



**Building**

**Trust in**

**Journalism**

**- Bulgaria**

*Aida Kaisy*

# Building Trust in Journalism – Bulgaria

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy report provides an overview of the challenges and opportunities that the media are facing in Bulgaria. Based on a number of interviews that took place with key Bulgarian media stakeholders, it finds that the situation of Bulgarian media is worsening with freedom of press and professional journalistic practice under severe threat. These findings are in line with its [RSF Press Freedom Ranking](#) of 111th place in 2020, the lowest ranking of any European country.<sup>1</sup> Control of the media continues to be retained by pro-government allies and oligarchs who have created an environment where sensational and tabloid journalism is thriving at the expense of quality outlets. Independent media and journalism that holds power to account is in danger of being eliminated as independent financial investment and trust in the media are at all-time lows. The few ethical pockets that remain are subject to intimidation and harassment from their counterparts in the tabloid private press which are owned by oligarch structures aligned to the government. While narratives are not yet overtly nationalistic, hate speech and discrimination against certain minority groups and NGOs prevail in some of the private media and there is little recrimination from the public or government. Disinformation and a lack of verification of facts are also rife. These circumstances are creating an environment where the reputation of journalism continues to suffer and worsen.

### **This report draws the following conclusions:**

The Bulgarian media landscape is divided based on attitudes towards the main objectives and principles of journalism. There are those who produce quality ethical content and then those who see the media as a tool for propaganda.

The media in Bulgaria is subject to financial constraints and as a result some of the media has been captured by those with political and financial connections with the government and those in power.

Independence in the television market has almost been destroyed with both public and private television channels subject to political influence, mainly by actors who are close to the government and whose concern for the public interest is considered to be questionable.

The majority of the print market, newspapers and distribution, is governed by the media empire of Delyan

Peevski, a Bulgarian politician and oligarch who owns a number of newspapers and websites and indirectly controls many others. These publications are known for their pro-government tabloid style journalism and lack of impartial factual reporting and are used as a tool to promote negative campaigns against those who uphold democratic values.

Freedom of press is under attack as critical voices continue to be silenced through financial and security threats. Job security is extremely low and self-censorship is often practised as a means of avoiding harassment and intimidation. Smear campaigns against media platforms and individual journalists are commonplace.

Ethical journalism principles such as accuracy, accountability and impartiality are under threat in some parts of the media sphere. Fact-checking is often missed out of the editorial and publication process in many Bulgarian newsrooms.

The mainstream media in Bulgaria are still treating minorities – ethnic, religious, and gender – problematically and hate speech against certain groups is allowed to be published with little evidence of any regulation or protocol in this field.

Trust in the media, like trust in the state, is at an all-time low in Bulgaria and there are few initiatives to educate the public on issues such as media ownership, financing or literacy. Disinformation and a lack of accuracy are further perpetuating this lack of trust.

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<sup>1</sup> Reporters Sans Frontieres (2020). *Press Freedom Index Bulgaria*, [online] Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/bulgaria> (Accessed 12 June 2020).

## METHODOLOGY

The independent evaluation of the Bulgarian media landscape presented in this document is based on fieldwork conducted remotely by the Ethical Journalism Network (EJN) between February and May 2020. It has been produced as part of a project developed in partnership with the Evens Foundation (EF) and the Fritt Ord Foundation (SFO). The 'Building Trust in Journalism' project aims to explore the condition and identify the needs of the media community in Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia in order to better define the challenges of contemporary journalism.

The report is based on a combination of desk research and key stakeholder interviews with media practitioners and experts from across the Bulgarian media landscape. Fourteen interviews were conducted with journalists, editors, academics and civil society organisations in Bulgaria as well as representatives of one media platform working in exile. The focus was on assessing the key challenges facing the media in Bulgaria with a view to presenting a set of recommendations for ways of dealing with these issues. The EJN tried to include a broad spectrum of views and opinions from the media sector. However, attempts to contact practitioners from Delyan Peevski's media conglomerate received no response.

All of the interviews for this report were conducted remotely over the phone or via online platforms. The Covid-19 public health crisis restricted travel to Bulgaria to conduct the research. For this reason, the EJN are grateful to a number of Bulgarian media stakeholders who supported the production of this report by providing the required information, feedback and review in order to ensure that the nuances of the Bulgarian socio-cultural and political landscapes were fully captured.

This paper also draws on a number of other reports and research studies into the Bulgarian media. These include a number of reports produced by Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF), including their [white paper](#) on media freedom in Bulgaria<sup>2</sup> and a further report in 2018 on the challenges to investigative journalism.<sup>3</sup> This paper also refers to [EJN's previous work](#) in assessing ethical and professional media practice in countries where conditions are challenging. A number of papers on hate speech, migration reporting, and media governance as well as on-going work with the RSF Journalism Trust

Initiative inform the analysis in this report.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the report draws on key academic paradigms used to study the media. These include political economy, sociology of news production as well as the media culture paradigm. Interview questions ranged from enquiry into business models, modes of governance, newsroom structures and hierarchies to factors, which are impacting on practice and content.

