

NEEDS AND GAPS BRIEF NO. 3: BULGARIA

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“In Bulgaria [...] the majority of the journalists are women. I don't think it's because in Bulgaria women are braver or tougher or they're better journalists. It's just because the conditions for doing the job are really bad and men would turn to more well-paid jobs.”

Maria Cheresheva, journalist and member of AEJ-Bulgaria

“Politicians and businesspeople have a lot of money with which they can buy any small editorial office. If they fail to buy it, they start intimidating, suing, and can practically destroy any small regional media.”

Marieta Dimitrova, editor-in-chief and owner of Blagoevgrad News

Journalists in Bulgaria are under enormous pressure exerted by politicians, local authorities, the business world, the management of the news organisations, and many other actors. A delegitimation process of the role of independent journalism is in place in the country, with a detrimental effect on the already low level of trust of the public. The severe issues undermining media freedom and the safety of journalists in the country include lack of transparency of media ownership and of allocation of state advertising and public funding. Bulgarian media outlets are highly dependent on political and economic influences. Although the situation is slightly changing, many media outlets are still owned by businessmen and oligarchs with political connections. Year 2020 in Bulgaria was not only marked by the pandemic, but also by the protests against the Prime Minister Borisov and his centre-right government accused of corruption. The protests saw thousands of citizens asking for his resignation and early elections, while journalists covering the protests were often arrested and beaten, as in the case of Dimitar Kenarov.

The climate in which women journalists operate is part of a wider context of systemic sexism, exemplified by the country's failure to ratify the Istanbul Convention, declared anti-constitutional. Gender-based hate speech is very present in Bulgaria and its media, especially against women's rights activists. Women are not underrepresented in the news production. However, this does not mean they are not discriminated against, as there is a lack of gender-sensitive policies in media organisations. Pay is often lower, and women journalists are often the first to lose their jobs in difficult times.

Women journalists are particularly exposed to threats and attacks when reporting on issues related to human rights.

Although journalism is predominantly a profession for women in Bulgaria, solidarity with a colleague is virtually non-existent when something goes wrong.

The Covid-19 pandemic has further deepened the financial crisis of local and regional media. Although media plurality and economic security of journalists are endangered at the regional level, no specific measure has been put in place. Political independence of the media in Bulgaria is under threat at all levels. However, local and regional media are particularly at risk due to their strong dependence on funds coming from municipalities and local owners. Moreover, the use of EU funds by local authorities to strengthen control over local newspapers and TV channels has been denounced.

The low level of pay outside Sofia makes journalists much more vulnerable to pressure mechanisms. In such a context, there is little room for investigations. Self-censorship is the resulting practice at the level of regional media, due to the risk of being sued when publishing something that does not please those in power.

Facts

27



Alerts recorded on the Mapping Media Freedom Platform between 1 January 2020 and 31 December 2021 (3.55% of the EU27 total).



13

Alerts recorded on the Council of Europe Platform in the same period. Not one has been addressed yet.

30%



Bulgarians who trust the media (Civil Liberties Union for Europe 2022).



30TH

Bulgaria's media literacy rank in Europe (Open Society Institute of Sofia 2021).

112TH



Bulgaria ranks 112th in the World Press Freedom Index, retaining the last place in the EU (RSF 2021).

The local dimension of journalism is 'a truly endangered species' (AEJ-Bulgaria).



Respondents to the survey who work for a media outlet located outside Sofia (AEJ-Bulgaria 2020).

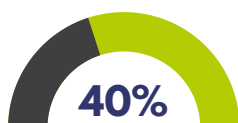
2.7 MILLION LEVA
(APPROXIMATELY 1.5
MILLION EUROS)

Amount spent by municipalities on local newspapers, TV stations, and radio between 2013 and 2015 (Spasov).

18TH

Bulgaria ranks 18th in the EU in the Gender Equality Index 2021.

Women in managerial positions in Bulgarian National Television (BNT) and Radio (BRT) (Media Pluralism Monitor 2021).



Women in top management of private TV companies (Media Pluralism Monitor 2021).

Recommendations

For Bulgarian media outlets

- Combat the tendency to isolate a journalist under threat clearly expressing solidarity.
 - Encourage the participation of journalists to training opportunities related to safety issues.
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For unions and national support centres

- Support the journalistic community in the fight against external and internal pressures.
 - Take concrete actions to protect journalists subject to threats, persecution, and lawsuits.
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For international actors

- Call on Bulgarian authorities to increase respect for women's rights in the country, starting from the ratification of the Istanbul Convention.
- Commit to identifying alternative, external ways of financing independent media, especially at the local level.
- Simplify the application processes for EU and international funds.