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BULGARIA

A rise in violent attacks against journalists, significant shifts on the Bulgarian media ownership scene, the falling quality of journalism, a radical increase in corporate and political propaganda, and the expected final failure of the digitalization process defined 2015. The media are deeply divided between a group of mainstream television stations with national coverage and print publications of relatively professional quality on the one side and a growing number of quasi-media, externally funded propaganda mouthpieces on the other.

Pro-government propaganda outlets are leading an intensive smear campaign against politicians, journalists, and media that do not follow the official line. Bulgaria has also waded into the battlefields of the hybrid war of Russia against the United States and the EU, marked by massive Russian investment, support for anti-western and anti-democratic propaganda, industrial-scale trolling campaigns, and hacking attacks against independent media and public institutions.

After years of public denials, the controversial politician–media mogul Delyan Peevski began declaring ownership of print, broadcast, and online media outlets. The financial resources for the acquisitions remain unclear and are not being investigated, but the pro-government Peevski group of media engage in smear campaigns against uncooperative politicians, magistrates, journalists, citizen organizations, and even EU diplomats who voice concerns of political corruption. In addition, the bankruptcy in 2014 of the Corporate and Commercial Bank (KTB) exposed the funding mechanisms of quasi-media in Bulgaria, resulting in the closure of publications, including *Presa* and *Tema*, and the transfer of ownership of TV 7 and News 7.

A failed attempt by the government-funded Bulgarian National Radio (BNR)'s management to cut the bonuses of top journalists set off a crisis and strikes. The standoff resulted in the loss of editorial control over the public broadcaster's main news channel, Horizont. The cancellation of a controversial anti-western weekly talk show dominated the final weeks of 2015 for the media, leading to public reactions ranging from political protests by leftist and pro-Russian activists to tacit approval by those who believe propaganda has no place on public radio.

Amid all of this turmoil, independent media outlets, such as the investigative site Bivol, have stepped in to expose corruption in the judiciary and the higher echelons of power. And yet, the publications' authors, whistleblowers, and sources—rather than the exposed officials and magistrates—have been investigated.

Bulgarian media traditionally score well in the MSI study in indicators related to general citizen access to news, technical equipment for newsgathering, the available telecommunications infrastructure, and unrestricted access to the journalism profession. While these are seen as important preconditions for the development of a sustainable media environment, these factors are not sufficient to establish a vibrant and professional media to serve the interests of the Bulgarian audience.

BULGARIA at a glance

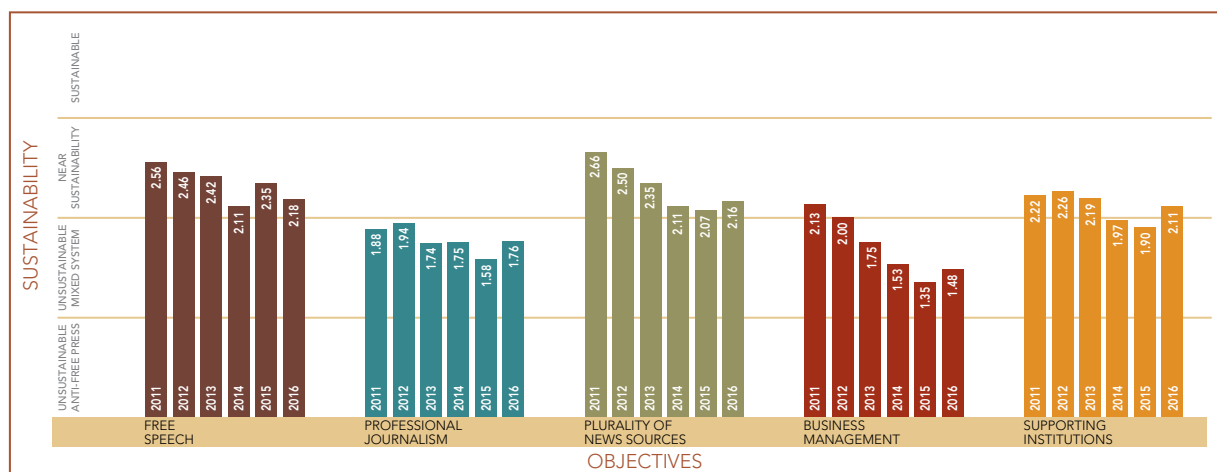
GENERAL

- > **Population:** 7,186,893 (July 2015 est. *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Capital city:** Sofia
- > **Ethnic groups (% of population):** Bulgarian 76.9%, Turkish 8%, Roma 4.4%, other 0.7% (including Russian, Armenian, and Vlach), other (unknown) 10% (2011 est. *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Religions (% of population):** Eastern Orthodox 59.4%, Muslim 7.8%, other (including Catholic, Protestant, Armenian Apostolic Orthodox, and Jewish) 1.7%, none 3.7%, unspecified 27.4% (2011 est. *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Languages:** Bulgarian (official) 76.8%, Turkish 8.2%, Roma 3.8%, other 0.7%, unspecified 10.5% (2011 est. *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **GNI (2014-Atlas):** \$55.04 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2016)
- > **GNI per capita (2014-PPP):** \$16,260 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2016)
- > **Literacy rate:** 98.4%; male 98.7%, female 98.1% (2015 est. *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **President or top authority:** President Rosen Plevneliev (since January 22, 2012)

MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- > **Number of active media outlets:** Print: 295 newspapers, 635 magazines (National Statistics Institute 2014); Radio Stations: 85; Television Stations: 112 (Council for Electronic Media)
- > **Newspaper circulation statistics:** Total annual circulation: 324,310,000 (National Statistics Institute 2014)
- > **Broadcast ratings:** Top three television stations: bTV, NOVA, BNT1
- > **News agencies:** Bulgarian Telegraph Agency (state), BGNES (private), Focus Information Agency (private)
- > **Annual advertising revenue in media sector in 2014:** \$107.6 million (MA Pierrot 97)
- > **Internet Usage:** 57% of the population (Eurostat, 2015)

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: BULGARIA



MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX 2016: OVERALL AVERAGE SCORES



CHANGE SINCE 2015

▲ (increase greater than .10) □ (little or no change) ▼ (decrease greater than .10)

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.

Scores for all years may be found online at http://www.irex.org/system/files/EE_msiscorers.xls

OBJECTIVE 1: FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Bulgaria Objective Score: 2.18

According to Boyko Vassilev, editor and television host for Bulgarian National Television, regulations are not a serious problem for the Bulgarian media. He believes the issues lie in implementation.

Ivo Draganov, a lecturer at the New Bulgarian University and the National Academy for Theater and Film Arts, disagreed. He believes that more time is needed before the media regulations are accepted and start being implemented properly. "Regulation and liberalization of the media market happened in Bulgaria only in 1999, 10 years after the EU and 75 years after the US. We need a lot more time before these instruments are recognized as serving the public interest and begin to operate properly here. Legal regulation and economic systems are relatively easy to change... but people's thinking and mentality change slowly. This is the domain of religion, culture, education, and science, and that's exactly where our quasi neo-liberal (and in reality oligarchic) state is paying less attention. This is why our transition has been so slow and we're in the middle of nowhere with the freedom of the media."

Yassen Boyadzhiev, chair of the Free Speech Forum and editor of Mediapool.bg, finds it difficult to apply the

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 or registration of media protects a public interest and is fair, competitive, and apolitical.
- > Market entry and tax structure for media are fair and comparable to other industries.
- > Crimes against media professionals, citizen reporters, and media outlets are prosecuted vigorously, but occurrences of such crimes are rare.
- > The law protects the editorial independence of state of public media.
- > 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 available; right of access to information is equally enforced for all media, journalists, and citizens.
- > Media outlets' access to and use of local and international news and news sources is not restricted by law.
- > Entry into the journalism profession is free and government imposes no licensing, restrictions, or special rights for journalists.

standard terminology to Bulgaria's current media situation: "In the 15 years of MSI studies, Bulgarian media have deteriorated so far that we cannot use the same terms anymore. Freedom of speech doesn't mean anything anymore. For a huge part of the population, freedom of speech means the freedom to say whatever you feel like, to defame and discredit people. We do have supporting text in the constitution and in the laws defending freedom of speech—but they are hollow."

The legal and regulatory framework did not change much in 2015, although some changes are urgently needed. Above all, the parliament needs to resolve the crisis by appointing new members of the broadcast regulatory body, the Council for Electronic Media (CEM). It also must amend the Telecommunications Law after the failure of digitalization and the judgement of the EU Court that the Bulgarian legislation is in breach of EU competition rules.

According to Dilyana Kirkovska, chief of the CEM Licensing and Analytical Department, the digitalization process in Bulgaria has failed beyond repair. It has failed from the perspective of the legislation and from the perspective of the judgment imposed on Bulgaria by the European Commission. It also has failed physically, as broadcasters have withdrawn from the multiplex networks. TV 7 has just withdrawn; News 7 pulled out earlier. According to Kirkovska, there is a current initiative supported by the government to amend the legislation and allow broadcasters to buy out the multiplexes in line with the ruling of the European Court in Luxembourg: in April 2015, the EU Court of Justice issued a judgment against Bulgaria, confirming that the country breached EU law in 2009 in assigning spectrum rights of use for the deployment of digital terrestrial television infrastructure. Bulgaria violated free-competition rules established by the EU and faces steep financial sanctions if the national regulations are not amended. The judgment went unreported in Bulgarian media, as it highlights a sustained effort by at least three governments to avoid implementing the European legislation.

