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Albania passes anti-slander law despite media protest calling it censorship

by Benet Koleka

TIRANA (Reuters) — Albania’s parliament on Wednesday passed an anti-defamation package criticized by journalists and the Council of Europe as an attempt to muzzle the media while the government countered it was merely regulating “a jungle of misinformation and hate.”

Parliament adjusted two laws to empower the Albanian Media Authority (AMA) and the Authority of Electronic and Postal Communications to hear complaints about news websites, demand retractions, impose fines of up to 1 million leke (\$9,013.88), and suspend their activity.

The journalists, who protested by wearing black scarves outside parliament, said that the measures were tantamount to censorship.

More than a dozen media organizations condemned the law and said they would start an information campaign that would also aim to kill those bills or nullify them with litigation.

“We call on journalists to keep working by reporting truthfully and correctly and fear not the existence of these regressive laws,” the media organizations said in a statement.

The package was initially meant to cover some 700 or 800 online news sites that have sprung up over the last decade, but may also apply to TV stations, according to last-minute changes.

“This law says ‘if we do not like your news story, we can remove it and fine you’”, said editor Enton Abileka.

Prime Minister Edi Rama told parliament the move intended to stop fake news or slander from causing loss of life or pressing businesses for bribes by shaming the quality of their products.

The law did not violate at all the right to free speech and opinion, but restored dignity to the slandered, Rama added.

[End]