

Bulgaria's media jungle: the good, the bad and the ugly

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The media landscape in Bulgaria seems grim at the moment – oversaturated with tabloids and politically-slanted, oligarchic-owned outlets. The few independent and professional journalists face harassment and prosecution. Boyko Borissov's recent fall from power gives some hope that things may change in the long run. However, there are a few caveats.

In the latest [World Press Freedom Index](#) by Reporters Without Borders (RWB), Bulgaria has been ranked 112th. Bulgaria is the member of the European Union with the worst score which is a major source of concern for international observers. In the country itself, this unfortunate state of affairs has given rise to a blame game. Some have tried to explain the threats to media freedom with clichés, such as the structure of funding and ownership of media. Others point fingers at concrete individuals. There are those who notoriously deny that there is a problem altogether, insisting that RWB's conclusions are biased.

The sad reality is that the problem is much more complex. It is difficult to have a healthy media environment in a poor, undemocratic country. Bulgarian media merely reflects how sick Bulgarian society is. Here I make the clarification that I am writing this article from an outsider's perspective – as an engaged citizen who reads Bulgarian and international media every day and sees important differences between the Bulgarian and the western media landscape.

Toxic environment

Reading Bulgarian media may be a very unpleasant experience. Most leading media can be classified as tabloids even though they refuse to admit it. It is common to find articles which are classic examples of defamation. Journalists traditionally ignore the basic requirements of fairness and balance – making insinuations and flamboyant allegations without even asking the affected party for a comment is the standard. Many media deliberately engage in tarnishing campaigns against concrete individuals. Some of them have expertise in more covert attacks – they choose facts selectively and connect unrelated events to influence gullible readers.

Brutal invasions of privacy can also be seen. For example in 2019, PIK, one of the pro-Borissov tabloids (Boyko Borissov is the previous prime minister who still yields a lot of influence – editor's note), attempted to discredit one of the candidates running for mayor of Sofia, Borislav Ignatov, by releasing a sex tape with his girlfriend. It appeared that the woman [was a victim of revenge porn](#) – this media decided to amplify the harassment in a pathetic, yet degrading attempt to influence the election campaign.

Amidst this toxic culture, there are some brave souls who try to make a difference by engaging in serious journalism. Most of them are subjected to unacceptable abuses. For instance, anticorruption journalist Ognyan Stefanov faces numerous absurd charges by Bulgaria's prosecutor's office, including one for [treason](#). Previously, he was beaten almost to death with hammers – a heart-breaking story which caught the attention of the [New York Times](#). Journalists from the Bulgarian partner of the Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project – Bivol – are also [vocal about threats and interrogations](#) by Bulgaria's prosecutor's office which they believe are meant to silence them.

There are cases of murder and mysterious deaths, as well. One example is provided by the widely reported [ruthless murder](#) of Viktoria Marinova in 2018. Nevertheless, civil society has reasons to believe that the prosecutor's office provides an umbrella for those who organise such assassinations – it either frames innocent individuals or presents murders as accidents and suicide.

In a nutshell, it is not that Bulgarian journalists do not have freedom. If they are willing to comply with the agenda of harassing critics of the status quo and supporting the corrupt regime, they can employ all possible means, including disrespecting people's dignity. The system becomes merciless only towards journalists who are willing to expose its ugly face.

The chemistry of poison

There are diverse factors which may shed more light on how toxicity has become the norm. The pattern of financing surely plays a role, but there is a plethora of cultural and political issues which have taken their toll as well.

One of the emerging internationally-accepted models of funding which seems to ensure media freedom in practice is soliciting donations by the readers themselves. However, this model is extremely difficult to implement in Bulgaria where readers are unwilling to pay for access to media. The main reason for this is [low economic indicators](#) – Bulgaria has the lowest GDP per capita, the lowest minimum wage and the lowest median earnings in the EU. When one struggles to provide food on the table, paying for access to media seems like an unaffordable expense.

Meanwhile, there are readers who are simply suspicious of Bulgarian media and refuse to donate to advance someone else's agenda. Historically, journalism in Bulgaria had a bad reputation which also promotes distrust. During communism, the main role of media was to spread propaganda of the omnipotent communist party and glorify the totalitarian regime. Bulgaria never saw full lustration – exposing all names and precise activities of those who collaborated with the [communist secret services](#) (*Darzhavna sigurnost*) which were the arm of terror of the regime that was responsible for violent purges and repression. However, within its limited [powers to lustrate granted by law](#), the committee responsible for disclosing the affiliation of Bulgarian citizens to communist intelligence services [exposed 109 people](#) still working in the media sector in 2009. Among them one finds [prominent journalists](#). On different occasions, this committee has lustrated other journalists as well. It is easy to imagine that many Bulgarian citizens would be sceptical about the credibility, objectivity and intentions of those who collaborated with a terror machine.