This paper does not claim to be a comprehensive study of the media in Bulgaria. It is primarily based on the finding from interviews with additional input from Bulgarian stakeholders and experts in a peer review process. It aims to provide an external perception of the challenges that the media are facing, based on its own journalistic experience, ethical practices and academic vigour.

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2 Reporters Sans Frontieres (2018). *White Paper on Media Freedom in Bulgaria*. [online] Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/news/white-paper-media-freedom-bulgaria> (Accessed 12 June 2020).

3 Reporters Sans Frontieres (2018). *New RSF report on obstacles to investigative journalism in Bulgaria*. [online] Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/reports/new-rsf-report-obstacles-investigative-journalism-bulgaria> (Accessed 12 June 2020).

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4 Ethical Journalism Network (2020). *Ethical Journalism Network*. [online] Available at: <https://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org> (Accessed 12 June 2020).



## INTRODUCTION

The Bulgarian media landscape continues to be one of the worse performing in Europe with regards to healthy pluralism and media freedom.<sup>5</sup> Paradoxically, this decline in media standards began in 2007, around the time of Bulgaria's admission into the European Union. The Bulgarian media is highly polarised with divisions mainly defined by their journalistic missions and practices. There are those who work to provide independent impartial content and then others which act as a tool for propaganda. Many of the latter group are pro-government although even this varies according to related corporate interests. The lack of diverse and sustainable options for funding the media has increased the propensity for the media to be captured by oligarchs and businessmen whose main financial interests are served by providing platforms for pro-government narratives. As a result, the landscape for truly independent media to proliferate is persistently shrinking. Most media are partisan, although the more typical left versus right-wing media definition is not applicable in the case of Bulgaria.

The lack of concern with journalistic principles seen in the pro-government media is also evident in some anti-government media, for example, the print and broadcast channels owned by the current opposition party, the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), and the nationalist Ataka Party. Many are using the media as a tool for their own propaganda.

Bulgaria's transition from a communist to a democratic state in the early nineties saw a large proliferation of non-state media outlets, although control is still practised by a number of post-communist governing parties. As the years progressed, investment in the media market was driven in the main by foreign conglomerates. The financial crisis in 2008 saw a number of foreign investors in the media withdraw from Bulgaria, to be replaced by local businessmen and the phenomenon of the local oligarch owned media market began to embed itself. This became dominated in particular by the politician and media mogul Delyan Peevski, whose empire stretched across print, including the newspapers Telegraph and Monitor, television channel Kanal 3, digital websites and large portion of the print distribution market. This trinity of political parties, oligarchs and publishers now dominates the media scene with corruption and a lack of financial transparency as key challenges to independence.

While the public media, Bulgarian National Television (BNT) and Bulgarian National Radio (BNR) continues to develop some content that does take into consideration the public interest, it is also split. BNT is seen as pro-governmental while BNR continues to resist government control of its narrative. The newspaper market is controlled to some extent by the Peevski empire and private television is controlled in the main by people close to the government, bar a recent entry into the market by a Czech oligarch, [Peter Kellner](#), the future of which remains to be seen.<sup>6</sup> There is a lack of job security in the media as businessmen associated with the government continue to take control of media outlets in Sofia in particular, [sacking and replacing whole teams of journalists](#) and media practitioners who might be considered to be critical or defiant.<sup>7</sup>

[Attacks on the media](#), both physical and virtual, are also [becoming widespread](#) and used as a tool by political leaders to discredit their opponents or attempts to call the powerful to account.<sup>8</sup> As a result, self-censorship is practised, and critical voices are few and far between. Hate speech, in particular against the Roma community as well as [anti-Soros rhetoric](#)<sup>9</sup>, is also pervasive with some sense that pro-Russian narratives are also becoming prevalent. [Trust in the media is low in Bulgaria](#) as media outlets continue to be used to promulgate disinformation and hate speech on behalf of the politicians that finance them, and independent journalism is under attack.<sup>10</sup>

5 Reporters Sans Frontières (2020). *Press Freedom Index Bulgaria*. [online] Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/bulgaria> (Accessed 12 June 2020).

6 More can be read on this acquisition online at: Novinite (2020) Nova Broadcasting. [online] Available at : <https://www.novinite.com/articles/195306/Bulgarian+Businessman+Kiril+Domuschiev+Buys+Nova+Broadcasting+Group> (Accessed 10 July 2020).

