

Title	Freedom of the Press 2012 - Albania
Publisher	Freedom House
Country	Albania
Publication Date	12 October 2012
Cite as	Freedom House, <i>Freedom of the Press 2012 - Albania</i> , 12 October 2012, available at: http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/507bcaea27.html [accessed 3 December 2012]
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Freedom of the Press 2012 - Albania

2012 Scores

Press Status: Partly Free

Press Freedom Score: 51

Legal Environment: 16

Political Environment: 18

Economic Environment: 17

The constitution guarantees freedom of the press, and the media are vigorous and fairly diverse. However, outlets often display a strong political bias, and their reporting is influenced by the economic or political interests of their owners. Libel remains a criminal offense, punishable by fines and up to two years in prison. While there have been no criminal libel cases against journalists in recent years, civil suits, including among politicians, remain common. Several opposition lawmakers were fined during 2011 for accusing state officials or ruling party members of corruption. However, a series of slander suits filed by opposition Socialist Party (PS) leader Edi Rama were dismissed by the courts. In September, an appeals court overturned a penalty of roughly \$500,000 that had been imposed in 2010 on the private television station Top Channel. In 2009 the station had aired hidden-camera video of then culture minister Ylli Pango asking a female

job applicant to disrobe. He was forced to resign, but he sued on the grounds that the recording was obtained illegally. The government of Prime Minister Sali Berisha has used administrative mechanisms, including tax investigations and arbitrary evictions from state-owned buildings, to disrupt the operations of media outlets it perceives as hostile. Regulatory bodies are seen as highly politicized.

The media played a central role in a political crisis that erupted in January 2011. That month, an investigative program on Top Channel aired a video recording – acquired from a former economy minister – that appeared to show Deputy Prime Minister Ilir Meta discussing corrupt activities. Ensuing opposition protests on January 21 turned violent, and four demonstrators were shot to death. A number of journalists were attacked during the clashes, with at least two seriously wounded. Berisha claimed that the unrest was a coup attempt, and accused four leading journalists of complicity with his other perceived foes. He set up a parliamentary inquiry, offering to pay witnesses to testify; the commission of inquiry then attempted to question and seize the telephone records of the accused journalists. However, under international pressure, the parliamentary probe was effectively dropped within a few weeks.

Media outlets generally favored either the government or the PS in their coverage of contentious municipal elections in May, though a few television stations sought to avoid using material produced by political parties. Smaller parties received little airtime.

The public broadcaster, RTSh, is financially dependent on the state and typically shows a strong progovernment bias. Three private television stations have national reach, and dozens of smaller television and radio outlets also operate in a poorly regulated environment. Albanians have access to foreign radio content and television broadcasts from neighboring Greece and Italy, but the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) ended its Albanian-language radio service for budgetary reasons in early 2011, removing an important source of independent news. There are a variety of daily and weekly newspapers, but circulation is low. Media outlets typically rely on financial support from owners and a few major advertisers, and self-censorship to suit their interests is common.

There are no government restrictions on the internet, which was accessed by 49 percent of the population in 2011. Penetration has been increasing in recent years, but access in rural areas remains limited. The diversity of online news sources is on the rise; Albania's first online daily newspaper was launched in 2010.

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