

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

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 sought to influence the media in inappropriate ways.

Press Freedoms: The independent media were active and largely unrestrained, although there were cases of direct and indirect political and economic pressure on the media, including by threatening journalists. Political pressure, corruption, 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 organization IREX indicated that the independence of the media in the country remained the same as in 2013.

The independence of the Audiovisual Media Authority (AMA), the regulator of the broadcast media market, remained questionable. A politicized dispute over the AMA's leadership and the composition of its board hindered its ability to fulfill its mandate. The country's progress toward a scheduled June 2015 switchover to digital transmission was halted by the political impasse and a lawsuit by broadcasters claiming that the AMA made a decision without a required quorum. There were credible reports that the influence of commercial operators limited the Assembly's efforts to complete and reform the AMA and the public broadcaster.

The country's only public broadcaster, Albanian Radio and Television, operated a national television channel and a national radio station and by law received 50 percent of its budget from public funds. Disputes between political parties prevented the public broadcaster from filling senior posts. While private stations generally operated free of direct government influence, most owners believed the content of their broadcasts could influence government action toward their other businesses, although less so than in the past. Business owners also freely used media outlets to gain favor and promote their interests with both major parties.

Some media outlets continued to produce investigative stories, which sometimes led to dismissals and criminal cases against corrupt public officials. Transparency International reported that in 2013 the media played a greater role than in earlier years in exposing cases of corruption and abuse of public office.

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

There were credible reports that Telnis Skuqi, a reporter for the daily *Rilindja Demokratike*, received a text message threatening violence against him following the publication of an article he wrote alleging that government officials were involved in drug trafficking. He received the text message via the internet from an anonymous sender. According to credible reports, police in Gjirokaster and Tirana offered to provide protection to Skuqi, but he declined the offer.

On April 12, police forced reporter Armand Bajrami of the daily newspaper *Panorama* to delete photographs he had taken of police officers beating a young man. The victim had participated in what authorities considered an illegal protest in front of the Greek embassy in Tirana. The media reported that police apologized to Bajrami and that the four officers involved in the incident were suspended. After the public apology, the general director of police and the director of Tirana police met with the reporter and promised a full investigation. As of September there were no reports of the results of any investigation. On June 16, during a large police operation to take control of the southern village of Lazarat, known for its cultivation of cannabis, persons who were engaged in a gun battle with police assaulted an A1 Report Television vehicle. They forced the reporter, cinematographer, and driver out of the vehicle at gunpoint and held them hostage for several minutes until a local resident saved them. The vehicle was burned after the television crew was taken out of the village.

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.

In September the Union of Albanian Journalists stated that in 90 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 rely more heavily on outside sources of income, which biased their reporting.

Libel Laws/National Security: The law provides special protection to national and foreign government officials against charges of defamation but permits private parties to file criminal charges and obtain financial compensation for insult or deliberate publication of defamatory information. NGOs reported that the fines, up to three million leks (\$29,200), were excessive and together with the entry of a conviction into the defendant's criminal record, violated the right to freedom of expression.

In 2012 the Tirana District Court fined the broadcaster Top Channel 51 million leks (\$497,000) 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 Supreme Court sent the case back to the district court. The district court ruled against Pango, who again appealed the decision. As of September the appeals court had not heard the case.

Internet Freedom

The government did not restrict or disrupt access to the internet or censor online content, and there were no credible reports that the government monitored private online communications without appropriate legal authority. According to data compiled by the International Telecommunication Union, approximately 60 percent of the population used the internet in 2013. Approximately 35 percent of the population subscribed to mobile broadband internet, while 5.8 percent subscribed to fixed broadband internet. Fixed broadband was concentrated mostly in urban areas.