7 <https://www.facebook.com/svobodnaevropa.bg/videos/524704564974268>

8 More can be read at: Committee to Protect Journalists (2020). CPJ. [online] Available at : <https://cpj.org/2020/09/bulgarian-journalist-attacked-while-covering-ruling-party-conference> (Accessed 12 October 2020); Reuters Staff (2020). Reuters. [online] Available at: <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-bulgaria-media-attack/bulgarian-investigative-journalist-assaulted-in-sofia-idUKKBN215353> (Accessed 12 October 2020).

9 Balkan Insight (2020). Soros Foundation Blames Attacks om 'Il-liberal Governments'. Balkan Insight. [online] Available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2017/02/10/soros-foundation-rebuffs-balkan-governments-attacks-02-09-2017> (Accessed 12 October 2020).

10 Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (2018). Country Report: Media Programme South East Europe. [online] Available at: <https://www.kas.de/documents/252038/2984145/Bulgaria+-+Trust+in+Media+Is+Still+Low.pdf/067a9028-5da9-77dd-b297-93dab2369673?version=1.0&t=1543941803362> (Accessed 12 October 2020).



# PART 1

## A PRO-GOVERNMENT DOMINATED MEDIA AGENDA

The public media in Bulgaria consists of Bulgarian National Television (BNT), Bulgarian National Radio (BNR) and the Bulgarian Telegraph (BTA) national news agency. Funding comes via the Bulgarian Parliament and is included in the annual state budget for the media. BNR receives approximately €23.5 million and BNT €35.5 million, according to the state budget law of 2020. While some stakeholders did suggest that there was still some hope for protecting the public interest and serving the needs of the citizens, most were highly critical of the declining standards in the public media and lack of propensity to provide independent content. There was also criticism of their lack of transparency around spending public money and on-going financial liability.

***They get millions of Euros per year, but no one checks how they spend it...They usually overspend millions and are in debt.*** – Journalist and activist

***Bulgarian National TV has some programming that tries to offer diversity and pluralism but under the current leadership there has been turbulence and some shows taken off air.*** – Media freedom activist

There was an overwhelming concern that the public media was becoming a tool in the hands of politicians and their powerful allies as the public media was acting increasingly like a state media platform rather than one with a public service broadcasting remit. In 2019, the national television broadcaster appointed a new head, Emil Koshlukov, with known connections to the government who dismissed a large number of journalists with some rather controversial changes to programming. He was also known as having previously been antagonistic towards environmental activists and climate change protests. While the media's regulatory body, the Council for Electronic Media, does appear to regulate broadcasting effectively to some extent, by monitoring violations and content in the public media, this becomes problematic in the context of appointment processes to the Council. The Director General is considered to be chosen on the basis of their proximity to government and in the interests of political power.

***(The media are) all tightly controlled by the government they don't allow anti-government narratives, through direct appointments in the case of the public media as well as the Council for Electronic Media.*** – NGO and human rights activist

Stakeholders had higher hopes for the BNR than BNT, which was seen as more professional and a greater advocate against political pressure and interference in the media, in particular with the recent hiring of a new highly experienced director of BNR, Andon Baltakov. Interviewees advised that the government was more concerned with control of television than radio, it was also suggested that trust in the public radio is much higher than the majority of other media platforms.

***There is no public control over the public media – it is accepted as state media by all.*** – Journalist, independent online platform

***Radio (BNR) are trying and at least it offers a platform for critical voices and young journalists to experiment but there is a long way to go compared to the BBC.*** – Media freedom activist

In September 2019, even the BNR faced controversy when its flagship morning talk show, Horizont, was taken off air and its host, Silvia Velikova, temporarily suspended for what many considered to be her critical position towards the lack of competition and transparency around the selection process for the position of the chief prosecutor, Ivan Geshev. In an interview with the EJM for this report, Velikova suggested that this type of action was becoming the norm in Bulgaria, in both the public and private media:

*This crisis in the Bulgarian national radio was part of a long chain of events, demonstrating the dark state of Bulgarian media in the recent years. Prior to the incident, the privately-owned Nova television channel terminated the contracts of several journalists with critical views on the governing forces in the country. Similar cut-offs also happened in the Bulgarian national television, with unconvincing argumentation for the measures undertaken.*



### **The privately owned media**

Government control of the media has also extended into the private media sector as the media has become [captured by businessmen and oligarchs](#) working in favour of the government<sup>11</sup>. A stakeholder who works at an NGO which monitors the government suggested that 80-90% of the Bulgarian media, including the public media, were at present tightly controlled indirectly by the government. The underlying trend is that foreign investment has been withdrawn, namely as a result of the economic crisis in 2008, and local oligarchs have taken over.

