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TRIFONOVA PRICE, Lada

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Between a rock and a hard place: continued struggle of media and journalism in Bulgaria's media system

Introduction and background

This chapter aims to show that the political and economic context is crucial to the current poor employment conditions for journalists in Bulgaria, one of the poorest member states of the European Union. With a GDP per capita at 50 % below the EU-28 average (Eurostat, 2018; Antonov, 2019) Bulgaria and its media are in financial dire straits. Difficult economic conditions have exacerbated the crisis in journalism while journalists and editors have witnessed a consistent decline in press freedom in the past two decades. Bulgarian journalists and media workers have voiced their concerns about the difficult working conditions under which they exercise their profession on numerous occasions, stating that their concerns “are not just a problem of the Bulgarian society, but of the entire European Union.” Journalists argue that the crisis engulfing journalism is a threat not only to Bulgarian society, but to the EU as a whole (AEJ Bulgaria, 2012). It's important to examine and understand the reasons for this state of affairs and to suggest some steps that can be taken to safeguard and enhance journalism in a country often classified as a “flawed” democracy (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2019: 112).

The annual Reporters Without Borders (RWB) Press Freedom Index places Bulgaria at 111th place (out of 180 monitored countries), demonstrating deterioration of media freedom indicators from previous years. Bulgaria's position on the list is lower than all other European states owing to a widespread corruption and collusion between media, politicians and local oligarchs (RWB, 2019a). The government and political parties are monopolized by oligarch politicians and businessmen who use improper influence, such as financial incentives and applying direct pressure on editors, and have power to shape policies. Growing concentration of media ownership is a highly problematic issue for journalism as it threatens pluralism and media freedom (IREX, 2019). Ownership is mostly used as a vehicle for fulfilling political, business and other agendas. A climate of fear and threats of violence against journalists is widespread to the extent that to be a journalist is now dangerous in Bulgaria (RWB,

2019a). This affects how journalists do their jobs on a day-to-day basis and contributes to harsh employment conditions across the media sector.

Bulgaria was a staunch communist country up to 1989. During communism the state-owned media were tightly controlled and censored; they were paramount in maintaining the power of the communist regimes throughout Eastern Europe. Used as an instrument for political purposes rather than as a channel for communication and distribution of information, the communist media in Bulgaria were a vital instrument of control by the ruling communist party, namely used for propaganda of ideas, manipulation of citizens and maintenance of culture of fear of retribution experienced by political opponents of the regime (Sparks and Reading, 1998; Gross, 1999; Paletz and Jackubowicz, 2003). The development of the media in Bulgaria since the start of democratisation thirty years ago has been marked by a number of rapid changes. On the positive side, the immediate liberalisation of the market created favourable conditions for expansion of the printed press, freed from the direct political censorship and the ideological restrictions of communism. The absence of strict regulation and the ease in starting a media outlet allowed for free speech, media pluralism and access to information to all citizens. Freedom of speech and expression was quickly enshrined in the new Bulgarian constitution becoming an essential part of the democratic public sphere (Raycheva, 2009). The press, keen to meet the new information demands of audiences, cherished its newly acquired functions as a watchdog for society and its increasing role in shaping public opinion. In the early years of democracy the media played a central and pivotal role in establishing and representing the new power elites responsible for political governance (Znepolski, 1997), quickly becoming an agent of public communication and the centre of power struggles where hostile and open wars between the elites were fought (Roudakova, 2008; Dyczok, 2009; Gaman-Golutvina, 2009; Votmer, 2013). While the media market was undergoing a rapid transformation, scores of young journalists in Bulgaria were entering the profession and adopting new norms of value-free objective reporting (Foley, 2006; Stewart, 2013).

