



Annual Report of AEJ – Bulgaria on the State of Journalism and Freedom of Speech in Bulgaria, 2017

The general trend is negative. Bulgaria ranks 109th out of 180 countries in the “Reporters without Borders” 2017 World Press Freedom Index, with the country expected to go further down the list in the next edition of the ranking. Alpha Research, Bulgarian sociological agency, indicates that more than 65% of Bulgarians do not trust the media.

The "Culture of Pressure" in Bulgarian media is on the rise

Since 2011 AEJ-Bulgaria conducts every two years a [Survey on the state of Bulgarian media and the nature of pressure](#). The pressure is measured by the journalists themselves who could hide or reveal their identity in the inquiry.

- Stable tendencies of control and restriction of media pluralism, evidence of which can be observed in the survey on the freedom of speech in Bulgaria for the two last surveys - in 2015 and in 2017.
- In 2015 the main sources of pressure was coming from the owners and advertisers, respectively the marketing departments of the media and the pressure on editorial content was bigger in the private media.
- In 2017 the survey shows the coming back of the political pressure.
- 26 % of journalists admit that they self-censor their articles and the owners are restricting criticism toward the government or VIP.

In general there are numerous media print outlets, many TV and radio stations, formerly the legislation is good and there are constitutional guarantees for the freedom of speech. At the same time there are quite few critical and serious professional journalistic investigations that dare to touch powerful people and structures. The question who owns the media stays and who is behind the official names as well.

Only the owners of media that criticize the government are under scrutiny and under fire of possible or real legal charges.

The media that are attacking the civil society and that are praising the government receive also financial support from the government through communication money for the operational programs of EU. Thus the authorities buy media comfort.



Up to December 2017 we have seen a PARADOX

- The public media - BNT (Bulgarian National Television) and BNR (Bulgarian National Radio) were relatively freer and open to critical journalism than the private ones.

(For instance one of the biggest cases for the last 2 years was the disappearance of the political cartoons made by Tchavdar Nikolov for the Nova TV (private TV) in 2016. Because of the fact that the television itself is in the portfolio of the media group that owns many online media, the cartoons of Tchavdar Nikolov disappeared from all the platforms at once after a particularly sharp political cartoon of the prime-minister).

MEDIA TROUBLES MONITORED BY AEJ-BULGARIA in 2017

- Physical Attacks against journalists:

[2 July 2017](#) - the cameraman Peter Dzhanavarov was hit by a nationalistic "hero" Petar Nizamov-known as Perata, while the cameraman with bTV (a big private TV) was filming a protest in the town of Asenovgrad. Nizamov received considerable media attention through his aggression toward refugees even on bTV itself.

[26 July 2017](#) - The famous TV anchor Ivo Nikodimov (Bulgarian National Television BNT, Channel 1) was attacked by three people in a central park in Sofia on Tuesday. The attackers escaped immediately. Although the reasons for the attack remain unknown, it is extremely alarming that a prominent TV journalist can be subjected to aggression in broad daylight.

[4 October 2017](#), Zornitsa Akmanova case (a reporter for the TV programme Lords of the Air). Her car was set on fire in the central Bulgarian town of Karlovo. On the following day, the owner of a car garage in Karlovo, Plamen Dimitrov, was arrested in connection with the attack on Akmanova's car. On 9 October, Dimitrov was released on bail after being charged with a single act of fraud against a client. No charges have been brought in connection with the burning of Akmanova's car or the threats she says she has received. The Council of Europe notes that the attack on Akmanova's car has been the third case of threats or violence against reporters for Lords of the Rings so far this year. In July, Dimitar Varbanov said he had received threats in relation to his investigation of dangerous working conditions at a construction site in the town of Veliko Tarnovo. In the spring, his colleague Eva Veselinova was physically assaulted while filming an investigation into alleged fraudulent practices on the part of a construction company in the town of Pazardzhik.

