

# BULGARIA



## MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX 2019

Tracking Development  
of Sustainable  
Independent Media  
Around the World



# BULGARIA

## AT A GLANCE

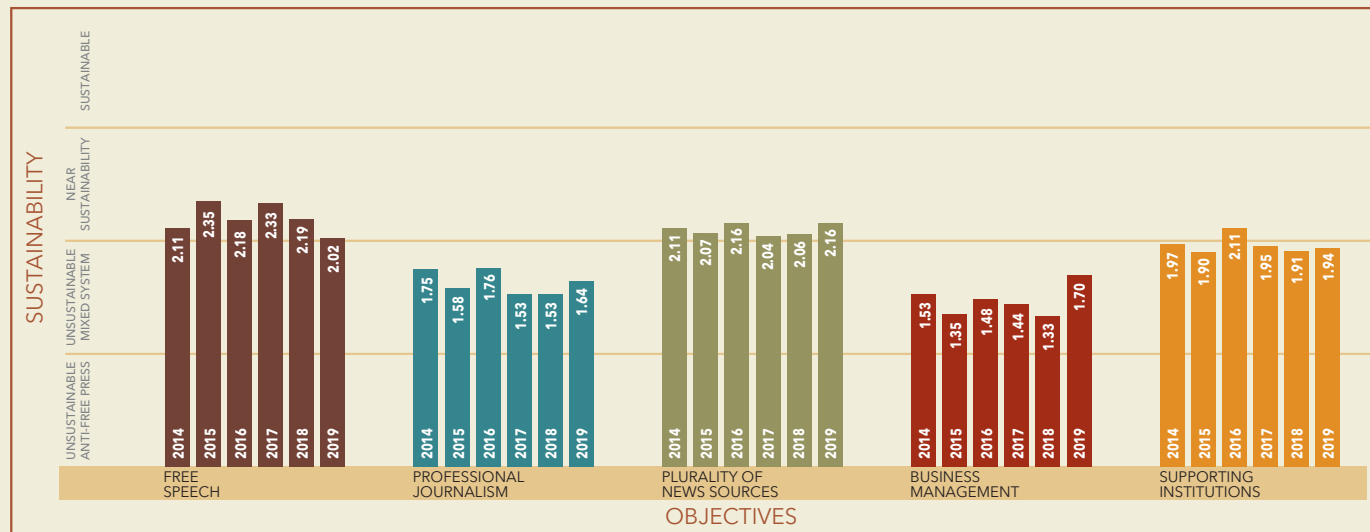
### GENERAL

- **Population:** 7,050,034 (CIA World Factbook, July 2018 est.)
- **Capital City:** Sofia
- **Ethnic groups:** (% of population): Bulgarian 76.9%, Turkish 8%, Romani 4.4%, other 0.7% (including Russian, Armenian, and Vlach), other (unknown) 10% (CIA World Factbook, 2011 est.)
- **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% (CIA World Factbook, 2011 est.)
- **Languages:** (% of population): Bulgarian (official) 76.8%, Turkish 8.2%, Romani 3.8%, other 0.7%, unspecified 10.5% (CIA World Factbook, 2011 est.)
- **GNI:** (2016 - Atlas): \$53.69 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2017)
- **GNI per capita:** (2016 - PPP): \$17,880 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2017)
- **Literacy rate:** 98.4% (male 98.7%, female 98.1%) (CIA World Factbook, 2015 est.)
- **President or top authority:** President Rumen Radev (since January 22, 2017)

### MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- **Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations:**
- **Print:** 245 newspapers, 603 magazines (National Statistical Institute, 2017); Radio stations: 85 (Council of Electronic Media, 2018); Television stations: 113 (Council of Electronic Media, 2018)
- **Newspaper circulation statistics:** 196,288 total (National Statistical Institute, 2017); certified individual newspaper circulations not available
- **News agencies:** Bulgarian News Agency (state), Focus News (private), BGNes (private)
- **Broadcast ratings:** bTV: 24.27% share, Nova TV: 21.65% share, BNT Channel 1: 4.03% share source: Nielsen Admosphere Bulgaria, October 2017
- **Internet usage:** 72.1% of households (National Statistical Institute, 2018)

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### SCORE KEY

**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.



While participants in the Bulgaria MSI discussion have continued to give low grades to the media environment across all five objectives, Bulgaria's overall score increased from 1.81 in last year's study to 1.89. Despite this modest gain, the country remains in the unsustainable MSI classification. Objective 1 (freedom of speech) saw a decline, reflecting a general weakness of the rule of law and uneven application of laws and protections that do exist, among other factors. Additionally, as Bulgaria's media scene is a patchwork of outlets used to advance owner interests and handicap rivals, professional standards suffer. Journalists increasingly practice self-censorship to protect themselves from political, corporate, and criminal pressure.

