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FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

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Bulgaria

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The constitution protects freedom of speech and of the press, and the government generally respects these rights in practice. Defamation is punishable by large fines, and government officials have filed suits against journalists, but the courts tend to favor press freedom in such cases. In an unusual incident, after the news site Bivol.bg reported on suspected corrupt banking practices in June 2012, a group of banks filed a complaint under a statute that allows the Bulgarian National Bank to impose fines for disseminating false or harmful information about banking institutions. However, at the end of the year, the national bank had not pursued the complaint further. A 2011 law prescribes up to four years in prison for the instigation of hatred, discrimination, or violence based on race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, sexual orientation, marital or social status, or disability. It was criticized by press freedom advocates for failing to define terms like “discrimination,” and for criminalizing speech that does not intentionally incite violence.

The law on freedom of information is considered fairly robust, though state institutions sometimes improperly deny information requests. Legislation passed in 2011 reduced journalists’ access to an important official registry of private companies’ contracts and activities. The broadcasting regulatory body is subject to pressure from the government, politicians, and large corporate interests.

Media outlets convey a range of political views, in most cases without government interference. However, political leaders sometimes display an intolerance for media criticism, and a number of outlets show a strong progovernment bias. In July 2012, Prime Minister Boyko Borisov declared that media scrutiny of the Interior Ministry’s work served the interests of organized crime. Reporters continue to face pressure and intimidation aimed at protecting economic, political, and criminal interests. Impunity for crimes against journalists remains the norm, encouraging self-censorship. In May, the vehicle of investigative journalist Lidia Pavlova of the Blagoevgrad daily *Struma* was set on fire. She and her family had received multiple threats in the past, and her car had been repeatedly attacked. In July, Varna-based journalist Spas Spasov received a threatening message at his home address, apparently in connection with his reporting on a construction project.

A number of private newspapers publish daily, and most are owned by two rival companies. Two of the three leading national television stations, bTV and Nova TV, are owned by foreign companies. The third is state-owned Bulgarian National Television (BNT). Like Bulgarian National Radio, BNT generally provides news coverage without a clear political bias, but the legal structure leaves public media vulnerable to potential government interference. Foreign firms have also played an important role in the print and radio sectors. Key outlets continued to change hands in 2012 as a result of difficult economic conditions and the shifting business or political interests of the owners. The New Bulgarian Media Group, which takes a staunchly progovernment line, continued to acquire outlets during the year, raising concerns about concentration. The government has been accused of indirectly subsidizing the conglomerate through deposits by state entities in an affiliated bank. Commercial media frequently tailor their coverage to suit the interests of key financial backers, including corporations and national or local government bodies. The shrinking private advertising market has increased the importance of state advertising and other subsidies, especially for local outlets. Individual journalists continue to suffer from decreasing salaries and job insecurity, leading to unethical practices and acquiescence to editorial pressure.

Many traditional media outlets have established a presence on the internet, which is not restricted by the government and was accessed by about 55 percent of the population in 2012. Some newspapers have switched to an online-only format for economic reasons.

2013 SCORES

PRESS STATUS

**Partly
Free**

PRESS FREEDOM SCORE

37

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