

Democracy needs Media Pluralism

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One could say: "Again a citizens' initiative". But this citizens' initiative isn't just any initiative. Media pluralism is of greater significance than some other political issues. Citizens, politicians and experts from all over Europe have realized that and support this campaign with their voice.

Media pluralism is a neutral term that probably does not touch many people emotionally. But nowadays, in information society, it forms the basis of how we can participate in political processes. We, as citizens, need media to help us form an opinion or take the floor to express ourselves. Newspapers, television, radio, internet – without mass media, there wouldn't be any societal or political discourse in the country.

Media landscape should be as pluralistic as diverse the ideas and opinions in society are. This sounds natural, but it is not guaranteed in practice. Media pluralism needs to be protected. Many experts, among them the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, have pointed this out. There are a number of reasons for that. On one side, many media houses are not making profit and therefore there is a tendency towards concentrations. On the other side, some journalists say they get little support for expressing "different" opinions in their daily work. Some of our research, for example with the Foundation Media Democracy, shows tendencies towards conformity among some media.

For such tendencies there are, generally speaking, partly economic and partly political reasons. But we also observe that many journalists, media experts and politicians want to maintain pluralism as basis for democratic debates. Several factors are necessary for that:

- Better legal guarantees, but also efficient individual commitment to media pluralism. The following aspects are important: ownership transparency, equal access to press distribution as well as media owners who ensure their journalists room for independent coverage.
- Furthermore we need viable business models. Because if media houses are generating losses, they get too dependant on other interests. There is no pluralism without freedom and there is no freedom without independence. Nowadays many media houses can only survive due to subsidies. Only if media outlets find additional sources of income through new business ideas, media pluralism can be preserved. Just to give an example from Germany: Some newspaper publishing houses also operate call centres, advertising agencies or organize conferences in order to support their core business.
- And maybe the most important point: we need a stronger consensus in society about the significance of media pluralism. If there are fewer opinions, there are fewer debates – but debates form the basis of every functioning democracy. Media pluralism is not something that is just "nice to have", it is something crucial for our European understanding of politics.

Today, more than 20 years after the end of communism, Bulgaria has a broad media landscape. Not all media outlets will manage to survive economically in the long run. But we should provide the right frame conditions in order to preserve as much of this pluralism as possible.