balkans television service based in Sarajevo, with a branch office in Skopje. Concerns about the government's excessive use of promotional advertising grew during 2011, as media outlets became increasingly dependent on the spending. The state is the country's single largest advertiser. Journalists face low salaries, poor job security and working conditions, and editorial pressure from owners.

Access to the internet is restricted only by cost and infrastructural obstacles, with around 52 percent of the population accessing the medium in 2011. The vast majority of Macedonian users reportedly have accounts on the social-networking site Facebook.

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