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FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

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Latvia

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

Latvia's constitution protects freedoms of speech and the press, and the government generally upholds these rights in practice. Libel remains a criminal offense. While in previous years journalists rarely faced criminal prosecution, European Parliament member Aleksandrs Mirskis accused journalist Gunta Sloga of libel for publishing a 2009 report that questioned the merit of his military experience. After a lengthy legal process, Sloga was acquitted in July 2011, but Mirskis appealed the judgment, and at the end of 2012 the case was pending before the Supreme Court. Incitement to racial and ethnic hatred, as well as anti-Semitic speech, is prohibited. In April 2012, the National Electronic Media Council (NEPLP) initiated an administrative procedure against Radio NABA over anti-Semitic comments that aired on one of its weekly shows. The program was temporarily suspended, and proceedings were ongoing at year's end. Tolerance for varying opinions on controversial issues related to the Second World War is still a challenge.

Although access to the internet is generally not restricted, in February 2011 the

Ministry of Defense introduced amendments to a draft law on states of emergency that would allow the government to block the internet and other data-transfer systems, including television and radio broadcasts and postal correspondence, during declared states of emergency. The draft was endorsed by the cabinet in July of that year, but Parliament had yet to pass it at the end of 2012.

The Law on Freedom of Information provides detailed rules on access to public information. A 2010 law on electronic mass media requires at least 65 percent of broadcast programming to be in Latvian, which is the country's only official language despite the presence of a large Russian-speaking minority. Beginning in 2012, members of the NEPLP are to be appointed by Parliament in consultation with various nongovernmental organizations. Most current NEPLP members, however, have links to the government. There is no self-regulatory organization, such as a press council, for journalists in Latvia.

Political parties have been known to exert influence over the media. In June 2012, an NEPLP member threatened to restrict guests on state-run Latvijas Radio after several former political advisers appearing on one of its talk programs criticized the ruling party.

Journalists and media outlets have occasionally been harassed or attacked. In March 2012, two assailants severely beat Leonīds Jākobsons, owner of the online news outlet *Kompromat*, which covers organized crime and government corruption. The attackers have not been identified. In December 2011, Jākobsons had been detained without charge for two days after he published e-mail correspondence between Riga mayor Nils Ušakovs of the Harmony Center party and Aleksandr Hapilov of the Russian embassy, suggesting that the former was engaging in corrupt activities and espionage. The 2010 murder of investigative journalist Grigorijs Nēmcovs, widely believed to have been a contract killing, remained unsolved at year's end.

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 TV3 and LNT. A third major commercial channel, PBK, broadcasts programs in Russian. A number of privately owned radio and television outlets operate on a regional basis. 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 newspapers, are independent and

privately owned. Many people in eastern Latvia cannot access Latvian television channels and primarily watch broadcasts from Russia and Belarus. Those stations generally do not carry much news about events in Latvia. In April 2012, the NEPLP approved a government proposal to create a new public broadcaster; the existing entity continues to struggle with inadequate funding, which affects the quality of its programming and personnel. The plan is subject to approval by the cabinet. Parliament in October approved the temporary suspension of some of the country's must-carry rules—which require cable operators to retransmit the content of free-to-air broadcast stations—because they had resulted in an unfair market situation for commercial broadcasters. In 2012, approximately 74 percent of the population had access to the internet.

Media ownership is becoming increasingly concentrated, raising concerns about the sector's ability to act as an effective watchdog. Foreign companies, including Scandinavian firms, own or control a considerable portion of Latvia's print and broadcast media. Following a series of ownership changes, in 2012 Latvia's three major Russian-language newspapers were merged into a single publication. In June, TV3, which is controlled by Sweden's Modern Times Group (MTG), took over LNT, which had seen a decline in market share in recent years. MTG now holds more than 60 percent of the Latvian television advertising market. In response to recent scandals that have exposed Latvia's inadequate legislation on media ownership transparency, in September 2011 Parliament had adopted an amendment to the Law on the Press and Other Mass Media that requires full disclosure of the beneficiaries of media enterprises, including websites. Outlets must now list their beneficiaries in the Register of Enterprises.

The media environment suffered from the effects of the economic downturn that started in 2008, but it is beginning to recover, along with Latvia's overall economy. Although television advertising takes up almost half of the advertising market, the recovery in 2012 was driven mostly by the internet.

2013 SCORES

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