

Only one in seven Bulgarians thinks the media are free

STUDY COMMISSIONED BY THE KAS MEDIA PROGRAM

60 percent of the inhabitants of Bulgaria deny that the media are independent. Many are undecided, only 14 percent explicitly believe that reporting is free. This is the result of a study commissioned by the KAS Media Program. It also shows that daily papers have almost entirely lost their significance for Bulgarians.

The media landscape in Bulgaria already has a bad reputation. Monopolization in the newspaper sector, insufficient or inefficient legal rules and a self-regulation system only in theory have attracted a lot of criticism. Foreign ambassadors have expressed their concern and exploitation of the media for political purposes was the subject of Western press reports.

Now the citizens have delivered a devastating verdict on their media, in a survey by the company Market Links, which has a good reputation in Bulgaria. Representative sample of around 1,200 adults were questioned in face-to-face interviews on the quality of the media in December 2013. According to this survey, only a small minority believes in real freedom of the press.

Those living in the capital hold an especially critical view of the media

Especially critical are the inhabitants of Sofia – there only seven percent see the media as “completely” or “somewhat” independent. Those living in the capital have access to a greater spectrum of media, use the Internet more intensively, and many have been demonstrating for months for political change. The better opportunities for the development of opinion

in the capital have an influence on the image of the media, which here turns out to be extremely critical.

Even though digitalization is making rapid advances, television remains the number one medium for broad sections of the population. For two thirds of Bulgarians (62 percent) it is the preferred information source for politics, only 20 percent here mention the Web and a mere 4 percent the newspapers. In terms of content too, television is much better regarded than online and print media. 78 percent say that television helps them to understand politics and the economy; only 17 percent say this about the newspapers. And this is the case, although print media are theoretically much better suited to in-depth presentation of complex topics.

Online portals appeal to younger Bulgarians through objectivity

Similarly, asked about their “most trusted” individual media form, far more citizens name television (57 percent) than other media (Internet 22, radio 4 and newspapers 3 percent). But the younger generation of up to 34 year-olds holds online media to be equally credible and objective as television. As expected the elderly have the least trust in the Net.

The relatively high level of trust in TV broadcasters can be explained by local conditions, but also on the basis of media research. At least until recently, the public broadcaster BNT has resisted political pressure and proved to be rather balanced in its reporting of political conflicts. The private channel BTV also enjoys a relatively

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good reputation. The newspapers by contrast have lost credibility in the recent past by campaign journalism and publicly conducted "media wars". In addition there is the psychological factor that many people have more trust in pictures than in words. The role of newspapers in the media mix is also not as pronounced as, for example, in Germany and by force of habit higher TV consumption leads to a more positive general image for TV.

Alarming finding for the daily press

The finding is alarming for the daily press since lack of trust is clearly making itself visible for quite some time in a sharp decline in circulation. For some established nationally appearing papers, figures are privately being mentioned of only 10,000 to 20,000 copies. According to insiders, many titles are for a long time unprofitable and are maintained only because they serve outside interests for the purpose of influencing political and economic decision-makers. This also partly explains the poor position of the EU-member Bulgaria in international rankings on freedom of the press. According to "Reporters Without Borders" it occupies rank 87 in the world, and with „Freedom House“, 77th place (in both cases, for 2013). Depending on the source, this puts Bulgaria on about the same level as states such as Mongolia or Madagascar.

and diversity in the Bulgarian media. The Foundation conducts an expert media monitoring programme on the quality of political reporting and has observed the discussion on a still non-existent press law in this new EU member state. Together with the KAS Bulgaria office, other NGOs and the German Embassy, the Media Program in Sofia organizes Panels on the challenges faced in the media landscape. In the difficult general environment existing at present, a media policy oriented to EU standards is not to be expected in the short term, but in the consciousness of many journalists and experts media freedom and diversity continue to be important building blocks for further democratisation.

In the increasing competition with the Internet the print media must now put the emphasis consistently on higher quality to remain relevant for broader sections of the population. If the publishers are already under pressure in traditionally strong print markets as in Germany, this applies all the more for Bulgaria as a smaller country in a period of transformation and modernization. It remains to be seen whether a substantial majority of media proprietors and managers will meet this economic challenge and orient itself more strongly to international professional standards.

The KAS Media Program South East Europe has provided intensive support in the past two years for public discussion of quality



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