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BULGARIA

The MSI panelists concluded that in 2011, the content crisis in the Bulgarian media, which started with the financial crisis in 2008–2009, reached new depths and is already affecting Bulgarian citizens' access to quality media coverage of political, social, and economic developments in the country. Unfortunately, signs of political and corporate pressure, editorial bias, sale of news content, and a general decline in the quality and intelligence level of media content now mar journalism in Bulgaria.

Bulgaria's media are falling below sustainable levels in an increasing number of areas, and the problems in each of the areas with low scores are deepening. Most alarmingly, serious violent attacks on journalists, once isolated incidents, seem to be a trend now. While investigations into the crimes are underway, none of the attackers have been identified and prosecuted. There is little public sympathy for the journalists, largely because the perceived integrity of the journalism profession is slipping. Self-censorship has become the norm in most media outlets, and editors actively and willingly impose content restrictions over their media and permit the sale of news content to politicians and corporate sponsors.

The national and local governments' distribution of public funds under different disguises to select media outlets in return for favorable press constitutes another grave problem. The economic crisis in the country has tempted many media outlets into weakening their standards and accepting the funding, which represent a growing part of their budgets and limits greatly their independence.

Another worrying trend is the decline in quality journalism, traced largely to the reasons listed above, but also because of low pay levels and the insufficient availability and resources for professional training. This decline is especially visible in the further shrinking of quality niche reporting—particularly business and culture—and investigative journalism.

At the same time, areas of progress include the professional development of online media, and the unlimited access to traditional and new media that Bulgarian citizens enjoy; such access appears unthreatened.

That very plurality is one of the main strengths of Bulgaria's media, along with the well developed information and communication technology framework and equipment in use by the media.

Overall Bulgaria's overall score changed little, although the change was negative once again, continuing an overall trend that has persisted since 2006/2007, when Bulgaria hit its peak of 2.98.

# BULGARIA AT A GLANCE

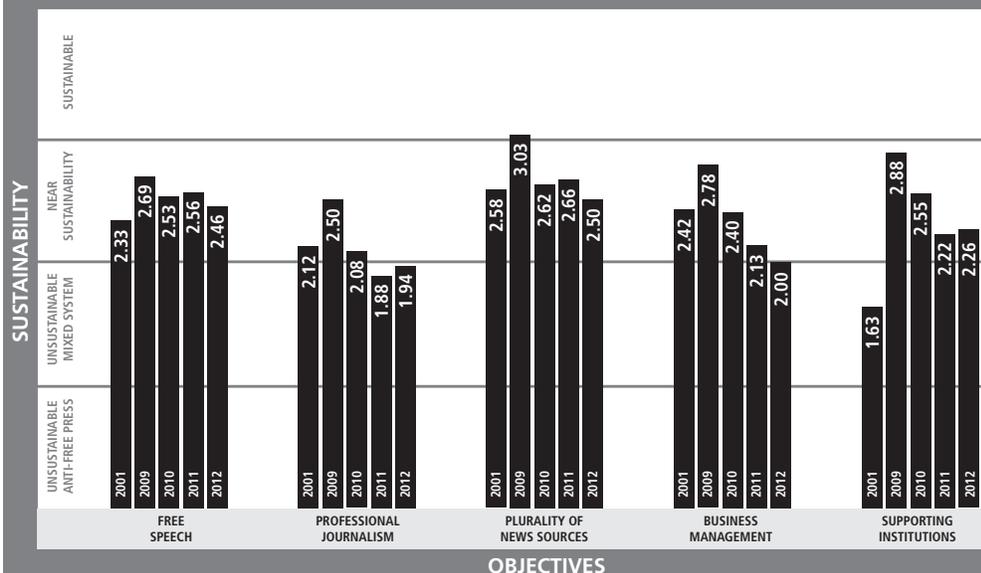
## GENERAL

- > **Population:** 7,037,935 (July 2011 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Capital City:** Sofia
- > **Ethnic Groups (% of population):** Bulgarian 83.9%, Turk 9.4%, Roma 4.7%, other 2% (2001 census, *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Religions (% of population):** Bulgarian Orthodox 82.6%, Muslim 12.2%, other Christian 1.2%, other 4% (2001 census, *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Languages (% of population):** Bulgarian 84.5%, Turkish 9.6%, Roma 4.1%, other and unspecified 1.8% (2001 census, *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **GNI (2010-Atlas):** \$47.16 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2011)
- > **GNI per capita (2010-PPP):** \$13,210 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2011)
- > **Literacy Rate:** 98.2% (male: 98.7%, female: 97.7%) (2001 census, *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **President or top authority:** President Rosen Plevneliev (since January 22, 2012)

## MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- > **Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations:** Print: 211 newspapers; Radio Stations: 76; Television Stations: 217 (Pairo97)
- > **Newspaper circulation statistics:** Total daily circulation: 340,000 (Market Links)
- > **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:** \$256 million (Market Links)
- > **Internet usage:** 3.395 million (2009 est., *CIA World Factbook*)

## MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: BULGARIA



Scores for all years may be found online at [http://www.irex.org/system/files/EE\\_mscores.xls](http://www.irex.org/system/files/EE_mscores.xls)

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

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

### Unsustainable Mixed System (1-2):

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

### Near Sustainability (2-3):

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

### Sustainable (3-4):

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

## OBJECTIVE 1: FREEDOM OF SPEECH

### Bulgaria Objective Score: 2.46

Objective 1 scores dipped slightly from last year. Most of the panelists agreed that the problem is not negative changes in the regulatory framework, but rather fair and transparent implementation of the media laws.

The relatively few changes in legislation in the past year related to the increased protection of minors against damaging content on radio and television, improved copyright legislation, and the adoption of a long delayed law regulating the status and funding of the Bulgarian News Agency.

As for a long-discussed new radio and television law, no tangible progress is evident. Working groups of experts submitted a draft to the government, but there are no signs of its imminent introduction for public debate or parliamentary approval. In one of its many controversial ideas, the proposed new legislation suggests merging public television (BNT) with public radio (BNR), an idea justified with financial motives, but drawing sharp criticism from most of the country's media experts. The legislation also envisions merging the two regulatory bodies, the Council for Electronic Media (CEM) and the Communications Regulation

#### 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.

Commission—another proposal opposed by most of the media community. None of these suggestions have been formally introduced for public and expert discussion by the government, and the panelists posited that their circulation in the media might be more about testing the ground, rather than an expression of genuine regulatory intention. According to CEM expert Dilyana Kirkovska, the proposed legislation might also reflect the government's interest to reach into new territory and regulate other electronic communication as well, most notably the Internet. However, since this is an extremely controversial issue, it seems that the idea has been abandoned, at least for the time being.

