Freedom of the Press 2013 - Lithuania

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2013 Scores

Press Status: Free
Press Freedom Score: 24
Legal Environment: 6
Political Environment: 8
Economic Environment: 10

Lithuania's constitution provides for freedoms of speech and the press, and those guarantees are respected by the government. Libel and defamation are punishable by fines or imprisonment. While it is more common for lawmakers and business leaders to pursue cases against individuals who make allegedly defamatory statements than to target the news outlets that carry them, journalists are sometimes affected. In 2011, online journalist Gintaras Visockas was convicted of libel and fined $12,400 for an article in which he suggested that a former presidential candidate was controlled by the state security service during the Soviet period. He failed to pay the fine and was sentenced to 40 days in jail. Visockas subsequently filed an appeal at the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), which was still pending at the end of 2012. Separately, Algirdas Butkevičius, who became prime minister following October elections, pursued a defamation case against a political opponent who insulted him in the media in March. A verdict was pending at year's end.

Lithuanian law prohibits some categories of speech, including incitement to hatred and denial of Soviet or Nazi crimes. In June 2012, a court in Vilnius, the capital, found journalist and Socialist People's Front leader Algirdas Paleckis guilty of denying Soviet aggression against Lithuania, overturning an earlier acquittal. Paleckis's supporters paid the $4,000 fine. He has appealed both the fine and the conviction to the Supreme Court. Prosecutors appealed the verdict as well, calling for Paleckis to serve a year in jail. Online hate speech aimed at Jews and Roma has reportedly proliferated in recent years. However, according to the European Journalism Centre, inaction by law enforcement agencies has left local nongovernmental organizations – specifically the Tolerant Youth Association – with the task of referring online hate speech to officials, who have prosecuted a number of cases.

A freedom of information law obliges the government to help citizens access public documents, but state authorities do not always respect it. The law was amended in April 2012 to improve assistance for those requesting information. Media freedom advocates remain concerned about a 2009 law that limits or bans a wide range of content considered harmful to young people. No prosecutions under the law have been reported.

In November 2012, the private television station TV3 fired Ruta Janutiene after canceling her documentary on the life of President Dalia Grybauskaitė. Janutiene criticized the move as an act of censorship, but TV3 officials said the program was inconsistent with the network's code of ethics. There were no reports of attacks or threats against journalists in 2012.

Kurier Wileński, a newspaper serving the ethnic Polish community, lost crucial public funding in 2008 after printing inflammatory statements about Lithuania in a 2007 article that the country's journalism ethics ombudsman said represented an ethics violation. Officials from the state-run Lithuanian Media, Radio, and TV Fund (LMRTF) have denied that the funding cutoff was politically motivated. *Kurier Wileński* lost its domestic appeals of the decision, and in 2011 took its case to the European Court of Human Rights, where a ruling was still pending at the end of 2012.

Lithuania's media freely criticize the government and express a wide variety of views. In addition to the public broadcast media, dozens of independent television and radio stations are available, including the main commercial television stations LNK, TV1, and BTV. More than 300 privately owned newspapers publish in Lithuanian, Russian, and a few other languages. About 68 percent of Lithuanians used the internet in 2012, and the government does not limit access.

Media ownership has undergone increased concentration over the last several years, with purchases of outlets by both domestic firms and foreign companies, mainly from Scandinavia. Moreover, ownership is often less than transparent. Banks are barred by law from owning media outlets, but many institutions work around those restrictions by maintaining media holdings through intermediaries. Newspapers controlled by financial institutions demonstrate bias toward their owners. Amendments designed to keep banks from purchasing shares of media outlets indirectly were introduced in Parliament in November 2011, but they were not passed during 2012. A number of politicians also maintain ownership stakes in media outlets, some of which demonstrate similar biases.

The rapid decline in advertising revenues that followed the global financial crisis of late 2008 has slowed, as the country's economy slowly recovers. A U.S. diplomatic cable released by the antisecrecy organization WikiLeaks in 2011 revealed new information on the extent of corruption in media advertising in Lithuania. Major newspapers such as *Respublika* and *Lietuvos Rytas* had allegedly threatened politicians with negative coverage to obtain advertising revenue, according to the document. The cable also indicated the ease with which politicians could buy positive press coverage. *Respublika* owner Vitas Tomkus sued Lithuanian Union of Journalists chairman Dainius Radzevičius for defamation in October 2011 after Radzevičius discussed the WikiLeaks cable on his blog. In June 2012, a court ordered that Radzevičius pay a $980 fine and nearly $3,800 in damages to Tomkus, but a higher court overturned the ruling in October.