On the negative side, some of the major issues that currently plague the Bulgarian media landscape have their roots in the early 1990s. While the transition to democracy was peaceful as in other countries in the region, the former rulers

converted their political capital into significant economic assets and social status without much difficulty (Steen and Ruus, 2002). Continuity with the previous regime was exemplified by the desire of newly elected political and economic actors to control, own and influence the media for their own agendas. This is one of the main reasons why autonomous and independent press and broadcasters have failed to prosper. The new ruling elites perceived radio and television as very attractive channels of political communication deliberately inhibiting changes in this field, and “fearing the loss of influence on the content of the reformed public media” (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2019: 108). Whether public or private, most media have been subjected to continued political and economic pressure since the early days of transformation, especially those that are critical the government in power. Journalists regularly experience interference with their work, which has led to widespread self-censorship (Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom (CMPF) Media Pluralism Monitor (MPM), 2017; Trifonova Price, 2018). News outlets often tailor coverage to suit the agendas of their owners (Freedom House, 2019). Other problems include non-transparent media ownership and financing. The existing legal framework for disclosure of media ownership allows the actual owners of some media outlets to remain hidden to the public. While in theory there are sanctions for non-transparency, in practice, these have never been imposed on media outlets (Spasov, 2019).

In 1990, there were 540 newspapers with total circulation of 1 098 632 but by 2018, the number of newspapers had reduced to 239 (37 dailies) with a total circulation of 216 037 copies (Tsankova, 2018; BNSI, 2019). Like in many other countries Bulgarian daily newspaper circulation numbers have continued their steady decline. Severe competition and market constraints over the past two decades, including the fallout from the global financial crisis, from 2008 to 2013, have halved advertising income and brought many print media on the edge of collapse (Center for Study of Democracy (CSD), 2016; IREX, 2014). As well as a sharp drop in circulation and significant decline in gross advertising budgets, newspapers have experienced a decline in trust (40% in news overall) due largely to a dependence on funds from local oligarchs or foreign NGOs (Antonov, 2019). In the early years of democratisation the media exerted considerable influence over public opinion and brought high polarisation in Bulgarian society (Raycheva, 2009). 2018 has also been defined by extreme polarisation of the media and the return of control by political parties, which

have their own TV channels (Antonov, 2019). Yet, despite being in a difficult financial situation, print media still continue to wield substantial political clout in Bulgarian society just like they did in the early 1990s (CSD, 2016). Licences to private broadcasters are often granted on the basis of strong friendship ties between businesses and ruling elites similarly to Greece and Spain (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2019). Several influential TV channels such as the cable channel Evropa and the national Nova TV are owned by people with close links to the government, ensuring positive coverage of policies and launching frequent attacks on government critics (Antonov, 2019).

Democratic transformation in Bulgaria has been hampered by slow institutional and economic reforms and the lack of democratic culture with shared principles and values that guide their behavior and attitude (Balčytienė, 2015). A good example of low democratic culture is the deeply engrained culture of corruption in government, business and society, which has affected the development of the media landscape and journalism practice since the end of communism (Trifonova Price, 2019b).

Corruption and media

Corruption is a serious impediment to economic reforms and democratisation in any society but it is particularly damaging to those often described as vulnerable or “fragile” such as Bulgaria (Rupnik and Zielonka, 2013). Despite the country becoming a member of the European Union (EU) more than a decade ago, anticorruption efforts have stalled due to strong resistance from the current political elite. Bulgaria is ranked 77th out of 180 countries in the latest annual Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index (TI CPI, 2018), which rates countries by their level of public sector corruption. Bulgaria’s position in the index has gradually deteriorated since 2007 when the country was ranked 64th on the list. Corruption was actually worse by 2010 than it was in 2007 at the start of its EU membership. This is partly due to the fact that once the accession criteria were met prior to membership, the Bulgarian government immediately scaled down its efforts to tackle corruption in society (Ganev, 2012). Notable cases of large-scale embezzlement of EU funding forced the European Commission to temporarily stop practically all pre-accession funds directed to Bulgaria and to issue stern reports from Brussels (Andreev, 2009;

Ganev, 2012). Since then there has been very limited progress in the political corruption domain with rare convictions of corrupt high-ranking officials (Stoyanov et al., 2014). Transparency International notes “persistent unaddressed problems including dirty money in politics, unregulated lobbying, a lack of uniform anti-corruption policies in public institutions, non-transparent appointments to key public offices and no clear ethics policy for the parliament” (Transparency International, 2017) as some of the key concerns relating to corruption.