At the same time, the MSI panelists shared a concern that the regular public attacks by political figures against CEM, the independent radio television regulatory authority, jeopardize its existence and independence and may result in increased regulatory pressure over media outlets themselves.

As Yassen Boyadjiev, editor of MediaPool.bg, commented, "The general trend here is negative, which is due not that much to changes in the legal and regulatory framework, but to the ease with which this framework can be bypassed. The low level of public sensitivity towards freedom of the media aggravates the problem."

Svetla Petrova, a freelance journalist, traces the reasons for the negative trend to "the pronounced tendency of the current government to disregard the existing norms, and the inability of the professional community of journalists to protect these norms."

One of the negative tendencies seen in 2011, related to the presidential and local elections held in Bulgaria this past year, was the excessively restrictive regulation of election coverage by the public media, adopted with the new elections code passed by Parliament earlier in the year. The elections brought other problems to the surface as well, including hidden political advertising in the commercial media, high prices demanded by the media to cover political events of the candidates, and unfair advantages extended to government candidates against their opponents in the news coverage of all major television channels.

The panelists also mentioned the current state of the judiciary, which is expected to protect the freedom of speech and act against attempts to limit it. As Vassil Dimitrov, director of bTV Radio Group, said, "The independence of the judiciary is still lacking. Corrupt practices create fear among the journalists, especially in regard to serious investigations."

The scores for the indicator measuring the fairness, competitiveness and apolitical character of the licensing process are usually low in Bulgaria. The objections typically focus on political and corporate pressure on CEM, which

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results in a licensing procedure that favors big corporate media and political control over public media.

“Politics in Bulgaria is a business,” Petrova claims. “The way the CEM members are appointed makes them politically dependent, and they act under political control and make politically motivated decisions. So if there is a political or a business motivation behind a certain decision it does not make a big difference; in both cases the principle of fairness in licensing is violated.”

Among the many concerns raised by the experts was the failure of the licensing regulator to protect the public interest of the local audiences and the existing domination of large media networks at the expense of local broadcasters. At the same time, in 2011 CEM has continued issuing licenses for regional analog media and has started a process of licensing over the air digital broadcasting.

Digitalization in Bulgaria has continued at a very slow pace. In 2011, only the national commercial Darik Radio, which has also registered a national television digital frequency, and one regional broadcaster in North Eastern Bulgaria secured digital licenses. In all, a total of 25 digital licenses have been issued so far, but actual broadcasting is limited. Full digitalization is now not expected before 2014–2015. With the rapid growth of online media distribution in mind, both broadcasters and representatives of the regulator are questioning the need for digitalization at all.

An important positive development noted by the panelists was the launch of BNT 2, the second national channel of the Bulgarian public television. BNT 2 is designed as a network of five regional stations with a large percentage of regional production focusing on the regional audiences and compensating the lack of significant news and current affairs production outside the capital city Sofia. At the same time, commercial broadcasters have complained that BNT and BNR are receiving frequencies without a tender procedure, which gives them unfair advantage over independent broadcasters.

Representatives of private broadcasters have noted that the licensing process is not used as a tool to limit the number of media outlets in order to protect the market from oversaturation. The policy of licensing in Bulgaria has always been to license as many as possible operators and then does let the market forces decide who survives.

The lowest score under this objective, and the second worst in the whole MSI, proved to be indicator 4, documenting crimes against journalists and media, their prosecution and the lack of public support for stronger sanctions against those who violate freedom of speech. On several separate occasions journalists and media outlets suffered attacks. In the most serious cases, journalists’ cars were blown up or torched, and

a bomb exploded at the door of an editorial office. All cases remain unsolved by the authorities.

One of the panelists, Petya Cholakova, the editor of a small regional environmental magazine, *Srednogorski Bagri* in Zlatitza, was a victim of such crimes herself. On the night of the elections, her car was set on fire, in apparent retaliation for publications prior to the elections. As she puts it, “The low score I’m giving with regard to the freedom of speech is based on my personal experience—assaults, intimidation, threats, and corporate pressure, especially on the smaller regional or local media. There is a huge surge of corporate pressure over media, citizens and local authorities on the local level. Over the seven-year period in which I have published the magazine, I have encountered a number of serious violations of the environmental protection requirements...the companies involved, which fully control the local economy, started with informal threats, illegal surveillance, economic pressure, and finally set my car on fire.”

Vesselin Vassilev, owner of Radio Sevlievo, reacted to the developments with the judgment: “But this is like going 20 years back in time!” referring to the early 1990s, when the first attempts to create independent media in Bulgaria faced serious obstacles from the political and business environment.

A serious problem is also the lack of results in prosecution of crimes committed against journalists. Investigations of the bomb blast outside the headquarters of *Galeria* newspaper and the bomb, which shattered the car of journalist Sasho Dikov have not produced any results yet and the panelist were skeptical that the perpetrators of these crimes will be found and punished. In the first incident a small bomb exploded at the front door of the offices of the newspaper known for its anti-government stance and for its contacts with people investigated for participation in organized crime. Prior to the explosion the newspaper had published a series of secretly recorded phone conversations between members of the cabinet suggesting corruption. In the second incident almost nine months later a powerful bomb destroyed the car of the prominent critic of the government and champion of free speech Sasho Dikov. The cable television Channel he runs, Channel 3, has been nicknamed “The Bulgarian Al Jazeera” by Prime Minister Borisov and is known for its extensive coverage of current affairs, bold confrontations with people in power and for its critical approach towards the government.

“It’s very dangerous that there is no public reaction against these crimes against the media,” Petrova said. “Our society has seen so much that it does not react anymore and does not protest. Partially this might be the fault of journalists themselves.”

The panelists pointed to another example as well: the unprecedented public pressure against one of the leading reporters of the largest Bulgarian commercial television stations, bTV, for her coverage of the anti-Roma protests in the country and the direct attacks against the broadcaster, whose newscasts are the most popular in the country. Instead of showing sympathy with the attacked reporter, many people joined the protesters in accusing her of bias and political prejudice.

