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Freedom of the Press 2011 - Bosnia-Herzegovina

Status: Partly Free

Legal Environment: 9

Political Environment: 23

Economic Environment: 16

Total Score: 48

The constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina guarantees freedom of the press, but attacks on journalists continued in 2010. Since the Dayton Accords that ended the civil war in 1995, the country has been split into two semi-independent constituent entities: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), whose population is mostly Bosniaks and Croats, and the Republika Srpska, whose population is mostly Serbs. Each entity has its own public broadcaster, private media, and political parties. Intimidation of the press is especially common in the Republika Srpska.

Libel has been decriminalized since 2003, but the burden of proof is placed on defendants, municipal courts are often biased, and suits can drag on for years. The Freedom of Access to Information Law is not always heeded by government bodies and journalists rarely use it. Under the Law on Communications of 2003 in the Federation, broadcast media are licensed and monitored by an independent Communications Regulatory Agency (CRA), which is financially independent but often exposed to political pressure. However, its licensing decisions are generally seen as fair and impartial. The print media are self-regulated by the Press Council of BiH, which in 2010 expanded to include online media. The Press Council handles complaints about the press from the public, but it has no power to fine, suspend, or close down media outlets. Instead, it mediates between the complainant and the publication, often resulting in a retraction or the publication of a response or denial from the complainant. In 2010, 113 citizen complaints were filed with the Press Council.

The presidential and parliamentary elections held on October 3 – the ninth elections in the 15 years since the end of the war – generated a lot of media coverage. Due to CRA and Election Commission rules, public TV stations carried many candidate presentations and debates, some of which attracted high viewership. One candidate for the Bosniak member of the presidency was media magnate Fahrudin Radoncic, who came in a close second. Radoncic is the owner of the *Dnevni Avaz* (*Daily Voice*), the highest-circulation newspaper in the country, as well as several magazines and a TV station. During the campaign, *Dnevni Avaz* was highly critical of all Bosniak parties other than Radoncic's own SBB BiH party, the Party for a Better Future of BiH.

In the Republika Srpska, there were cases of harassment of journalists by government

officials. On October 3, a member of the Republika Srpska's ruling party sent a memo to Alternativna Televizija (Alternative Television, ATV) barring its journalists from visiting or reporting from election locations. One week earlier, an ATV journalist was allegedly insulted and called a liar by the Republika Srpska's prime minister, Milorad Dodik, after asking a question about progress on a planned highway. In March, Dodik had sent a confidential memo to leaders of the Bosnian Serb community in which he called for a boycott of Federation TV (FTV), the Federation of BiH's public broadcaster. Dodik called FTV's coverage "biased and distorted," according to Reporters Without Borders, which condemned the attempted boycott as a violation of the 2001 Freedom of Information Act.

There were cases of intimidation against journalists and news agencies while covering the news in both constituent entities. On the morning of January 13 in Bijeljina, the Republika Srpska's second-largest city, a police raid shut down BN Television's broadcasting for four hours. The Southeast Europe Media Organisation (SEEMO) condemned the unnecessary disruption of programming caused by the raid, which was based on concerns over nonpayment of taxes and an anonymous phone call. In March, journalist Rade Tesic's car was set on fire while parked near his house in Dobo, Republika Srpska. Tesic, who was unharmed, had recently written several articles about local criminal networks for *EuroBlic*, the Bosnian edition of the Serbian paper *Blic*, in response to which the staff of *EuroBlic* had received verbal threats.

There were not many attacks on journalists in the Federation of BiH. On February 6, TV journalist Osman Drina was verbally and physically assaulted by local policemen in the town of Zenica, where he was reporting on a women's basketball league. When the incident was reported, the Ministry of the Interior opened an investigation, but no results had been announced by year's end. In September, a journalist for *Dnevni List*, Nevres Dedic, was attacked by a store owner when he attempted to take photos of a police raid of the store. Criminal charges were filed, but the case remained pending. Self-censorship is a widespread problem, as outlets are under pressure not to act against the economic interests of their owners.

According to IREX, Bosnia and Herzegovina has 11 daily newspapers, dozens of weekly and monthly newspapers, 143 radio stations, 44 television stations, and 6 news agencies, of which 2 are state owned, 2 are privately owned, and 2 are owned by religious organizations. The public television and radio stations in the two constituent republics are the most influential broadcasters in the country, although there are also several private TV stations with near-national reach. The print media is dominated by privately owned newspapers. Especially during the current economic downturn, the number of media outlets outstrips the amount of available advertising. This has led to increasing ethnic fragmentation and dependence on government and party financing. The internet is unrestricted, and 52 percent of the population had access in 2010.

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