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BULGARIA

The 2009 Media Sustainability Index for Bulgaria reinforces the conclusions of previous panels, and steadily maintained scores reflect a consistent trend of consolidation. At 2.78, the overall country score for 2009 shows little change from last year's score, and the media environment has remained practically unchanged in recent years. In 2009, none of the five objectives sustained a dramatic decrease in score, and a couple—Objective 1 (free speech) and Objective 4 (business management)—showed modest gains. The availability of multiple news sources providing the public with reliable and objective news is traditionally among the indisputable achievements of the evolving media sector in Bulgaria. Supporting institutions in the media field and the business and management standards are also among the aspects where Bulgaria is approaching sufficient sustainability levels. The country meets many aspects of sustainability, but the development of the sector is still dependent on political and economic forces and therefore has not yet progressed to the next level.

The highest-scoring indicators in 2009 suggest that some of the conditions of a strong and sustainable media system are being fulfilled and that there are aspects in each objective that approach actual and irrevocable sustainability. Progress on those indicators has been steady and has not been affected by negative developments. The media in Bulgaria enjoy unrestricted access to international news and information sources. Newsprint and printing facilities are in private hands and apolitical and so are the channels of media distribution. The free entry into the journalism profession and citizens' unrestricted access to local and international media are among the stable features of the Bulgarian media development that are immune to political influences. Other sustainable achievements are the diverse and largely accessible menu of media options and the professional and unobstructed work of independent news agencies.

Alongside those unquestionable achievements, some aspects of the Bulgarian media remain underdeveloped. Progress on some indicators is either lacking or too exposed to political and economic influences. The indicator covering crimes against journalists received by far the lowest score in 2009, followed by the work of professional journalism associations and the degree of transparency of media ownership. The licensing of broadcast media, self-censorship, pay levels in the industry, and the proportion between entertainment to news and information programming also have a ways to go to reach sustainability.

BULGARIA AT A GLANCE

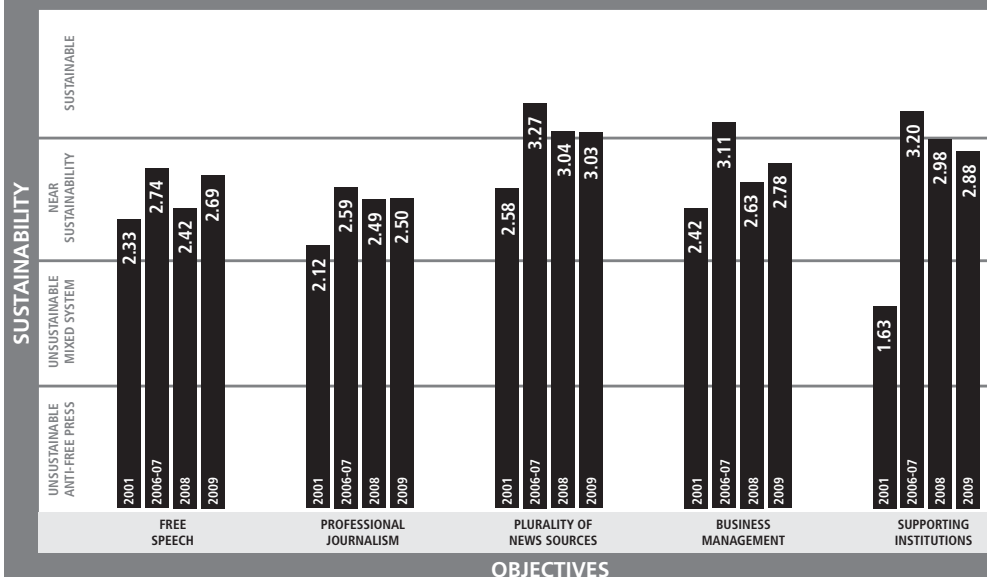
GENERAL

- > **Population:** 7,262,675 (July 2008 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Capital city:** Sofia
- > **Ethnic groups (% of population):** Bulgarian 83.9%, Turk 9.4%, Roma 4.7%, other 2% (including Macedonian, Armenian, Tatar, Circassian) (2001 census, *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Religions (% of population):** Bulgarian Orthodox 82.6%, Muslim 12.2%, other Christian 1.2%, other 4% (2001 census, *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Languages (% of population):** Bulgarian 84.5%, Turkish 9.6%, Roma 4.1%, other and unspecified 1.8% (2001 census, *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **GNI (2007-Atlas):** \$35.06 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2008)
- > **GNI per capita (2007-PPP):** \$10,180 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2008)
- > **Literacy rate:** 98.2% (male 98.7%, female 97.7%) (2001 census, *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **President or top authority:** President Georgi Parvanov (since January 22, 2002)

MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- > **Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations:** Print: 446 newspapers; Radio: 97; Television Stations: 189 (National Statistics of 2006, Piero97)
- > **Newspaper circulation statistics:** Total circulation: 400,000+, with the largest being *Dneven Trud* (circulation 70 000-100 000 daily) (Market LINKS)
- > **Broadcast ratings:** Top three television stations: bTV, NOVA, BNT Channel One
- > **News agencies:** Bulgarian Telegraph Agency (state-owned), Sofia News Agency, BGNES, Focus Information Agency, BulPhoto
- > **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** \$647 million (TVPlan/TNS)
- > **Internet usage:** 1,899,000 (2007 est., *CIA World Factbook*)

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: BULGARIA



Annual scores for 2002 through 2005 are available online at http://www.irex.org/programs/MSI_EUR/archive.asp

Unsustainable, Anti-Free Press (0-1):

Country does not meet or only minimally meets objectives. Government and laws actively hinder free media development, professionalism is low, and media-industry activity is minimal.

Unsustainable Mixed System (1-2):

Country minimally meets objectives, with segments of the legal system and government opposed to a free media system. Evident progress in free-press advocacy, increased professionalism, and new media businesses may be too recent to judge sustainability.

Near Sustainability (2-3):

Country has progressed in meeting multiple objectives, with legal norms, professionalism, and the business environment supportive of independent media. Advances have survived changes in government and have been codified in law and practice. However, more time may be needed to ensure that change is enduring and that increased professionalism and the media business environment are sustainable.

Sustainable (3-4):

Country has media that are considered generally professional, free, and sustainable, or to be approaching these objectives. Systems supporting independent media have survived multiple governments, economic fluctuations, and changes in public opinion or social conventions.

OBJECTIVE 1: FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Bulgaria Objective Score: 2.69

The ratings achieved under this objective are a step up from last year's levels. Panelists' scores represent a slight improvement, although not enough to move the objective to a higher level of sustainability. Increases in five indicators helped push the score higher. Only Indicators 4 (crimes against journalists), 8 (media access to foreign news sources), and 9 (free entry into the journalism profession) remained more or less the same. However, it is noteworthy that Indicator 1 (legal and social protections for free speech) suffered a lower score than last year. The score of 2.69 averages a very wide range of values for different indicators. For example, Indicators 2 (broadcast licensing) and 4 both scored markedly below the objective score, the latter indicator by about a point. On the other hand, Indicators 3 (market entry and taxes on media), 8, and 9 all scored well above the overall score.

The country has the necessary regulations in place to guarantee the independence and freedom of the media. However, the inadequate implementation cannot rule out potential violations of freedom of speech and the right to information. Protecting freedom of speech is not high enough on the public agenda, and encroachments fail to provoke proportionate public outcry.

Panelist Danail Danov, program director for the Media Development Center, gave a good overview of the laws protecting freedom of speech in Bulgaria: "The existing legal framework is capable of ensuring the freedom of speech. The public is altogether keen to resist violations, but sometimes business interests oppose the resolute implementation of guarantees for the freedom of speech. Bulgaria's legal system is generally in line with modern European standards, but regulations still fail to fully ensure the transparency of ownership. The independent judiciary sometimes appears incompetent (including media matters), but that's mostly the result of its general inefficiency. Internet services are completely independent of government. There are differences between exercising the freedom of speech in big cities and small communities, where fear and legacies of the past seem to hold stronger." Stoyana Georgieva, editor-in-chief of MediaPool.bg, was more pessimistic: "There is still much to be desired regarding the level to which the domestic framework on human rights and freedom of speech meets international standards."