While there have been no legal changes concerning the editorial independence of state or public media, panel participants have noted that in 2011 these media have managed to protect professional journalism principles better than the technically independent commercial media. “The corporate pressure over commercial media turns out to be far more effective than the direct political pressure over state owned media,” Petrova marked. This trend is further strengthened by the economic crisis.

Bojadjiev noted that in many cases, commercial media owners do not see themselves as victims of political or corporate pressure, but rather yield to it driven by their own business or political interests. “Their independence has been sacrificed in advance, because these are not media per se, these are media outlets constructed to support other businesses or political initiatives.”

According to journalist Ivan Michalev, of *The Capital Weekly*, economic hardship also influenced the freedom of the media negatively. According to him, the publishers and the established media groups in Bulgaria are losing their economic independence, influencing the independence of their editorial decisions. Another factor behind the negative trend is the domination of one single political party and the lack of effective opposition. “We are entering uncharted territory here, with a government of an authoritarian type, almost non-existent opposition and the lack of media counterbalances.” Few media dare criticize the government; those who do are personally reprimanded by the prime minister. According to Michalev the government realizes that the media are economically weak and uses that fact to decrease their role as a corrective, which is against the interests of the public.

Scores for the indicator analyzing libel and defamation legislation were lower than average, as well. In 2011, the International Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg twice found Bulgaria in violation for sentences against journalists. The most striking cases against journalists are led by highly visible public figures, including the leaders of two small pro-governmental parties in Parliament. According to media lawyer Alexander Kashamov, with the Access to Information Program, the number of cases against journalists—especially

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on the local level—is increasing, but at the same time new types of legal prosecutions against media representatives are emerging.

Aside from the traditional occurrence of libel and defamation cases by public figures against journalists, there are a growing number of administrative cases for disclosure of personal data against journalists, where the Commission for Personal Data Protection imposes heavy fines on media outlets and individual journalists. Such fines vary between BGN 10,000 and BGN 100,000 (\$6,700–\$67,000) and may be a very serious financial blow, especially for a small local media outlet. A recent alarming trend is also the increased number of requests by the Ministry of the Interior for disclosure of IP addresses of participants in the forums of Internet-based media. Such requests have been successfully appealed in court, but according to the lawyer the trend is extremely dangerous. At the same time, Kashamov notes that the Bulgarian courts are supporting decisions backed by international courts providing IP addresses with the same level of protection as other personal data. As he pointed out, in the case with media this is extremely important, as it concerns the level of trust between the online media and its readers.

Regarding journalists’ access to information, Bulgaria has a sound legal and regulatory framework, but cases of unacceptable denials spring up. The panelists noted examples, such as the denial to disclose information about state subsidies to political parties and the practice of some courts to request the plaintiffs to cover the legal expenses of government institutions for their court representation in cases about access to information. Courts have significant positive practice in overruling cases of denial and according to media lawyer Kashamov there can’t be any significant regress in that area. Journalists are increasingly using the Freedom in information legislation. There is a steady increase in the number and scope of government information available on-line.

The highest scores in this objective are traditionally reserved for indicator 8 (media outlets’ access to and use of local and

international news and news sources, and Indicator 9 (free entry into the journalism profession). If anything, the panelist are questioning if that access might be too free—with many ill-prepared young journalists taking over positions in leading news media. These are also the highest scores for individual indicators in the whole MSI in 2011 in Bulgaria.

## OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

### Bulgaria Objective Score: 1.94

The score for Objective 2 remained static, still within the upper reaches of the “unsustainable, mixed system” scoring category after having scored well within the range of “near sustainability” for several years until 2010, when the score nose-dived. Professional standards in journalism drew the lowest scores from all objectives in 2011.

The rapid expansion of one large media group, which already owns dozens of newspapers, including some with large circulations, at least two television stations, several radio stations, news portals, the largest printing house in the country and a vast distribution network influenced events in this area in the past year. The heavy investments in media come from undisclosed sources, and have distorted Bulgaria’s media market significantly. A common feature of the content of all media outlets controlled by the “New Bulgarian Media Group” is positive coverage of the government, combined with severe criticism of all its opponents. As noted by the panelists, this is becoming the media group’s traditional posture, as it openly supports a second consecutive government and switches sides as soon as a new government is elected.

#### 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).

Former ABBRO Chairman and independent media producer Konstantine Markov noted that there has been significant decline in the quality of the media in the last several years. The media are becoming more and more instruments for the promotion of corporate interests. “As a result of this the quality of journalism and the programs is in rapid decline,” he noted. Whole segments of specialized reporting disappeared—including informed analysis of culture and cultural events. According to Vassilev, the whole journalism profession is in a decline. BTC ProMedia director Petko Georgiev resorted to urban warfare language to describe the worsening situation with professional journalism: “There are individual pockets of resistance, but they are being taken out systematically one by one.”

According to media lecturer Nicoletta Dasklova, with the Media Democracy Foundation, the only exception to this trend are some representatives of citizen journalism, especially bloggers, who look for more alternative sources of information and look of content of higher quality.

“There are many media battles, but few clashes of opinion,” journalist and media owner Ivan Atanasov claimed. “Even the elections lacked serious debate, which decreases the power of journalism.” The panelists characterized the media elections coverage, usually the central media event in an election year, as too brief, failing to provide sufficient information about the candidates, lacking opportunities for debate and marred by hidden political advertising of the pro-government candidates.

Elections coverage in general drew heavy criticism from most of the participants in the discussion. With the visible exception of the public broadcasters, there were numerous cases of hidden political advertising, promoting candidates in the main news programs and disregarding the campaigns of other, non-paying candidates. Georgiev described cases when politicians are promoted in mainstream broadcast media and print editions without any indication that the content is paid as “political product positioning.”

In addition, a major shortcoming of the elections coverage was the fact that the media largely disregarded coverage of the local elections and focused completely on the coverage of the presidential race (both elections took place simultaneously), even though Bulgaria is highly decentralized and many aspects of daily life depend on the local government, rather than on the president of Bulgaria, who has relatively limited powers. Especially on the level of local elections, the media generally failed to give Bulgarian voters the knowledge needed for an informed choice.

