

Freedom of the Press 2013 - Estonia

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2013 Scores

Press Status: Free

Press Freedom Score: 16

Legal Environment: 5

Political Environment: 4

Economic Environment: 7

The constitution provides for freedoms of speech and the press, and the government respects these rights in practice. Libel is not a criminal offense, but journalists can be sued for civil defamation, and several such cases were filed in 2012. Legal amendments enacted in 2010 contained provisions that many observers regarded as threats to freedom of speech, including a measure that would allow courts to jail journalists for refusing to disclose their sources in cases involving major crimes. While the amendments have drawn criticism from rights groups, no one has been prosecuted under them to date. In June 2009, the Supreme Court ruled that web portals and online news outlets could be held responsible for reader comments posted on their sites. The case was pending before the European Court of Human Rights at year's end.

The Public Information Act, the primary law governing freedom of information, obliges the authorities to assist citizens in accessing public documents. Estonia is among 14 countries that signed the Council of Europe's Convention on Access to Official Documents, which establishes the right of anyone to request information held by public authorities at no charge.

There are two press councils in the country, and public-service broadcasting is supervised by the Estonian Broadcasting Council (RHN). The RHN has nine members – five politicians and four professionals – who are elected by Parliament. In May 2012, after the terms of the four independent experts expired, the ruling coalition replaced them with its own appointees without a public debate. The country's numerous media outlets express a wide variety of views, generally without government interference. In December 2012, however, Prime Minister Andrus Ansip questioned the integrity of some journalists as he responded to media criticism of his environment minister.

Several politicians in 2012 also criticized the public broadcaster, Eesti Rahvusringhääling (Estonian Public Broadcasting, or ERR), calling for the regulation of journalistic activities.

Political tensions between Estonia and Russia sometimes affect media freedom. In May 2012, the Russian Foreign Ministry expressed concern over Estonia's move to annul the visa of a Russian journalist, Igor Korotchenko, who had been scheduled to participate in a conference in Estonia covering the politically sensitive subject of World War II. Estonian authorities claimed that Korotchenko had been turned away because he had "filed inaccurate information on his visa application about the purpose of his stay."

ERR operates two television stations (ETV and ETV2) and five radio stations. There are two primary national commercial television stations – Kanal 2 and TV3 – and a large number of private radio stations and cable and satellite services. In November 2012, Parliament amended a law that obliges cable operators to retransmit all free-to-air television channels, clarifying that the broadcasters can charge "reasonable" fees to cable services for their content. Many commercial broadcasters have been struggling financially even as cable operators continue to earn profits. Media ownership has become increasingly concentrated over the years, with Scandinavian business interests taking a sizable share, particularly in the television sector. The Estonian-language print media landscape includes four national dailies as well as regional, municipal, and weekly papers. For the country's sizable Russian-speaking population, there are television and radio programs in Russian (including on ERR), Russian-language newspapers, and access to broadcast and print media from Russia. As a result of the country's 2009 economic crisis, a number of print outlets ceased publishing, or cut staff and salaries and reduced their output. The recession also led to significant declines in the advertising market. However, the country recovered quickly, and the decline in advertising revenues has since slowed or reversed, particularly in the internet sector.

Estonia remains among the leading countries in the world regarding internet penetration, with approximately 79 percent of the population active online in 2012. Several newspapers have gone online in the past few years, and online-only news portals have an extensive readership.

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