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Freedom of the Press 2012 - Romania

2012 Scores

Press Status: Partly Free
Press Freedom Score: 41
Legal Environment: 12
Political Environment: 15
Economic Environment: 14

Press freedom is protected by the constitution and generally respected by the government. After a lengthy period of legal ambiguity, libel was effectively decriminalized by a Supreme Court ruling in 2010. No major civil cases were reported in 2011. Journalists regularly use Romania's freedom of information law to obtain public records, but bureaucratic obstacles and uneven enforcement have been reported. Appointments to the National Council of Broadcasting are politicized, resulting in ineffective regulation and biased decision-making.

A new general director took office at the public television broadcaster, TVR, in the second half of 2010, replacing a former official of the Social Democratic Party (PSD) who drew complaints for politicized control over editorial matters. Many observers praised the change, noting the new director's experience as a media professional. However, opposition parties accused TVR of favoring the government in 2011, and the broadcaster continued to face financial difficulties. The private media sector is dominated by conglomerates owned either by foreign companies or powerful Romanian businessmen, some of whom have openly used their outlets to attack President Traian Băsescu. One such owner, Sorin Ovidiu Vântu, was arrested in April on racketeering charges after a business associate accused him of extortion. His Realitatea media group was sold a few days later to Romanian real-estate investor Elan Schwartzberg. Vântu claimed that his legal troubles were politically motivated; he had been arrested in September 2010 on separate charges – later dropped – that he had aided a man at the center of a Ponzi scheme.

While no cases of serious violence against journalists were reported in 2011, politicians have displayed hostility toward critical outlets, and reporters sometimes face physical altercations in the course of their work.

TVR competes with several popular private television stations, including Pro TV and Acasa TV, both owned by the Bermuda-based Central European Media Enterprises (CME); Antena, owned by opposition politician Dan Voiculescu; and Realitatea. The public broadcaster similarly operates alongside private networks in the radio sector, and the major Romanian and foreign conglomerates have considerable holdings in the print sector

as well. A number of print outlets have closed since the economic downturn in late 2008, and many others survive on infusions of cash from their owners, who use them to advance political and business interests. The broadcast sector has also suffered. After changing ownership in April 2011, Realitatea filed for insolvency reorganization in September, and some foreign-owned stations were reportedly up for sale during the year. Individual journalists in Romania are susceptible to various forms of financial and editorial pressure, particularly given the poor economic environment.

Access to the internet is widely available, with no reports of government interference. Close to 44 percent of the population used the internet in 2011. However, online news outlets and blogs are still poorly developed, with most users obtaining news from the web versions of established newspapers and television stations.

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