Dasklova noted that elections coverage peaked just in the last week before the vote, and suggested that the short

attention span shows more an interest in the contest than in the actual political issues of the campaign. At the same time, she noted a very strong negative campaign against the main candidates carried out through the tabloid press.

Another area of concern for the panelists was the fact that many journalists cut and paste content from other sources, without any regard for copyright or without checking the sources. Events of little significance find extensive coverage, while important events remain uncovered. The journalism Code of Ethics is not implemented—even by those who signed the document. To many of the participants, the Code remains only a wish on a piece of paper.

Some of the panelists also note the negative overall impact of social media. Unprofessional reporting and biased coverage of stories dominates the new media, and the final result is that the news environment is distorted.

For Dimitrov, the quality of journalism directly depends on the availability of resources in the media to hire well-trained journalists. This is becoming more and more difficult in connection with the commercialization of private media and the prolonged crisis of the advertising market, which leads to further tightening of the media budgets.

The problem is especially dramatic on local level, where media cannot afford professional journalists. According to Cholakova, this leads to a dual problem: “On the one side, there are few local professional journalists and there’s no objectivity. On the other, when reporters from national media come to cover local events, they don’t bother learning more about the region and come up with superficial and confused stories. Good journalism on the local level is becoming the voluntary hard work and free civic initiative of a few citizen activists and not the product of professional local media outlets.”

For some of the professional journalists in the panel the regress in professional journalism is especially painful. According to Petrova, “The decline is so serious and the trend is so alarming, that there is already the question if we have independent journalism in Bulgaria at all. The best illustration is the recent elections campaign, which did not offer the Bulgarian citizens an informed choice between the candidates and was more of a parody. The current status requires rapid large scale mobilization of the remains of the journalism community, because the very survival of journalism as a profession is at stake.”

A serious problem for the local media is their direct and voluntary subordination to the local authorities or the local corporate leaders. As Liponovski said, “all too often... information in the local and regional media is dominated by direct quotes from official press releases, with no alternative sources and no verification of information.”

Many of the panelists agree that while an ethical code exists, and there are print and broadcast media commissions, which review cases addressed to them, their effect is relatively limited. Media coverage of such cases is also more and more limited and, most importantly, there is a large group of new media outlets, which have not signed up to the Code and do not observe its requirements.

Furthermore, a media war between the two largest newspaper groups has resulted in total disregard for the professional code of ethics. Facts are not checked, the parties are not given a fair opportunity to present their cases, and the right to reply is rarely observed.

“To me, self-regulation has not started working,” Petrova claims, even though as a commission member she quotes a number of cases reviewed for compliance with the Code. “Adopting the Code and creating the commissions is a good step, but from here on out very serious work is needed to improve implementation. Recent events at the Union of Bulgarian Publishers are also affecting negatively the work of the commissions; they share the same office with the Union and are partially funded by it, which is problematic.”

Kashamov, also a member of the commission for ethics in the broadcast media, feels that the bigger problem is the fact that too many media outlets have not signed the Code. “Not that we can force anyone to join the Code; it is absolutely voluntary, but these are the facts,” he adds.

The indicator measuring pay levels for journalists, and whether low pay leads to corruption among journalists, ranked among the lowest scores under this objective. For the second consecutive year, salaries in some of the leading national media outlets have been decreasing, alongside downsizing of newsrooms and technical personnel. The insufficient pay is very visible on the local level. The difference in pay of a reporter in a local media and in one of the big national publications may be up to 100 percent for the same work and same level of qualifications. All too often, local reporters work for the minimum pay, which affects negatively their motivation to work and the editorial independence of the media.

Also, because of the economic crisis, many editions have limited their production expenses, including travel and correspondent networks. “This reinforces ‘parrot journalism,’ based on agencies and press releases,” said Michalev.

Petrova is the former anchor of the most popular current affairs television talk show *Seismograph*, discontinued at the end of the season before the elections. She is convinced that closing down the program is indicative of the fact that entertainment is eclipsing news and information programming, both for commercially-corporate and for political reasons. Petrova decided to end the program after

she was offered by the media management to move her show from a popular weekend prime time slot to an earlier and less attractive programming location. *Seismograph* at the time had the best audience share in the whole segment of current affairs programs aired on any of the three television channels with national coverage.

“The strange and unsubstantiated programming decision helped speed up my decision to leave bTV, where over the last years I had to work under almost impossible conditions, with human, financial and administrative resources below the absolute minimum...this could have lasted many more years if it wasn’t for the direct and non-negotiable political pressure to take off the air or marginalize any zones of critical discussion, especially in the most influential media. And so, after 10 seasons and exactly when it was needed most, *Seismograph* was discontinued, to be replaced by programs like *Sea of Love*, *High Heels*, and *In the Jazz* [all light entertainment],” Petrova commented.

At the same time, it would be difficult to argue that the amount of news and current affairs programming is decreasing across the board. Two new national television channels—TV 7 and Bulgaria On-Air—were re-launched in 2011 with news-oriented formats. bTV and Bulgaria On-Air have launched Radio programs simulcasting a lot of their news content. The volume of news and current affairs programming on BNT, the public broadcaster is increasing. Panel discussion members were concerned that the commercial television news programs have been launched with obvious pre-election intentions and that their content will continue to be politically biased. At the same time, as a positive trend the participants in the discussion noted that the launch of BNT 2, the network of regional public television stations is providing new opportunities for local news and current affairs production, which has been very limited in the previous periods.

The highest score in the objective went to the quality of the facilities and equipment for gathering, producing, and distributing news. Most of the panelists agree that they are modern and efficient in the national media, but note that in some local media outlets the equipment is outdated and very limited in quantity.

However, again due to the economic crisis and the commercialization of the main media, quality niche reporting and programming has been cut back severely. A special concern for the participants in the discussion was the lack of serious, informed reporting about the media, and especially about culture. Again, as positive exceptions to this rule, BNT and BNR were pointed out for their new and high quality programs about culture and arts.

## OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

### Bulgaria Objective Score: 2.50

Objective 3 scores fell slightly below last year’s level, sinking into the range where it was in the initial years of the MSI in Bulgaria. This comes after having broken into the “sustainable” range, with scores in the low 3s, between 2006/2007 and 2009. The low score is due mainly to the worsening situation with transparency of media ownership, pluralism of opinion, and the tightening of the spectrum of social interests reflected and represented in the media.