The year of 2018 began with Bulgaria taking the helm of the European Union (EU) for a rotating six-month term. Among its priorities was to advance Western Balkan countries' links to the EU and their eventual membership in the bloc. By midyear, just after relinquishing the EU presidency, Bulgaria had refused to ratify a Council of Europe convention meant to combat domestic violence. In the fall, an investigative reporter was murdered in the northern city of Ruse, leading to speculation that she was killed in retaliation for her work. That speculation ended, however, when police in Germany arrested a Bulgarian man who confessed to the crime as a random attack. In November, Bulgarian authorities arrested high-ranking officials and accused them of selling false documents to people from nearby non-EU countries. The intent was to enable them to obtain Bulgarian passports, with which they could live and work in any EU country. A short time later, a deputy prime minister stepped down after weeks of protests spurred by his insults of activists for the disabled.

The summary above reflects the environment in which Bulgarian journalists work. It's a country making fitful progress, held back sometimes by a decades-old history of corruption and often wracked by political protests. Moreover, Bulgaria has seen a steep decline in media freedoms since it joined the union in 2007. In just over a decade, it has plummeted from 36th to 111th place in Reporters Without Borders' ranking for freedom of the media.

In its most recent annual report on judicial reform and organized crime in Bulgaria, the EU said the country's deteriorating media environment has particular obstacles with transparency, accountability, and the public's access to reliable information. Further, the 2018 European Media Pluralism Monitor, conducted by the Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom, concluded that pluralism in Bulgarian media was imperiled by highly concentrated media ownership, media owners' improper influence, and an unregulated system for placing state advertising. The Monitor also cited the dangers of "soft censorship and self-censorship; manipulation of editorial content; media market deformation; use of EU funds for buying media compliance and paying for smear campaigns against political opponents."

In 2018, Bulgarian politicians continued to try to grab the reins of public media. Vezhdi Rashidov, chair of parliament's Culture and Media Committee, suggested consolidating the three public outlets (Bulgarian National Television (BNT), Bulgarian National Radio (BNR), and the Bulgarian Telegraph Agency (BTA)). Journalists and other media professionals have repeatedly rejected the idea, fearing that that structure would be more vulnerable to government control than three separate public entities, each with its own governance structure.



**OBJECTIVE 1:  
FREEDOM OF  
SPEECH**

2.02

**Freedom of speech is protected by the Bulgarian constitution and legislation. The constitution states that “the press and other media are free and not subject to censorship.” Nevertheless, the country suffers from a general weakness of the rule of law and authorities do not always apply these norms and protections.**

European legal standards have been incorporated into Bulgarian media law, but the law is often circumvented or even changed to favor powerful interests, said panelist Nelly Ognyanova, a professor at Sofia University. What is more, bodies that would traditionally defend the integrity of media law are themselves compromised. “The independence of the judiciary is problematic, which makes the judicial protection of media freedom problematic,” Ognyanova said.

Panelist Stoyana Georgieva, editor-in-chief of the Mediapool news website, summed up the problem in this way: “The media have become both a victim and an instrument of sham democracy — a victim because they have been neutered by oligarchic interests, and an instrument because many now serve these interests, misleading society.”

Politicians and other public officials often pressure journalists and block access to information. According to Georgi Lozanov, a senior editor at the BTA News Agency, Bulgarians have come to question the value of free speech, thanks to a conservative-nationalist attack on liberalism. “We’ve come to the point where the unenviable place of Bulgaria in the international charts of freedom of speech is being blamed on the organizations that make them,” he said.

These issues have eroded citizens’ confidence in the media. A September 2018 study by the respected Alfa Research agency found that only 10 percent of Bulgarians trust journalists and 63 percent do not believe the country’s press is independent.

Panelists noted that despite the clear conflict of interest, some parliament members that own media properties sponsor media-related legislation. One of the most brazen is Delyan Peevski, a member of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms. Peevski owns the *Monitor*, *Telegraph*, *Politics*, *Meridian Match*, and *Borba* newspapers and holds sway over others. Last year, he pushed through parliament a law requiring media properties to disclose their sources of funding aside from their own business activities. The law’s reach is highly selective: it does not require disclosure of the business model behind his own media empire (funded largely by government advertising) but targets the business model of his competitors, who now must declare donor grants and individual donations. In its most recent annual assessment of media independence, Reporters without Borders called Peevski “the most notorious embodiment” of the “aberrant state” of Bulgarian media.