This background elucidates why three main means of financing media developed in Bulgaria – media funded by or supported through the connections of their owners who are prominent businessmen/oligarchs,[\[1\]](#) media dependent on advertising and media relying on government funding. Variations are common as well. It is hardly surprising that the first type advance the agenda and political preferences of their owners – of course, they would vehemently deny this, but a savvy reader quickly sees who receives objective coverage, who is attacked, and who is completely ignored by these media. The second type are forced to self-censor and avoid criticising those advertising with them. The third type naturally self-censor or even try to please the government.

The environment significantly worsened after Borissov rose to power in 2009, as can be seen from Bulgaria’s plummeting in the World Press Freedom Index. In 2009 Bulgaria was [68th in the world](#) – a much better ranking than the one it has today. It is no secret that Borissov built an [autocracy](#) and a key feature of autocracies is curtailing freedom of speech. The motivation behind the capture is not only to suffocate criticism, but also to weaponise media against inconvenient opponents of the regime. Borissov’s circle found a way to influence or even control all three types of media because it had a targeted strategy for each one.

Borissov initially flirted with some oligarchs to receive positive reporting because of goodwill. Bulgarian citizens remember the glowing coverage Borissov received in the publications of [Economedia](#) in his first government. He also had a talent to put oligarchs who own media against one another or against those businessmen who did not, in the hope that the oligarchs who were well-disposed to him would somehow ruin the reputation or even the business of those who were not. Many Bulgarians remember the epic battles between *Economedia* owned by Ivo Prokopiev and the media of Delyan Peevski. Borissov was able to quickly switch sides too, depending on what was convenient for his autocratic agenda – he progressively stopped seducing *Economedia* and cut a deal with Peevski who became his behind-the-curtain close ally. The latter was just [sanctioned](#) for corruption by the US Government under the Global Magnitsky Act this year.

Borissov knew that state-owned media could easily be compelled to comply with his agenda if the “right” type of management was appointed. Subduing this media was a low-hanging fruit all the more that state-owned media are not known for hiring rebellious journalists. His government, however, had the ingenuity to play with advertising and service contracts in the dark. There are emerging reports by civil society members that ministries have entered service contracts with [various media](#) which disregard basic ethics of journalism. Even worse, tabloids have been [financed](#) through EU funds – a problem which even the European Commission noted in its [Rule of Law report on Bulgaria](#), albeit in a diplomatic manner. Unsurprisingly, Borissov receives splendid coverage in such media while his opponents are crucified there.

Sadly, even those who have had their cathartic moment and have started criticising Borissov’s regime are willing to publish untruths against payment – I was personally [shocked](#) that *Economedia* published a press release with false information in 2019 as part of an advertising package bought by the government even though, at the time, they were already presenting themselves as critics of the regime.

Is there an antidote?

The fact that Borissov fell from power gives some hope that things may change in the long run. However, there are a few caveats. Firstly, there are oligarchs who own media and there are media financed by Borissov's government that owe Borissov favours. This is clearly visible in the coverage his GERB party receives at the moment. The goal, of course, is to portray Borissov in a positive light, influence voters, and bring him back to power. Secondly, it has been repeatedly argued by the opposition and civil society members that Borissov [controls](#) the prosecutor's office. Inconvenient journalists will continue to be harassed until that is the case.

Beyond Borissov, however, there are other factors which impede a healthy media environment. One of them is the notorious disunion typical of Bulgarians. There are legends about the Bulgarian cauldron in hell which does not need to be guarded by the devil's assistants because Bulgarians pull anyone who attempts to get out of it by their feet. In the media sector in Bulgaria, there is no solidarity which gives a *carte blanche* to abusers.

One example is provided by the activity of the Bulgarian chapter of the Association of European Journalists. While [AEJ-Bulgaria](#) has developed a constructive habit of publishing public positions raising awareness of the threats against media freedom, one cannot help but notice that their defence is selective, and suspect dual standards – the journalists in some media seem more important to them than others. This is what one is inclined to believe since known instances of harassment are ignored by their positions. In turn, the Union of Bulgarian Journalists has been compared to [a person in a coma](#), numb to the threats against Bulgarian journalism. Even worse, its latest [president](#) has been exposed as an agent of *Darzhavna sigurnost*. If such professional bodies are biased and do not defend the right to free speech of all journalists, who will?

Another factor which surely does not foster a toxic-free media environment is the behaviour of readers and opinion leaders. By reading and by sharing content which does not comply with ethical standards, readers encourage the proliferation of such material and unwittingly participate in smear campaigns. Opinion leaders who give interviews to such media legitimise such low standards, too. For instance, I was surprised to see the former UK Ambassador to Bulgaria and the current US Ambassador to Bulgaria give interviews to *24 Hours*. This is one of the weapons of Borissov's regime which mixes serious news with tabloid-style articles harassing critics of the status quo.

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly was a famous Western which received praise for its depiction of the Wild West. Its title seems fit to describe the Wild East of Bulgaria. The media landscape is surely ugly. This bad outcome was reached because of complex political and cultural factors. The only good thing is that despite the pressures and the toxic atmosphere, there are still some journalists willing to expose the ugly face of Bulgaria's autocracy. But how long can they last without proper support?