Ivo Draganov, television documentarian at the National Academy of Film and Theatrical Arts, explained some of the consequences of having holes within the freedom-of-speech

law. He said, "In the past year there have not been major cases of journalists getting fired in the broadcast media, but we have a troubling example in print. Journalist Iva Nikolova was expelled from the *Politika* daily over critical coverage of the MRF [Bulgarian Turkish Party, member of the ruling coalition]. Unfortunately, we're starting to build a civil society, and freedom of speech is not quite part of the core societal values, even if bloggers on the Internet are keen to share their views on the most controversial issues of the day. The country's legal system is harmonized with European legislation, but subjectivity and decisions driven by expedience make a bad impression."

A new media law has still not been adopted to address the new technological requirements. Bulgaria lacks a clear view of how the pending digitalization will be regulated. Panelist Yuliana Toncheva, freelance media and public-relations expert, explained how this will be problematic: "Our big problem is a law that fails to address the European-wide realities of media development, like digitalization. The transition to digital broadcasting is scheduled to be concluded in 2012, but at this point it seems unthinkable. We're still at the stage of bickering about who is going to control it. Amidst the clash of economic interests, nothing is being done to bring the law up to date."

Licensing procedures are not open and transparent. Licensing is not proof against political pressure and economic interests, and that is reflected in the score of this indicator. Toncheva said, "There are serious attempts to influence licensing by all means and instruments possible. Whether they succeed is a different story, but a fact's a fact."

Toncheva commented, "The only media law—the Radio and TV Act—is imperfect and dated. Inevitable changes have been held off for over a year now, and that's a serious obstacle to digitalization, which is the future of broadcasting. Other than that, Bulgarian media are still not professional and independent enough. They are susceptible to pressure and influence, both political and economic. The same is true for the legal system and licensing. We have the rules, but we don't play by them."

Media enjoy equal treatment under tax laws, and there are no special restrictions or concessions. The increase reflects the favorable and fair-market conditions allowing the media to perform professionally and independently. Danov explained, "The functioning of the media is comparable to all other industries in terms of market regulations and rules. The media are experiencing the same highs and lows as the other businesses out there. The fact that print media are not regulated simply shows that different media operate in different environments. There are no regulations that provide tax concessions for the media."

Panelists viewed crimes against journalists as the most problematic aspect of the Bulgarian media system. Although they are quite rare, the response of both the court and the public is not strong and determined enough to send out a clear message that they will not be tolerated. In 2008, a journalist was brutally assaulted, allegedly over unfavorable coverage on the Web of the president and the State Agency for National Security (SANS). Although the attack took place in downtown Sofia and almost claimed his life, still no suspects have been apprehended, and there is not a hint of who may have ordered it. In the aftermath, it became clear that SANS was collecting phone records and tapping phones in a large-scale operation targeting journalists and media outlets.

Journalists are being threatened, too, because of critical coverage of businesses, but such cases are rarely investigated or punished. Generally, journalists in the national media are more likely to receive protection and proper legal assistance than their colleagues in local outlets, who are exposed to direct pressure from local political and economic interest.

Danov put these crimes into perspective: "Crimes are committed against journalists, but they are just part of the general context. There are crimes against members of other trades, too. Perpetrators are being prosecuted but often go unpunished. That's due to the general inefficiency of the judicial system, not necessarily specific to crimes against journalists and the media."

There was some improvement in regard to the legal treatment of libel. It is a civil-code issue, and the lack of major lawsuits in the past year reflects the improved observance of

professional standards as well. Panelist Alexander Kashamov, a lawyer with the Access to Information Program, said, "Libel lawsuits are very few, an exception really. As a whole, the judiciary is way more independent in such matters than it is against organized crime." Internet service providers are not held liable for the content created using their services.

Another slight increase was observed in the indicator measuring the equal legal treatment of public and commercial media outlets. Through the continuing consolidation of the media market—especially in the broadcast field—small regional and local outlets benefit from their affiliation with nationwide networks. They enjoy a better market standing, and the transmission fees, which used to be a burden, are no longer so strenuous. The regional affiliates of Bulgarian National Radio (BNR) and Bulgarian National Television (BNT)—the national public media—are still too strong for the local outlets to compete with, however.

The integrity of BNR and BNT is still compromised at times due to funding problems. Georgieva said, "The public media are not independent by way of funding. We actually don't have public media in their pure form. Yes, their management is appointed by an independent body, but they are not funded by the public via license fees. Public media are subsidized by the state, which puts them in a position of dependence." Draganov added, "The editorial independence of public operators is laid down in the law, but their executives are politically appointed. There's an axis of political influence that goes from the regulator to the boards of public media."

