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Freedom Of The Press - Albania (2011)

Status: Partly Free

Legal Environment: 16

Political Environment: 17

Economic Environment: 17

Total Score: 50

The constitution guarantees freedom of the press, and the media are vigorous and fairly diverse. However, outlets often display a strong political bias, and their reporting is influenced by the economic or political interests of their owners. Libel remains a criminal offense, punishable by fines and up to two years in prison. While there have been no criminal libel cases against journalists in recent years, former culture minister Ylli Pango successfully sued the private television station Top Channel for airing hidden-camera video of him asking young female job applicants to disrobe. He had been forced to resign after the recordings were broadcast in March 2009. In June 2010, a court ordered the station to pay roughly \$500,000 in damages to Pango on the grounds that they had been obtained illegally. The government of Prime Minister Sali Berisha has repeatedly used administrative mechanisms, including tax investigations and arbitrary evictions from state-owned buildings, to disrupt the operations of media outlets it perceives as hostile. Regulatory bodies are seen as highly politicized.

Journalists sometimes face intimidation and assaults in response to critical reporting. Mero Baze, the owner of the newspaper *Tema* and host of a talk show on the independent television station Vizion Plus, was allegedly assaulted by businessman Rezart Taci and two of his bodyguards in November 2009. Through his media outlets, Baze had accused Taci of tax evasion and irregularities in his acquisition of a state-owned oil refinery. Taci, who has close ties to Berisha, was acquitted in December 2010, while the bodyguards were each fined 350,000 lek (\$3,500). Also in 2010, Piro Nase of the newspaper *Panorama* and the broadcast station TV Planet was assaulted in November by unidentified attackers who made threats related to his work,

and officials with the opposition Socialist Party (PS) forced a crew from the public broadcaster, Albanian Television and Radio (RTSh), to leave the scene of a May PS hunger strike, purportedly for the journalists' own safety.

RTSh is financially dependent on the state and typically shows a strong progovernment bias. Three private television stations have national reach, and dozens of smaller television and radio outlets also operate in a poorly regulated environment. Albanians have access to foreign radio content and television broadcasts from neighboring Greece and Italy. There are a variety of daily and weekly newspapers, but circulation is low. Media outlets typically rely on financial support from owners and a few major advertisers, and self-censorship to suit their interests is common. Journalists are especially vulnerable to editorial pressure due to a lack of employment contracts and irregular pay.

There are no government restrictions on the internet, which was accessed by 45 percent of the population in 2010. Penetration has been increasing in recent years, but access in rural areas remains limited.