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Freedom of the Press 2010 - Serbia

Status: Partly Free

Legal Environment: 11

Political Environment: 16

Economic Environment: 8

Total Score: 35

Note: This report does not reflect conditions in Kosovo, which is now covered separately.

- The constitution protects freedom of the press, which is generally respected in practice. However, there were reports of some government interference during 2009.
- Libel remains a criminal offense and is punishable with imprisonment or large fines.
- In August, the parliament adopted amendments to the 1998 Public Information Law that threaten to increase self-censorship and could lead to the closure of several media organizations, according to local and international media freedom organizations. Possible violations include operating a media outlet without registration and failure to honor the "presumption of innocence" when reporting on an individual charged with a crime. The penalties assigned by the amended law include harsh fines and jail time. Lawmakers did not consult members of the media before passing the legislation.
- The parliament also adopted the Law on National Councils of National Minorities in 2009, which allows government bodies to transfer control of public media outlets to the minority councils. Such a move would allow the outlets to continue to avoid privatization.
- There is no official censorship, but journalists at times practice self-censorship, and many avoid politically charged topics including war crimes and the secession of Kosovo.
- Independent journalists continue to face threats for reporting on sensitive political, economic, or cultural issues, and there is a climate of impunity for crimes committed against journalists. The 1999 murder of journalist Slavko Curuvija remains unsolved. Press freedom groups have criticized the government for making comments that seemed to justify attacks on the media.
- Several bomb attacks on radio and television stations were reported in 2009,

including attacks aimed at Television B92 and Television Pink. In December, journalists with B92 faced threats and harassment after airing "(Lack of) Power of the State," a report on extremist soccer fans.

- The public broadcaster RTS1 was the dominant news source, operating two television stations and Radio Belgrade. However, both print and broadcast media are mostly privately owned and independent. The privatization of media owned by local governments remains incomplete.
- While there are no government subsidies for private media, the state-owned media enjoy strong financial support from the government, as does the state-owned news agency, Tanjug. Media ownership in general remains somewhat opaque, with indications that some formal owners serve as a front for the real interests behind a given outlet.
- An estimated 42 percent of the Serbian population accessed the internet in 2009.
- Internet access is unrestricted, though there were isolated reports of government monitoring of e-mail.

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