Access to public information is guaranteed by law, but problems still occur. A very positive amendment, which revoked the requirement for those seeking information to justify their inquiries, has simplified the procedure, and that is duly reflected in the raise of the rating for this indicator.

Traditionally, unrestricted access of the media to international news sources and free entry into the journalism profession are among the strongest assets of the Bulgarian media. Danov said, "Access to international news and sources is practically unlimited. Internet reach is growing, and the number of users is growing. The only problem is the low qualification: some journalists have little computer or foreign-language skills."

LEGAL AND SOCIAL NORMS PROTECT AND PROMOTE FREE SPEECH AND ACCESS TO PUBLIC INFORMATION.

FREE-SPEECH INDICATORS:

- > Legal and social protections of free speech exist and are enforced.
- > Licensing of broadcast media is fair, competitive, and apolitical.
- > Market entry and tax structure for media are fair and comparable to other industries.
- > Crimes against journalists or media outlets are prosecuted vigorously, but occurrences of such crimes are rare.
- > State or public media do not receive preferential legal treatment, and law guarantees editorial independence.
- > Libel is a civil law issue; public officials are held to higher standards, and offended parties must prove falsity and malice.
- > Public information is easily accessible; right of access to information is equally enforced for all media and journalists.
- > Media outlets have unrestricted access to information; this is equally enforced for all media and journalists.
- > Entry into the journalism profession is free, and government imposes no licensing, restrictions, or special rights for journalists.

OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

Bulgaria Objective Score: 2.50

The professional quality of journalism did not register any particular change, and the 2009 MSI values for this objective reflect the overall lack of forward movement. Likewise, most indicators remained static. The exceptions were Indicators 4

(journalists cover key events) and 5 (pay levels for journalists): the former experienced somewhat of a drop, while the latter made a small gain. Further, only Indicator 7 (technical facilities) received a score notably different (about three-quarters of a point higher) than the overall objective score.

The quality of reporting scores higher in 2009 but still fails to move to a higher level of sustainability. Danov said, "Professional standards in journalism are gaining ground, but slowly. Well-sourced is the rule, and everyone knows it. But lack of skill—and often, effort—stands in the way of professional reporting." There were no major problems to affect the generally objective and well-sourced coverage, but there is still a lack of dramatic sector-wide improvement in standards for corroborating information, presenting a wide range of views, and professional interviewing. Political and economic dependencies are still unresolved and stand in the way of professional reporting's achieving long-term and irreversible sustainability. Toncheva added, "Journalism is still not at the required professional level. Sensationalism, subjectivity, and superficiality prevail over fairness and balance. The fluidity of the workforce is perhaps one of the reasons."

In 2009, panelists find the issue of self-censorship a little less poignant, but the raise in score is minimal. Experts put special emphasis on the fact that under the broad term of "editorial policy" there is room for a rather selective approach to different topics and issues, dictated by the political or economic commitments of an outlet. Self-censorship can be subtle enough, and the media seem to have ways to maneuver or be flexible about different issues. Toncheva elaborated: "There are ethical standards, but there are also rewards for coverage. There's self-censorship, too, most often driven by business, not political reasons."

The pay levels for journalists are another aspect to do better in 2009, but again, this does not represent a comprehensive improvement that affects the sector across the board. The variety of remuneration options in the media, which include bonuses or other incentives for extra work on different stories or programs, are taken into account. Danov commented, "There are dramatic differences in pay levels, not so much between print and broadcast as between national and local [e.g., WAZ-owned newspapers, Nova TV, bTV against the small regional media]."

There was no notable growth from the previous years' levels in regard to the observance of widely recognized ethical standards in journalism. The lackluster score inevitably accounts for the still lingering tendency of journalists to accept various kinds of rewards for coverage. It is argued that journalists invited to travel abroad with high-profile political or business delegations are expected to provide favorable coverage in return. Panelist Svetla Petrova, a reporter for bTV, noted,

"Sometimes placing a politician in an interview is a PR job. It can be full of hard questions and pressure from the journalist, but all of it is actually staged. Nothing to do with journalism."