Among the many examples of improper influence on the Bulgarian media, panelists cited the case of Anton Todorov, a parliament member from the ruling GERB (the Bulgarian acronym for Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria) party, and his live interview on the highly rated Nova TV. Under tough questioning from journalist Victor Nikolaev, Todorov told Nikolaev that he would be yanked off the air if he did not ease up, just as one of his journalist colleagues had been. The resulting outcry led to Todorov’s resignation from parliament.

Panelist Ilia Valkov, a reporter for the Club Z website, said that media owners also use their

properties to attack rivals or to court favor with the government.

Broadcasters in Bulgaria must be licensed by the Council for Electronic Media (CEM). The president appoints some of the council’s members, and parliament chooses others. According to the panelists, there is a widespread belief that the appointment process is politicized.

**Legal and social norms protect and promote free speech and access to public information.**
**FREE-SPEECH INDICATORS**

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

Television and radio programs distributed via cable and satellite are subject to a much looser registration process, as they do not use publicly administered broadcast frequencies. In 2017 and

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2018, 21 new cable radio channels were licensed, nearly all by the handful of private networks that own the majority of Bulgaria's broadcast radio stations. These large companies have rushed in to fill the void created by the independent, local broadcast radio stations that have closed or been sold.

Panelists said that the government places no significant political restrictions on licensing. Notably, the opposition Bulgarian Socialist Party received a license for a cable TV channel, which went on the air in 2019. While political parties are not banned from establishing their own broadcast media, the practice so far has been limited to smaller nationalist parties such as Ataka (Attack), which owns the Alpha channel. CEM closely monitors Alpha and has sanctioned the channel repeatedly for hate speech and promoting ethnic intolerance.

Market entry and tax laws for media are fair and comparable to other industries. The media receive neither specific taxes nor tax benefits. Broadcast radio and television stations pay reasonable license and registration fees to the CEM, and they pay fees to telecommunication companies that broadcast their signals. However, because the broadcast media market is relatively small and crowded, there has been little interest in launching new channels lately. Experts on the television advertising market have said that Bulgaria's national scale can support only the three current nationwide channels.

Though officials find various petty ways to harass journalists, occasionally reporters are the targets of serious violence. Reporter Hristo Geshov was attacked in May in front of his house in broad daylight, for his investigation of officials in the small northern town of Cherven Bryag misusing public funds. Before the attack, Geshov had received veiled threats, including the comment "Rest in Peace" posted on his Facebook page. Additionally,

two journalists were arrested and briefly held near the western town of Radomir in September. Bulgarian reporter Dimitar Stoyanov from the Bivol investigative website, and Attila Biro, his Romanian colleague from the RISE investigative project, were looking into the misuse of EU funds, based on documents Bivol had received. After their first story was published, Bivol received a tip that the organizations involved in the transactions were getting rid of their computers and destroying documents. Bivol reported the tip to Bulgaria's anti-corruption police. But the reporters, unconvinced the authorities would act, went with a lawyer to the field outside Radomir where the papers were being burned, and police took them into custody. Finally, Ivo Prokopiev, owner of the *Capital* weekly and Dnevnik website, is being prosecuted for money laundering in what Reporters Without Borders called "judicial harassment." Prokopiev said he is being punished for a report in *Capital* about alleged misappropriation of state property by a business owner close to the government.

Bulgarian law treats libel and defamation as criminal offenses "of a private nature," meaning that cases are brought by a plaintiff, not a prosecutor. Libelous or defamatory claims made via the media or about public officials in relation to their positions are punishable by fines of BGN 5,000 to BGN 15,000 (\$2,900 to \$8,600).

In a landmark case in 2000, the Supreme Court of Cassation ruled that if journalists have checked their facts using available and accessible sources of information, they should not be deemed to have acted with malice or negligence and should not be found guilty of libel. The same ruling said that public figures may be subject to a higher level of public criticism than private citizens.

Libel plaintiffs may also sue under civil law for damages. Most such lawsuits are brought by local

government officials against local reporters covering corruption or mismanagement. Panelist Vessislava Antonova, a *Capital* reporter, cited two such cases. One involved the mayor of Cherven Bryag against Hristo Geshov (whose attack is mentioned earlier) for an article exposing the alleged misuse of city funds, and the other was brought by a Blagoevgrad's City Council member against Marieta Dimitrova for an investigation into alleged abuse of national energy efficiency funds. Courts have generally ruled for reporters in such cases, but the proceedings can be lengthy and expensive, and powerful people often use lawsuits to intimidate local media.