[December 2017](#) - the editor-in-chief Maria Dimitrova and Georgy Ezikiev, the publisher of the regional online media Zov News in Vratza received several murder threats after an investigation on the drug traffic network connected with the money loans compagny in the town.

[AEJ-International supported the AEJ-Bulgaria](#) national section reaction and the President of the mother organization [Mr. Otmar Lahodinsky](#) met the chief officer of the Directorate for combating organized crime in Bulgaria to ensure that the journalists will be protected against [physical attacks](#).

- Verbal attacks against journalists by politicians and people on power:



[August 2017](#) - Nikolay Barekov, Bulgarian politician and MEP (ECFR Group), wrote on his Facebook profile that he has summoned the state's General Prosecution for "corruption practices, hiding income and money laundering through purchases of luxurious property" by NOVA TV's host Anna Tzolova. He added he is preparing similar claims against BTV's host Anton Hekimyan, his producer Anna Todorova and Victor Nikolaev – co-host of NOVA's morning political show together with Tzolova. The name of Barekov himself has been involved in articles on hiding taxes and plundering millions of leva from the Corporate Commercial Bank, or CCB, which collapsed in 2014. According to findings of the State Revenue Agency of Bulgaria, he himself had not filed his tax declarations for several years.

After [AEJ issued a statement](#) that politicians should not threaten journalists, Barekov responded with direct attack calling AEJ "paid urinals [in Bulgarian jargon equivalent of "bootlicker" or "servant"], "

The [AEJ-International reacted](#) against the accusations of the MEP also with a letter to the President of European Parliament. The official response from the office (Delia Vlase) of the Cabinet of the President of European Parliament was the following: "The President has underlined many times that freedom of expression and freedom of press are essential pillars for any democracy. As for the comments made on social media by MEPs the President has no competence to scrutinize or station them."

More articles on the topic are available [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).

September 2017 - the anchor Anna Tzolova disappeared from the prime-time morning show. The official explanation was that she is preparing a lifestyle talk show. She is still off air. At the same time she never complained herself.

6 of October 2017 - Viktor Nikolaev, the co-host of the morning talk show of Nova Television, received direct threat on air on October 5 from Anton Todorov, a Member of the Parliament from the ruling party GERB. The MP directly linked the missing woman anchor Anna Tzolova with the uncomfortable questions she was asking and said that Viktor could follow her path and that his chair could also become empty. "You are using very strong words. They will take your bread, as they already did in relation to your colleague. She was also moving in some direction, but I see her chair is missing," Todorov said.

In the very same broadcasting Mr. Valeri Simeonov, a deputy prime minister for economic and demographic policy and a co-chairman of the United Patriots coalition, continued the line drawn by Anton Todorov, a member of parliament from the ruling GERB party and a deputy chair of the parliamentary commission for anti-corruption at the time, telling to Viktor Nikolaev that it is easy to arrange any kind of "gate" against anybody. Later he told the media that he was using "analogy" and he didn't mean to threaten the journalist.

[On 11 of October](#) AEJ-Bulgaria organized a protest for the sake of the uncomfortable questioning the politicians and the MP Anton Todorov resigned. The claims are available [here](#) in Bulgarian.

- Legal pressure within the state institutions against owners of media outlets that are critical to the ruling coalition and the government:



[December 2017](#) - The Commission for the Seizure of Illegally Acquired Property (KONPI) opened a case and blocked some properties of the owner of Economedia Ivo Prokopiev. Although the attack was not directly aimed at Economedia but at its majority owner, one can suppose that KONPI's actions have been provoked by articles published by outlets belonging to the media group that are critical to the political status quo and investigates in deep wrongdoings of the authorities.

[Summer of 2017](#) - The event in December presents us with an opportunity to recall a statement by Sasho Donchev, the owner of the Sega newspaper, another media critical of the government, who in the summer of 2017 said that Sotir Tsatsarov, the chief prosecutor of Bulgaria, had "advised" him not to risk his "nice business".