Media coverage of key events and issues fared worse this year than last. Panelists pointed to cases where some outlets consciously choose not to report events related to certain institutions. Panelist Yassen Boyadzhiev, editor for MediaPool.bg, said, "The rules in some outlets are bent to fit the agenda. This one we don't talk of, that one we only talk nice about. No one ever mentioned the hunting feats of our president, who shot a protected-species deer in Kazakhstan. It was a huge international controversy that no Bulgarian TV ever bothered to cover." Another example was a newspaper with a certain political affiliation failing to report on the suicide of a close associate of the party leader.

Panelists agreed on the negative implications for the country's media development because of the increasing share of entertainment programming at the expense of information programming. Petrova said, "Entertainment is rapidly getting the upper hand. I work in a commercial TV station, and it's hard for me put my noncommercial product in the right context. Many have embraced the entertainment element in journalism, and different tastes are cultivated. It's hard to find enough demand for real, quality journalism, the kind that looks at issues in depth and requires some background. The rest is simply lack of information." This trend emerged some years back with the growth of reality formats, which now seem to dominate the content of the mainstream media. Driven by this trend, the tabloid press tries to tackle serious issues, while tabloid-style coverage oozes into the mainstream. Draganov had an interesting take on this: "Strangely enough, talk shows and stand-up comedy

JOURNALISM MEETS PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS OF QUALITY.

PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM INDICATORS:

- > Reporting is fair, objective, and well sourced.
- > Journalists follow recognized and accepted ethical standards.
- > Journalists and editors do not practice self-censorship.
- > Journalists cover key events and issues.
- > Pay levels for journalists and other media professionals are sufficiently high to discourage corruption.
- > Entertainment programming does not eclipse news and information programming.
- > Technical facilities and equipment for gathering, producing, and distributing news are modern and efficient.
- > Quality niche reporting and programming exists (investigative, economics/business, local, political).

acts often reveal more about the controversial people and issues of the day than the information programs. But there's a shortage of quality entertainment, whereas news and information programs are plenty but usually skin-deep."

The level of technical equipment for gathering, producing, and distributing news is an indicator that traditionally scores high. The process of consolidation and entry of major foreign investors, like SBS, MTG, and CME, has obviously benefited both the content and the technical outfitting of Bulgarian broadcast media. Danov said that the quality of the equipment is not the problem: "Big outlets have state-of-the-art equipment: Nova TV, bTV, TV 7, Darik Radio, WAZ papers. The problem is rather the qualification of the workforce—mostly the lack of multiple media skills and the right workflow, especially at the national radio and TV. In small outlets, the poor technical equipment and inadequate staffing inevitably affects the final product."

The quality of beat reporting stayed on the level identified by previous reviews. Journalists specializing in specific beats, and capable of in-depth coverage, are typical for the big national media. This model proves inapplicable to small and regional outlets for the limited availability of skilled staff. Some beats, like healthcare and culture, are covered quite professionally, while others seem to chronically lack resources. Boyadzhiev said, "Economic reporting is inadequate. The crime beat is traditionally well-covered; we never seem to lack capable crime reporters!" Danov said, "Beat reporting practically doesn't exist outside the national media. A journalist in a local outlet gets to cover just anything and cannot focus and acquire in-depth knowledge in one particular field. Investigative journalism disappeared from radio; TV no longer has quality business stories."

Investigative journalism is maturing, and some of the national media outlets run dedicated investigative-journalism programs and series. Progress, however, is still insufficient to positively affect long-term sustainability and is constrained by various financial limitations.

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

Bulgaria Objective Score: 3.03

The plurality of the Bulgarian media sector is an unquestionable achievement. Scores under this objective are consistently within sustainability targets and show that the diversity of news sources is providing citizens with comprehensive information. This balanced behavior is manifested over a long period of time, and no changes in the political or economic environment are likely to threaten it.

Few indicators showed any change, the exceptions being Indicator 3 (public media reflect the views of the political spectrum), which increased modestly, and Indicator 7 (media coverage of minority and broad social interests), which decreased somewhat. The only indicators not scoring close to the overall objective score were Indicator 2 (citizen access to media), which scored about a half-point higher, and Indicators 6 (transparency of media ownership) and 7. Indicator 6, in particular, continues to drag down the overall score, as panelists rated it more than a point lower than the overall score.