The Bulgarian telecommunications law limits competition and does not allow broadcast media to participate in the digital distribution networks. A new Digital Communications Act reversing the challenged texts has been drafted and opened for discussion; its passage is expected in 2016. Meanwhile, mainstream television stations have been withdrawing from the digital broadcasting platforms, making them irrelevant to the audience. "This is a completely different approach, which also has challenges—for example, what will happen with the digital distribution of the public broadcaster BNT?" Kirkovska added.

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According to Constantine Markov, a lecturer for the Sofia University Faculty of Journalism, the failure of digitalization is one of the significant events of the year. "I have witnessed small towns losing programs, initially from five to six channels to the three big national television stations," he said.

Concerning the appointment of CEM members, for more than a year, the institutions responsible have been unable to replace two of the members whose mandate has expired. The president, who appoints one of the new members, made his choice in May, but parliament has been unable to agree on its choice. Since under the law the new members can enter into their functions only simultaneously, the president's appointee is in limbo as well.

The Radio and Television Act was amended several times in 2015. Kirkovska labeled the latest changes "curious." Instead of addressing substantive issues, such as the mandates of the CEM members, the parliament amended the law to allow CEM and governing board members of the public broadcasters to receive bonuses.

Kirkovska noted that one suggested amendment in the RTV Act this year was to cancel the provisions for the RTV Fund as a way of funding the public media. In her opinion, this is a step backward and leaves the public media in the hands of the government, which will continue to exert pressure through the budget. The texts were discussed in the Media Committee of parliament, with some urging that the amendment should be passed only after a wider public discussion.

The panelists discussed the conflict in BNR and noted that there are significant shortcomings and violations of the regulations. BNR suffered from two crises in 2015—the labor dispute between the management and the journalists from the news-oriented Horizont channel and the dispute over the cancellation of the controversial weekly program *Deconstruction*, which many saw as a propaganda piece incompatible with the role of public media. In the view of the panelists, it did not deal satisfactorily with either crisis.

Several dozen citizens gathered outside BNR to protest the show's cancellation, and the majority of the leftist and pro-Russian media labeled the decision censorship. At the same time, many journalists and political analysts who had been warning about the show's propaganda overtones for many years welcomed the move. It is worth noting that the

program did not seem to be taken down under political pressure. There had been no public expressions of discontent with the program on behalf of the government; legitimate management structures of the National Radio adhering to internal editorial regulations decided to cancel it after CEM, the broadcasting regulatory body, warned BNR that it would face steep fines if it did not take measures to stop the controversial show's violations of the broadcast law.

According to Markov, "...there is a clear violation of the principles of objectivity and fairness of information in the National Radio. The most striking example is Peter Volgin's program, *Deconstruction*. It's obvious that no one can restrain him. But the problem goes beyond this program; the guests he invites on the regular daily programs only serve his point of view... I recently heard a regular program describing the French ambassador as a 'third-rank diplomatic functionary' interfering in the internal affairs of Bulgaria." Other panelists pointed to Volgin's unrestrained hate speech and defamatory language against protesters and politicians; he dismissed citizens protesting for judicial reforms as "rabble" and has on numerous occasions used language against disliked politicians that many consider unacceptable for public radio.

According to Petko Georgiev, director of BTC ProMedia, *Deconstruction* is not even the biggest problem. "This propaganda piece poses as an 'author's' program and is being presented as free expression of opinion, but Volgin is also the head of one of the news and current-affairs teams at BNR. Allowing such a politically biased figure to lead a major editorial team amounts to surrendering the principles of editorial independence and professionalism in a significant part of the public radio's program."

The panelists took a critical stance on the other crisis at BNR as well, related to the standoff between the management and the Horizont journalists over pay and bonuses. A long-lasting strike at BNR was triggered by an attempt to limit bonuses for leading journalists, but it escalated into a full-scale confrontation between a large number of the journalists and the management over management principles.

While some suggested that initially the protests may have had professional grounds as well, the majority agreed that the conflict is currently "all about money and nothing else." Most of the panelists agreed that the management's inability to impose professional editorial control and resolve labor issues has been aided by the CEM decision not to interfere in the conflict.

According to Ivan Radev, board member of the Association of European Journalists, "Should the turmoil at BNR continue in 2016, there is a serious threat that it will lose its reputation as a relatively independent and trustworthy

source of information. The behavior of the regulator has been less than convincing, as it has failed to decrease the tension between the management and the journalists.”

Georgiev added, “BNR represents a loose confederation of feudal principalities at war with each other and united against the management. Each ‘principality’ has its prince (or princess) in command and control; there’s no central editorial policy and very little regard for professional standards. This system was not created by the current management. It has been in place for a decade. The past two directors of BNR are to blame for it more than the current one, who is clearly unable to deal with it.”

Regardless, it appears that BNR’s problems will continue into 2016, as the labor dispute remains unresolved and the controversial host of the canceled propaganda program has simply moved the content to his daily shows. While the law protects the editorial independence of state or public media, events at BNR prove that the legal requirements are not being vigorously implemented.

Examples are not limited to BNR. As Dimiter Stoyanov, an investigative journalist for Bivol, said, “...The program of Dimiter Tzonev on BNT also disseminates propaganda and lies. Our team has been the victim, but that’s a general problem; this program is being used to circulate propaganda messages. The media’s management does nothing to stop this practice.”

There has been limited licensing of new broadcast media in 2015, but the majority of the panelists agree that the process suffers from deeply rooted problems related to its fairness, competitiveness, and apolitical character. According to regional radio manager Krassimir Dimitrov, owner of Radio MIXX, “There are substantial limitations in the licensing process and in the implementation of the license requirements. The red tape is appalling, many of the requirements are artificial, and the market should be allowed to filter the good media from the weak ones.”

However, the panelists pointed out a positive development as well: the launch of two new television channels, the Bulgarian-American BIT and the Bloomberg Bulgaria channels.

In a significant regulatory development that will see its continuation in 2015, the Union of Bulgarian Artists has addressed CEM with a request to review and cancel the license of TV Alfa, the cable channel of Bulgarian-turned-Russian nationalist party Ataka. The request followed an incident at the National Academy for Theater and Film in which the leader of Ataka, accompanied by a television crew, physically attacked students and had to be carried away by bodyguards and the police. The politician has been stripped of his immunity and is under investigation; CEM is

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monitoring the channel for violations of the law to decide on its license.

Conditions for market entry and the tax structure for media have not changed over the years. They are comparable to other industries, yet the panel did not score them high given serious concerns over the selective implementation of the tax regulations.

In June 2015, the National Revenue Agency (NRA) announced it was starting an investigation against *Sega*, one of the dailies with a critical stance toward the government. After the association of publishers requested clarification about the reason for the investigation, NRA announced it was investigating all print media because of what it described as “high risk of tax evasion.” The Economedia Group of publications, which included the most influential newspapers and sites critical of the government, was already fully investigated in 2014.

In 2015, there was a rapid rise in crimes against journalists, including physical attacks against journalists at work, conducting interviews, or covering events. Another worrying trend is the pressure of the authorities—the tax authorities, for example—against the media.

According to Radev, “The actions of the Financial Supervision Commission [FSC] are a reason for deep concern. In 2015, it took measures against national and regional media and imposed heavy sanctions on them over their coverage of the bank crisis in 2014. The fact that FSC acts as a censor, analyzes editorial content, and holds up Peevski media as a positive example is scandalous.”

Stoyanov described the pressure exerted on national and regional media over stories about corruption in the judiciary. “The Supreme Judicial Council [SJC] tried to make us identify the source of the recorded conversation between the two judges. I think it was a very brutal attack against us. There is a court decision protecting journalist sources, but still we have been summoned three times to be pressured into disclosing

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the source of the recording. We have clearly and repeatedly indicated that we have received the recordings from the platform BalkanLeaks, a regional equivalent of WikiLeaks, which guarantees confidentiality to the initial source.”

The panelists also mentioned Miroslav Ivanov, a financial blogger investigating the bankruptcy of KTB and its aftermath and investigated by the prosecution, the State Agency for National Security, and the NRA as another example of pressure on the media.

Another case revolves around reporting of a highly critical European Commission (EC) monitoring report regarding the Bulgarian judiciary (the Report from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on Progress in Bulgaria under the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism). The report quotes calls for an independent investigation into a wiretapping scandal in which judges from the Sofia City Court accuse the prosecutor general of political meddling with the court.

