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Freedom of the Press 2012 - Kosovo

2012 Scores

Press Status: Partly Free
Press Freedom Score: 49
Legal Environment: 14
Political Environment: 18
Economic Environment: 17

While Kosovo's constitution and legal framework provide for freedom of expression and freedom of the press, the media environment continues to be affected by political interference, corruption, and financial pressure. A weak judiciary that is not considered to be fully independent and an underdeveloped civil society present further obstacles to media freedom. Defamation remains part of the provisional criminal code, though the penalties do not include imprisonment and journalists are infrequently targeted for prosecution. There is a law on access to information, but journalists report that they are often denied access to public sources in practice.

The media are governed by two independent regulators: the Independent Media Commission (IMC), which handles broadcast licenses and promotes ethical, technical, and professional standards, and the Kosovo Press Council, which is focused on print media and advocates freedom of expression. While the IMC is considered to be largely independent, it does not enjoy full financial autonomy. The public broadcaster, Radio Television of Kosovo (RTK), also lacks adequate financing and continues to draw funds directly from the state. The Fund for the Support of Media of Minority, Multiethnic, and Other Special Groups has not been operational since 2009, when collection of the public broadcasting fee for RTK was suspended. In 2011, two bills were introduced in the parliament to reform the IMC and RTK, but a number of local and international civil society groups, such as the Association of Independent Electronic Media, objected to their content, including their treatment of the financing problems. The bills were withdrawn before year's end and were set to undergo revisions.

Political interference, direct and indirect, is a concern for both the public and private media. In 2011, the Association of Professional Journalists of Kosovo reported 33 instances of government officials, business interests, or media owners abusing press freedom, including through verbal threats against journalists and their agencies, pressure on outlets not to publish stories, and obstruction of reporters' work. Analysts noted during the year that RTK appeared to be producing increasingly one-sided, progovernment coverage. Journalists who criticize public officials are often denounced, and at times accused of being traitors or Serbian sympathizers. Official actors as well as religious authorities continued to harass the independent daily *Koha Ditore* in 2011. In

January, the Kosovo Liberation Army Veterans' Association accused *Koha Ditore* journalist Halil Matoshi of being a traitor due to his reporting. Also in 2011, the Ministry of Trade and Industry suspended relations with the daily newspaper *Zëri* as a result of its critical coverage. Editors often bar their reporters from publishing or broadcasting stories that are critical of the government or particular officials due to the outlets' connections to, or preferences for, certain leaders. In some cases, editors have allegedly threatened to fire reporters if they continued to produce such stories. Newspapers that are not aligned with the government or ruling parties are subject to intimidation through tax investigations or blocked from accessing public information.

Although there were no fatal crimes against journalists in 2011, a number of journalists were physically threatened and beaten. In two separate incidents in August, a reporter and a cameraman from TV Klan were attacked while trying to film a fire, and a correspondent for *Pravda* was verbally and physically abused. Also during the year, a photographer from *Zëri* was dragged by her hair out of the Kosovo Assembly by the chamber's information officer, preventing her from taking close-up photographs during the inauguration of the new president. It remains difficult for both Kosovo-based and Serbia-based media to report in contested border areas, particularly in periods of heightened tension and violence. In June, Željko Tvrđišić, the editor in chief of Radio Kontakt Plus, was attacked while reporting on the demolition of illegally constructed buildings in the divided city of Kosovska Mitrovica. The next month, Bojan Božović, a journalist with the Klan Kosova cable television station, was beaten and had his camera broken by a group of Serbs in northern Kosovo. In a separate incident in July, a Belgrade-based Tanjug news agency film crew was attacked by a local mob near the village of Leposavić, also in northern Kosovo.

Kosovo has a large number of media outlets, both in Pristina and in other parts of the country. There are around 10 daily newspapers, over 90 radio stations, and 22 television stations. Newspaper readership is low, with about 30,000 copies sold daily. There are three television broadcasters with national reach. Television remains overwhelmingly the top source of information. In a 2009 survey conducted by Index Kosova, 86 percent of respondents said they receive their news from television, around 5 percent from radio, and 7 percent from print media. Ownership structures, particularly for print media, remain unclear. Kosovo lacks a strong and private advertising industry that could support the growth of private media. As a result, private broadcasters have been dependent on international donors. While some outlets have started to rely more on their own revenues from advertising, most remain financially unstable, and very few are able to operate without support from the government or businesses associated with public officials. Indirect economic pressure is hard to avoid given that the government is the country's largest employer and public entities provide the largest amount of advertising revenue. Cases of advertising being withdrawn from certain media outlets have been noted in the recent past. Journalists have few professional rights, earn low wages, and often work without contracts, leaving them vulnerable to corruption and prone to self-censorship.

There were no reports of government restrictions on the internet in 2011. About 20 percent of the population accessed the medium during the year, according to Internet World Stats. In July, a group of hackers broke into the website of a Kosovo radio station, Radio City, and left the message "Kosovo is Albanian." Radio City later issued a statement noting that the attack likely stemmed from its efforts to provide programming that bridges the gap between ethnic Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo.

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