There are no direct or indirect ways to interfere or deter citizens from seeking and obtaining information from local and international sources. Draganov said, "There's a variety of alternative information sources; Internet blogs are offering edgier coverage. As a whole, everyone who is seeking information has enough sources and alternatives." The trend of the growing reach and increasing number of Internet users continued this past year. The media scene has evolved accordingly, and new online media are a growing alternative to traditional print and broadcast outlets. Forums and blogs are rapidly gaining popularity and reshaping the way information is being used. The scope of free speech is expanding, and that is another positive sign in the Bulgarian media scene.

Another two indicators reinforce the solid progress toward long-term and irreversible sustainability. The existence and affordability of multiple and diverse sources of news is one of the pillars of the Bulgarian media plurality. Danov stated, "News channels are diverse and accessible. Cable covers 80 percent of households; it's used even by the least affluent social groups, the Roma. It's a different matter what kind

MULTIPLE NEWS SOURCES PROVIDE CITIZENS WITH RELIABLE AND OBJECTIVE NEWS.

PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES INDICATORS:

- > A plurality of affordable public and private news sources (e.g., print, broadcast, Internet) exists.
- > Citizens' access to domestic or international media is not restricted.
- > State or public media reflect the views of the entire political spectrum, are nonpartisan, and serve the public interest.
- > Independent news agencies gather and distribute news for print and broadcast media.
- > Independent broadcast media produce their own news programs.
- > Transparency of media ownership allows consumers to judge objectivity of news; media ownership is not concentrated in a few conglomerates.
- > A broad spectrum of social interests are reflected and represented in the media, including minority-language information sources.

of information people are looking for. The only potential limitations are geographical remoteness and the lack of skills required to use them. Usage fees are quite reasonable and therefore not a limiting factor.”

A healthy number of professional news agencies supply outlets with news. Alongside BTA, the national news agency, independent news agencies like Focus News and novinite.com are offering diverse, timely, and wide-ranging coverage. In 2008, the websites of leading media outlets have been transforming to place special emphasis on news. Dailies like *Dnevnik*, *Sega*, and *Standart* and broadcasters like Darik Radio, bTV, and Nova TV are in fact operating like news agencies, too.

Another steadily evolving aspect of the Bulgarian media sector is that the independent broadcast outlets produce their own news programs. Danov noted, “Programming is open to a wide range of views; pressure and censorship have been outlived. Stereotyped coverage of government and opposition is less prominent. Some of the public-service programming and formats are so dated they are not viewable and are unlistenable.” National-coverage broadcasters have quality newscasts, and information programming is well-developed. In 2008, the three major television channels (BNT, bTV, Nova TV) extended and supplemented their newscasts with special commentary and in-depth coverage sidebars.

The ability of BNR and BNT to reflect the diversity of opinions in society and serve the public interest is making notable progress. The panelists appreciated the nonpartisan and pluralistic performance of the public media. Recent developments in public media have resulted in an increased share of socially significant topics and issues of national importance. Programs like “Referendum” and “The Big Read” on BNT are motivating and involving citizens in dialog. There are still minor negative practices, like refraining from negative coverage of government, but this occurs mostly regarding their private life rather than political matters.

The plurality of information sources and the diversity of formats is an undoubted achievement. But panelists identified problems regarding specific minority interests and issues. Minority-language media are limited in number and reach, with a narrow and scattered audience. Panelists noted that ATV recently set a tone of hate and intolerance—mostly through viewer call-ins—of the Roma and Turkish minorities and Islam. Petko Georgiev, executive director of BTC ProMedia Foundation, warned, “Over recent years, the language of the media is degenerating. What we’re witnessing is not simply ethnic intolerance, but violence. It was maybe the political party Ataka that started it, but this is now everywhere. Anti-Roma and anti-Turkish voices are getting stronger.”

The most critically viewed indicator was the transparency of media ownership. It is formally provided for, but in practice there are still outlets with offshore or figurehead ownership. Danov said, “Transparency is lacking. There’s no will to set up a register of media ownership. Conglomerates exist, and they’re further consolidating. The effects of foreign investment in media are at this point positive, rather than negative.” In 2008, there was large-scale acquisition of regional and national newspapers and a television channel by an entity represented by a former state official. The actual owners of the media holding have not been exposed, and investigations into the origin of funds have been inconclusive. Lack of ownership transparency increasingly holds true for websites as well.

OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Bulgaria Objective Score: 2.78

The score for Objective 4 inched up somewhat this year, with an increase of 0.15. Almost all indicators showed some improvement. Only Indicators 1 (media operate as efficient businesses) and 3 (the advertising market) remained static. Indicator 5 (private media do not receive government subsidies) was unique in that it did decrease somewhat, but, like all other indicators, it received a score close to the overall objective score.

Advertising revenue is in line with widely accepted standards at commercial media outlets. The amount of commercial time is regulated, and the media observe the rules. Sale of commercial time is sufficient to ensure outlets’ sustainability. The relatively high scores of this indicator do not preclude some of the Bulgarian outlets struggling to cover their operating costs. Draganov said, “Independent commercial

INDEPENDENT MEDIA ARE WELL-MANAGED BUSINESSES, ALLOWING EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE.

BUSINESS MANAGEMENT INDICATORS:

- > Media outlets and supporting firms operate as efficient, professional, and profit-generating businesses.
- > Media receive revenue from a multitude of sources.
- > Advertising agencies and related industries support an advertising market.
- > Advertising revenue as a percentage of total revenue is in line with accepted standards at commercial outlets.
- > Independent media do not receive government subsidies.
- > Market research is used to formulate strategic plans, enhance advertising revenue, and tailor products to the needs and interests of audiences.
- > Broadcast ratings and circulation figures are reliably and independently produced.

outlets are better run; business comes first. But generating enough advertising revenue is still problematic. Many small- and medium-sized businesses, which are willing to advertise but lack the proper expertise and staff, are outside the scope of big advertising agencies. Some small outlets only rely on their own marketing and sales." The positive aspect here is the effective free-market regulation of the relations between media and advertising.

The efficient functioning of the media and supporting institutions as professional and profitable businesses is consistently among the indicators to score well. The trend of consolidation of the media market allowed some regional outlets to take advantage of being part of a wider business network. They improved their business performance and solidified their position in the local markets.

State funding for the media is regulated, and there are formal legal guarantees of editorial independence. The only Bulgarian media to receive state funding are BNT and BNR, which are public broadcasters. Independent outlets are fully sustained through advertising. A practice that emerged in 2008 reveals the potential for nontransparent state or municipal funding of outlets. Panelist Konstantin Markov, honorary chair of the Association of Bulgarian Broadcasters (ABBRO), pointed out, "There's concealed state funding through media partnership contracts and joint coverage projects." Through the so-called media partnership, contracted media and the administration team up to publicize the achievements and progress made on various capacity building projects, most often carried out with state or EU funds. Participating media effectively receive direct funding from national or regional government agencies. Those emerging practices explain the decline in scores for this indicator.

This kind of funding could be viewed as a way to diversify sources of revenue, however. Regional media are also involved in this kind of coverage of EU-funded municipal programs. Even if the outlets' political independence is not questioned, local and national government agencies benefit from positive exposure, while their political opponents are put at a disadvantage. In 2008, the government initiated a series of celebrations of the 100th anniversary of Bulgarian independence that will go on for nine months. Around BGL 4 million (€2 million) are allocated to media coverage. The funds are scheduled to be paid to participating media about the time that the campaign will start for the next general elections. That could potentially become another advantage for the current administration.

The current state of the advertising market reflects a still existing controversy. Bulgaria has a mature and professional advertising market, but it is still feared to be susceptible to manipulation driven by close ownership ties between media

and advertising structures. Danov said, "The existence of conglomerates and symbiosis between outlets and audience measurement agencies provide opportunities to break the rules of good business. There are still ways to influence editorial policies through funding. In big commercial outlets, influence is mostly economic, while the small are both politically and economically dependent."

Georgiev elaborated on this point, saying, "It's hard to say 'no' to the mayor if you live in a small town. The owner of a local TV station can't afford to refuse partnership or joint projects, including PR." This raises doubts about the unprejudiced allocation of advertising budgets and independence of outlets. However, as more foreign capital is entering both the media and the advertising market, transparency and trust should grow, panelists said.

Media base their operations on audience research, and this also informs startup decisions. Outlets are compelled to be aware of the interests and needs of their readers, listeners, or viewers because of the increasingly competitive market and the evolving public demand. This is a steadily developing feature of the media environment in Bulgaria. However, Danov said, "Small outlets operate by hunch or, depending on the assignment, they don't use market research."

