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Freedom Of The Press - Latvia (2011)

Status: Free
Legal Environment: 6
Political Environment: 11
Economic Environment: 9
Total Score: 26

Latvia's constitution protects the freedoms of speech and the press, and the government generally upholds these rights in practice. Libel remains a criminal offense, though no journalists were imprisoned or fined during 2010. The Law on Freedom of Information provides detailed rules on access to public information. A new law on electronic mass media, adopted in 2010 after considerable parliamentary debate, holds that at least 65 percent of broadcast programming must be in the country's official language, Latvian. In a high-profile case, a Riga court ruled in February 2007 that the country's financial police had invaded the privacy of LTV journalist Ilze Jaunalksne by recording her telephone conversations and leaking the transcripts to the newspaper *Neatkarīga Rita Avīze*. The government appealed the verdict, and a final court decision in February 2010 awarded her approximately \$25,000 in damages. Jaunalksne had broken a story on government corruption in 2006, and *Neatkarīga Rita Avīze* was widely believed to be controlled by the powerful mayor of Ventspils, Aivars Lembergs, who has faced investigations for corruption.

Cases of harassment or intimidation of journalists occur occasionally. In April 2010, Grigorijs Nemcovs, the publisher of the Russian-language newspaper *Million*, which is known for its investigations of government corruption, was shot dead at close range. He had faced threats and attacks in the past. In May, police searched the home of Ilze Nagla, a journalist with Latvian public television, and confiscated her computer. The television station had aired a story using leaked government documents about the excessive salaries of high-level state officials. Law enforcement officials denied that they were looking for the identity of the hacker who had extracted the documents and said they were merely trying to determine whether Nagla's computer contained data from the state revenue service. However, press freedom groups criticized the police for disregarding the protection of journalists' sources.

Latvian media are relatively diverse and competitive, offering a wide range of political viewpoints. The main national television stations include two public channels—LTV 1 and LTV 7—and the commercial channels LNT and TV3. A number of privately owned radio and television outlets operate on a regional basis. Russian-language programming for the country's large Russian-speaking population is available on traditional and cable television networks. The print media, which include a large number of both Latvian and Russian-language papers, are independent and privately owned. Foreign companies, including Scandinavian firms, own or control a considerable portion of Latvia's print and broadcast media. However, transparency of media ownership is not adequately protected by law, and information on owners of media companies, some of whom are widely believed to be

affiliated with political or economic interests, is not easily accessible. In July 2009, the highly respected newspaper *Diena* was suddenly sold by Sweden's Bonnier media group to a foreign owner, though the true identity of the new owner remained a subject of dispute. Many editorial staff members, including *Diena's* editor in chief, submitted their resignations in protest. In August 2010, a controlling interest in the paper was purchased by Viesturs Koziols, a close associate of Ainārs Šlesers, one of the country's leading business and political figures. In 2010, LNT and another television station, TV5, were purchased from U.S.-based News Corporation by Independent National Media. The latter is composed of LNT managers headed by Andrejs Ekis, the station's founder and an associate of another Latvian business magnate and politician, Andris Šķele.

Latvia's economy suffered due to the global financial crisis, causing a drop in newspaper and magazine subscriptions and a 40 percent decline in advertising revenues from the first six months in 2008 to the same period in 2009, according to TNS LT, the country's largest market research firm. However, as the economy showed signs of recovery in 2010, the advertising decline slowed to about 18 percent in the first half of the year, according to the international media agency network Carat. The government does not restrict access to the internet, which was used by an estimated 68 percent of the population in 2010, up from 45 percent in 2006.