The rapidly expanding “New Bulgarian Media Group” has further strengthened its market position through the acquisition of new media outlets and has positioned its editorial policy as the mouthpiece of the government. Serious investments were made in yet another television station with national coverage and a lot of news content. Competing media groups have invested heavily in the launch of new television stations, and existing television stations have launched simulcast radio stations to strengthen their market positions.

However, the media is failing to present a broad spectrum of interests. The most problematic here is again the state of the media on the local level. According to Dimitrov, “There is a feeling of a completely centralized process of news and information management. All leading television and

## 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.

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radio stations have the same running order of news in their newscasts. The news is repetitive and uniform." All media outlets follow the morning talk shows of the three national television stations, and set their daily agendas accordingly. In addition, the fact that all smaller media and all independent radio stations use the same free news portals, like Focus News, results in similarity or even uniformity of the newscasts.

Cholakova believes that pluralism of news on the local level is almost impossible. "All is either 'all well and good,' if the mayor has a contract with the media, or it's all scandal and corruption, if he doesn't. There is no objectivity, no analysis. Corporations and local governments control the content... There's very little chance of getting objective information. In the best case scenario we would re-print an article from the national press, connected to the region, but we don't have the time and resources to check the sources... I am really sorry that I can't give a positive example from my region," she continues. "In reality, we don't have local media." According to her, the main reason why several strong local corporations invest heavily in controlling the media is to quell any citizen resistance against the environmental damage they are doing. Accidents with air and soil pollution are not reported, or are made to look insignificant. "People are kept in the dark," she concluded. "Corporate interest overshadows political interest in our case."

The situation varies greatly from place to place, according to the local government, corporations, and the strength of local media. According to Vassilev, in his region of Sevlievo and Gabrovo, the independent local media are managing to provide good news services to the audience, in good partnership with the local community. His radio station features a program about the local civil initiatives, which is one of the few examples of cooperation between civil society and the media. "Unlike other places," Vassilev said, "we have significant American investments in our region. They don't fund the media, but thanks to them the whole local economy is strong and the local businesses buy advertising, helping to sustain a good local media market."

Ivan Atanasov's experience from Harmanli, where he runs a network of local news portals, also differs. He concentrates more on covering local private business, and pays less attention to the local government news and big corporate events. In his area, citizen journalism is also growing, with people uploading their news on the news portals prompting others to follow, with the journalists only serving as moderators of the news flow.

According to Michalev, who recently completed academic research in the area of new media in Bulgaria, one of the negative effects of social media is that the audience loses its loyalty to the media outlets, and rather "consumes information

randomly, from a variety of sources." This strengthens the role of social media as the "selector" of news for the reader. People receive news shared by their friends and often do not realize or think to question the real source of the information. The over-saturation in the news field leads to decreased audience attention, and undermines the role of professional media in the selection and interpretation of news. Another trend is the relative decline in interest in blogs at the expense of Facebook micro-blogging, further reducing the volume and quality of content available to readers.

Georgiev expressed his concern that social media could break society down into small, unrelated groups and create an environment that stimulates expression of radical ideas, and limits the opportunity to debate these ideas with people who think differently. The traditional media, which played an important mediator role, are no longer able to facilitate public debate and help form public consensus on key policy issues, especially for the younger and more active audience. This was especially visible at the time of the anti-Roma protests in Bulgaria, when young racist Bulgarians organized over Facebook, Twitter and mobile phones and carried out extremist attacks against Roma neighborhoods. At the same time, Michalev noted that the authorities interfered successfully in one such case, when a youngster posted racially inflammatory comments in his Facebook profile and was detained and sentenced by the Varna court for incitement of racial hatred.

Daskalova underscored the lack of community media. "An interesting structural deficit of the Bulgarian media system is the lack of community media—both in terms of legislation (such media are not even defined in the Radio and Television Act), and in terms of initiative by the civil sector or specific communities. There is a lack of legislative and civic awareness about the need of such media.

One interesting exception emerged during the discussion. In the region of Zlatitza and Srednogorie, there is a Roma minority radio station. Radio "Aurea" is allegedly owned by a Roma baron, Roma party leader and ex-member of Parliament (one of the few new Bulgarian politicians to serve time for criminal offenses). According to Cholakova, the radio station airs no news, but has powerful transmitters that overshadow all other radio stations. "Come to my place and you'll see—the only station that I can hear, no matter what the frequency, is Aurea."

Another important media event in 2011 was the change of ownership of the two largest daily newspapers in the country, *24 Hours* and *Trud*. Owned and developed by the German media conglomerate WAZ for many years, they were sold to an Austrian-based investment company specially set up for the deal. Contrary to the initially stated intentions, the

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new owners rapidly fired the long-standing editors of the two newspapers, and started introducing visible changes in the editorial policies. Before long, the owners entered into an internal struggle over control of the company, had the company's accounts frozen for a while, and will resolve their differences in court in 2012. The changed editorial policies of the newspapers prompted a number of journalists to resign and form the core staff of a new daily, which will be launched in 2012.

The panelists also noted the emergence of two competing new tabloids: *Everyday* and *Bulgaria Today*, controlled by the two competing major press media groups. According to Lipovanski, "This example illustrates the negative direction of media development. These are new media, but they do not contribute to the diversity of topics offered for public dialogue, and further contribute to the decline in editorial standards in the country."

Still, in what has become a tradition in the Bulgarian MSI, the highest score under this objective, high above the objective average and Bulgaria MSI average (indicating likely sustainability), goes to the indicator measuring the freedom of access to domestic and international media.

Another positive development in recent years, according to most of the panelists, has been that the state-owned public media, and especially the Bulgarian public television station, BNT, are making significant progress toward better coverage of a wide scope of views from the whole political spectrum and are starting to better serve the public interest, especially in contrast with the decline observed in corporate media. BNT went through further restructuring and downsizing, but also managed to launch a new network of regional channels, BNT 2, and to regain some status as a leading provider of news and current affairs programming; BNT 2, with a special focus on regional and local news, has performed much better in covering hot political issues, including the elections, than most of its commercial rivals. BNT's program, as marked by the panelists, includes more and more current affairs programs of higher quality and is providing much needed space for public debate about politics, the economy, culture etc. The same progress has been observed by some of the panelists in BNR's programs, BNR, and especially in its relatively less popular *Hristo Botev* program, which focuses more on culture and public debate. Thanks to their national over-the-air coverage, the public broadcasters fill a gap not served by commercial broadcasters across all of Bulgaria, by providing more public affairs programs, more unbiased in-depth reporting, and by promoting education and culture through their programming.