*Nova TV*, which until recently was considered to provide independent content and programming, was bought from the Swedish Modern Times Group by the Advance Media Group, owned by a Bulgarian oligarch, Georgi Domuschiev, in March 2019. There was [a claim](#) that [critical journalists have been fired or have since resigned](#) and that the content has become more tabloid and sensational.<sup>12</sup>

Capture of the Bulgarian media also takes place through control of state advertising. For example, 24 Chasa an independent newspaper formerly owned by the German Waz media group, are now considered to follow a pro-government line for fear that they would lose financial revenue through advertising.

***Mainstream private media are more captured by a strange embrace between the government and the tabloid press.***

– Senior journalist, public media

***There is a state mafia nexus working to control information to population.***

– Investigative journalist

The key oligarch and figure perpetuating this situation is the aforementioned Delyan Peevski, a politician and media magnate whose media empire includes newspapers, websites, broadcast channels as well as print distribution networks, which means that much of the print market serves his own business and political agenda. The media platforms owned by Peevski are known for their pro-government narratives, sensationalist journalism and lack of professional standards. Some stakeholders also discussed Peevski's close relationship with the current Chief Prosecutor and there was a suggestion that reporters who were critical of this office had been blacklisted by the office:

11 [https://www.capital.bg/biznes/media\\_i\\_rekla-ma/2017/11/20/3081758\\_georgi\\_harizanov\\_e\\_noviat\\_izpulnitelen\\_direktor\\_na\\_tv](https://www.capital.bg/biznes/media_i_rekla-ma/2017/11/20/3081758_georgi_harizanov_e_noviat_izpulnitelen_direktor_na_tv)

12 Deutsche Welle (2020). Dw.com. [online] Available at: <https://p.dw.com/p/3aymz> (Accessed 12 October 2020).

***Peevski's media are pro-government but what he has managed to do is sell influence to whoever is in government. It doesn't matter which party, if you want coverage you strike a deal with him.***

– Media activist

***When the topic of a publication, or should I say, its victim, is an opponent of Mr. Peevski, neither facts and the truth, nor the person's life, are relevant or considered. When the MP's (Peevski's) interests are jeopardized, the language used is in contradiction with any ethical and journalistic standards.*** – Independent journalist

The underlying issue is the lack of independent financing to the market or any viable business models to support professional and sustainable media platforms. As a result, not only have politically interested parties stepped in, but politicians are essentially paying for media content that supports them and propagates their messages. The finances to support investigative journalism are also very limited and the combination of factors is having an impact on accountable journalism.

***We need strong and powerful examples of journalism, good investigations of corruption, to show people what good journalism is but to do this we need resources.***

***We need the finances to find good people, we need rule of law so that when you publish something there is follow up from the attorney general and courts. People are losing the line that leads from first investigation to jail.*** – Editor in Chief, independent media platform

It is worth noting that there is a small pocket of media who are hostile to the government with a tendency towards nationalistic populism. These include *Alpha TV* of the Ataka political party, formerly part of the governmental coalition, who have taken a very strong anti-government stance since being expelled from the coalition as well as the channel *BSTV*. Both are considered to be mouthpieces for Russian propaganda and there are rumours that Alpha TV is financed indirectly by Russia. BSP, the Bulgarian Socialist Party, which has a large representation in parliament, also receives government subsidies in addition to alleged funding by Russian actors.

There is also *TV Europa*, a pro-governmental channel which is financed by a businessman close to the ruling party, which is [seen to be a strange mix](#) of very liberal and very populist content and lacking in consistency<sup>13</sup>. Its manager Georgi Harizanov is believed to have close connections to the prime minister and ruling party<sup>14</sup>. All of these TV channels belong to parties, which is not forbidden by law in Bulgaria, and add to the already highly politicized partisan media scene.

Regional European networks are providing some liberal and independent news and commentary of higher quality via platforms such as Deutsche Welle's Bulgaria channel and Radio Free Europe.

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13 Capital (2020). Capital [online] Available at: [https://www.capital.bg/biznes/media\\_i\\_reklama/2017/11/20/3081758\\_georgi\\_harizanov\\_e\\_noviiat\\_izpulnitelen\\_direktor\\_na\\_tv](https://www.capital.bg/biznes/media_i_reklama/2017/11/20/3081758_georgi_harizanov_e_noviiat_izpulnitelen_direktor_na_tv) (Accessed 12 October 2020).

14 Antonov, Stephan (2019). Digital News Report: Bulgaria. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Available at: <http://www.digital-newsreport.org/survey/2019/bulgaria-2019> (Accessed 12 June 2020).