For more than a decade, Bulgaria has had a freedom of information law that meets international standards and has generally been enforced. In early 2019, however, parliament broadened the legal definition of personal data that could be protected from freedom of information requests. The ruling has made media use of personal information subject to regulators' scrutiny.

**"The independence of the judiciary is problematic, which makes the judicial protection of media freedom problematic," Ognyanova said.**

Panelist Petko Georgiev, director of the BTC ProMedia Foundation, said the interpretation of personal data in the new law, which was pending at the time of the 2018 panel discussion, reaches beyond its stated purpose. He said the intent is to align Bulgarian law with the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), but it might pose a danger to journalists. Antonova noted that a lawyer for the Access to Information Program, a leading transparency group in Bulgaria, had warned that

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violations are defined too generally in the law and could lead to censorship.

Authorities do not restrict access to international news or news outlets. Media and citizens can freely use the internet to gather information about international events. Media access to international news agencies is limited only by ability to pay the subscription fees. Most professional media pay for photographs and video content and use proper attribution.

The law allows anyone to work as a journalist or study journalism, and reporters are not subject to licensing to carry out their jobs. Freelancers and bloggers are not denied access to events for lacking journalism credentials. However, covering state institutions is subject to accreditation. The number of accreditations a media organization may obtain is limited, but that has not been used as a means to restrict media coverage. Freelancers and bloggers must apply in advance to cover particular events at state institutions and can usually get a temporary accreditation. According to media analyst Nikoletta Daskalova from the Media Democracy Foundation, access to the journalism profession is free, but national and local officials favor or freeze out certain journalists based on whether they think the journalists' outlets are friendly or hostile.

### OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

1.64

**Given that Bulgaria's media scene is a collection of outlets used to advance owner interests and handicap rivals, professional standards suffer. Journalists increasingly practice self-censorship to protect themselves from political, corporate, and criminal pressure.**

Panelists said that propaganda is often presented as news in Bulgaria. "An aggravating circumstance in the country is the living social memory of communism, when journalism was officially replaced by propaganda," said Lozanov of the BTA News Agency.

Georgieva, of the Mediapool news website, said that only a handful of independent media try to practice honest and objective journalism with verified sources. "The majority of the print media, most of which are owned or controlled by Delyan Peevski, and their websites conduct open propaganda campaigns against politicians, public figures, magistrates, publishers, journalists, and civil society activists who criticize the government or expose the links among oligarchs, people in power, and the judiciary," she said.

Ognyanova corroborated by saying, "The media surrounding ... Delyan Peevski spread rumors about people whose views are critical of ruling figures like Peevski himself, or of the unlimited power of the prosecutor general." She also cited the program "More from the Day" on public broadcaster BNT1 as "an example of a campaign against critical voices on the public media screen."

Anna Tsoleva, a Nova TV presenter who left the airwaves last year, told the *Dnevnik* website a month before her departure, "Every day, efforts are underway to make journalism a dirty and disreputable profession. There are people who call themselves journalists who are in fact peddlers of propaganda. These so-called journalists are on retainer for the powerful of the day. They twist the truth and have no problem with flat-out lying."

Official circulation figures are not available, but a survey by the Media Links agency in 2018 found that Peevski's *Telegraph* was the country's most-read newspaper. Roughly 15 percent of Bulgarians over 18 said they had read it at least once in the past year.

### Journalism meets professional standards of quality.

#### PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM INDICATORS

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

Bulgaria has a media ethics committee that receives complaints, but its work has had no appreciable effect on the field. According to the committee's latest available report<sup>1</sup>, the most common transgressions include discrimination against minority groups, inaccuracies in the print media, and violations of privacy.

Ognyanova said that "there are still many violations," but noted that standards are respected by broadcast media, which are regulated. Valkov said newsroom layoffs have made it more difficult

<sup>1</sup> <http://mediaethics-bg.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/%D0%9E%D0%A2%D0%A7%D0%95%D0%A2-%D0%B7%D0%B0-%D0%B4%D0%B5%D0%B9%D0%BD%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%82%D1%82%D0%B0-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%9D%D0%A1%D0%96%D0%95-%D0%B7%D0%B0-2016-%D0%B3.pdf>

to check information, and now “copy-paste journalism is at its height.” Still, Lozanov said, national broadcast media are more serious about standards than the proliferation of websites that are obvious propaganda vehicles. A similar, and growing, problem is reporters’ use of social media posts as unverified information sources.

Self-censorship often determines what reporting sees the light of day, as the Association of European Journalists – Bulgaria noted in its October 2017 report on freedom of the press<sup>2</sup>. “Self-censorship is a constant companion and part of reality for many media and journalists. Economic uncertainty is an important factor in this respect,” said panelist Katerina Buyuklieva, director of the Media Connection ad agency. The problem is especially acute in regional media, which make money by publishing announcements and advertising from local governments.

