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Freedom Of The Press - Slovakia (2011)

Status: Free
Legal Environment: 6
Political Environment: 9
Economic Environment: 7
Total Score: 22

Press freedom in Slovakia is constitutionally guaranteed and generally respected, and independent media outlets freely disseminate diverse views. Defamation is not a criminal offense, though some other types of expression—such as Holocaust denial—can, and have been, sanctioned with criminal prosecutions. In the first half of 2010, Slovakia's court system was flooded with civil defamation suits, primarily against media outlets. Financial damages awarded in such cases awarded are often exorbitant. In May 2010, the president of the Supreme Court, Stefan Harabin, sued Slovak Radio Express on behalf of the court for claiming that it had paid €32,700 (\$43,475) to renovate Harabin's private bathroom. A case brought by then prime minister Robert Fico against the weekly publication *Plus 7 Dni* sought an apology and €33,000 (\$43,890) in damages for publishing allegedly false details of a conversation between Fico and Libya's leader, Mu'ammar al-Qadhafi. The case was dismissed in November 2010.

Newspapers in 2009 and early 2010 also struggled with the repercussions of the 2008 Press Act, which places restrictions on content, grants powers of intervention to the state executive, and requires publishers to print responses to any "statement of fact that impinges on the honor, dignity, or privacy of a natural person, or the name or good reputation of a legal entity," regardless of whether the statement in question is accurate. Work on a draft amendment to the Press Act began in the fall, but was still in preparation at year's end. The amendment is expected to eliminate the "right of reply" for officials in cases where the disputed facts pertain to their public lives. In other respects, the law will not change significantly.

Slovakia's decade-old Act on Free Access to Information allows anyone to demand information from state agencies and receive an answer within 10 days, with noncompliant officials subject to potential fines. A series of studies by the Citizen and Democracy Association in 2002 found that basic information was usually provided but more sensitive data was sometimes withheld.

Official pressure on public media outlets continued to be a concern. In the run-up to the 2010 parliamentary elections, Fico's government continued to pressure Slovak Television (STV) to provide favorable coverage of official events. The June elections resulted in a new center-right governing coalition led by Iveta Radičová, who pledged to prioritize economic, social welfare, and media concerns. No physical attacks or harassment of journalists were reported during the year.

Most Slovak media outlets, including all major print outlets, are privately owned. Lack of transparency in media

ownership remains a concern, as does inadequate enforcement of regulations on cross-ownership of media outlets. In late 2010, the parliament passed legislation over the president's veto to merge public television and the financially weak Slovak Radio (SRo) to form a new public service provider, Radio and Television Slovakia (RTS). Though pressure from the government and judiciary seemed to be waning by the end of the year, Slovak media outlets face increasing financial pressures that are quite likely to affect their independence. In March 2010, Slovakia's leading financial group, J&T, purchased the country's second-most-popular daily newspaper, *Pravda*. Three years ago, the same company assumed control of TV Joj, Slovakia's second-largest television network. Media analysts worry that the increased appetite of multinational financial giants like J&T or the Czech Republic's PPF for media acquisitions will eventually result in protection from bad publicity for the publications' new owners.

Electronic media are diverse and pluralistic. Slovaks enjoy growing access to the internet, which the government does not restrict; approximately 79 percent of the population had access in 2010.