Some media interpreted this as a call for the removal of the prosecutor general. During a live interview with the Peevski group’s TV Channel 3, Dimitar Glavchev, deputy chair of parliament, asked the police and the State Agency for National Security to investigate Mediapool for publishing information based on communications with spokespeople of the EC from Brussels. Replying to a Mediapool inquiry, an EC press office wrote in an e-mail that the EC wanted to see an independent investigation into the allegations that the prosecutor general has been involved in illegal meddling with the work of the courts. The Peevski media group interpreted the question and the published answer as an “attempted coup d’état” against the legitimate institutions, and Glavchev seemed to be speaking in sync with them. Mediapool has asked parliament for an official explanation on whether Glavchev’s statement represents the institution’s official position.

According to Ivan Bedrov, deputy editor-in-chief of Club Z.bg, “Last year, we just suspected some coordination; this year, it’s very visible; messages that appear in the Peevski media are repeated by several regular guests in the morning shows on national television and by the prosecutor general. One example is the case with the ‘coup d’état’ scenario pushed by the Peevski media group. The day the scenario

appeared in the Peevski media, the morning shows had already invited the respective guests who repeat the same sentence; soon after, the prosecutor general uses the same sentence at an SJC meeting.”

The EC noted the controversy in the final version of the report: “A particular issue in this context concerns aggressive and polarizing campaigns by some media, often targeting individual figures in the magistracy. Unbalanced media coverage in the course of disciplinary or criminal investigations presents additional challenges for judicial authorities.”

Aggression against journalists has become more commonplace, with a number of reporters from different outlets suffering from threats, harassment by public figures and institutions, or violent attacks while conducting journalism work in dangerous environments. The panelists also pointed to a positive development: the leader of Ataka, Volen Siderov, is to be stripped of immunity as a member of parliament on charges related to the violent attack against a journalist from TV SKAT in 2013. This is one of several incidents for which Siderov is facing criminal investigation.

But in general, the attacks against journalists intensified during the elections period. In October Nova TV reporter Nadia Gancheva was attacked in Samokov while trying to interview a local candidate for City Council from the Movement for Rights and Freedoms. The candidate was alleged to be the organizer of an illegal network of distribution of stolen electric power in the Roma ghetto of the town. The candidate and his relatives and supporters attacked and beat the news crew. The reporter, the camera operator, and their driver escaped with minor injuries. The attacker’s political party distanced itself from him, and the prosecution started an investigation against him.

Journalists who lack the protection of a large media organization behind them are usually less lucky. In a very disturbing incident, a local investigative journalist from Pomorie, Stoyan Tonchev, was very badly beaten. The police announced they had arrested two suspects within three days of the incident.

“As a journalist with a television crew, I have been attacked eight times since 2010,” Stoyanov added. “They poured gasoline on me once; even magistrates have attacked me physically. There hasn’t been a single example of adequate reaction by the authorities,” he insisted.

Besides the cases of direct aggression against journalists and attacks against the media, there are numerous and ongoing cases of harassment. Aside from shows of solidarity by other media outlets in reporting the incidents, and by journalist organizations, the majority of journalists feel the authorities do not react adequately.

Stoyana Georgieva, editor-in-chief of Mediapool.bg, raised the issue of harassment employed by the Peevski media over politicians and journalists. In some of the cases, the police had taken measures; for example, they interfered to prevent Peevski media reporters from ambushing Nova TV journalist Anna Tsoleva outside her house.

Bedrov pointed out the behavior of Alfa TV as an example of harassment: “They show a portrait of someone on screen and present him or her as a ‘national traitor,’ prompting viewers to harass them. This is used against politicians and against civil activists. There have been consequences—the doorbells of some of the people have been broken, windows have been smashed.”

Georgieva believes these tactics work: “You start asking yourself whether to make such incidents public—since the police don’t offer support, you don’t want to encourage more. In the summer, a crew from Alfa TV stood outside our office for a week to wait for me, without calling in advance for an interview or a meeting. They just waited in ambush, to catch you off-guard.”

Stoyanov shared another example: “A TV 3 crew was sent to Paris to check out where the editor-in-chief of Bivol lives. They wanted to see if he’s living in social housing for free. They could have checked that he teaches at a linguistic academy there and pays rent to the academy for his flat. Instead they ambushed his wife, pretending to be friends and colleagues from Bulgaria.”

There has also been a heavy campaign against a group of media and some politicians because of the financial support they receive from the America for Bulgaria Fund or the European Economic Area grants of Norway, Iceland, and Liechtenstein to support the development of democracy, an independent media, and civil society. The national television stations should not disregard this campaign, but in reality they are scared. The Peevski media group and other tabloid publications regularly describe these media as “national traitors.” The prosecutor general and other authorities have also questioned whether such international support for select media might carry a hidden foreign political agenda.

Libel and defamation remain in the criminal code, and there have been a number of cases against the media—but also, increasingly, among the media and journalists, who sue each other for such offenses. The courts generally observe a practice of holding public officials to higher standards. The offended party must prove the falsity and malice of the alleged libelous or defamatory statements.

According to Boyadzhiev, though, the situation with libel and defamation has changed; in previous years, the law and judicial practice were examined from the perspective

of protection they provide to journalists to exercise their profession freely. Now there are more and more cases of deliberate slander campaigns led by the “media baseball bats” taking advantage of the difficult legal process of proving falsity and malice.

“The problem is that the majority of the media in Bulgaria libel and defame on purpose; that’s their business,” said Boyadzhiev. “The question is not would a journalist be able to protect himself against such charges; most of the time they act with purpose to damage the public image of people, so the question is whether they have the opportunity to protect themselves from the media.”

Ivo Prokopiev, the owner of Iconomedia, the publishing house behind the most respected Bulgarian broadsheet, *Kapital*, and a number of mainstream news sites, has been targeted by the “media baseball bats” for many years. In 2015, he won a case against the site www.bnews.bg and its owner (and ex-television personality) Nikolay Barekov. The criminal charges against Barekov have been dropped, as he currently enjoys immunity as a member of European parliament. Prokopiev has already won cases against many of the tabloids, including *Weekend*, *Telegraph*, and *Vsekiden*.

At the same time, Minister of Economy Bozhidar Lukarski won a case against famous television talk-show host Sasho Dikov for defamatory qualifications used against him in a Nova TV program.

Citizen-activist Nikolay Staykov, part of the informal group Protestna Mrezha (Protest Network), is suing the agency PIK, which is described as the leading “media baseball bat” for a series of over 30 libelous and defamatory publications.

Such cases are relatively rare; mainly people with sufficient financial resources can afford them, and so the charges do not serve their final purpose. The majority of the media involved in libel and defamation are deliberate, and the fines are either never paid or are not enough to discourage further publication. In 2015, the “media baseball bats” published literally thousands of libelous and defamatory pieces against journalists and politicians, focusing on the pro-Western president, the leader of the party Democrats for Strong Bulgaria—which is in the governing coalition, but takes a very tough line on the need to fight corruption and reform the judiciary. The defamatory content is multiplied on an industrial scale by known and unknown sites, in social media, and by an army of trolls; the eventual court sentences do nothing to prevent the scope of damage to the public image of the concerned public figures.

As for the freedom of information legislation, the panelists were unanimously positive about the extraordinary role played by the Access to Information Program, the

non-for-profit entity working actively with consecutive parliaments and government on the passage and improvement of the freedom of information legislation and helping hundreds of citizens and media organizations obtain public information. While the legislation and the proactive publication of public information is improving, many of the panelists pointed out that some public institutions are becoming more and more creative in denying information to the media.

With a law on the access to information on the books in Bulgaria for 15 years now, the public institutions, citizens, and media have been establishing better practices, and the Bulgarian law ranks 42nd among 102 national laws worldwide. According to Access to Information Program experts, its major shortcoming is the lack of an independent public body similar to the information commissioners in other national legislations. The program has prepared a concept for the development of the access to information legislation, which provided for the needed changes in the law.

In an important, freedom-of-information-related development, the parliament adopted amendments to the freedom of information law, improving the procedures and regulating the reuse of public information.

Yet problems with the implementation of the law persist. As Georgieva said, "It's great that the Access to Information Program exists; many media outlets and citizens receive excellent support from them; however, the problems are getting bigger and bigger. The prosecutor's office refuses information to media outlets they dislike; some media are taken off the mailing lists of the prosecutor's press service and are deprived even of regular information."

Investigative journalist Dimiter Stoyanov also says that public procurement information is rarely available despite the requirements of the law. The public relations officers of public institutions are becoming a barrier rather than a conduit of information.

According to Georgieva, the public institutions—the executive, the regulatory bodies, and the judiciary—with their action or inaction legitimize the curtailing of freedom of speech outlined in the discussion.

The panelists pointed out that unlimited access to the journalism profession may actually have negative results as well. Many media employ staff with no media training who do not understand and share professional values and have no qualms creating manipulative content, happily fulfilling propaganda assignments and disregarding basic professional rules of behavior.

OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

Bulgaria Objective Score: 1.76

The panelists expressed their deep disappointment with the falling professional quality of journalism in Bulgaria. Boyadzhiev explained that more and more media are being openly used as an instrument for disinformation, exactly the opposite of the media's normal mission, and as an instrument of the dumbing-down of Bulgarian society.

According to Vassilev, quality remains the biggest challenge for Bulgarian media. "The media are superficial, lacking in objectivity, and openly manipulative, with a high degree of self-censorship, and quick to engage in smear campaigns," he said.