Another representative of the local media on the panel, Dimitar Lipovanski, a journalist and producer with Arena Media Russe, touched on the state of news agencies in

Bulgaria, which many media, especially in the regions, cannot afford: "The use of independent news agencies is primarily a question of financial resources, which are strained for regional and local media. Plagiarism and the use of information without attribution is common practice."

All of the panelists were especially critical of the lack of transparency in media ownership, and the results of this on the objectivity and reliability of the information provided to the public. The overall score for this indicator is the lowest in the whole objective.

Bojadjev said, "There is much diversity of media, but there is no progress in the reliability and objectivity of the information they distribute. The situation with the transparency of ownership is worsening, and it is the biggest problem in this objective. There is an ongoing process of concentration of ownership in the hands of a few big business structures whose origin of capital remains unclear, and they are interfering directly with the editorial policy of the media."

Panelists expressed especial concern about the concentration of ownership in one media conglomerate, The New Bulgarian Media Group, which unequivocally supports the government. As Mihalev described it, "There is a diversity of information sources, but last year continued the trend of concentration of newspapers and other media in a media group, which blindly supports the ruling party. The same group receives generous support from the government in the form of deposits from state-owned enterprises." The group in question includes a bank, which holds the accounts of a great number of public institutions and companies.

"The prime minister avoids questions from the other media about this de facto hidden state intervention in the market, but regularly gives interviews to the television station of this media group," Michalev continued. "The result is a vicious circle—the state is "buying" media comfort for the government with taxpayers' money."

This phenomenon is repeated on a smaller scale by the local media. As Cholakova explained, "The information in small cities is usually trained on the activities of the municipality or the economic entity, which owns the media."

Generally, all participants see a growing problem with the pluralism of news on the local level. According to Ivan Atanasov, the local media cover local events, but only as news items, without in-depth analysis. Lipovanski added, "The over-centralized life in Bulgaria is reflected in the geographical scope of the news coverage of the media. The national media rarely have the time and resources to present in-depth issues on regional or local level. When local events are covered, they are often related to visiting dignitaries or members of the government." Feature stories and longer reports tend to

be less problematic, because many local media are financially associated with the municipal government. All participants agree that such media outlets are supported financially mainly to provide positive coverage to the activities of the local authorities and their sponsors, and do not fill the need for a variety of local news and opinion. Moreover, events are being covered and analyzed based on whether the local government, corporate entity or other local organization has signed an “information services” contract with the media outlet. The contracts require positive and extensive coverage of events organized by the contracting party, virtually prevent any negative coverage and often form a significant part of the media’s budget. This “specialty” of local media in Bulgaria is now moving to the national level as well, and is becoming even more dangerous with the economic crisis, since funds from such “service contracts” represent an ever more important part of the media budget. As Georgiev puts it, “The single biggest problem of Bulgarian media, big and small alike is that they sell content. News, current affairs, morning shows, talk shows, series, comedy, even cooking shows these days are used for ‘political product positioning’—unmarked and unaccounted sale of air time to politicians and sponsors within the main body of programming, under the guise of regular media production.”

#### OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

### Bulgaria Objective Score: 2.00

Objective 4 scores decreased slightly this year, but the decrease pushed the objective into an all-time low for the Bulgarian MSI. The economic crisis and the shrinking advertising market, as well as shifting audience preferences, have led to a significant increase of the online media audience at the expense of traditional media. Well-established newspapers have stopped their print editions and now publish online editions only. The panelists also pointed to the growing dependence of commercial and public media on direct or indirect funding from the government, both on the national and the local level. As Georgiev said, “Faced with the choice between economic survival and upholding editorial independence, many owners and editors are making a very visible choice in favor of the former.”

Still, there are strengths. Most of the panelists believe that the vast majority of media outlets operating as efficient and well-managed enterprises, both in the private and in the public sector. Significant differences here remain between the large national publications, radio and television stations and networks on the one hand, and the few remaining local media outlets, where management practices are still outdated.

Overall, though, most panelists agreed that media outlets and the media industry in general (advertising agencies, independent producers, etc.) follow business plans, use professional management tools in decisions on expenditures and personnel, and plan capital expenditures. Both at the request of the international owners and in compliance with the Bulgarian legislation, most media outlets have accounting and finance practices in line with international standards. Small local media, which cannot afford financial services of their own, use the practice of outsourcing these to professional accounting and consulting companies.

Markov noted that international investment in the Bulgarian media has played a very important positive role in elevating standards in media management, especially in major national broadcast media. At the same time, there is a marked difference between the management practices and tools used by the foreign-owned commercial media, and the small locally owned publications. As Dimitrov pointed out, a general score for the whole media sector would be misleading. The media outlets with professional management serve the vast majority of the audience, while the numerous less professional media are much smaller in terms of audience impact.

In terms of the diversity of revenue streams for the media, Daskalova commented, “The crisis worsened the market revenues of the media. In this context, in 2011 the most important revenue source for many media outlets proved to be advertising by state authorities and party campaign funds for the elections. Even those, as many noted, were markedly lower than in previous election years.”

#### 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.

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With the deepening economic crisis and shrinking advertising budgets, many media outlets have become more and more dependent on just a few clients, allowing or even inviting outside influence on their editorial policy. Even though there has been some positive movement in terms of increased share of advertising for online media, that does not benefit the independent online publications, but rather the web incomes of the large media outlets, which can afford to produce the content the readers are looking for.

Not surprisingly, the advertising infrastructure in Bulgaria does not get a very high score. The main problems are not with the lack of professionalism of the advertising agencies, but are seen in the non-market methods of distribution of advertising financial flows to selected media outlets. While the vicious circle of inter-related advertising companies, media outlets and audience research agencies described as one of the hallmarks of the Bulgarian market persists, there are some newcomers in the game—the competing media group of newspapers, radio and television station, printing houses and a bank is using similar methods to regulate advertising flows. In addition, there is a growing concern that big advertisers, both nationally and locally, are forced to place their ad budgets with certain media through political influence.

