

Reporters Without Borders

<http://www.rsf.org/macedonia-draconian-foreign-media-bill-27-02-2012,41941.html>

Europe/Ex-USSR - Macedonia

Paradox

Draconian foreign media bill elicits mix of laughter and dismay

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Reporters Without Borders calls on the Macedonian parliament to urgently amend a proposed foreign media law in order to dispel concern about several key points and ensure respect for freedom of information.

"What a paradox if the new law were to be more repressive than the one inherited from socialist Yugoslavia," Reporters Without Borders said. "We are very worried by the authoritarian attitudes that imbue the draft submitted to parliamentarians and we are perplexed by some of its provisions, which seem quite simply absurd.

"The bill confers excessive powers on the foreign ministry and allows the judicial system a dangerous degree of leeway in its interpretation of the law. The parliamentarians must reexamine and clarify the bill or else all the international media will be subjected to an arbitrary regime at complete variance with the European and international conventions ratified by Macedonia."

The proposed law on "establishing, developing and disseminating foreign publications and films in Macedonia," which came before parliament for its first reading on 17 February and will have its second reading soon, aims to replace the Yugoslavian legislation on the foreign media that has been in effect since 1974.

The bill's main innovations concern the procedures for accrediting foreign journalists and media, and have given rise to a great deal of concern in various quarters in Macedonia, including the [Association of Macedonian Journalists](#).

If the bill is passed in its current form, responsibility for issuing foreign media accreditation would be transferred from the government secretariat's public relations office to the foreign ministry. Several national media such as the daily *Utrinski Vestnik* and *Telma* TV pointed out before parliament began debating the bill that "the head of the diplomatic service will decide who can and cannot become a correspondent."

Minister of state for justice Biljana Brishkoska-Boshkoski told parliament: "Foreign news media will be able to base themselves here only after a bilateral accord has been signed between Macedonia and the media's country of origin."

In its current form, the bill implies that foreign correspondents will be permitted only one renewal of their press accreditation, which would in practice limit their stay in Macedonia to two years. The issuing of accreditation will take up to two weeks, even for TV crews that are planning to spend less than a month in the country.

Failure by any foreign correspondent or news bureau to respect Macedonia's laws and regulations

would result in the immediate withdrawal by the foreign ministry of their permission to operate in the country. It could also give rise to judicial proceedings and a sentence of up to six months in prison.

"Making foreign media accreditation dependent on the goodwill of government officials, and at the same time introducing sanctions on this scale, opens the way to every imaginable form of pressure and censorship," Reporters Without Borders said.

In an apparent attempt to curb contraband, strict limits are placed on the number of publications that can be brought into Macedonia. Individuals are allowed to bring only five copies of each foreign "publication" with them. These are surreally defined as "books, CDs, periodicals, magazines, software, electronic publications, atlases, posters, photos, slides and any sound or video file, reproduced abroad."

Finally, article 18 of the bill bans foreign correspondents from "gathering personal opinions and data from citizens by means of investigation." Contravening this prohibition would be punishable by a fine of 100 to 300 euros for a reporter or 500 to 1,000 euros for a news media.

"We dare not suppose that those who drafted this bill want to penalize one of the bases of journalistic activity – interviewing people and asking them what they think," Reporters Without Borders said. "But what else could 'by means of investigation' involve? This must be clarified quickly to avoid absurd interpretations that could be disastrous for media freedom."

No date has so far been set for the bill's second reading. Macedonia is ranked 94th out of 179 countries in the [latest Reporters Without Borders press freedom index](#).

(Photo: AFP / Attila Kisbenedek)