Georgiev regrets the willingness with which parts of Bulgarian society fall victim to disinformation: "There is a decreasing media literacy of both the creators and the consumers of media content. Content appearing in respected mainstream media more and more often fails to meet even basic professional standards. It's obvious that professional development of the staff, editorial, and ethical standards have been completely abandoned in search for higher ratings. It's a very unfortunate combination of heavy propaganda on the one hand and falling media literacy on the other; propaganda messages are landing on ears ready to listen and accept everything as truth."

Bedrov pointed out, however, that the Bulgarian media scene should not be considered as a homogenous mass: "If we evaluate the media as a whole, we won't get far. There is a circle of media which behave professionally, and there's another circle of publications that only pretend to be media, but are actually being used for specific political and oligarchic purposes—and there is the third group of the national television channels that are trying to stay away from the first two. If we give them an average score, we'll end up with something that doesn't tell us much about the status of the media environment."

The national television channels are not a homogenous group, either, argued Nicoletta Daskalova, a researcher and lecturer with the Media Democracy Foundation. "Nova TV was trending toward becoming more and more critical and oppositional, in a way, but they've decided to fire talk-show hosts Sasho Dikov and Luba Kulezitch—the 'razors' of their current-affairs programs—replacing them with much softer and tamed journalists. Still, I believe that the national television channels, which probably capture 70 percent of the audience in Bulgaria, are more or less balanced and can present an objective picture of the situation—but they are being attacked for that. Let's not forget that among

the media targeted by the Peevski group, besides the usual suspects, are the news team of bTV and the morning-show team of Nova TV.”

She refers also to the series of publications by Bivol that shed light on the mechanism of behind-the-scenes control over the judiciary. “The media scene is not as bleak as often described; it’s not a space where nothing is happening, just the opposite. There is a very serious confrontation between media that try to expose the reality objectively and media that try to marginalize and discredit these voices,” she said.

The panelists used a development with one of the most promoted journalists in the country, Valeria Veleva, to illustrate the media’s slipping ethical standards. Veleva, already exposed as a former communist secret police collaborator, launched a new online project that shocked everyone with its advertising prices for news items, including “top placement of news,” “advertising analysis,” and “advertising interview.” Veleva also angered her former colleagues from the bankrupt newspaper *Presa* by using their names and material to launch the new project. Despite all of that, Veleva remains one of the journalists regularly invited by the mainstream television stations to analyze important public events and is being promoted as a trustworthy representative of the journalism profession.

Bedrov pointed out that 2015 marked a deluge of new online media replicating and peddling the disinformation originating from the Peevski media. The blogger Krassimir Gadjokov has created and is expanding a list of over 75 online sites used to disseminate propaganda for Peevski media and the Russian interests in Bulgaria; these sites

frequently quote each other. The sites do not indicate their owner nor their editor, and do not provide contacts.

Bedrov said, “Against the background of this flood of fake sites, we can see how the security services refuse to address the increasing number of DoS attacks against legitimate sites of media and institutions. Many of the media—and I assume there are those of us among us—don’t even want to talk about it, as we don’t want our readers to know about it. My information is that the attacks are very frequent and are not targeted at the disinformation sites that we’ve talked about.”

Daskalova, who researched the attitudes of the media during the municipal elections campaign of 2015, also pointed to the low quality of elections coverage: “The elections did not turn into an interesting media event. The media have given up on investing more to ensure better coverage of a political debate; there was none. There was no campaign for the referendum, either. Our monitoring showed a deepening division between the editorial agenda of the mainstream media, as opposed to citizen journalism. The bloggers and social media activists were very active on issues like the referendum and the refugees, while the mainstream media stayed away from those topics.”

She also noted that during the elections, there was no clear distinction between paid and news content. “Openly PR material was published as interviews. There was no need for official paid advertising,” she added.

Another commonly shared concern by the panelists relates to the Russian capital invested in mainstream media and its influence on messaging. According to Georgiev, propaganda is expanding beyond news and current affairs and is now creeping into entertainment and light content. “A Bulgarian television series shown on TV 7 features the US president as a backbencher in a Masonic lodge, which instructs him to destroy European civilization—and the Russian president in the role of Bulgaria’s savior, packaged with secret societies, mystique, etc.,” said Georgiev.

The panelists also noted that in 2015, online and social media witnessed an invasion of trolls on an industrial scale, deployed to render any meaningful debate impossible.

Additionally, according to Draganov, there is a strong prevalence of institutional and purely protocol information both in the broadcast and in the print media. “Here’s an example: the president is awarding well-known figures from Bulgarian culture on the occasion of the Day of Bulgarian Culture. The report shows him speaking and handing out the awards and focuses several times on his advisers, showing only briefly just three of the awarded intellectuals without even mentioning their names. What is this? Total disrespect for the

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 and retain qualified personnel within the media profession.
- > 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 exist (investigative, economics/business, local, political).

According to Vassilev, quality remains the biggest challenge for Bulgarian media. “The media are superficial, lacking in objectivity, and openly manipulative, with a high degree of self-censorship, and quick to engage in smear campaigns,” he said.

people who are there to be celebrated. This is either journalism servitude or complete incompetence,” said Draganov.

Georgieva and Markov agreed that journalism is losing its professionalism. The quality of coverage of major news is falling; news is presented sometimes in a misleading way, even on the major national television stations. Someone following only those sources cannot receive a good picture of events.

According to Georgiev, attention sourcing and fact-checking is slipping; media organizations perform fewer and fewer checks on the information they are reproducing—fakes from unchecked sources. He quotes a number of copy-pasted publications claiming that the Spanish football team Real Madrid has decided to remove the cross from its coat of arms to please its fans in the Muslim world, a complete falsehood that none of the media cared to check.

In a similar case, news site big5.bg published a news item that Islamists had attacked the New Bulgarian University in Sofia. The news was completely invented, but that did not prevent a series of sites—such as dunavmost.bg, novinitednes.net, bunt.bg, and others—from copying it.

Daskalova added, “These cases are becoming more and more numerous, not just in superficial media, but also in some mainstream outlets. The media did not do the most basic check: calling the university to check the report. When somebody finally did, the official rebuttal was ‘drowned.’ A similar case was the fake news that the Council for Electronic Media had fined [bTV news anchor] Victoria Petrova for using the term ‘Roma summer’ [the Bulgarian equivalent of ‘Indian Summer’]. There seems to be a common denominator—many fake stories have anti-Muslim and anti-refugee overtones.”

Markov brought up the recent “news” about the “faked” US landing on the moon. The Peevski newspaper group published a secret interview with director Stanley Kubrick, who allegedly admitted he had faked the moon landing in a Hollywood studio. Interestingly enough, the newspapers quoted as their source the British newspaper *Express*, which

explicitly describes the interview as a fake. The media were quick to attach this “news” to other similar stories, such as claims that the Americans orchestrated the 9/11 attacks, etc.

Bedrov pointed out that this is not a Bulgarian phenomenon. “I’m not sure if we can measure whether Bulgarian media fall victim to such fakes easier than others, but the dangerous thing here is that such fakes in Bulgaria are a part of the hybrid war we’ve been talking about,” he said. “Another example is the faked mail with which Meglena Kuneva [the vice prime minister] allegedly quits the government. It was carried by bgnnes, a news agency, meaning every user takes it as verified. One of the reasons for the falling quality of reporting is the lack of resources. Media that used to employ a staff of 10 now support only one part-timer. Much of the content is produced by someone in front of a monitor, even without a phone,” Bedrov added.

According to Georgiev, some Bulgarian journalists have a confused understanding of what constitutes news, and when it needs to be checked. “They are confusing ‘news’ with ‘coverage.’ Telling correctly who said what at a press conference is being presented as ‘news,’ and not for what it is: free advertising for the people giving the press conference. Claims made at official events are taken at face value and are being disseminated to the audience as ‘breaking news.’ The fact that someone said something at a press conference doesn’t make that something a fact. The only fact is that someone has said it,” he said.

Galina Spasova, editor of the Health Media Group, pointed to another disturbing aspect of news production: “I’m shocked that major national media can prerecord their news. This is a step backward from any standards.”

The ethical standards that many of the media apply are highly questionable; as Dimitrov said, “Following the principle that ‘only bad news is good news,’ the media are flooding us with apocalyptic pictures, sometimes by exploiting personal tragedy to attract viewers.” Kirkovska added: “The trend of interviewing and victimizing victims of crime and violence is growing dangerously. The cases include interviewing the parents of the student killed in Veliko Tarnovo with a repeat on Nova TV; another case was the murder of a kid in the Borisova Gradina [a central park in Sofia]. The way it was done, showing pictures of the dead body, is a breach of basic professional standards.”

There were efforts to reboot self-regulation mechanisms in 2015, however. The National Council for Journalism Ethics restored its activities in early 2015 after a break of several years. Unlike the earlier arrangement, the Council now has one commission reviewing complaints against print, broadcast, and online media. The commission includes leading broadcast and print journalists from the

mainstream media, media experts, and lawyers and is chaired by Alexander Kashamov, a lawyer from the Access to Information Program.