In 2009, panelists continue to be critical of the reliability of ratings and circulation figures. There are two PeopleMeter television audience measurement systems in the country, but neither is fully trusted. Toncheva said, "PeopleMeter data is not accurate or independent, nor is it widely accessible. The reasons are mostly economic." One is alleged to have a conflict of interest; the other has limited reach in the market. There is no alternative comprehensive audience measurement.

Not all publications report their circulation, so the cumulative figures do not reveal the actual situation on the market of print media. Publishers only benefit from the lack of reliable statistics, as they can meddle with circulation figures to their best advantage.

OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

Bulgaria Objective Score: 2.88

Objective 5 received a slightly lower score, compared with last year, but still remains high in the "near sustainability" range. The decrease was due to minor decreases in Indicators 2 and 7 (professional associations and apolitical channels of distribution, respectively). Offsetting these decreases somewhat is a modest increase in Indicator 4, the work of NGOs. However, only Indicator 2 scored notably below the overall score, a testament to the overall strength of this

objective; Indicators 6 (access to printing facilities) and 7 scored about three-quarters of a point higher.

The performance of trade associations representing publishers and media owners generally received accolades from panelists, along with the role of NGOs supporting free speech and the independence of the media. Indeed, Draganov said, "The only advocates of media and journalists' rights are NGOs and trade associations like ABBRO. There are organizations, too, which contribute to the improvement of the media-related legislation."

There were dissenters, however. Toncheva claimed, "Trade associations are mostly focused on upholding the interests of the big players." Danov added, "The organizations of media owners most often promote private or corporate interests (even if it's disguised as a universal cause), so they are not held in high esteem by the media and journalists. Many of them are practically unknown to the public."

Within this objective, panelists were most critical of the professional journalists' associations, which they said are increasingly detached and inactive. This organizational failure is partly attributed to the fact that the journalism profession does not quite fit traditional trade-union patterns. Panelists still pointed out that the Union of Bulgarian Journalists did not react in any way to a number of cases of journalists being threatened or assaulted. Draganov summed up the feelings of the panel: "The Union of Bulgarian Journalists does not support its members. The Union failed to act in a number of cases of leading journalists being fired."

The two indicators measuring the quality of journalism training retained roughly the same score as last year. Academic training is still failing to keep up with industry standards and give young journalists a solid practical

SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS FUNCTION IN THE PROFESSIONAL INTERESTS OF INDEPENDENT MEDIA.

SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS INDICATORS:

- > Trade associations represent the interests of private media owners and provide member services.
- > Professional associations work to protect journalists' rights.
- > NGOs support free speech and independent media.
- > Quality journalism degree programs that provide substantial practical experience exist.
- > Short-term training and in-service training programs allow journalists to upgrade skills or acquire new skills.
- > Sources of newsprint and printing facilities are in private hands, apolitical, and unrestricted.
- > Channels of media distribution (kiosks, transmitters, Internet) are private, apolitical, and unrestricted.

grounding. Short-term training and qualification programs seem to enjoy less demand and are generally not as active as they used to be a few years back, when many of the new Bulgarian media outlets were emerging. Overall, "The quality of journalism education is inadequate. Professional training and development is underfunded," claimed Toncheva.

Remarking about access to newsprint and printing facilities, panelists confirmed that this is unrestricted and apolitical. Likewise, they said, media do not encounter any obstacles in distributing print or broadcast media, and distribution is not subject to any political pressure.

List of Panel Participants

Yassen Boyadzhiev, editor, MediaPool.bg, Sofia

Danail Danov, program director, Media Development Center, Sofia

Violeta Draganova, Roma mainstream freelance journalist, Sofia

Ivo Draganov, television documentarian, National Academy of Film and Theatrical Arts, New Bulgarian University, Sofia

Petko Georgiev, executive director, BTC ProMedia Foundation, Sofia

Stoyana Georgieva, editor-in-chief, MediaPool.bg, Sofia

Alexander Kashamov, lawyer, Access to Information Program, Sofia

Konstantine Markov, honorary chair, Association of Bulgarian Broadcasters, Sofia

Ivan Mihalev, journalist, *The Capital Weekly*, Sofia

Petya Mironova, chairperson, Print Media Ethics Commission, Sofia

Svetla Petrova, journalist, bTV, Sofia

Yuliana Toncheva, freelance media and public-relations expert, Sofia

Moderator and Author

Rumyana Bachvarova, consultant, Market Links Research and Consulting, Sofia

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