

Christiana Christova; Dirk Förger: On the Situation of Bulgaria's Media and Their Contribution to the Civil Society

Somewhat less than two decades after the downfall of communism, things are not looking too well for Bulgaria's media landscape. In the Worldwide Press Freedom Index, the country was relegated from rank 35 to rank 51 between 2006 and 2007. This is a compelling reason for alarm, as the freedom of the press always reflects the quality of democracy, and as the media especially should act as a corrective to the authority of the state, uncovering irregularities and pillorying abuses of power.

In 1879, the first constitution after the end of Turkish rule propagated freedom of opinion and conscience which the country lost under the communists in 1947 and 1971. Freedom of speech, protection of information sources, freedom of opinion, freedom of the media, prohibition of censorship, and the right to free access to information found their way into the constitution of 1991. In addition, competition on the media market is institutionally safeguarded by relevant laws.

The majority of Bulgaria's media have by now agreed upon an ethics code as a voluntary foundation. It postulates truthfulness, respect for human dignity, freedom from censorship, editorial independence, and prohibition of discrimination and calls upon the media to support democratisation. An ethics committee for print and broadcast media composed of journalists, media owners, and citizens was founded in 2006.

Bulgaria's print media market does have a legal framework, but it still lacks a specific press law. Current publication regulations offer much freedom in terms of editing and content. Due to the 'underregulation' of the market, however, no exact circulation figures are available. Most regional and local papers are published several times a week, with *24 tschassa* and *Trud* leading the market. *Kapital* and *Banken*, two weekly publications, appeal to readers interested in economics, while *168 tschassa* and *Politiker* address the masses. *Kapital* and *Dnevnik* may certainly be rated as quality products, and *Tema* is regarded as a competent political and social weekly. *Eva*, *Grazia*, and *News Week*, a business paper, are popular journals. Bulgaria's ethnic minorities also have their own periodicals, but they are published infrequently and in small numbers.

Bulgaria's media market is controlled by a few tycoons existing side by side with a large number of small proprietors. The biggest player is the WAZ group (*Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*) whose subsidiary, the newspaper group Bulgaria, owns *Trud*, *24 tschassa*, and *168 tschassa*, three products with a wide circulation. The WAZ maintains two printing plants, a distribution company, a shipping company, and a book-publishing house. The second biggest player is Economedia, a publishing house for economic subjects.

As Bulgaria's media are registered as trading companies, financial contributions by political parties and others can hardly be traced. However, not only institutions but also individuals with a dubious background, such as Chorny, a Russian, are included among the financiers. Especially foreign investors make an ambivalent contribution towards the development of Bulgaria's media: On the one hand, they promote their modernisation; on the other, they impede the development of an independent press by keeping sales prices low. After the WAZ group appeared on the scene, a tabloid press did indeed establish itself along Western lines, partly causing the decline of the party-affiliated press. What is more, many media focus on things that are irrelevant, personal, or voyeuristic but fail to communicate complex political and economic subjects comprehensibly. This is an unfortunate situation, especially as in a country like Bulgaria, where the media are occasionally subjected to great political pressure, and where even violent assaults on critical

journalists are said to happen, it is absolutely necessary to communicate democratic thought, the values of the EU, and the rules of the economy.

Unlike the print media, radio and television broadcasting is regulated by law. Founded in 2001, the Council of Electronic Media is supposed to ensure compliance with the regulations on advertising, donations, copyright, and the protection of children and adolescents in the audiovisual field. Consisting of nine members, the Council also appoints the directors of the public broadcasting station. Five of its members are appointed by parliament and four by the president. When the Council stopped issuing licenses in 2005, numerous broadcasting providers continued their work with temporary permits. In 2005, it was decided that the transition to digital broadcasting was to be completed by 2012. However, this expensive project will probably not become reality before 2015.

Bulgaria has a dual broadcasting system. Next to Bulgarian National Radio (BNR) and Bulgarian National Television (BNT), there are 233 other television and radio providers. The BNR operates *International Bulgaria* as well as two Bulgarian-language stations, *Horizont* and *Christo-Botev*. While *Horizont* broadcasts national news, *Christo-Botev* regards itself primarily as an educational and cultural station.

The BNR stations have the largest audience; since 1993, the rest of the market has been shared out among numerous small providers. *Radio Vesselina*, for instance, offers a mixture of pop-folk, rock, Greek, and pop music. The BNR is known for its independent critical position: After Ivan Borislav was appointed director general in 2001, a move that was regarded as politically motivated, many editors went on strike, and the appointment was annulled. This case gives rise to hope, but there are many other cases which prove that critical journalism does require courage in Bulgaria.

In Bulgarian television, there are four national terrestrial stations – BNT, bTV, Nova TV, and TV2. Robert Murdoch's News Corporation, owner of bTV and the Antenna Group which includes *Nova TV*, is considered the biggest player on the television market. As a public television broadcasting station, the BNT maintains Kanal 1 and the satellite channel *TV Bulgaria*. Regional broadcasting studios are located in Blagoevgrad, Varna, Plovdiv, and Russe. bTV is the first private station to broadcast around the clock, primarily offering entertainment and holding a leading position on the market. Other stations that are widely watched are the three channels of *Diema* and *TV7*.

While German public broadcasting stations are financed by subscriptions and do not depend on the state, there are no such charges in Bulgaria, so that the national television and radio network is largely financed by government subsidies. Therefore, one could say that the television stations are close to the state – the floodgates for direct or hidden political pressure are wide open.

Unlike *bTV* and *Nova TV*, political programmes take up little space on BNT. Financed exclusively by advertising, the private stations keep their eye on a broader audience, primarily offering socially relevant and entertainment programmes. In this context, high professional standards are reached only rarely. News broadcasting is selective; in the majority of cases there are no international analyses. Certain subjects, such as those dealing with the environment or ethnic minorities, are readily left aside or treated with disrespect.

Of all the Bulgarian media, the internet is the most independent. www.mediapool.bg, www.focus.bg, www.novinite.com, and www.news.bg are competent, address a well-educated audience, and enjoy great prestige. One year ago, www.radar.bg joined that group. Renowned newspapers can also be read online, and an independent blogosphere has developed which might be seen as the forum of a civil society. Blogs as 'civic journalism' enjoy the trust of the population as they are not suspected of serving commercial interests.

Among the news agencies, the Bulgarian News Agency (BTA) is rated as the most professional. Financed by subscription, it cooperates with dpa, Reuters, and AFP as well as others. Although the BTA is regarded as independent, attempts to exert political pressure on it are made occasionally.

Now to summarise: What do the framework conditions for free and independent media in Bulgaria look like? In many cases, especially in the print media, the property situation is unclear. Sophisticated media are subject to the pressure of low-price competitors; quality papers vanish or change their format. It is said that some media are controlled by former members of the secret service, who are certainly not interested in promoting self-confident journalism.

Investigative journalists do not have an easy life in Bulgaria. They risk their job and sometimes even their physical integrity. Many of them do not shy away from self-censorship, one of the results being that there are hardly any impulses promoting a civil society in the media. Legal uncertainty, the pressure exerted by politics and the economy, and the fact that democratic values are embedded only weakly are playing their part. It can only be hoped that the country's European roots do not fail to have the desired positive effect.