Bedrov, who is a member of the commission, expressed doubts about its efficiency, though: "When the majority of the media is not real media but is only pretending, self-regulation becomes a strange exercise with very controversial results. Only the media which wish to participate are part of it; the others do not respect the code of ethics and do not participate, so nobody files complaints against them. We have a paradox where the complaints are against the good ones and not against the likes of Alfa or PIK; so when they see something wrong in Nova, they notice and complain. No matter what our decisions are, if you look at the list of complaints they are against the so-called normal newspapers and against the big television stations, which are again a lot more normal than the rest."

The panelists also noted that the Bulgarian Media Union (BMU) has adopted an alternative ethical code, which includes the majority of the Peevski-owned media. BMU has its own ethical commission, but according to Bedrov, it has not reviewed a single case yet. There are no signs of activity of this commission on the official site of BMU, either.

Working self-regulation mechanisms also exist in another part of the broadcast industry, advertising. The National Council for Self-Regulation of Advertising has been set up by the Bulgarian Association of Advertisers, the Bulgarian Association of Communication Agencies, and the Association of Bulgarian Commercial Broadcasters (ABBRO). It regularly reviews claims against advertisements that breach the ethical rules adopted by the industry, and gives professional advice to copywriters about the practical implementation of the guidelines.

The panelists were unanimous that journalists and editors practice self-censorship on a massive scale; it is becoming the norm rather than the exception. Bedrov gave an example from his experience as a trainer: "A young journalist had buried the lead of the story about a meeting between a former minister and citizens in a Sofia district. People became so angry with him that the politician was forced to flee the scene under police protection. Instead of leading, that was briefly mentioned in the last paragraph of the story. When I asked the reporter why, she said with some surprise, 'But he's a former minister.'"

Boyadzhiev added: "I don't think anyone here doubts the answer to the question about self-censorship. In the standard case, it sneaks through or is being imposed by the editors and the management because your job is at stake. I would like to draw your attention to the fact that the

general context is so dirty, there is so much intimidation and psychological pressure and this is beginning to play a role. Even if there are no specific threats or reasons to censor yourself at your workplace, this general environment starts crushing you morally and psychologically," he said.

Many of the panelists noted that there are some problems with indicators for media sustainability that had not been problematic in earlier years, such as whether journalists feel free to cover all key events and issues. Georgiev said, "I think we are starting to have an issue here. There are more and more events that are being ignored. One of them was the coverage of the referendum, which was more like a cover-up... Even the big media are becoming selective on which of the important stories to cover and which not. There's a serious danger, if you trust only what you see on television, to miss important news."

Daskalova added: "There seemed to be some progress in the previous two years. Now this year there's a setback; there are more taboos. There is indeed a distance between the citizen journalists' agenda and the agenda of the mainstream media. There are conflicting agendas, as if the mainstream and the citizen media are covering different worlds."

Georgieva provided another example. According to her, the media provided extremely unprofessional and unbalanced coverage of the campaign of the Chamber of Commerce and the Confederation of Industrialists around the energy prices. "Instead of covering the debate about it and the role of the so-called American power stations, the media carried only one side of the story in what was a political campaign. This is not just about presenting both sides of the story, which the media didn't do; they need to have a reasonable position on these issues which concern the price of electricity paid by all of us. The same goes for the hysteric provocations on an ethnic and racial basis. This is not happening."

Spasova thinks that this year's migrant crisis coverage has been too limited and unbalanced. She points out that the issue was not covered on time and in-depth.

Georgiev shared his concern that the news coverage follows the government's version of the event and does not look deeper. "During David Cameron's visit to Bulgaria," he said, "most of the coverage was about the inspection of the Turkish border. I'm not sure the audience understood that he was here to negotiate support for his EU reform initiative, including the cancellation of social services to Bulgarian citizens in the EU. The main agenda of the talks surfaced only a few days later in an interview of the deputy prime minister. The message was entirely changed: from reforming the social payments in the EU to Bulgaria as an example of

Boyadzhiev offered a different perspective, however: “In theory, the presumption is that journalists should be paid well enough to prevent them from taking bribes, but in our case, the very pay they receive from the owners is a kind of corruption. Journalists are hired to do for money exactly the opposite of what their profession requires.”

good border policing in Europe”—quite a contrast to what the UK media wrote about the visit.

Draganov echoed the observation: “It’s very irritating that the government’s promises are presented as upcoming news.”

According to Bedrov, the media coverage is getting worse because of ignorance but also because of dependencies and fear. “Not to understand the true reason for Cameron’s visit is probably ignorance; but not to look where the country’s money is going is a matter of habit. The majority of the Bulgarian media and journalists are used to the concept that this is not important. Even people who consider themselves top professionals and cover the news in a balanced way, quoting different opinion and positions, do not search for news stories. If no one has said that Peevski’s companies have received BGN 900 million (\$516.3 million) worth of public tenders, then the media wouldn’t say it, either.”

According to him, another issue that the media avoid are cyber-attacks against Bulgarian public and media sites from Russia. “There are topics absent from the media out of fear and financial dependencies. Peevski’s name can be mentioned, but no one dares ask the question: how can someone without taxed legal income start acquiring assets? OK, Peevski and Valentin Zlatev are talked about, but TIM [a company alleged to be a front for organized crime] and Vinprom Peshtera are totally absent from the media. Colleagues know what mentioning these two means: either withdrawal of advertising or direct action against the reporter,” Bedrov said.

Daskalova shared her experience with the attempts to limit hate speech: “Our foundation and CEM came up with an initiative before the elections that political parties will abstain from hate speech in the election campaign. The public commitment was signed by all mainstream parties except *Ataka*, and its media was full of hate speech, but they were not alone. The Patriotic Front signed it, too, but

then one of its leaders, Valery Simeonov, said on national television that the border police ‘should shoot to kill’ illegal immigrants. That happened after an incident in which a border guard killed an Afghan immigrant who had entered Bulgaria illegally. The problem here is with the journalists. They do not challenge the politicians for using hate speech, as required by the ethical standards. This is more the exception than the rule.”

Other panelists agreed that this was a real problem in covering the refugee crisis. According to Kirkovska, “The fact that the Patriotic Front signed the agreement against hate speech did not prevent its TV SKAT from using it. Throughout the year, maybe because of the refugee influx as well, there were more hate-speech voices, coming from beyond the usual suspects.”

Leading political figures, including the BSP’s mayoral candidate for Sofia, Michail Mirchev, and the former Constitutional Court justice, Georgi Markov, are allowed to go unchallenged when using hard hate-speech language on television, the panelists noted.

On several occasions throughout the year, there were significant cases of anti-Roma riots and protests across Bulgaria. Some of the media took a sensationalist approach to them and may have contributed to the increase of tension. According to Daskalova, two of the events—the riots in the village of Gurmen and in the Sofia district of Orlandovtzi—happened with serious media provocation. “The media intentionally overexposed hate speech both from the Bulgarians against the Roma and from Roma against the Bulgarians. That amounts to media instigation. The media used the one-way hate speech to justify ‘balancing’ it with hate speech in the opposite direction,” she concluded.

According to Georgiev, the media should protect the rights of citizens in vulnerable groups; instead we see the media leading campaigns against them.

The panelists thought that the pay levels for journalists and other media professionals are not high enough to discourage corruption and retain qualified personnel within the media profession; just the opposite is happening: salaries are being decreased, young people are leaving the profession, and students from the faculties of journalism search for better-paying jobs in communications and public relations. The situation is most critical at BNT, which is systematically underfunded and struggles to attract and retain young talent.

Boyadzhiev offered a different perspective, however: “In theory, the presumption is that journalists should be paid well enough to prevent them from taking bribes, but in our

case, the very pay they receive from the owners is a kind of corruption. Journalists are hired to do for money exactly the opposite of what their profession requires.”

Georgiev added: “This phenomenon starts being treated as something normal. I participated in a public discussion about the media where a respected intellectual attending the debate said that we shouldn’t expect too much from journalists—they are being paid to say what they are told to say. Initially, I wasn’t sure if that was only a provocation for debate, but then it seemed as a genuine opinion. The prevailing attitude is like that, and it was so much different in the 1990s.”

Despite the significant number of important events in 2015, the majority of the media gave prevalence to the entertainment content. According to Daskalova, “...exactly when the media cover serious events like the elections, one can see the prevalence of the entertainment element: instead of a meaningful debate, the media focused...on the marginalia, on the funny candidates and messages. Entertainment really dominated the political debate.”

The panelists complained about the kind of people mainstream television solicits to comment on key social and political developments. Chasing after higher ratings, even mainstream current-affairs talk shows seem to have quotas: if there’s no “diva” guest, there should be at least a footballer.

Business and economic reporting has all but disappeared from the main television channels, but it is expanding on cable channels, like Bulgaria on Air and Bloomberg, the panelists noted.

The regional media remain financially weak and vulnerable. According to Dimiter Lipovanski, owner of Arena Media, the majority of the regional reporters and editors are not professionally trained and need to learn on the job. The

variety of news sources in most of the cases is brought down to the press centers of the official institutions or the public relations agencies.