# PART 2

## MEDIA VALUES UNDER ATTACK

In a market now taken over by partisan private interests, there is little room for independent voices and content. There are, however, some media that are trying to maintain professional standards and cover issues related to corruption and human rights. These operate primarily online and publish work that exposes or is critical of the authorities, the prosecutor's office and the state capture by oligarchs and political parties. These outlets are however finding themselves the subject of harassment and attack for their work. Media owners are subjected to numerous investigations. Ivo Prokopiev, publisher of the independent news website *Dnevnik* and the business weekly *Capital*, is currently facing trial for alleged tax fraud linked to business deals dating back to the early 2000s. The publications are critical of the government and it has been [alleged](#) that he has been targeted as way to crackdown on freedom of expression.<sup>15</sup>

***These two groups fight each other. They have different perspectives on key issues such as joining the euro zone, and either pro Russia or pro US attitudes. You either belong to one or other but the liberal group does try to be more professional and follow standards more closely.*** – Independent journalist and academic

Stakeholders suggested that this repressive environment was being perpetuated mainly by Peevski's media platforms and close affiliates. There were claims that platforms were being used a means of undermining both political and business opponents. Smear campaigns against journalists from the other side of the political spectrum are commonplace, as is anti-NGO and anti-Soros rhetoric.

***His (Peevski) publications are huge, cheap and full of disinformation and smearing of journalists.*** – Independent journalist and activist

***The problem stems from the fact the dominating media outlets (gravitating around Delyan Peevski) do not recognize the problems with the freedom***

***of expression in Bulgaria. Furthermore, they use all means available to attack international organizations (like Reporters Without Borders) and accuse them of overblowing the free speech problem in Bulgaria.*** – Senior broadcast journalist

This is becoming a widespread practice as a way to silence criticism, not just by the media but also by those in official office. The prime minister has been known to [describe the media and journalists as 'turkeys'](#)<sup>16</sup> and some stakeholders also alluded to references to prostitution in relation to journalists being legitimate in the public domain.

***We have a new prosecutor who is using hate speech and intimidation to journalists, like Trump.*** – Independent journalist and activist

Stakeholders were also concerned that programmes and content which were seen to be oppositional to the government were being cut and jobs were lost as a result. Another method of disposing of challenging people has been the application of untenable systematic changes in working contracts, which has forced many journalists to resign. In some cases, it has been made clear that if a journalist wants to remain in employment, they should not ask provocative questions and choose to follow the dominant pro-government narrative. Stories of pressure and phone calls to heads of department where investigative journalists are working on pieces uncovering corruption are also becoming the norm, according to the interviewees. Independent outlets producing investigative work are being exposed to physical and online threats as well as firing.

In this environment, there is little need for direct censorship. Self-censorship is widely practiced as journalists are concerned for their safety as well as their job security. As one journalist put it:

*When it comes to the ranking, we are not Russia or Turkey. We don't send journalists to jail yet. You don't need to kill journos to repress the media. It has been suffocated.*

The impact that this is having on journalistic practice is profound. The press is dominated by tabloid style

<sup>15</sup> Committee to Protect Journalists (2020). CPJ. [online] Available at: <https://cpj.org/2020/06/verdict-expected-in-trial-of-bulgarian-publisher-ivo-prokopiev> (Accessed 12 October 2020).

<sup>16</sup> VOA (2020). VOA [online]. Available at: <https://www.voanews.com/europe/bulgarian-journalists-facing-disgraceful-attacks-top-officials> (Accessed 12 October 2020).

reporting which is rife with hate speech and mis/dis-information. Professional standards have deteriorated in favour of sensationalism and gaining audiences for political and business purposes. In the Bulgarian local elections in October 2019, explicit photographs of the girlfriend of one of the candidates standing in Sofia were published in a number of publications. In another incident, a young child who was arrested in an alleged terrorist attack had his face and identity revealed by the media.

Even election reporting is being impacted. During the pre-election period, media platforms are obliged to follow rigid guidelines on reporting which are outlined in the electoral code. Interviews and reporting funded by political parties must be clearly marked as such. Equal coverage should be provided to all participants in the electoral process. Despite these stipulations, there is no indication that healthy political pluralism exists as political figures use their associated media outlets to propagate messages and threats to those that oppose them are ongoing.

There has also been an increase in the number of media outlets acting as news aggregators and effectively stealing content from the larger players in order to produce clickbait. It was even suggested that some news sites were creating a hybrid of stolen content with pro-Russian content. This is creating an environment where disinformation and fake news are widespread. Fact-checking is not common practice and the position of copy editors are few and far between.

***People are in a sea of misinformation and lack of facts. Finding the answers is a very acute problem because journalism's fundamentals have been eroded in the last two decades and now the profession is on shaky ground.*** – Senior manager, public media

***Similarly, to other countries, the phenomenon of 'fake news' is present in Bulgaria as well. In our warped media landscape, the term has taken the form of a convenient barrier against uncomfortable questions.*** – Independent journalist and activist





# PART 3

## QUALITY OF CONTENT

In this environment, where content is politicised and hate speech and disinformation have become endemic, a number of dangerous narratives have emerged against minority groups. Discrimination against the Roma people is prevalent in the media and has become an acceptable national narrative.