More than half of Bulgarian citizens believe that their government is not doing enough to combat corruption within its ranks (Pring, 2016). The media, along with civil society and the private sector, are usually seen as one of the pillars of a national integrity system, a framework that encompasses a variety of approaches to combating corruption worldwide (Pope, 2000). However, there has long been doubt over the ability of the press and journalism to expose corruption, even in established liberal democracies (Curran and Park, 2000; Petley, 2004). If the media is plagued by corruption, it is unable to perform its role as a check on power. The situation in Bulgaria illustrates this well. Editorial corruption in Bulgaria is so widespread that some public relations agencies that are bidding for contracts with international companies have had to openly distance themselves from the common practice of having to pay journalists for news stories (Braun, 2007; Trifonova Price, 2019b).

One of the biggest problems that affects media content is the non-transparent and unregulated allocation of state advertising to certain media outlets in Bulgaria (see Antonov, 2013; CSD, 2016; IREX, 2019). The practice has become more widespread since Bulgaria joined the EU because the money often comes from designated publicity funds from EU projects (Trifonova Price, 2019b). Interviews by the author with a number of Bulgarian journalists conducted in 2010, 2016 and 2019 show that such practice is strongly affecting the media’s ability to act as a check on power on national and on regional level (Trifonova Price, 2019b) as this quote from an interview illustrates: “Ministries make payments under allocations for “publicity” under EU projects, which are usually less than 1% of the value of the project. This guarantees complete lack of criticism of the way the project money is spent. For instance in Varna where projects are covered only on the basis of official press releases and there are no questions about the results of the projects, the costs of public

tenders and so on. The media are “bought” to cover up corruption on other levels.” (Spas Spasov, 2016).

Government control and censorship on national and local level is exercised by allocating state advertising to media that are willing to provide pro-government coverage or avoid asking inconvenient questions: “outlets are dependent on financial contributions from the state, often in the form of advertising, which can lead to demands for favorable coverage of the government (Freedom House, 2019). In practice this means that any topics that can potentially jeopardise the payments can be banned or blacklisted by the media owners and editors and that leads to widespread self-censorship among journalists (Trifonova Price, 2018). A large proportion of regional media outlets relies on financing from the local government and political parties through contracts for information services and political advertising. Most owners and publishers are in direct contact with local political and council authorities (Tsankova, 2018). It is common for politicians and journalists to maintain a close a relationship, which often leads to corruption and clientelism, as is the case in Bulgaria, Romania, Spain, Greece and other southern European countries (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2019). Financial insecurity, inadequate contracts and low salaries are now the norm for many journalists in Bulgaria while trade union protection is essentially non-existent (MPM, 2017). The average monthly wage for a reporter ranges from 1,000 to 1,500 Bulgarian Lev (BGN) (equivalent of 500 to 760 EUR), close to the national average (IREX, 2019). This has not changed significantly since 2010 when the average monthly salary of a journalist was estimated to be less than 1,000 BGN (EUR 500), which was slightly above the national average with journalists in regional outlets getting paid at the lower scale of the spectrum. (Štětka 2011). Many employers tend to pay reporters the minimum wage to save on statutory deductions and the rest of their salaries are handed to them “in hand”. Continued closures of print media outlets and rising unemployment among journalists are accompanied by a lack of legal protection with the exception of the state broadcasters (Štětka 2011: 15). Low pay and precarious job marker conditions sometimes coerces reporters into corrupt or unethical practices that go against the principles of ethical journalism but can bring them a much-needed income. However, corruption on a higher editorial level is more problematic as it amounts to silencing not just individual journalists but whole media outlets robbing them of their independence. The continued uncertainty about the long-

term economic survival of media outlets in a highly volatile political and economic environment is indicative of the impact of systemic corruption on journalistic culture, attitudes and behaviour (Trifonova Price, 2019b). In a corrupt environment and weak judiciary the state is either unable or unwilling to investigate and prosecute anyone who commits crimes against journalists, including harassment, verbal and physical abuse and intimidation. Observers have expressed concerns about the rise in crimes against journalists in Bulgaria, including violent attacks (IREX, 2017).