“Sixty percent of the management of the media in Ruse can’t recall ever joining the Code of Ethics or consulting its guidelines,” Lipovanski added. “With minor exceptions, there is no quality beat reporting, mainly because of the minimal staff of the media. We end up with the same reporter writing about crime and about culture. The competence level is low, which has a negative impact on the quality of the media production.”

According to Draganov, the news programs avoid serious information and in-depth analysis and turn instead toward institutional and protocol information, which includes ill-disguised public relations material, lifestyle gossip, and a small amount of event coverage. “Current-affairs programs had to become an alternative to state broadcasting and to include a vast range of opinion coming from the academic environment, from the citizen sector, and the various professional communities. In reality, the circle of opinion makers is limited to 10 to 15 permanent commentators on all national television channels, of whom just 10 percent could be perceived as truly authoritative. The young political scientists, philosophers, and artists, who should represent the future of Bulgaria, have no access to the programs which influence public opinion and analyze the major social and political events,” said Draganov.

Yet, there are bright exceptions. According to Galina Spasova, editor of the Health Media Group, the investigative site Bivol has accomplished 50 percent of the job of the whole media community this year. As already described, the site is publishing information from whistleblowers and investigations exposing high-level corruption.

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

Bulgaria Objective Score: 2.16

According to Vassilev, a plurality of news sources exists, but the journalists succumb to pressure and wind up in service to external interests to earn extra money. Public radio and television try to cover a wider range of viewpoints, but journalists tend to dominate some programs—especially on BNR—with their own opinions, he believes.

There are a couple of new television channels targeting previously unserved audiences, launched to address Bulgarian viewers worldwide—the Bulgarian International Television BiT, and for the business audience, Bloomberg Bulgaria.

Media access for small towns and villages is still restricted, compared with the big cities and the capital. According to Lipovanski, people in the region of Ruse, for example, have limited access to the digital television signal, because of the specifics of the terrain and because the multiplexes balked at investing additional funds to provide high-quality coverage with the signal.

Overall, Lipovanski painted a bleak picture of shrinking journalism outside the capital city: “The circulation of regional newspapers has fallen sharply, partially due to increased access to online information. The regional media are cutting back on the time and resources to produce original content, especially for news.” Furthermore, staff

turnover is high because of unsatisfactory pay, even for national media correspondents in the regions, he said, noting that former correspondents of the mainstream national media from Sofia are starting to look for secure (if not well-paid) jobs in public media. “The private television channels with national coverage use the same technical teams and sometimes the same correspondents from the regions, which results in very similar coverage of the events. The national media have less and less time for news from the region, and the newscasts are more and more Sofia-centered,” he lamented.

As for whether the public media are non-partisan, reflect the views of the political spectrum, and serve the public interest, a majority of the panelists pointed to the crisis at BNR as evidence to the contrary. At the same time, Georgiev noted that despite the serious financial restrictions, BNT is maintaining and expanding its repertoire of high-quality public-service programming. He shared his concern, though, that the trend may not be sustained if the upcoming appointment of a new director introduces someone more eager to serve the powerful people of the day than to protect professional and independent editorial standards. To an extent, changes in the media environment in 2015 can be traced to the changed ownership of some print and broadcast media outlets, especially the Peevski group’s involvement.

As Georgieva noted, if in previous assessments the panelists pointed to signs that Peevski was a behind-the-scenes owner exerting influence, now there is no doubt. “The lack of official reaction—by the regulatory bodies or by the prosecution—to the fact that he has admitted ownership is disturbing, since no one knows the origin of the money,” she added.

The lack of access to cash after the bankruptcy of KTB in 2014 led to the closing of the daily *Presa* and the magazine *Tema*, as well as the transformation of *Standard* and the website *Blitz*. According to the panelists, the concentration of media power in the hands of one conglomerate threatens the public’s right to be informed objectively.

According to Bedrov, after the failure of KTB the Peevski media group switched to funding from the European structural funds distributed to it by the government—in return for positive coverage.

As a significant media development, the panelists noted that some media organizations are changing their funding model to adapt to the limited and strictly controlled advertising market. One example quoted is the weekly *Kapital*, which has launched a paid online subscription.

A new media project tested how crowdfunding would work in Bulgaria but did not manage to take off: the Klinklin

MULTIPLE NEWS SOURCES PROVIDE CITIZENS WITH RELIABLE, OBJECTIVE NEWS.

PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES INDICATORS:

- > Plurality of public and private news sources (e.g., print, broadcast, Internet, mobile) exist and offer multiple viewpoints.
- > Citizens’ access to domestic or international media is not restricted by law, economics, or other means.
- > State or public media reflect the views of the political spectrum, are nonpartisan, and serve the public interest.
- > Independent news agencies gather and distribute news for media outlets.
- > Private media produce their own news.
- > Transparency of media ownership allows consumers to judge the 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
- > The media provide news coverage and information about local, national, and international issues.

site, which announced the launch of a media alternative run funded by the readers, has so far failed to gather the funding needed for the launch. Founded by young journalists and journalism students, the Klinklin initiative missed its initial launch date in September. As of December, it had managed to raise just above 11 percent of the BGN 50,000 (\$28,680) needed to get off the ground.

According to the panelists, the media fail to serve a broad spectrum of social interests. Points of view from minority and vulnerable groups are not represented; on the contrary, many endure being targeted by negative campaigns.

Georgiev shared his impression that there is a trend toward increased use of hate speech in the media. "It started many years ago, with the appearance of the political party Ataka and its media, which broke the taboo on the public usage of hate speech. Little by little, this spread to more and more media until it reached the mainstream. In 2015, we could see big media engage in campaigns against minorities, 'Sorosoids,' [organizations funded by the Open Society Foundations] homosexuals, etc.," he said.

According to Georgieva, censorship and self-censorship are more and more the rule in the regional media, driven mainly by local governments and local corporate interests. She pointed out that political pressure comes second and is a function of the corporate pressure over the media in the regions.

Daskalova pointed out that while Internet penetration is growing outside the big cities and reaching the villages, the distribution of print media is problematic. The Peevski-controlled Lafka distribution network flourishes in the small cities, amid complaints that it discriminates against the publications of other media groups. This creates problems with access to news in the rural areas. Some media are not available at all.

Markov, the former head of ABBRO, thinks that small radio stations are finding it harder and harder to operate. "The local advertisers are not sufficient to support them, and everything else goes to the big chains. Alternative forms of advertising are not tolerated. A local radio station in Sevlievo was recently fined by CEM for inviting a local businessman to participate in programs rather than pay for spots," he said.

Overall, Lipovanski painted a bleak picture of shrinking journalism outside the capital city: "The circulation of regional newspapers has fallen sharply, partially due to increased access to online information. The regional media are cutting back on the time and resources to produce original content, especially for news."

"Radio is a local media," Markov continued, "but still most of the licenses go to the chains, and there is very little remaining local programming, and the local audiences are not well served. The local radio stations sell their frequencies and go online in order to survive. There was a case like this in Gabrovo this year, but it's not the only example. In Samokov, there used to be three local radio stations, but there isn't a single one left now. All their licenses were bought by the chains. The programming is impersonal and does not relate to the local community."

Kirkovska also agrees that local radio and television stations are a rarity. "Most of the local stations have used legal means to transfer their licenses to the chains, but we should note that not all of them are only musical formats. Radio Focus, for example, is a news-oriented, poly-thematic program," she added.

Draganov said that most original content of the private television channels boils down to cheap entertainment reality shows, and the radio stations copy from each other the cheapest and most boring CHR-Top 40 format. "Talk radio is rare, and television infotainment is all over the airwaves. The events of deeper public interest are missing. The television scene is diverse, noisy, and superficial and lacks outstanding personalities. Yet, there are good exceptions—the *Tema* on Nova TV, *The Reporters* on bTV, some programs on BNT, and others," he added.

OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Bulgaria Objective Score: 1.48

Changing governments of various political colors have been using the state budget and the significant financial resources Bulgaria is receiving from the European structural funds to interfere directly with the advertising market. Pro-government media outlets receive contracts for communication campaigns of EU-funded projects and programs in exchange for favorable coverage; the government has become the biggest advertiser for a vast majority of media outlets. "Guess who will get most money from it—the channels that support the government or those critical of its actions?" Draganov asked. The situation is far worse for the regional and local media, most of which are completely dependent on the funding they receive from local governments.

According to Draganov, nearly half of Bulgaria's population is poorly educated and either works in a low-skilled job or depends on social payments. This is a problem for the country, but also for the television industry. "This huge part of the television audience has minimal, if any, esthetic culture and demands junk television production—pop folk music, cheap comedy sketches, and voyeuristic shows with ill-disguised pornography. It takes a lot of guts for the television program directors to plan something more demanding, but that's a risk the owners do not want to take," he added.

Newspapers account for 13.5 percent of the advertising market and have seen a growth of 8.2 percent in gross

and 2.9 percent in net revenues in 2014, according to Pierrot 97 data. Radio takes about 5.4 percent of the advertising volumes, but there is a complete lack of detailed information about the market, which some organizations believe is too small to justify expenses for professional measurement. Internet advertising shows significant growth in gross numbers, but falling net revenues. No reliable data for the amount of advertising on social media are available on the Bulgarian market.