The indicator measuring the government's role in the market scored particularly low, and it overlaps with questions about revenue streams. According to Boyadjiev, this is really the most problematic area for the whole objective. Participants noted problems in almost all of the questions related to that one indicator. The government uses direct and indirect subsidies to exert pressure on critical media and to reward loyal media, both on the national and on the local level. As noted earlier in the discussion, the influence of local governments on smaller local media is overwhelming, and many outlets have become mouthpieces of the authorities. A similar model is being applied on the national level towards bigger national media, where the government is using its role in the distribution of Bulgarian public and European structural funds to reward loyalist media by awarding contracts for communication campaigns to large media and creating a financial dependence on public funds as a tool of content control. Another "innovative" approach is depositing large amounts of public resources with the bank connected to one of the large media groups in the country, which openly supports and promotes the government.

According to Atanasov, "The revenues from municipalities have become the most reliable source of funding for local media. Advertising revenues from the local media market are irregular and the revenues from online advertising are limited."

A serious problem noted by him, and many of the other media panelists, is the fact that the government advertising placements are not distributed fairly and favor those outlets

that provide positive coverage to the local authorities. As a general rule, the smaller advertisers have no influence on the content, but the few bigger companies on the local market are in a strong position to influence the market.

As Dimitrov said, "The process of consolidation of media ownership in Bulgaria, which is a fact, increases the potential for political influence over the audience, but at the same time makes the several big players relatively more independent in financial terms." According to him, small private broadcasters cannot survive on the limited resources of local markets, and fall easily victim to local business and political interests.

According to Lipovanski, most advertisers ignore the local media when it comes to advertising, because they consider that the audience of their national media is sufficient to do the job. "National advertising agencies encourage their clients to work with the national media; it is easier and less time consuming," he said. At the same time, in the country no independent audience studies of local electronic media have been carried out for years, making it difficult for advertisers to measure the degree of effectiveness of their advertising activities on the local market. Local radio owner Vasilev agreed: "Outside the capital, big advertisers avoid the local media. It's getting worse by the year. Earlier, the local branches of banks and insurance companies had some budget for local advertising. Now everything is centralized, coming from Sofia and going to the national media. Even public advertising goes only to the national media."

In addition, the panelists pointed out that no national or local funds for support of public media exist, even though there are legal provisions for their establishment. At the same time, the law limits the amount of advertising on public media. As a result, many media, which are public in terms of their programming, are forced to register with the authorities as commercial broadcasters, hoping that this will help them increase their commercial revenues.

According to many of the panelists, problems persist with the transparency of allocation of state subsidies to the public media. These subsidies are not product-oriented, and do not include requirements for a specific number or time of public-type programs, but rather cover the overall subsistence of the public media.

Boyadjiev underscored the worsening state regarding the allocation of public funds for commercial media this year. "If a ministry doesn't pay for a particular media outlet to be covered, it is as if [that ministry] does not exist. No mention of it, ever, until it starts paying. But once it does...they don't need a press center or a PR agency anymore." Some media outlets, especially newspapers and news portals, use their coverage of specific government agencies to extort money

from them—coverage of their activity is minimal and only negative if they don't have an "information services" contract with the media. Once they sign such contracts, the coverage becomes abundant and all positive.

The advertising market in Bulgaria has been strongly influenced by the local and global financial crisis, and one result is that less research is being done for the purposes of media planning. Market studies are conducted mainly at the national level and do not reflect the situation in smaller cities and regions. Vasilev said, "Market research in cities under 50,000 citizens is not being conducted. Market agencies require sums of money for such research that no local media can afford."

The indicator measuring the availability and independence of broadcast ratings, circulation figures, and Internet statistics also received critical reviews from the panelists. Traditionally for Bulgaria, few experts have trust in the People Meters used to measure television audiences, yet with the lack of an objective alternative, they remain the data that defines the market and directs controlled flows of advertising money to selected media outlets and independent producers. In 2011, the bigger and better established People Meter agency bought the smaller one, but according to the panelists, neither the existence of two independent agencies nor their merger has significantly influenced the objectivity of the measurement and serious concerns about manipulation of the data continue.

There is no reliable data for radio ratings, and these do not get often measured outside the few bigger cities. Even though an Audit Bureau of Circulation exists, its services are not being used by the majority of the print media and the circulation figures of newspapers and magazines are deemed highly speculative and misleading. Thanks to the available technology, only the Internet readership data are seen as more reliable.

## OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

### Bulgaria Objective Score: 2.26

While there is no significant change in the score for Objective 5, there are some visible trends that reveal areas of both progress and decline.

As far as industry associations are concerned, Bulgaria continues to be one of the good examples for the development of a sustainable and professional Association of Broadcasters, ABBRO, able to provide much needed and adequate member services and to represent the industry before the government and regulatory bodies.

Vassilev praised the assistance he has received from ABBRO during the year. His station was visited by the authorities, who tried to impose an unfavorable contract with the monopolistic copyright protection agency on him at a time when ABBRO was leading industry-wide negotiations on the terms of the contract. ABBRO and other media organizations like BTC ProMedia interfered and managed to put the pressure on the local stations on hold until a nation-wide solution is found. "Ever since the creation of ABBRO and the other support organizations, these have been of great help to us, smaller, local media."

Kirkovska also noted that the Bulgarian Association of Cable Television Operators has a strong record of promoting and defending the interests of its members, especially in relations with the regulatory bodies.

Recent personnel changes have shaken the Union of Bulgarian Publishers, but its main challenge remains that too many print media outlets are not members and the organization is not seen as universally representative for the print media.

Vasilev praised the level of development of the broadcasters' association; he said, "It is a professional organization representing the interests of the media and very adequate in protecting their rights."

According to Dimitrov, the professional organizations are in a different state: "The Association of Broadcasters is a strong organization with concrete and visible achievements in lobbying

#### 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.

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for better media legislation and successfully defended its members. At the same time journalism organizations are weak; the trade unions remain invisible in respect of protection of journalistic rights or professional standards.”