***The biggest issue is discrimination against Roma. I constantly see how easily people take for granted that this is acceptable and accept stereotypes.*** – Media activist

During the Covid-19 public health crisis, an incident whereby a village in which 90% of inhabitants were Roma was quarantined on the basis of only four cases, was covered in an overtly xenophobic manner by the media, so much so that the Chief of the National Operation Unit for Covid-19 spoke out against the racist questions of the press in his daily briefing. There is no broadcasting content available in the Romani language nor are there any dedicated media platforms to deal with their needs, despite the fact that they are considered to make up at least 10% of the Bulgarian population, one of the largest worldwide, [according to the Council of Europe](#).<sup>17</sup>

Stakeholders argued that the narratives were not nationalistic, like their counterparts in Hungary and Poland for example, as the government was avoiding being labelled as such. The focus is more on a return to traditionalism and anti-immigration. These narratives and framing from the government were being propagated and affirmed by much of the Bulgarian media, public and private.

***It's propaganda but it's milder, it's more subdued. They don't want people to remember the times of the state communist propaganda but the practice of not taking questions, the deluge of pro-government opinions, experts, fake experts, this is all part of it.*** – Journalist, Independent media platform

<sup>17</sup> European Commission (2020). EU Funding for Roma Integration. [online] Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/combating-discrimination/roma-and-eu/roma-integration-eu-country/roma-integration-bulgaria\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/combating-discrimination/roma-and-eu/roma-integration-eu-country/roma-integration-bulgaria_en) (Accessed 12 October 2020).

***Through certain political parties, like the nationalist parties, such messages reach the mainstream media.*** – Senior broadcast journalist

Stakeholders were also concerned about treatment and lack of coverage of what was seen to be the taboo subject of the Macedonian minority in Bulgaria. There was also a concern that some media tended to be very defensive of local and international criticism of media freedom in Bulgaria and critical of NGOs working in these and other areas.

***Hate speech is not properly understood as a crime or a hate crime here so anything goes.***

***Right wing parties form part of the government coalition and they are using hate speech against ethnic minorities and against liberals/NGOs.*** – Senior journalist, public media

Although the rights of children and mental health issues are more favourably covered by the Bulgarian media, gender related issues and coverage of domestic violence and sexual harassment are often labelled as liberal propaganda. Gender balance in sources and experts does not exist. Interestingly, while the media industry in Bulgaria does employ many women in senior and junior roles, this was not seen to necessarily be a positive but a hangover from the communist era when women were installed in positions by the party in order to control them.<sup>18</sup> The glass ceiling and gender pay gap were also issues that some stakeholders were keen to see addressed. There was also a concern that sexual harassment of female media practitioners was pervasive.

***The #metoo wasn't a big thing here even though female reporters get sexually harassed based on looks. Young female presenters offer fertile ground for sexual abuse which is happening across the media sector.*** – Independent journalist and activist

<sup>18</sup> Nastasia, Sorin and Iulia Nastasia, Diana (2016). 'Bulgaria: Cinderella Went to Market, with Consequences for Women Journalists' in Byerly, C.M. ed. *The Palgrave international handbook of women and journalism*. Springer.



***You need to have a strong character in this field – you get threatened and sexually harassed as well as receive death threats.*** – Editor, local news website

There was an increased concern for the rise in Russian influence and pro-Russian journalism in the Bulgarian media as referenced earlier in this report. A [research project](#) conducted by Sofia University on anti-liberal discourses and propaganda in the Bulgarian media found that pro-Russian narratives were dominant in the media, with anti-US, anti-NATO, Eurosceptic and anti-Soros rhetoric also prevalent.<sup>19</sup> The study identified a number of words which had entered media and political parlance which included Sorosoid, *Sorosoid*, un-Bulgarian, bezrodni, and Eurogay, evrogey, amongst others.

The resulting climate is one where trust in journalism has dropped significantly. The media are criticised by the public for being partisan. There is little trust in the state and the media is in the main associated with the state, government and allied parties. The profession of journalism is poorly regarded by many citizens.

***It is difficult to remain for longer in the profession and gain trust from the public with all of these other media outlets which are not transparent, which spread disinformation and hate speech from public figures who use their own media channels.*** – Independent journalist and academic

This is also having an impact on recruiting and developing a new generation of journalists in Bulgaria. Although there are a number of universities which offer journalism degrees and training, journalism education is underfunded and there is little motivation for students and young people to enter into the field. The Journalism Department at Sofia University does provide a range of courses however and works closely with practitioners and international organisations to ensure that curriculum is relevant and up-to-date. While there are some great academic minds and research coming out of Bulgarian academic media departments, such as the aforementioned research project on Russian propaganda in the Bulgarian media, low salaries and benefits exacerbate the situation on the ground as does a lack of investment in the study of and engagement with new technologies.