The panelists said that the only newspapers that make money out of sales are some of the weekly tabloids and media for the pensioners. According to Spasova, the free newspapers also have good prospects. "Our circulation is about 100,000 weekly, though it used to be 300,000 two years ago. This is still big for Bulgaria, and the newspaper runs out immediately. This allows for high-quality content. Distribution is a problem, though," she shared.

Dimitrov said the advertising market is extremely twisted. There is a lot of cross-ownership between media and ad agencies, and advertising agency owners are directing the advertising budgets to the media they control. Government advertising is politically driven or serves the corporate interests of those close to the people in power.

According to Vassilev, the financial situation of the public media is very different. While BNT is chronically underfunded, BNR is overfunded. The different levels of pay in the two media act as a demoralizing factor, and Georgiev also thinks that there is no good reason why the top journalists on public television get many times less than their counterparts on national radio.

There has been a significant shift in the ownership of advertising agencies, the panelists noted. After decades of domination over the advertising market, the companies controlled by Krassimir Gergov have shifted toward the Peevski media group. Stoyanov believes that the advertising market was taken over by the Peevski group: "This is being used as leverage to influence the content of the national television channels," he said. Peevski has used the fact that the advertising agencies of the advertising mogul Krassimir Gergov had amassed debt owed to KTB and has managed to take control of them.

"The fact is that most of the agencies formerly controlled by Krassimir Gergov are currently in the hands of Peevski," Stoyanov said. "This makes Peevski the man who distributes the advertising money in Bulgaria. This is very visible by the content we can see on the four national channels and by looking at the advertisers and the advertised products."

Radev points out the striking imbalances exposed after KTB's bankruptcy in 2014, when it became clear that the bank had

MEDIA ARE WELL-MANAGED ENTERPRISES, ALLOWING EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE.

BUSINESS MANAGEMENT INDICATORS:

- > Media outlets operate as efficient and self-sustaining enterprises.
- > 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.
- > Government subsidies and advertising are distributed fairly, governed by law, and neither subvert editorial independence nor distort the market.
- > Market research is used to formulate strategic plans, enhance advertising revenue, and tailor the product to the needs and interests of the audience.
- > Broadcast ratings, circulation figures, and Internet statistics are reliably and independently produced.

been used to fund select media that ended up officially in the Peevski group.

“The suspicions that the bank had been used to buy media content proved true. Media outlets and publishing houses have been supplied with unguaranteed loans, and it’s shocking that the judiciary is not investigating how that money was siphoned off to corrupt the media. This hasn’t been limited to KTB; recent publications exposed that *Trud* owes a huge debt to First Investment Bank, and it’s not hard to see that the newspaper has been really active in supporting the projects funded by the bank, including a negative campaign against environmentalists who objected to its plans to expand the winter resorts at the expense of wilderness,” Radev added.

The dependence of regional media on the local governments and the oligarchs is even more pronounced than at the national level. As Lipovanski pointed out, the media in Ruse have so-called information service contracts with the local authorities, which have direct influence over their levels of self-censorship and over their editorial policies. The news is dominated by positive coverage of the local authorities. The local media offer few current-affairs programs, and investigative journalism is entirely missing. The local cable channels are doing a bit better, as they depend on fees rather than on revenues from advertising.

According to Georgieva, the government is supporting in all possible ways the existence of this vicious media model, funding the owners of media like Peevski through public tenders and EU funds. A second way is the direct funding, usually through EU funds, to these media to organize meaningless public events—for example, by *Trud* and *Standard*. The third way is by providing exclusive information and saturated participation in interviews.

“Keeping in mind the limited resources, it is quite amazing how so many print and broadcast media outlets exist in Bulgaria,” Draganov said. “This question takes us directly to the problem of influence peddling and the direct interdependence between media messages and political and corporate interests.”

The advertisers continue steering away from controversial publications. As Stoyanov commented, “You must have noticed that there isn’t much advertising in Bivol, despite the fact that we are one of the popular sites. Here’s what happens: if an advertiser decides to place an ad with us, he is immediately investigated by the tax authorities. There is serious pressure over potential advertisers. The pressure is so strong that even private citizens are wary of giving money to Bivol; they are afraid of being investigated. People who have donated money online refuse to have their names published.

“The fact is that most of the agencies formerly controlled by Krassimir Gergov are currently in the hands of Peevski,” Stoyanov said. “This makes Peevski the man who distributes the advertising money in Bulgaria. This is very visible by the content we can see on the four national channels and by looking at the advertisers and the advertised products.”

Bedrov explained that the advertising specialists use the term “non-controversial” media. “If you advertise a beer, you don’t want it to be in Bivol, not because you are afraid of the tax authorities, which will indeed come to investigate, but because the ad there may be seen as confrontational by a part of your target market,” he said. “The same goes for PIK. Even if they have the huge number of impressions they claim they have, the advertisers will not go there. Best for the advertisers are sites like [news portal and free-mail platform] DIR.bg, which no one loves nor hates, and keep a balanced position and publish everything.”

“But there’s a new phenomenon, which some of these sites are taking over from the printed press,” he continued. “When PIK publishes five consecutive stories that the cheese in Kaufland is spoiled and then all of a sudden they disappear, this is very suspicious. This is open racketeering,” Bedrov claimed. He also shared a personal experience: “We wanted to start a citizen initiative with a significant media presence, and we contacted friends with money; all of them were ready to support us financially but did not want their names published.”

Stoyanov encountered the influence of the advertisers firsthand. “I was working for a small agricultural television channel at the time I was also engaged in investigative journalism at Bivol, looking at the involvement of First Investment Bank into illegal siphoning of money from a Romanian public fund. All of a sudden, the bank approached the television channel with a request for advertising; a bit later I was no longer with them. The companies are used to this technique; once the media attacks them for something, no matter if it’s really their fault or not, they turn directly to the media to try and buy their peace,” he said. He learned later that “after the publication, the regional chief of police called the owner of the television station I was working for and warned him that if I’m not fired he will be beaten and

the police will find drugs and illegal guns in my home. This is why I had to leave.”

Bedrov picked up this story from his experience on the National Council on Journalistic Ethics, to which First Investment Bank complained about the publication’s investigation into its involvement with the Romanian public fund. “The letter of [First Investment Bank] is a classic example of a threat,” he said. “It is addressed to the prosecutor general, the head of the State Agency for National Security, the National Bank, the chair of parliament, the prime minister, to the Council of Electronic Media, and with a copy to us at the Committee of Journalism Ethics,” quoting a law that the media have allegedly violated. “For us it shouldn’t be a difficult decision; they haven’t indicated any specific violation of the Code of Ethics, and they haven’t asked the media for the right to reply. But the purpose of this letter is to serve as a threat. When the editor sees to whom the letter is addressed, he will be very careful the next time he writes about the bank; and it really doesn’t matter whether the letter will have any legal consequences. Some of the best lawyers have been hired to write it; they are always ready to write a new one.”

The big advertisers have won themselves the position of the “sacred cows” in media. As Georgiev puts it, “...you can only publish negative facts about a bank when it’s too late and it’s already officially bankrupt. For the mobile operators, there’s a short window of opportunity while they are being sold to someone. It’s far easier to write about the prime minister or about the prosecutor general than about some of the media’s main advertisers.”

Bulgaria’s media market remains difficult to measure, as there are no reliable data about circulations, ratings, and the actual price of advertising. According to the Pierrot 97 advertising agency, which depends on data provided by the media themselves, the volume of the entire media market in 2014 was BGN 1.328 billion (\$762 million) gross and BGN 305.54 million (\$175.3 million) net. The gross figure for television, BGN 995.7 million (\$571 million), is about 5 percent higher on an annual basis, but the net figure

is down by 2.5 percent. This decrease is the result of two factors: the shrinking budgets of some of the big advertisers and the increased number of television outlets pushing down prices for television spots.

According to Draganov, this is extremely insufficient and forces all television stations to operate as “low-cost” television. He believes that bTV alone (allegedly the station with the highest advertising revenues) needs at least BGN 125 million (\$71.7 million) net to be able to operate; instead it has BGN 285 million (\$164 million) of debt. “And there are about 45 other television channels on air. This means only one thing: the media, especially the broadcast media, do not have sufficient financial independence, which endangers their editorial independence as well.”

There are two people-meter agencies, locked in market battles: GARB and Nielsen/Admosphere. One favors Nova while the other one gives higher ratings to bTV, and the market remains in the gray zone. Daskalova said, “I wonder how the advertisers put up with this...the media market operates on the basis of incomplete, inaccurate, and sometimes deliberately manipulated audience research data,” she added.

“As for the people-meter agencies, it is war,” Georgieva said. “It started at the end of last year and continues still. The big differences are in the data for bTV, up to 10 rating points, which is decisive about its leading role in the media market. This is huge. There is a similar situation with the radio advertising market, but the amounts are far lower; thus, we do not hear about it so much.”