Violence and self-censorship

One of the most recent and symptomatic cases is the murder of the TV presenter and journalist Viktoria Marinova from Ruse in 2018. Marinova had previously reported on fraud involving EU funding. Despite the authorities insistence that the crime was not linked to Marinova's work, lingering doubts of a cover up of a botched investigation remained even after the quick arrest of a suspect (Mapping Media Freedom, 2018; Freedom House, 2019; RWB, 2019a). The reporter's brutal assault and killing was condemned by numerous international organisations tasked with improving safety of journalists such as Reporters Without Borders, Committee to Protect Journalists and OSCEE's Media Representative and covered extensively by global media outlets. In 2018, another journalist, Hristo Geshov was attacked outside his home and two reporters were arrested and briefly detained while also investigating alleged fraud with EU funds (Freedom House, 2019).

The Bulgarian national security agency and the police have been used to intimidate and harass journalists and critical media outlets through coercion to reveal sources, spying, threats, and blackmail (Trifonova Price, 2014). In a recent example, the police summoned the journalist Assen Dimitrov, from the online news site Blagoevgrad News to issue a written warning after he covered a protest in the city of Blagoevgrad. The AJE Bulgaria stated that it is unacceptable for journalists to receive police warnings when they cover protests as they have a right to do so guaranteed by the Bulgarian Constitution and the Law for Radio and TV (AEJ Bulgaria, 2018). Also in 2018, newspapers in a conglomerate owned by notorious MP and media owner Delyan Peevski called on a television station to fire a presenter who had posed questions about Peevski's businesses on air (Freedom House, 2019). There

are numerous examples of physical and online abuse, arson of property, dismissal and verbal threats against reporters as well and legal harassment. Such type of intimidation and interference not only amounts to censorship but also leads to widespread self-censorship among journalists, avoidance of certain topics, and dulling of criticism (Blagov, et al, 2014). The problem with violence against journalists and impunity is linked to the way Bulgarian media are owned and ran and the environment of complex web of dependencies between owners, business, political and government actors.

Ownership and income

The majority, if not all, print and digital media in Bulgaria are unprofitable and depend on income from the owners' other business ventures (Antonova, 2019). They do not aim to make a profit but operate with the sole purpose to "trade influence while TV channels receive income from advertising and from cable network fees" (Antonova, 2019). For the press, low incomes and online competition have further reduced readership and most foreign investors have left the market, a trend that started in 2010 when the German conglomerate Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung (WAZ) sold its leading titles, citing formidable corruption and political dependencies as some of the main reasons for withdrawing (Trifonova Price, 2014). Since then the ownership of media outlets has largely transferred and concentrated in the hands of wealthy local businessmen, exposing journalists to political and economic pressure and threatening pluralism (Freedom House, 2019). Risk of commercial and owners' influence over editorial content is high at 92%. The concentration of media ownership in Bulgaria is also considered a high risk. Horizontal media ownership concentration is estimated to be as high as 96% and cross-media concentration of ownership and competition enforcement 88% (MPM, 2017).

Media legislation does not contain any specific measures to prevent a high degree of horizontal concentration of ownership in all media sectors. The general rules in the competition law do not include specific provisions for the media market but the actual level of concentration is impossible determine due to a lack of precise data (Spasov, 2019). As already noted due to considerable financial insecurity and small advertising market many news organisations rely on the state advertising, given in

exchange for positive coverage of the government. This poses a strong barrier to media pluralism along with low media literacy (MPM, 2017). The government's penchant for allocating EU funding to sympathetic media outlets has been likened to bribing whole media outlets to apply a soft touch approach when reporting on the government or to avoid certain topics and controversial news (Trifonova Price, 2019b; RWB, 2019a; Freedom House, 2019). Judicial harassment of independent media has also increased. For example, in 2019 an investigative reporter from the business weekly Capital owned by the independent publisher Economedia Rosen Bossev was convicted of defamation and fined approximately 500 EUR for expressing criticism of the former head of Bulgaria's Financial Supervision Commission (FSC) Stoyan Mavrodiev in a live TV broadcast in 2015 (RWB, 2019b). While reflecting on the defamation case, which continued for four years, Bossev noted the negative impact on his professional and personal life, including the life of his family and open intimidation from judicial police. The case is pending submission to the European court of Human rights because, according to the reporter, it is important that there are boundaries that should not be crossed when it comes to protecting freedom of speech and expression in Bulgaria (Bossev, 2019).