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The labor market for journalists in Bulgaria is in serious crisis, with an overabundance of low-quality media paying meager wages. Journalists are loath to

stick their necks out to oppose editorial decisions or defend professional principles.

Panelists said that media either do not cover certain stories and personalities, or cover them solely in a misleading or negative light. Lozanov said that journalists at most outlets could lose their jobs by violating this unwritten rule. “The risk is not so much in entirely excluding events and problems from media coverage, as in discounting their significance,” he said, adding that citizen journalism, typically blogs or social media posts, tends to fill in the areas ignored by traditional reporting outlets.

Panelist Ivan Radev of the Association of European Journalists said that the profession is not respected, salaries are low, and reporters live in economic insecurity. According to a survey by his organization, the average monthly pay for a reporter is BGN 1,000 to BGN 1,500 (\$580 to \$870), around the national average (BGN 1,190, \$650). Further, he said, media members make little investment in training and professional development. People are leaving the profession, and most journalism school graduates opt for careers in public relations or communications.

Current affairs programming and analytical journalism is eclipsed by entertainment formats. “Serious journalism is increasingly giving way to so-called infotainment, especially in the electronic media,” Valkov said. The morning talk shows of national TV channels, long devoted to politicians and political issues, have turned to crime reports and lifestyle formats.

A conflation of journalism and entertainment has further eroded standards. For example, the highly rated *Lords of the Air* on Nova TV and *Slavi’s Show* on bTV present entertainment content but often take on the functions of investigative or current affairs programs. They air superficial commentary alongside serious topics. Recently, for instance, the

*Slavi’s Show* host was roundly criticized for being unprepared and asking shallow, softball questions in an interview with Prime Minister Boyko Borisov. “We’ve reached a point where the anchor of a satirical show, Slavi Trifonov, has been blasted by media critics for not asking the right questions in his interview with the prime minister, rather than for pretending to be a political journalist,” Lozanov said.

Panelists said that Internet access is not a problem for journalists or their consumers, but strained budgets put the latest equipment and technology out of reach for many media. Digitization of public media archives is one task that remains undone for the lack of technology.

As funds dwindle throughout the media sector, many outlets give up covering certain beats. Public media still support more specialized reporting, but even their beat reporters sometimes lack the necessary skills or knowledge. The same reporter might cover crime, politics, energy issues, or protests in Roma neighborhoods. As a result, reports can lack the depth that a knowledgeable niche reporter can bring, and they are more prone to inaccuracies.

Genuine investigative reporting is rare and is often ignored by those with the power to implement reforms. Panelists said that the few investigations that do appear in pro-government media are usually spurred by a controlled leak of information to achieve a certain political or commercial objective — perhaps to target an opposition figure or harm a competitor.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.aej-bulgaria.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Голямото-завръщане-на-политическия-настик-2017.pdf>

**OBJECTIVE 3:  
PLURALITY  
OF NEWS**

2.16

**Bulgarians have unrestricted access to a good variety of media, whether cable, online, broadcast, print, domestic, or foreign. In addition to traditional media, more than 2 million Bulgarians are on Facebook. “The number of media channels is very large for the size of the Bulgarian market,” Buyuklieva said.**

Access to media is affordable, even for consumers on social assistance, panelists said. Most households have Internet access and subscribe to a cable operator, and thus receive a huge variety of channels. Television is the most consumed medium in Bulgaria, with people usually spending more than three hours a day watching. The most trusted news source is public radio, and Facebook is the most widely used social network. *Telegraph*, owned by Peevski, is the most popular and cheapest daily newspaper.

However, a variety of media has not translated into a variety of viewpoints. “The large number of media outlets does not mean pluralism – most are tabloids and sensationalistic media,” Ognyanova said. Georgieva said the most-watched and thus most influential outlets, the private Nova and bTV, along with state-owned BNT, all follow editorial lines friendly to the government and big advertisers “and thus represent no threat to the centers of power.”

Foreign media are not censored, but the language barrier prevents some consumers from taking advantage of them. As a result, not everyone in the country enjoys equal access to information, panelists said.

Public television fails to offer a variety of views. Instead, it frequently features politicians from the

ruling majority. “The content of the state/public media changes very slowly and doesn’t meet the needs of the audience. That’s why it’s losing viewers and it’s no longer a serious factor in shaping public opinion,” Buyuklieva said.

