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Freedom of the Press 2014 - Latvia

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 journalists rarely face criminal prosecution, in 2009 European Parliament member Aleksandrs Mirskis accused journalist Gunta Sloga of libel for publishing a report that questioned the merit of his military experience. After a lengthy legal process, Sloga was acquitted in July 2011 by the Jūrmala City Court, but Mirskis appealed the judgment. In March 2013, the Supreme Court confirmed Sloga's acquittal.

Journalists have also faced pressure from authorities to reveal sources in cases of potential libel or for publishing state information. In December 2013, Edgars Kupčs, the deputy editor of the regional newspaper *Zemgales Ziņas*, was accused of libel for writing an article that referenced the transcript of a court hearing and was pressured to reveal his source, even though it was a public hearing. During interrogations by the police, Kupčs reported that he was harassed and threatened with house arrest. Ultimately the court dismissed the libel case and did not compel Kupčs to reveal the source that had given him the transcript. In July 2013, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) issued a ruling in the case of *Nagla v. Latvia*, which concerned a police search of a journalist's home in May 2010. The ECHR rejected a domestic court ruling and declared that the investigative authorities had failed to properly protect journalistic sources during their search.

Incitement to racial and ethnic hatred, as well as anti-Semitic speech, is prohibited. 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. The National Electronic Media Council (NEPLP) serves as the main regulator for broadcast media. Beginning in 2012, members of the NEPLP were to be appointed by Parliament in consultation with various nongovernmental organizations, a move that was intended to improve its independence. Most current NEPLP members, however, still have links to the government. There is no self-regulatory organization, such as a press council, for journalists in Latvia.

In February 2013, the NEPLP initiated an administrative procedure against Radio NABA, a public radio station supported by the University of Latvia, over anti-Semitic comments on one of its weekly shows, after which the station removed the show from the air. In November, the university was informed by Latvijas Radio, the main public broadcaster, that its contract would be canceled, effective February 2014, apparently due to a reorganization of the outlet. As of year's end, the student council was seeking clarification from Latvijas Radio and the NEPLP as to why their contract was canceled despite already having secured state funding for the year. In October, the Russian-language television station PBK aired a controversial segment that centered on January 1991 shootings in Vilnius, Lithuania, during the three Baltic states' process of separation from the Soviet Union. The feature presented a biased interpretation of the shootings, and was apparently received from Russia's Channel One and aired without further review. The media holding group Baltijas Mediju Alianse, PBK's parent company, removed the program in Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. Although the NEPLP found that PBK had violated the Law on Electronic Media, in December the Latvian Security Police determined that the program did not incite ethnic hatred and could not be deemed a criminal offense.

Political parties have been known to exert influence over the media. In June 2012, an NEPLP member threatened to restrict guests on Latvijas Radio after several former political advisers criticized the ruling party on a talk program. Journalists and media outlets have occasionally been harassed or attacked in previous years, but there were no reports of such incidents in 2013. The 2010 murder of investigative journalist Grigorijs Nemcovs, 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 print media, which include a large number of both Latvian- and Russian-language newspapers, are independent and privately owned. The main national television stations include two public channels—LTV 1 and LTV 7—and the commercial channels TV3 and LNT. PBK, a third major commercial channel, 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 cable television networks, in addition to the terrestrial broadcast stations. Many people in eastern Latvia cannot access Latvian television channels, partially as a result of the switchover from analog to digital transmission in 2009 and the lack of cable infrastructure in rural areas. Viewers there primarily receive terrestrial and satellite broadcasts from Russia and Belarus. In October 2012, Parliament 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 2013, approximately 75 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 the country's three major Russian-language newspapers were merged into a single publication. In June of that year, 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 October 2013 the NEPLP proposed amendments to the Electronic Media Act that would give it greater access to information on media ownership and true beneficiaries, as well as the right to create or prohibit media mergers. A 2011 amendment to the Law on the Press and Other Mass Media requires full disclosure of the beneficiaries of media enterprises, including websites. Outlets must 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 has been driven in large part by the internet. Due to advertising losses, in October 2013 MTG announced that LNT and TV3 would only be available to cable television subscribers beginning in January 2014, affecting the roughly 7 percent of the population that relies on free broadcasts.

2014 Scores

Press Status

Free

Press Freedom Score

(0 = best, 100 = worst)
27

(0 = best, 30 = worst)
6

(0 = best, 40 = worst)
11

(0 = best, 30 = worst)
10

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