Despite the continuous legal and financial pressure that the media has endured over the past two decades, Capital and its publisher company Economedia have established a new model, which brings them some much-needed revenue. Capital is one of the few outlets in Bulgaria charging users for its online content and makes a small profit through organising special events. The publisher invests in and focuses on quality content and journalism, which is then used for special editions on education, healthcare business, finance, property and others. The media takes these special editions further by organising events and conferences, such as a conference that brings together the best experts in the field to talk about healthcare issues. Their biggest event is "Capital Top 100", the ranking of companies by financial results. There are also awards, a business directory with information, which is sold by the publisher. The special editions and events are one of the biggest sources of income for the company and they are developing a new media division titled "Storio" to act as a mediator between the editorial and advertising departments. It works on the principle of sponsored content but it goes beyond being an advertorial. Essentially the advertiser pays for the time the journalists invests in researching and writing about a

certain topic but the stories, which contain quality information and analysis are marked as sponsored so the reader is aware of this sponsorship (Antonova, 2019).

“In the past decade the effects of digital technology on journalism in Bulgaria and Romania has manifested itself in three main areas: the new dynamics of news and information gathering, the changing professional practices and skills that are necessary to adapt in this digital environment and the changing status of traditional media” (Trifonova-Price, 2019a: 319). The current media market in Bulgaria is also characterised by the dominant position of online media as a source of information. In 2018 72.3% of Bulgarian household have home Internet access while 71.5% use broadband (BNSI, 2018). Statistics show that the percentage of online sources of news, including social media, is relatively high (88%) but only 7% pay for news. 52% share news either by social media, message apps or email while 41% comment on online news (Antonov, 2019). Digital technology has improved access to news content and information and has created more opportunities for people to express their opinions on issues they care about (Antonova and Georgiev, 2013) However, most digital news media do not have an effective business model. In practice, online platforms can support only a very small team of journalists without specialist knowledge. They tend to copy content from traditional media organisations and news agencies compiling and aggregating information from different sources, which often amounts to a copy-paste exercise. For a large number of Bulgarian journalists, news gathering and production is influenced by social media, active audience participation in news content creation and use of user generated content (Slavtcheva-Petkova, 2017). Digitalisation has brought some positive changes in the Bulgarian media landscape and working practices, namely easier access to information, growing audience participation and gradual adaptation of journalists to new technological conditions.

Conclusion

The observations on the Bulgarian media landscape show yet again that media organisations and journalists in fragile democracies without self-sustaining financial mechanisms are open for manipulation from state and corporate actors that can use them for personal gain and political agendas. This environment does nothing to

improve employment conditions for Bulgarian journalists who are struggling with rising unemployment, low pay and are indeed in a very difficult social situation (Štětka, 2011). Despite some gains, political and corporate interests are preventing the majority of Bulgarian media and journalists to act as a check on power and in the public interest. The conflict between serving sponsors and serving society is affecting not only the quality of journalism but the way journalists do their jobs, feeding widespread self-censorship, and is inevitably lowering the trust in journalism. In order to regain credibility and confidence, Bulgarian media needs to fight for its independence and find sustainable mechanisms to prosper in its primary goal to serve the public and act as an agent of change. However, even in consolidated democracies such as the United States, there has been a rise in bias and political polarization, the quality of information media has significantly decreased and journalistic professionalism has deteriorated (Hallin and Mancini, 2017). While this chapter has outlined difficult working conditions for journalists what in many instances lead to poor and unethical journalism, it must be stressed that there are some media and journalists who are battling against the tide of political and economic pressures, conducting investigations and exposing abuses of power despite the harsh every day reality. In 2012 in response to the urgent concerns expressed by Bulgarian journalists and editors, Neelie Kroes, the EU Commissioner for Digital Economy and Society at the time, stated that without journalism there is no democracy and all countries in the EU should fight together for media freedom (Novinite, 2012). Kroes vowed to make it a personal priority to drive improvement in the media market. Yet, despite this pledge and several others since then, nothing has changed for the better and employment conditions for Bulgarian journalists continue to deteriorate. There is no straightforward solution to the problems analysed in this chapter but it is imperative that the European Union stands up to its rhetoric and begins to work together with Bulgarian journalists and media houses protect their rights, safeguard media freedom and pluralism at state level, and to adopt concrete legal mechanisms to enforce its Charter of Fundamental Rights, especially Article 11, where it is completely disregarded by those in power.

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