BNT was once an independent-minded channel, but panelists said the government brought it to heel with the 2017 appointment of General Director Konstantin Kamenarov. He is close to a high-ranking member of the ruling GERB party. Upon his appointment, Kamenarov made obvious, pro-government changes and hired journalists linked to the Peevski media group. They included Program Director Emil Koshlukov, who hosts a daily talk show promoting the government’s point of view.

Large news agencies focus primarily on government events and viewpoints. BTA is funded by the state, and comments by parliament’s Media Committee Chair Vezhdi Rashidov suggested that people in power consider the agency their exclusive outlet. Further, Ognyanova said, “BTA gets paid for its information. This in practice calls into question its public character.” The other big agency in the market, Focus, receives a steady flow of European funds and subscriptions from state institutions.

Private television stations produce their own news programs, while self-produced news is disappearing from radio. The first private national radio station, Darik, and a few smaller stations do their own newscasts. However, about 80 percent of Bulgarian radio stations play only music.

Media are required to disclose their owners, but those names are often fronts for others who actually control the outlets. Some print media are registered in foreign countries (which is forbidden for broadcast media) or are also formally owned by front figures. Most online media have hidden and unclear ownership.

The owner of the Nova Broadcasting Group, the

Swedish Modern Times Group (MTG), last year tried to sell it to an investment company owned by Czech billionaire Petr Kellner. The €185 million (\$208.5 million) deal fell through due to objections from the anti-monopoly regulator. Antonova, of *Capital*, said that sources told her magazine that Kellner had been nudged by someone acting on behalf of the government to include a Bulgarian partner in the deal for Nova TV, and when Kellner refused, the regulator vetoed the sale. Observers are speculating that the Bulgarian partner in question was business owner Kiryl Domuschiev, who reached a deal to buy Nova in early 2019.

**“Regional journalism is disappearing. Information from Facebook posts is increasingly used as news stories. Citizen journalism is replacing traditional reporting, but at the expense of professional media standards,” Valkov said.**

bTV’s owner, Central European Media Enterprises, has long been suspected to be shopping it around.

In addition to owning several newspapers, Peevski controls the two largest printing houses in Bulgaria. One prints the newspapers believed to have the highest circulations – *Telegraph*, *Monitor*, *24 Chasa*, *Trud*, and, until November 2018, *Standard*.

Peevski is also widely assumed to be the owner of TV Channel 3. While the channel formally belongs to the Media Investment Organization Co., it follows closely the editorial line of Peevski’s newspapers. In addition, he is considered the actual owner of the second-largest radio group in Bulgaria, BSS, which broadcasts popular music stations such as The Voice, Veselina, Vitosha, and Magic FM.



**Multiple news sources provide citizens with reliable and objective news.**

**PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES INDICATORS**

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

Bulgarian media have persistent blind spots about some social issues and minorities, especially people with disabilities. Media in minority languages struggle and tend to go bankrupt. In 2014, Bulgarian National Television cancelled its Turkish-language broadcasts after 15 years, as Bulgarian Turks preferred to tune in to broadcasts coming directly from neighboring Turkey.

Bulgaria has no media in Romani, and only a few in Turkish. As an example of where the media have failed a vulnerable population, panelists cited the controversy last year over the country's impending ratification of the Council of Europe convention on violence against women and domestic violence, better known as the Istanbul

Convention. The topic polarized public opinion and was the subject of hate speech, including by politicians and opinion leaders. Antonova said that an analysis of articles in the country's most popular online media found frequent misrepresentation of the convention promoting a "third gender." She said that this likely contributed to Bulgarians' refusal to ratify.

News from outside the capital is becoming rare. "Regional journalism is an endangered species," Radev said. "National media focus on local or regional stories only if they're about crime, violence, or some tragedy." According to Valkov, shrinking newsrooms means a narrower variety of news and reports. "Regional journalism is disappearing. Information from Facebook posts is increasingly used as news stories. Citizen journalism is replacing traditional reporting, but at the expense of professional media standards," he said.

The public BNT2 channel used to have a regional focus, but new management converted it into a cultural channel. Some panelists cited research published last year by the journalism department of Sofia University that shows Bulgarians are losing interest in news from abroad.

**OBJECTIVE 4:  
BUSINESS  
MANAGEMENT**

1.70

**Bulgaria's private media are generally well-managed, and the country has a robust advertising market, according to panelist Buyuklieva. Bulgarian media have multiple and diverse sources of income: advertising, advertorials, subscriptions, donors, and nongovernmental organizations, plus revenues from cable operators, events, and ads from Google.**

Bulgaria has no single, objective source of information about advertising budgets, which leads to confusion. The Bulgarian Association of Communication Agencies (BACA) put the size of the market in 2017 at a near-record BGN 370.3 million (\$215.76 million), 8 percent higher than the previous year.

