

## FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

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# Moldova

[Moldova](#) | [Freedom of the Press 2012](#) | 

Press freedom improved slightly in 2011 as the ruling coalition, the Alliance for European Integration (AIE), reviewed a new Broadcasting Law, supported state broadcaster Teleradio Moldova (TRM) in providing balanced news coverage, started cracking down on corruption among broadcast media regulators, and fostered an environment in which physical attacks and politicized lawsuits against journalists continued to decline. The AIE bloc in Parliament—under the leadership of Prime Minister Vladimir Filat—continued to work with civil society experts to advance several media initiatives, but did so at a slower pace due to the country's ongoing political deadlock over the election of a president, which required a three-fifths vote in Parliament.

Moldova had decriminalized defamation by 2009, but a few civil defamation cases emerged during 2011. In August, a Chişinău court fined the investigative newspaper *Ziarul de Gardă* 500,000 lei (\$42,000) for defamation over an article on the alleged corruption of two prosecutors. The fine was reduced to 20,000 lei (\$1,700) on appeal, and a further appeal was pending at year's end. In April the minister of transportation accused the Unimedia news portal and the newspaper *Timpul* of defamation. He claimed that both news organizations had published a Moldavian Airlines press release that accused him of taking part in fraudulent collusion with the industry. The case remained pending at year's end.

The appointment of three new members to the Audiovisual Coordinating Council (CCA) was expected to improve broadcast media regulation, but the council continued to be criticized for politicized, nontransparent, and at times corrupt decision making. Two senior CCA officials, Gheorghe Gorincioi and Terentie Cherdivara, were arrested in January 2011 on charges of extorting some 110,000 lei (\$9,400) from a company. Cherdivara was convicted in April and received a suspended four-year prison sentence. The trial of the second official was ongoing at the end of the year. The CCA was also criticized for being ineffective in its enforcement of election-related regulations, handing down only small administrative fines—following the conclusion of the June 2011 local elections campaign—against the television channel NIT, which blatantly supported the opposition Communist Party. The Electronic Broadcasters' Association (APEL) prepared a draft Broadcasting Law in 2011, which the government debated in October and was still under consideration at the end of the year.

Reporters were able to obtain a greater amount of public information in the capital due to increased compliance with the Access to Information Law, but compliance remained poor in smaller cities and towns, according to a study conducted by Access-Info, a local nongovernmental organization. Some senior public officials continued to blame the media for political disputes within the ruling coalition. On January 12, Parliament speaker and acting president Marian Lupu justified keeping the media away from some parliamentary debates by claiming that their presence negatively affected the behavior of some deputies. Throughout the year, the press officers and bodyguards of senior officials from the ruling coalition arbitrarily excluded some journalists

## 2012 SCORES

### PRESS STATUS

**Partly Free**

### PRESS FREEDOM SCORE

**54**

### LEGAL ENVIRONMENT

**17**

### POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

**18**

### ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT

**19**

from press conferences and briefings without explanation. For example, on January 29, presidential security officers prevented Curaj TV journalist Oleg Brega—who is well known for his sharp criticism of abuses committed by police, prosecutors, judges, and politicians—from entering an event commemorating National Prosecutor's Day in Chișinău.

Media pluralism and the volume of locally produced programming continued to expand in 2011 in response to the improved legal and political environment that the AIE began fostering in 2010. In May, six local television stations from around the country joined together and launched the regional television network AICI to share news content for the 13 cities they cover. Local media analysts reported that two television stations launched in 2010, Jurnal TV and Publika TV, expanded and diversified the overall news coverage of the June 2011 local elections.

State-sponsored intimidation of journalists continued to decline during 2011, and local media freedom organizations reported no serious cases. The change reflected aggressive reporting of attacks against journalists by Publika TV, as well as efforts by government officials to interact more carefully with reporters. However, journalists remained vulnerable to attacks by private individuals. In July, Brega of Curaj TV was assaulted and briefly detained by managers from the private Slavonic University of Moldova while trying to film a story about a student whose personal documents were inappropriately confiscated, according to the Chișinău-based Independent Journalism Center (IJC). Police officers consistently failed to properly investigate such abuses, and in some cases failed to intervene when journalists were attacked in their presence. In December, a lawyer representing a priest assaulted a Publika TV crew as they filmed a dispute between parishioners and church officials in the town of Călărași. A group of police officers observing the altercation failed to protect the journalist.

In the separatist Transnistria region, media are highly restricted and politicized. Most local broadcast media are controlled by the Transnistrian authorities or by companies like Sheriff Enterprises that are linked to the separatist regime. Print media are required to register with the separatist Ministry of Information in Tiraspol, the region's capital, rather than the internationally recognized Moldovan government in Chișinău. Media pluralism declined further after one of only three independent newspapers published in Transnistria—the Russian-language weekly *Novaya Gazeta*—was closed by its owners after facing years of harassment from separatist authorities. Any critical information regarding the authorities is promptly suppressed and the journalists responsible harassed. The Transnistrian State Security Ministry intensified pressure on the region's few remaining independent-minded journalists ahead of the December 2011 election for the separatist presidency. During the first round of voting on December 11, police in Tiraspol detained Valentina Ursu, a reporter for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty who was covering the voting. In May, separatist officials had responded to international pressure by pardoning and releasing independent journalist Ernest Vardanean, who had been sentenced in 2010 to 15 years in prison for allegedly spying on behalf of the Moldovan government. Vardanean had worked for the Chișinău-based newspaper *Puls*, the Romanian-language service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, and the Russian internet news agency Novy Region. His arrest and imprisonment after a deeply flawed trial had intensified pervasive self-censorship among Transnistrian journalists.

There is a mix of private and public media in Moldova, but ownership transparency is still lacking, with many outlets employed to advance the business or political interests of their secretive owners. For the second year in a row, TRM managers appointed by the AIE government received high marks for the broadcaster's balanced coverage of politically sensitive events like the June 2011 local elections. The AIE also took steps to reduce government influence over some 40 state-owned newspapers; a plan to strengthen their editorial independence and privatize them took effect in February 2011, giving state institutions two years to reorganize, privatize, or shutter publicly funded newspapers. The city of Bălți liquidated two municipal newspapers in August. Progress on implementing the legislation remained slow, however, as the government was unsure how to establish new management structures for the newspapers and requested assistance from APEL during 2011. Due to the

global economic downturn, private media remained highly dependent on financial subsidies and advertising revenue that usually came from affiliated businesses and political groups, rather than being allocated according to market forces. Economic pressures continued to force media outlets to become more efficient and intensified the shift from print to online advertising revenue.

Although the underdeveloped telecommunications infrastructure and high fees for internet connections have resulted in limited usage, access is generally not restricted by the authorities, and approximately 38 percent of the population had access to the internet in 2011. Over 20 news portals and social-networking sites have become popular, with some one million users registered on the Russian site Odnoklassniki and some 200,000 on Facebook, according to the IJC. However, the growing number of bloggers remain excluded from reporting on the government because they are not officially recognized as journalists and cannot receive accreditation. In the separatist Transnistria region, residents increasingly use social-networking websites to anonymously discuss politically sensitive issues with their counterparts in the rest of Moldova.

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