Broadcast, print, and the online media markets all suffer from the complete lack of reliable audience data: two people-meter agencies provide conflicting data about the viewership of the main channels, no audit bureau of circulation exists to verify newspaper circulation figures, and online visitor data are being manipulated to create fake impression of popularity of propaganda sites. The audit bureau of circulation briefly launched a few years ago never managed to take off and has completely disappeared.

OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

Bulgaria Objective Score: 2.11

The panelists were unanimous that Bulgaria's supporting institutions are very weak ("vegetating," as Vassilev put it) and unable to effectively protect journalists and media organizations.

The organizations of the publishers and ABBRO still press on, consolidated around the shared interests of the owners. By contrast, professional journalist unions are inactive, and very few NGOs active in the media sphere have remained. According to Boyadzhiev, "The organizations representing the interests of the owners and editors of the private media are more numerous and active than anything related to professional associations working to protect journalists' rights and promote quality journalism or NGOs supporting free speech and independent media."

Markov commented, "ABBRO has shifted sharply toward the interests of its television members. When it started, it was a radio organization. The majority of local media have been sold to the radio chains, and they have become the dominant factor in ABBRO. ABBRO used to provide professional assistance for its members, through various workshops and training; now this is completely gone... the role of ABBRO has been marginalized. It serves a symbolic purpose or is being used as a façade to hide other interests," he added.

SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS FUNCTION IN THE PROFESSIONAL INTERESTS OF INDEPENDENT MEDIA.

SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS INDICATORS:

- > Trade associations represent the interests of media owners and managers and provide member services.
- > Professional associations work to protect journalists' rights and promote quality journalism.
- > NGOs support free speech and independent media.
- > Quality journalism degree programs exist providing substantial practical experience.
- > Short-term training and in-service training institutions and programs allow journalists to upgrade skills or acquire new skills.
- > Sources of media equipment, newsprint, and printing facilities are apolitical, not monopolized, and not restricted.
- > Channels of media distribution (kiosks, transmitters, cable, Internet, mobile) are apolitical, not monopolized, and not restricted.
- > Information and communication technology infrastructure sufficiently meets the needs of media and citizens.

The Union of Bulgarian Journalists (UBJ) and the Association of European Journalists (AEJ) are among the few functioning media support organizations, but UBJ is not broadly respected and AEJ is seen as quite powerless.

According to Daskalova, "UBJ has been working on a draft law for the protection of journalists. This has been going on for five years—this should be one of the laws that take the longest time to be written. AEJ, meanwhile, is becoming more and more established as a trustworthy organization. They receive and review alerts related to pressure on journalists. They react quickly and make their voices heard. But that's the general problem—our instruments end with the public declaration of support. We don't have the instruments to do something more effective and serious."

The panelists noted that there is a need for serious legal support for journalists who have been victims of attacks, but it is not freely available, which is a serious problem for the smaller publications.

Everyone praised the Access to Information Program for the support it gives to journalists and media looking for public information. Since its establishment in 1996, the program has been working to improve legislation and practices to make information more accessible, and it has attracted diverse donor funding—making it one of the few sustainable NGOs active in the information field. The Access to Information Program is also very well integrated in the international networks of organizations working for freedom of information. Unfortunately, though, support with other kinds of legal expertise for the media is not available.

The panelists discussed the increasing Kremlin-style propaganda attacks against the NGOs, including those involved in media development and against the donors supporting them. Some panelists reported that the Peevski media are tracking organizations that receive funds from the America for Bulgaria Foundation, the Norway Fund, and other donor programs supporting the media and are publishing accusations that the NGOs serve external political interests. For example, several print and online media published a list of "Sorosoids," including the names, pictures, and positions of members of NGOs supported by the Open Society Foundations founded by George Soros. In this "naming and shaming" campaign, the term "Sorosoid" is used to describe people being paid by Soros "to betray their country," following the example of similar campaigns in Putin's Russia.

"The media monopolies are creating an air of suspicion against NGOs, which is hard to disperse," added Vassilev. Daskalova commented, "There is a systematic effort to

Daskalova commented, “There is a systematic effort to compromise the public image of the NGOs, which hampers our ability to support high-quality journalism. It’s very unpleasant to know that your actions will be interpreted as a threat to national security or something like that.”

compromise the public image of the NGOs, which hampers our ability to support high-quality journalism. It’s very unpleasant to know that your actions will be interpreted as a threat to national security or something like that. The media participate in this campaign as well; they selectively extract from our reports, take things out of context, and use them for defamatory purposes,” she said.

Bedrov expressed skepticism about the support NGOs can provide to the media. “As a voice from within, I can tell you that there’s absolutely no respect toward any of the media organizations,” he said. “The UBJ is not even being considered. AEJ is seen as a bunch of nice young people writing declarations, but that’s it, to say nothing of organizations like Media Democracy. There’s a complete lack of trust and a full understanding that we are left on our own. Everybody knows that. I can mention a few flash mobs that have been organized, but this is an *ad hoc* reaction and not sustainable. Last year, when someone set [bTV reporter] Genka Shikerova’s car on fire, we just decided to organize something quickly, and we managed to gather maybe 200 journalists for a protest in front of the Ministry of the Interior. This year, the journalists covering the SJC agreed to disregard Volen Siderov’s appearance there. The photojournalists are uniting now and will be complaining against the National Security Service of physical abuse during official events. In other words, there is sporadic reaction of a flash-mob type, but no trust in organizations or unions,” Bedrov concluded.

As for professional training, organizations like AEJ and the Media Development Center provide some sporadic workshops, but there is very limited interest on behalf of the media community.

Daskalova shared her disappointment: “There are such programs, but there’s very limited interest. The editors do not let the journalist attend, and most of the reporters and students do not want to attend. We managed to put together a very good program with top-notch journalism

trainers, but we had to literally beg some students to attend. It’s very sad, that people are not interested in enlarging their professional horizons,” she added.

The panelists find some explanation in the fact that there is no direct link between the level of skills acquired by the students and trainees and their future employability. As Markov puts it, finding work with advanced skills is challenging. “The students become really good, even surprisingly good, but they can’t find a place to work and further develop these skills,” he said.

Daskalova added, “Even if you have advanced professional skills, they are not of any help in the media environment we’ve been discussing. Good journalists are not in high demand.” Kirkovska underscored the growing commercialization of the students’ thinking. “Young people prefer the ‘shortcuts’ to media education—for example, the masters programs offered by the Foundation of [Nova TV anchors] Lora Krumova and Galya Shturbeva—and bypass longer academic programs,” she added, putting the practical ahead of the difficult work of building up professional expertise in journalism.

Spasova noted that there are no more professional schools inside the media. “This instinct which the big media used to have—to bring in and nurture young journalists—seems to be forgotten or neglected,” she said.

On a positive note, the panelists noted that the physical and information infrastructure for the development of the media remains mostly favorable. Traditionally in Bulgaria, since the early 1990s, the sources of media equipment, newsprint, and printing facilities have not been subject to political restrictions and are not monopolized. The physical infrastructure for the distribution of information, including communications technology infrastructure, is satisfactory and meets the needs of media and citizens.

Broadband Internet penetration, however, remains a problem in the rural areas of the country. While Bulgarian cities, where most of the population lives, enjoy fast and very cheap Internet access, the connectivity in some of the villages relies almost entirely on mobile phone operators and is too expensive to be used by all, especially given the country’s demographics. Most of the people living in the villages are older and less educated. The low demand for Internet services has discouraged communications companies from investing in these areas, creating a digital divide between the younger and more active urban population and the elderly people living in the countryside. On the other hand, the massive migration of young Bulgarians to work or study in the EU is increasing the demand for digital communication, and the elderly are already adopting basic Skype skills to keep in touch with family members abroad.

The distribution channels for Bulgaria's broadcast and online media are not restricted. This is not always the case with print distribution, where a chain of news kiosks owned by the Peevski group has tried to push independent distributors out of the market, so far with limited success. A bigger problem is the weak demand and falling circulations of print media, which have discouraged media from investing in distribution networks, and many rural areas do not receive printed press on a regular basis. People living in these areas rely on television, including cable and DTH, for their news and information.

"Looking at the bigger picture, there are no objective reasons for the negative trends in the media in Bulgaria we are observing. All the problems we are experiencing are created by the media owners and the political and corporate masters they serve," Vassilev concluded, to everyone's approval.

List of Panel Participants

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Yassen Boyadzhiev, chair, Free Speech Forum; editor, Mediapool.bg, Sofia

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

Ivan Radev, board member, Association of European Journalists, Sofia

Dilyana Kirkovska, chief expert, Council for Electronic Media, Licensing and Analytical Department, Sofia

Nicoletta Daskalova, media expert and lecturer, Media Democracy Foundation, Sofia

Galina Spasova, editor, Health Media Group, Sofia

Dimiter Stoyanov, journalist, investigative reporting website Bivol, Sofia

Ivan Bedrov, deputy editor-in-chief, Club Z.bg, Sofia

Krassimir Dimitrov, owner, Radio MIXX, Burgas

Dimiter Lipovanski, owner, Arena Media, Russe

Boyko Vassilev, editor and program host, Bulgarian National Television, Sofia

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