BACA sources said that television advertising in 2017 reached BGN 220.2 million (\$127.95 million), about 59 percent of the total advertising market. But the Pierrot 97 advertising agency said television took 79 percent of ad spending in 2017. Print came second, with just six percent of the market; followed by radio and online, each with four percent, according to Pierrot 97.

On the other hand, a survey published at the first Communication Industry Forum in May 2018 estimated the size of the online advertising market as BGN 75.1 million (\$43.64 million), which would give it a significantly larger slice of the pie than either BACA's or Pierrot 97's single-digit estimate. That survey said Facebook and Google take 50 percent of the online advertising market and that investment in mobile ads is growing faster than other types of online spots.

Buyuklieva said the advertising market is solidly developed and structured, and the media manage their advertising content well. She said that prices for television advertising are affordable and managers of the largest TV stations actually try to limit the amount of advertising, especially in prime time, to avoid annoying audiences.

Growth in the advertising market is healthy, though not spectacular. The market is expanding by varying levels in television, online, and radio. However, in 2017 print ad spending fell by 17 percent to BGN 15.1 million (\$8.77 million), according to BACA. Telemarketing and product positioning are also well-developed in Bulgaria.

### Independent media are well-managed businesses, allowing editorial independence.

#### BUSINESS MANAGEMENT INDICATORS

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

BACA predicted that the advertising market would grow by nearly nine percent in 2018, with similar growth in television; and online advertising, especially on social networks and mobile telephony, would grow by 16 percent.

Retailers, pharmaceutical companies, food producers, furniture retailers, fast-moving consumer goods, and cosmetics companies are the biggest advertisers. International advertising agencies such as Publicis One, Dentsu Aegis Network, Ogilvy Group Bulgaria, and Havas Group – Bulgaria operate in the Bulgarian market.

Large media conglomerates, such as the Nova Broadcasting Group and the bTV Media Group, have diversified their portfolios to include broadcast and online channels. They enjoy stable revenue streams, including advertising, subscriptions, and sponsorships. Revenues are on the rise for bTV

and Nova, according to filings with the Commercial Register.

Print media are another story. Most newspapers and magazines do not sell enough ads to support themselves. The exceptions are the widely read *Telegraph* and *Weekend*, which get significant revenues from sales, and some specialized publications making money from niche advertising. Some publications, including the respected *Capital* weekly, have diversified sources of revenue but still need the support provided by the America for Bulgaria Foundation. Many others survive on a mix of opaque corporate funding and indirect government subsidies, mainly from EU structural funds.

In its latest annual survey, Reporters Without Borders said that public funds are used to keep the media in check: “The government’s allocation of EU funding to certain media outlets is conducted with a complete lack of transparency, in effect bribing them to go easy on the government in their reporting or refrain from covering certain problematic stories altogether.”

**Ognyanova also commented that there is no official effort to ensure that the public media use government funds to create content in the public interest, rather than a guaranteed specific editorial viewpoint.**

Public broadcasters BNT, BNR, and BTA depend on their annual appropriations from the state budget. Regional media rely on local politicians and local businesses, especially in smaller cities. Panelists agreed that other public funding for announcements or advertising, whether from national coffers or EU funds, is allocated by ministries and government

agencies to pro-government media. “A typical example is state support for tabloid media, even for those with anti-European articles,” Ognyanova said.

Ognyanova also commented that there is no official effort to ensure that the public media use government funds to create content in the public interest, rather than a guaranteed specific editorial viewpoint.

Large media groups use professional market research to formulate strategic plans, boost advertising revenue, and tailor content to their audiences. Smaller and regional publications cannot afford market research and instead depend on a few local advertisers, which notably shape the content and often the editorial line of local media.

Although it has a relatively small TV audience, Bulgaria is home to two ratings agencies: GARB, which works with bTV; and Nielsen Admosphere Bulgaria, which works with Nova. Each measures all networks’ audiences, but they often arrive at different conclusions, to the frustration of advertisers.

The media have no reliable figures on print circulation — which is not audited, and is considered one of the best-kept secrets of the print media. As the print industry could not agree on models to support it, the audit bureau of circulation closed in 2010. The Commission for Protection of Competition has acknowledged a lack of relevant data on print circulation.

The online audience is measured by Gemius, with metrics for Google, Facebook, and other social media sites also available separately. Advertisers buying from agencies have access to all of this data.

