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## FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

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# Albania

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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, though legal reforms enacted in March 2012 eliminated prison terms as a punishment, leaving only fines. The first criminal libel case against a reporter in several years, brought by a cabinet official against journalist Lindita Çela of the daily *Shekulli* in February, was quickly dismissed. Civil defamation suits, including among politicians, remain common. Changes to the civil code enacted in February set limits on financial penalties for defamation in order to protect the survival of media outlets. The government of Prime Minister Sali Berisha has in the past used administrative mechanisms, including tax investigations and arbitrary evictions from state-owned buildings, to disrupt the operations of media outlets it perceives as hostile. Freedom of information legislation is poorly implemented, and regulatory bodies are seen as highly politicized.

The media have played an important role in exposing political corruption, though the implicated officials are rarely punished by the courts. In January 2011, an investigative program on Top Channel aired a video recording—acquired from former economy minister Dritan Prifti—that appeared to show Deputy Prime Minister Ilir Meta discussing corrupt activities. Meta resigned after the video was aired, but the broadcast nevertheless touched off violent opposition protests and a major political crisis that included government pressure on key journalists. However, in January 2012 the Supreme Court dismissed the case against Meta, citing a lack of evidence. Prosecutors in September dropped a related case against Prifti for similar reasons. Separately, in July 2012, a high-ranking army officer resigned after the media reported a conflict of interest involving his wife's business activities.

Journalists are sometimes physically obstructed from covering specific events or assaulted in the course of their work. In June 2012, the bodyguards of a cement factory executive beat journalist Dashmir Bıçaku of *Shekulli*, who was photographing the man as he left a police station after being questioned in a murder case. In October, police in Tirana restricted journalists' access to an encampment of former political prisoners who were on hunger strike to demand reparations from the government.

There is a variety of daily and weekly newspapers, but circulation is low, and rural distribution is limited. The public broadcaster, 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. Media outlets typically rely on financial support from owners and a few major advertisers, and self-censorship to suit their interests is common. Most media are considered to be aligned with a political faction, leaving few genuinely independent domestic outlets. In September 2012, an opposition lawmaker criticized the government for directing the bulk of government advertising purchases to politically friendly outlets, including the newspaper of the ruling Democratic Party. Few foreign media companies have invested in the Albanian market. Germany's WAZ group sold its majority stake in the Vizion Plus television station in August 2012 as part of a broader withdrawal from the region. Journalists often work without contracts, increasing their dependence on managers and owners. Albania's Union of Journalists reported in November 2012 that employees at most print and broadcast outlets routinely experience delays in their pay for weeks or months at a time. Albanians have access to satellite television, foreign radio content, and television broadcasts from neighboring Greece and Italy.

There are no government restrictions on the internet, which was accessed by 55 percent of the population in 2012. Penetration has been increasing in recent years, but access in rural areas remains limited. Leaders of the opposition Socialist Party have reportedly turned to online social media with increasing frequency to communicate with the public at low cost and help mitigate the government's growing advantage in traditional media.

## 2013 SCORES

PRESS STATUS

**Partly  
Free**

PRESS FREEDOM SCORE

**49**

LEGAL ENVIRONMENT

**15**

POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

**17**

ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT

**17**

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