***If you want good professionals and people who are broad minded and educated, these kinds of people cost money and now they find work in PR, NGOs, administration etc. They have left the profession as they are deeply disappointed mostly by the state of the [media] market, the intrusion of the oligarchs and that society considers journalists as stupid simple servants.*** – Editor-in-chief, independent website

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<sup>19</sup> Human and Social Studies Foundation (2020). Anti-liberal Discourses and Propaganda Messages in Bulgarian Media. [online] Available at: <https://hssfoundation.org/en/anti-liberal-discourses-and-propaganda-messages-in-bulgarian-media> (Accessed 12 October 2020).

## COVID-19

This bleak picture of the media landscape in Bulgaria has further intensified during the Covid-19 public health crisis. The lack of financial security and sustainability of independent media is expected to worsen with some evidence of the closure of small independent media outlets, salary reductions and delayed payments. The Director of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Rasmus Nielson, wrote that 'A lot of news media won't make it' after the pandemic and this is significant concern in Bulgaria.

Key issues from this report have also played out in ways that are specific to the pandemic. Journalists are reporting from the frontline, asking the right questions but with little support from the government. Local health bodies and institutions that are monitoring the pandemic are refusing to provide data and information to journalists who are producing investigative work into the government's handling of the crisis. Stakeholders from the public media were also concerned that they were expected to report on lockdown rules and regulations but without criticism of the measures where appropriate. The lack of understanding and trust of the media by the public has also become more apparent as citizens blame journalists for the lack of a critical voice about certain measures rather than the government's lack of engagement with the media or providing the answers to questions when they are asked.

The environment is austere and one where independent media that can hold power to account is endangered. The need for local and international actors to act and respond to the challenges faced by the Bulgarian media is now greater than ever.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Stakeholders were all asked to provide their comments on spaces in the media which could benefit from greater development and support. It was evident that financial support and developing new business models that would work in the Bulgarian context was key. There was also a suggestion that the European Union could play a larger role by placing a great emphasis on the importance of media freedoms in member countries. Media literacy was also seen as an area in vital need of support from regional and international organisations.

In developing proposals for media development, it is important to iterate the importance of consideration for the context of Central Eastern Europe and Bulgaria in particular. While there are lessons to be learned from other projects and examples of media interventions and initiatives which may have been implemented in neighbouring countries with similar histories and contexts, Bulgaria has unique characteristics that must not be ignored. While some of the recommendations below have been proposed in other contexts, it is vital that the recommendations outlined below be agreed with Bulgarian grassroots organisations and local partners in order to ensure that the nuance of the Bulgarian context is considered.

With this in mind, the following recommendations will focus on providing long term solutions to some of the issues that journalists and the media are currently facing in Bulgaria. These recommendations are aimed at the policymakers, media, NGOs and CSOs and donor communities who are active in the support and development of freedom of press and the media.

**Continued dialogue with EU institutions** As one of the most recent entrants into the EU, there is a greater opportunity for the EU and the European Commission to consider the role of the media when monitoring corruption issues. Campaign and lobbying the relevant European Institutions could see them become a driving force for change in this area. If media freedom is placed higher on the European agenda, it might make a difference by applying financial pressure on the Bulgarian government and legislators to improve the situation. EU institutions should also be compelled to monitor how their grants and financial awards are allocated amongst the media community.

It is also worth considering supporting projects that continue to monitor media freedom and media pluralism such as the [Media Pluralism Monitor](#) (MPM), a tool which uses a set of indicators and data to assess the risks to media pluralism in given countries.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom (2020). Media Pluralism Monitor. [online] Available at: <https://cmpf.eu/en/media-pluralism-monitor/mpm-2020> (Accessed 12 October).

### **Support independence in public media institutions**

The role of public service media is one which is being debated on a global scale. Key challenges include establishing funding models that are sustainable and independent, producing content that is innovative but also in the public interest and attracting audiences that reflect the diversity of a nation. These issues all need to be considered in the context of Bulgaria and its public media institutions, BNR and BNT. Similarly, an independent media regulatory body plays an integral role in supporting an environment of healthy pluralism. It is imperative that stakeholders working to support independent media in Bulgaria also consider the independence of public institutions which impact on the media landscape.