**OBJECTIVE 5:  
SUPPORTING  
INSTITUTIONS**

1.94

**Two of Bulgaria's stronger media associations are the Union of Publishers, which unites some mainstream print media and hosts the media ethics commission, and the Association of Bulgarian Broadcasters, which protects the interests of the radio and television industries.**

Journalists have the Union of Bulgarian Journalists; however, it supports the government, and its current chairperson is a former informant for the communist secret police. "If this organization doesn't change its policy, its days are numbered," Ognyanova said. Lozanov said there is little solidarity among Bulgaria's benighted journalists because they cannot afford to alienate media owners. "With few exceptions, the professional organizations don't function," said Radev, of the Association of European Journalists – Bulgaria (AEJ).

**Ognyanova said that journalism teachers are paid poorly and some still approach academics in a Soviet manner. But she added that "there are many professors who work in good faith and with dedication. When there are motivated students, the combination produces a good result."**

Some non-governmental organizations promote professionalism and work to protect the rights of journalists, but they tend to labor in obscurity and their impact is limited. Among them are AEJ, the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, and the Access to

Information Program. "AEJ is an active nongovernmental organization of a new type; proactive and in support of journalists," Ognyanova said.

Journalism education in Bulgaria remains more theoretical than practical, and most universities lack the equipment to provide hands-on training. Georgiev, of the BTC ProMedia Foundation, said that the low number of prepared young reporters is a worsening problem for media outlets. Ognyanova said that journalism teachers are paid poorly and some still approach academics in a Soviet manner. But she added that "there are many professors who work in good faith and with dedication. When there are motivated students, the combination produces a good result."

The University of Sofia participates in the EU's Erasmus and Erasmus + exchange programs, which help expose many journalism students to other media environments and different levels of professional standards. Ognyanova said that many enrollees want to study journalism, but most go into public relations upon graduation.

AEJ conducts training programs to help journalists update their skills, learn specialized reporting, and discuss ethical issues. Last year, AEJ produced a handbook on ethical coverage of child abuse. Most of AEJ's work is funded on a project basis by the America for Bulgaria Foundation, which puts into question the sustainability of its efforts: once the project is over, the training programs and publishing will end.

Bulgarian media have unrestricted access to technical equipment and newsprint. The printing house that handles most newspapers is owned by a foreign company with unknown shareholders—potentially problematic for newspapers. No press outlets have reported being denied print service because of their political editorial line.

Distribution of print media is precarious

because Peevski controls the biggest distribution company. In 2017, for example, the publishers of the satirical *Prass-press* (which targets Peevski, among others) started hearing complaints on social media that readers could not find any copies. The publishers learned that much of their initial print run of 10,000 had vanished, and only a few newsstands in central Sofia had received one or two copies from the distributors. In all, fewer than 1,000 copies had been distributed across the country, with large cities like Varna and Plovdiv receiving no more than 15 copies. *Prass-press's* owners were left searching for other means of distribution, via their own network of fans at bookstores, cafes, and libraries. It is still absent from newsstands owned by Peevski's company.

**Supporting institutions function in the professional interests of independent media.**
**SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS INDICATORS:**

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

## B U L G A R I A

Bulgaria has a quality communications infrastructure. According to Bulgaria's National Statistics Institute, overall Internet household penetration in the country is 72 percent. According to research by *The Economist*, Bulgaria ranks 17th globally for Internet inclusiveness (measured in accessibility and cost of an Internet connection, the amount of information produced within the country, and the cultural acceptance of the Internet). Still, Bulgaria has a visible digital divide, with a relatively large portion of its population not online and the price of a connection out of reach for some.

Mobile devices are widely available and access to media content through them is highly developed. Mobile phone networks with 3G technology are accessible nearly throughout the country, panelists said.

### List of Panel Participants

**Miroluba Benatova**, journalist, Nova TV, Sofia

**Katerina Buyuklieva**, director, Media Club ad agency, Sofia

**Nikoleta Daskalova**, researcher, Media Democracy Foundation, Sofia

**Marieta Dimitrova**, editor in chief, Blagoevgrad News, Blagoevgrad

**Petko Georgiev**, director, BTC ProMedia Foundation, Sofia

**Stoyana Georgieva**, editor in chief, Mediapool news website, Sofia

**Nelly Ognyanova**, professor, Sofia University, Sofia

**Joana Levieva-Sawyer**, journalist, Bulgarian National Television, Sofia

**Georgi Lozanov**, senior editor, BTA News Agency, Sofia

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

**Iliia Valkov**, reporter, Club Z website, Sofia

**Ivaylo Vasilev**, producer, Bulgarian National Radio, Sofia

### Moderator and Author

**Vessislava Antonova**, reporter, *Capital* weekly, Sofia

*The panel discussion was convened on December 7, 2018, in Sofia.*