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## Freedom Of The Press - Armenia (2011)

**Status: Not Free**  
**Legal Environment: 20**  
**Political Environment: 25**  
**Economic Environment: 20**  
**Total Score: 65**

Despite constitutional and legal protections, press freedoms are restricted and the media environment in Armenia remains oppressive and has not improved since the flawed 2008 presidential election. The year was marked by continual antigovernment protests. Before and after the January 2010 parliamentary by-election in Yerevan, the authorities behaved in much the same way they did in 2008, pressuring and harassing the media in an effort to stifle the opposition. Although Armenia passed freedom of information legislation in 2003, the government has subsequently failed to adopt a number of regulations needed to implement the legislation. International and local media organizations praised a May 2010 amendment to the penal code that removed imprisonment from the list of sentences for defamation. Monetary fines are now the maximum punishment.

However, in June, despite international criticism, the government adopted amendments to the Law on Television and Radio that further consolidated government control over the broadcast media. The legislation, adopted as part of the digitalization process, now enables the regulator to revoke licenses without any justification and impose broadcasting restrictions, and also specifies that only one digital television license will be issued for each region outside the capital. Human Rights Watch expressed concern that the legislation would reduce the number of broadcast TV stations from 22 to 18. Meanwhile, the license of broadcaster A1+ remains suspended, despite a 2008 ruling by the European Court of Human Rights that the government had improperly revoked the license in 2002. In 2008, the government suspended all licensing until the digitalization process was complete in 2010. In December, the National Commission on Television and Radio, whose members are appointed by the president, denied A1+ station's license for the 13<sup>th</sup> time. Local television station Gala, based in Gyumri, has been under government pressure since it broadcast speeches by an opposition presidential candidate in 2007. In 2010, the station's bank accounts were frozen and its equipment seized, and its advertisers were pressured to cease their business with the station.

Armenia's perceived lack of judicial independence, climate of impunity, and continued violence and harassment against the media continue to result in self-censorship, which is widespread, particularly in broadcast media. In January 2010, opposition member and editor in chief of the independent daily *Haykakan Zhamanak* Nikol Pashinian was convicted of inciting mass disorder and assaulting a police officer during the mass protests following the 2008 election and sentenced to seven years in jail. Pashinian frequently wrote investigative reports critical of the government. Although the government passed a resolution for amnesty

for all those implicated in the March 2008 protests, Pashinian was immediately arrested after he came out of hiding in 2009. In November 2010, Pashinian was beaten in jail and placed in a strict-regime prison after he wrote a series of editorials from captivity. Several journalists were detained after police clashed with protestors in late May. While most journalists were released the same day, a journalist with *Haykakan Zhamanak*, Ani Gevorgian, was arrested for assaulting police.

Most of the dominant media are controlled by the government or government-friendly individuals. Television is the country's primary medium, and one of the only stations with a national reach is state-owned, although several dozen other private stations operate. Russian and minority language media are widely available. State and public media receive preferential treatment; they receive first access to official news and the lion's share of government advertising. Print media are available mostly in Yerevan and larger cities. Small state subsidies are available for private print media, but due to high distribution and licensing costs, newspapers are not profitable. Most media are dependent on narrow advertising resources and have little guarantee of independence. The government does not require registration to access the internet or satellite television, and these are freely available.

The internet penetration rate was 37 percent in 2010. Although online media are not widely read, bloggers have played an important role in recent years in providing political information, such as after the 2008 presidential election. In March 2008, the government restricted access to opposition websites, but there have been no reports of restrictions on the internet since then, according to the U.S. State Department.