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FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

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Croatia

[Croatia](#)[Freedom of the Press 2013](#)

After six years of accession negotiations with the European Union (EU), Croatia was expected to become the 28th EU member state on July 1, 2013. The accession process was successful in exerting some pressure on the Croatian government to fight corruption and create the conditions necessary for independent media to flourish. As amended in June 2010, the constitution recognizes freedom of the press as well as the right to information. Nevertheless, the state has often tolerated harassment of journalists and taken legal action against critical media outlets. There was improvement in this area in March 2012, when a judge in Zagreb, the capital, ruled against former Croatian president Stjepan Mesić, who in 2009 had sued political analyst and publicist Darko Petričić for defamation. Mesić claimed that Petričić had defamed him by stating that the Albanian mafia funded his first presidential campaign. The court found that Petričić had made a serious critique of a politician, which did not amount to defamation. Libel remains a criminal offense, but is punishable only with fines. Hate speech, however, carries a maximum prison sentence of five years.

Due to inadequate implementation and understanding of Croatia's Act on the Right of Access to Information, journalists continue to find it difficult to request and obtain information from the government. Amendments that expanded the definition of classified information in late 2010 raised further concerns about the law's efficacy.

Media analysts have criticized the Council for Electronic Media, an independent regulator that licenses broadcast outlets, for its lack of transparency and its licensing criteria. There is particular concern regarding the allocation of frequencies and the use of funds meant for the promotion of commercial television and radio productions. There is no licensing requirement for media that do not use the broadcast frequency spectrum. Outlets launched on other electronic communication platforms are only required to register with the media council and pay a nominal fee. Print media must register with the Chamber of Commerce.

The Croatian Journalists' Association (CJA), representing more than 90 percent of the country's active journalists, is considered a model for the region. The majority of Croatian journalists adhere to the CJA's code of ethics, and its Council of Honor is responsible for reviewing complaints from individuals, institutions, and companies. Membership in the CJA is currently declining, however, reflecting dissatisfaction with the association's responses to the worsening conditions faced by journalists. Nearly 400 journalists have been fired in the past two years, and hundreds more are working on a part-time basis without benefits. Furthermore, journalists, especially those covering corruption and organized crime, continue to face harassment and attacks as a result of their work.

The state-owned public broadcaster, Croatia Radio-Television (HRT), is funded through advertising revenue and licensing fees. HRT is often seen as representing political interests and has been criticized for censoring and suspending programs without explanation, politicizing personnel decisions, lacking transparency, and failing to respect professional standards. In January 2012, the CJA and 26 other nongovernmental organizations and associations signed an appeal demanding that HRT address these issues. Amendments to the Croatian Radio-Television Law, adopted by the parliament in July, allow the parliament to appoint HRT's director general, its 11-member Program Council, and the members of its Monitoring Committee, effectively institutionalizing political control over the broadcaster. In October, the parliament appointed Goran Radman as HRT's director general for a term of five years.

In addition to serious concerns regarding political interference with HRT's management, the public broadcaster came under fire in 2012 for numerous attempts to censor journalists. On April 22, Maja Server, editor of the show *Croatia Life*, was warned that she could lose her job over her allegedly unbalanced selection of guests for the show. On May 4, journalist Elizabeta Gojan was also warned that she could be dismissed from her job for criticizing HRT in interviews with Deutsche Welle, in the Croatian daily *Slobodna Dalmacija*, and in a speech she gave on World Press Freedom Day. On December 30, journalist Karolina Vidović-Krišto was publicly sanctioned by HRT and suspended from her job after running a television program that was critical of the government's new policy on sex education. Her show, *Pictures of Croatia*, was taken off the air.

There are dozens of private television and radio stations, both local and national, and cable and satellite television access is common. While private media owners must be registered, this information is not easily accessible to the public and often does not clearly indicate who or what entity is behind the registered company names. Many private media owners allegedly hold interests in nonmedia businesses, creating commercial and political pressure that can reduce critical news coverage of the government and influential companies. German-owned Europa Press Holdings and Austria's Styria control most of the print media market, raising concerns about ownership concentration. A decline in advertising revenue due to the global economic crisis, as well as rapidly dwindling newspaper circulations, have left many media outlets financially weak, leading to a blurring of the lines between journalism, advertising, and public relations. Not only are media outlets unable to publish articles that criticize their advertisers, but now it is possible to find advertising pieces disguised as news articles. The government does not restrict access to the internet, which was used by 63 percent of the population during 2012. Given the growth of online news media and the 24-hour news cycle, journalists are pressured to produce more articles in a shorter time frame, hurting the overall quality of reporting. Journalists often publish unchecked data and copy articles found online.

2013 SCORES

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