A problematic area is the indicator measuring the existence and strength of the professional associations working to protect journalists’ rights and promote quality journalism. The traditional Union of Bulgarian Journalists is not seen as an organization able to provide efficient support to the journalist community in the country; on the other hand, it remains the only functioning journalist association. All alternative journalism unions founded after the fall of communism and the freedom of speech organizations active in the 1990s and early 2000s have either ceased to exist, or are not active at the moment. As a result, very little support for journalists is available in terms of training, legal protection and lobbying. The Union itself is losing members and overall public, professional or lobbying influence.

According to Boyadjiev, the reason for the decline in the activities of the journalism associations is related to the issues discussed under the earlier objectives: “the breakdown of journalism values, independence, and professional standards.” In his words, it is difficult to be associated with journalists who do not share the same values.

According to Daskalova, “The most serious problem with respect to this factor is the lack of journalistic solidarity.” She notes that even in cases when politicians behave rudely with journalists, the other media does not react to protect the offended colleague only because he/she comes from a “competing” media outlet.

Kirkovska said, “While you cannot hear much about the Union or other organizations when they are most needed, once an opportunity is provided, they all have an opinion. Last year, eight of them suddenly appeared at the election of the General Director of BNT, and all wanted to be heard.”

The only positive examples noted were the lawyers of the Access to Information Program and the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, who provide legal support to journalists in need, both on libel and defamation and on access to information issues.

As Kashumov put it, “Recently, there is a crisis in the Union of Publishers, and the professional associations of journalists do not effectively protect their rights. On the other hand, several NGOs are strong in supporting journalists in specialized areas, like libel and defamation and freedom of speech.” In 2011, the European Court of Human Rights awarded damages against Bulgaria in the cases of journalists Katya Kassabova and Bozhidar Bozhkov for breach of Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights—unjust conviction

for libel. Kashumov and his colleague from the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee Yonko Grozev successfully presented the journalists before the court.

The withdrawal of international donors has taken the toll on almost every aspect of NGO work in the country, including media related NGOs. Daskalova said that her foundation is finding it ever more difficult to work on media projects because of the lack of funding, and many of its experts work on a volunteer basis.

At the same time, Georgiev praised the support of the Open Society Institute for the media in crisis in 2011. Under an innovative support scheme OSI provided dozens of journalists, including bloggers, Internet and local media journalists with funding to produce programming, which their media outlets would not fund because of the economic crisis. While such support is by default limited in time, it provided vital help in times when the media tries to limit its production expenses to the max. He also mentioned the important support of the America for Bulgaria Foundation for independent media and Bulgarian culture.

Despite some progress made in the area of journalism education over the last several years, the panelists agree that there is still a lot to be desired. According to Daskalova and based on professional research by her foundation, there is a need to reform the journalist education curricula, so that they would correspond to a greater degree to the needs of the media environment in terms of technology platforms, convergence and civic journalism. Her concern was shared by the representatives of the media industry in the panel, who point out that the professional quality of young journalists emerging from universities is insufficient - poor knowledge of foreign languages, lack of motivation and aspiration for quality journalism and unwillingness to work in regional media. “There is little contact between the media industry and the journalism education. The media is not happy with the students, the students are not happy with the media, even the universities are not happy with the students—there’s a lot of unhappiness around,” she concluded.

Markov, who teaches production at the Sofia University, also shared his disappointment with the entry level and motivation of the students: “Unfortunately, I see people who are extremely ill prepared by the basic school system, bordering on illiteracy. And these are the people who will talk to the audience tomorrow.” Another problem is the ready availability of journalism education at an ever-growing number of universities, which have limited experience in the field and depend heavily on traveling professors and local media representatives. A number of post-graduate programs also exist, even though some of them raised the

concerns of the panelists as to their focus: such as an “M.A. in lifestyle journalism.”

The availability of short-term training is another area of obvious decline. The reason for the decline lies partially with the economic crisis, prompting media to cut down spending on professional training, and partially to the withdrawal of international donors, who had actively supported such programs in the past.

Owners of the new television stations launched in 2011 have organized in-house training, but generally the training programs for the majority of the media have been suspended or downsized. Much-needed training in new media is not available due to the lack of resources. Some international training, including with funding from the US government, exists, but is not systematic and does not meet the needs of the developing media industry.

As Georgiev said, “We’ve carried out two training courses this year. This is a 200 percent increase compared to the year before, but it is nothing compared to the early 2000s... If we had to depend for revenue on training alone, we’d be long gone.”

The indicators within this objective that drew the highest scores from the panelists are traditionally those concerning technology and access to media equipment and distribution. The development and penetration of information and communication technology is seen as rapid and sufficient to meet needs of the media and the citizens alike.

While there are some concerns about the newspaper distribution networks, there are no restrictions on media equipment and consumables. The main problem is seen with the channels of media distribution.

Mihalev pointed out, “The distribution market is monopolized, and this distorts the circulation of individual newspapers, which violates the plurality of views. Practically the entire newspaper market is dominated by the two large groups, the New Bulgarian Media group and the former WAZ media group, who compete over which will provide more positive coverage to the government ... Few truly independent media remain.”

According to Lipovanski, “...the main problem is the monopoly of big companies and distribution networks, which local media can hardly overcome. The law does not guarantee access to local programs to the audience of cable operators [the must-carry clause]. There is also a serious monopoly in the distribution networks of print media locally.”

## List of Panel Participants

**Yassen Boyadzhiev**, editor, MediaPool.bg, Sofia

**Petko Georgiev**, journalist and producer, BTC ProMedia, Sofia

**Dilyana Kirkovska**, expert, Council for Electronic Media, Monitoring Directorate, Sofia

**Konstantin Markov**, honorary chair, Association of Bulgarian Broadcasters, Sofia

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

**Svetla Petrova**, freelance journalist, Sofia

**Vesselin Vassilev**, owner, Radio Sevlievo, Sevlievo

**Petya Cholakova**, editor and owner, *Srednogorski Bagri* magazine, Zlatitza

**Vassil Dimitrov**, director, bTV Radio Group, Sofia

**Ivan Atanasov**, editor and owner, Sakarnews.info, *The News*, Harmanli

**Alexander Kashamov**, lawyer, Access to Information Program, Sofia

**Dimitar Lipovanski**, journalist and producer, Arena Media, Russe

**Nicoletta Dasklova**, media expert and lecturer, Media Democracy Foundation

## Moderator

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