

## U.S. State Department Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2013

### Section on Freedom of Speech and Press for Albania

#### Freedom of Speech and Press

The constitution provides for freedom of speech and press, and the government generally respected these rights. There were reports that the government and businesses influenced and pressured the media.

*Freedom of Speech:* Individuals could generally criticize the government publicly or privately without reprisal; however, there were reports that the government required employees to attend campaign rallies.

Members of a group of former political prisoners from the communist regime who petitioned for government compensation reported that state security officials constantly monitored their movements and harassed them and their family members.

*Freedom of Press:* The independent media were active and largely unrestrained, although there were cases of direct and indirect political and economic pressure on the media, including threats against journalists. At times political pressure and lack of funding constrained the independent print media, and journalists reported that they practiced self-censorship. Political parties, trade unions, and other groups published newspapers or magazines independent of government influence.

In its annual Media Sustainability Index, the nongovernmental organization IREX noted that the independence of the media in the country neither improved nor deteriorated compared with the previous year.

The government controlled the editorial line of the public Albanian Radio and Television, which operated a national television channel and a national radio station and, by law, received 50 percent of its budget from the government. While private stations generally operated free of direct government influence, most owners believed that the content of their broadcasts could influence government action toward their other businesses. Business owners also freely used media outlets to gain favor and promote their interests with both major parties. Many media owners courted government leaders to gain favors or avoid taxes.

The media reported that the government distributed public funds for advertisements to media outlets based on personal and political favoritism rather than viewership or readership.

*Violence and Harassment:* There were incidents of violence against members of the broadcast media during the year, and political and business actors subjected journalists to pressure.

On April 7, police detained Gent Ballta, a cameraman of national commercial television station Top Channel, after a soccer match that led to confrontations between soccer club fans and police

officers. Ballta said that he was filming the confrontations and that police detained him along with fans. While in detention in Tirana's police station, he alleged that police assaulted him before he was later freed. Police first denied the assault and in a statement a day later claimed they detained Ballta briefly because he refused to identify himself. The state police later suspended the official who allegedly committed the assault and opened a disciplinary investigation against him.

*Censorship or Content Restrictions:* Journalists complained that publishers and editors censored their work directly and indirectly in response to political and commercial pressures. Many journalists complained that a lack of employment contracts frequently hindered their ability to report objectively and encouraged them to practice self-censorship.

The Union of Albanian Journalists stated in September that in 75 percent of the country's media outlets, there were delays of two to four months in the payment of reporters' monthly salaries. These delays led some journalists to more heavily rely on outside sources of income, which biased their reporting.

Broadcasters and publishers complained that the government used its purchases of advertising to leverage favorable reporting from media outlets. Private advertisers tended to do the same due to fear of tax inspections.

*Libel Laws/National Security:* The law grants special protection to national and foreign government officials in defamation cases; however, the law prohibits insult and deliberate publication of defamatory information as privately prosecuted misdemeanors subject to a fine. Some media outlets continued to produce investigative stories, which sometimes led to dismissals and criminal cases against corrupt public officials.

In 2012 the Tirana District Court fined Top Channel 51 million leks (\$489,300) for the 2009 broadcast of hidden camera footage that led to the dismissal of former minister of culture, youth, and sports Ylli Pango. The court of appeals overturned the decision. The High Court ruled that the case be sent back to the district court. Pango's lawyers appealed the ruling, and the High Court had not heard the case as of October.

### ***Internet Freedom***

There were no government restrictions on access to the internet or reports that the government monitored e-mail or internet chat rooms without appropriate legal authority. According to data compiled by the International Telecommunication Union, approximately 55 percent of the population used the internet in 2012. The number of individuals who subscribed to mobile broadband internet in 2012 reached 18 percent, while the number of individuals that subscribed to fixed broadband internet in 2012 was 5 percent. Fixed broadband was concentrated mostly in urban areas.

- See more at: <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/#wrapper>