### **Development of new business models**

There are a number of independent media outlets that are trying to contest some of the mainstream narratives. These outlets are trying to tackle corruption, hold governments and businesses to account, as well as address controversial issues such as sexuality and minority rights. These outlets tend to exist on digital platforms which could allow them to attract new younger audiences. However, commercial and advertising opportunities are limited with alternative financial options inextricably linked to the political class. There is an opportunity for these media to explore alternative business models, from local and community-based support through to content sharing, as a means to develop longer-term, sustainable independent media platforms. They could also be encouraged and supported to apply for funding through large scale initiatives, such as Google News and others. Organisations such as the European Journalism Centre have willing academics/practitioners who can help with such applications.

This is an important development, as advancing new business models for both public service institutions and smaller independent platforms remains imperative for the development of a free independent media scene in Central and Eastern Europe.

It is also important to support the provision of data on the media. This includes accurate and up-to-date circulation, distribution and traffic figures as well as more qualitative research on audiences consumption habits and changing levels of trust and perceived bias in the media.

### **Regional networking**

The opportunity to learn from peers working in comparable environments is highly appreciated in the countries of the CEE region which have a common legacy and, therefore, shared challenges. It would provide counterparts with the opportunity to share learnings and experiences. It would

also encourage cross-border, joint investigations and co-productions between groups and would allow the media to forge more lasting links.

**Human rights, gender and minority sensitive reporting** The dearth of programming available in minority languages and lack of dedicated content that deals with the needs of vulnerable groups and women can be addressed through the provision of small grants supported by training and development that focuses on human rights led reporting.

Networks to support those journalists working in these areas should be developed in order to create support groups and share experience. Cross-network collaboration can also support and foster greater tolerance and understanding of issues related to the rights of minorities and immigration. Networks of journalists, experts and scholars from across the media spectrum can also work to develop national media policies and editorial guidelines that support women and minority rights in reporting.

Stakeholders should also consider how they might create practical tools and databases of female and minority experts that can be utilised by all journalists. The database would be multi-disciplinary and be used as a way of bolstering women and minority voices in any media.

**Media literacy** It is clear that Bulgarian media audiences are confused about the role that the media can play in supporting democratic principles and socially cohesive societies. Initiatives which engage the public in the creation and dissemination of media content will provide them with a greater understanding of the practices and decisions that journalists are making throughout the publication process. These would need to come from civil society with input from relevant stakeholders such as journalists and academics as government and official institutions are not best-placed to implement these initiatives, for the reasons outlined in this report. This ultimately facilitates a greater trust in the pockets of independent media and voices from across the Bulgarian media landscape.

**Higher education** While universities in Bulgaria do provide courses which focus on teaching professional and ethical journalism skills, journalism education is generally underfunded and requires further support in order to encourage future journalists into the profession. Better support should be given to further and higher education institutions who wish to change the current environment for the media and improve the quality of journalism in Bulgaria. There is also an opportunity for university courses to focus more on the political economy aspect of the media and develop a greater aptitude for creativity and invention in developing alternative business models that might suit the Bulgarian context. Courses should also celebrate minority and gender representation in both their curriculum and teaching methods in order to eventually impact on

reporting and work on the ground. There is also a possibility to establish virtual partnerships with universities abroad for knowledge exchange.

**Security and safety** Bulgarian journalists are dealing with increasing attacks from the government and its allied media platforms. Smear campaigns are widespread and used a common form of silencing and scaring the media. These attacks need to be documented and work should be done to identify where these attacks are coming from and how they are orchestrated. UNESCO and the Council of Europe (CoE) have already done some great work in this area which needs to be highlighted amongst the journalism community. Journalists and media practitioners in Bulgaria should find regional and international networks of support in order to assist them in dealing with ongoing harassment. A number of online tools and courses to combat online harassment and defamation are available free of charge, from the CoE, Dart Centre and International Press Institute (IPI), which should be identified and eventually made available in Bulgarian.

## ABOUT THE ORGANISERS

### **Ethical Journalism Network (EJN)**

The Ethical Journalism Network works to promote media ethics, good governance and the self-regulation of journalism with the aim of strengthening independent journalism and building a responsible and ethical public sphere in an age where trust in the media is at an all time low.

[www.ethicaljournalismnetwork.org](http://www.ethicaljournalismnetwork.org)



### **Evens Foundation**

The Evens Foundation aims to contribute to rethinking and building a European reality committed to the values of diversity, freedom, responsibility and solidarity. We identify and support innovative ideas and achievements through our prizes and calls, initiate experimental projects bridging the gap between research and practice, and facilitate knowledge exchange through our lectures, seminars, debates and publications.

[www.evensfoundation.be](http://www.evensfoundation.be)

**Evens  
Foundation**

### **Fritt Ord Foundation**

The Fritt Ord Foundation is a private non-profit foundation that is intended to protect and promote freedom of expression, public debate, art and culture. We work internationally, concentrating on projects directly related to freedom of expression and free journalism.

[www.frittord.no](http://www.frittord.no)





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**Evens  
Foundation**

