

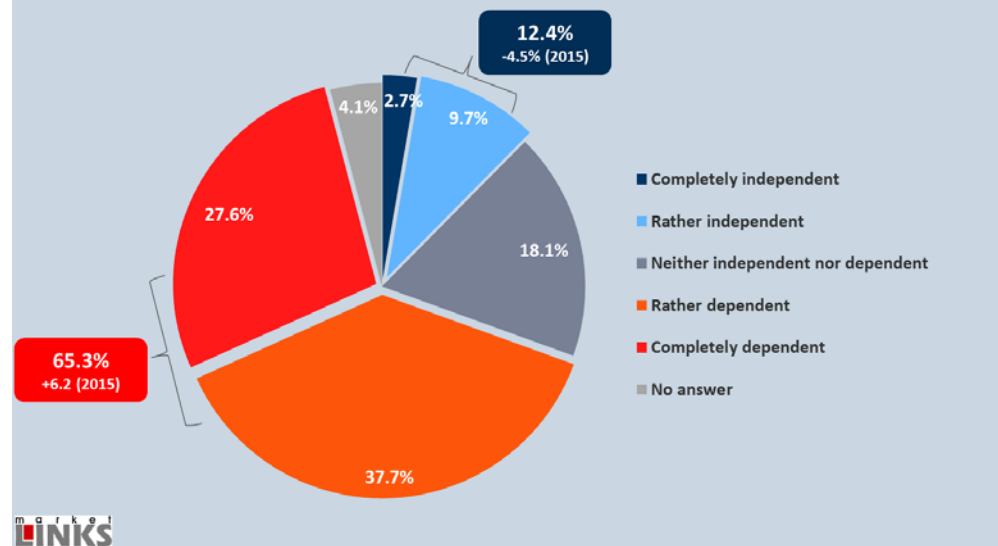
Bulgarian media cannot overcome crisis of confidence

REPRESENTATIVE SURVEY ON BEHALF OF THE KONRAD-ADENAUER-STIFTUNG:
CITIZENS REMAIN CRITICAL OF THE MEDIA AND POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Two thirds of Bulgarians (65 percent) do not think that the media are independent. Some are undecided. Only 12 percent believe reporting is free. This is the worst value for three years, according to a study commissioned by the KAS Media Program South East Europe. Citizens feel they are similarly inadequately informed by politicians. 67 percent take a generally negative view of their communications with the public. A representative sample of 1000 of the population aged 18 and over was questioned.

Only one in eight Bulgarians thinks the media are free

How dependent or independent are the media in the country?



The Bulgarian media sector still has a poor reputation. There is no systematic repression of critical journalists in this member state of the EU. However, monopolisation in the newspaper sector, inefficient legal regulation and a self-regulation not notable for its effectiveness are criticised by Bulgarian and international experts. Media freedom is restricted by scattered pressure from a variety of political figures and advertising customers, as well as by unstable employment conditions and self-censorship, so that Bulgaria is rated only 106th of 180 in the international ranking of Reporters Without Borders.

For the third time, the KAS Media Program South East Europe has commissioned an opinion survey to measure the extent of this crisis of confidence. The result shows that only one in

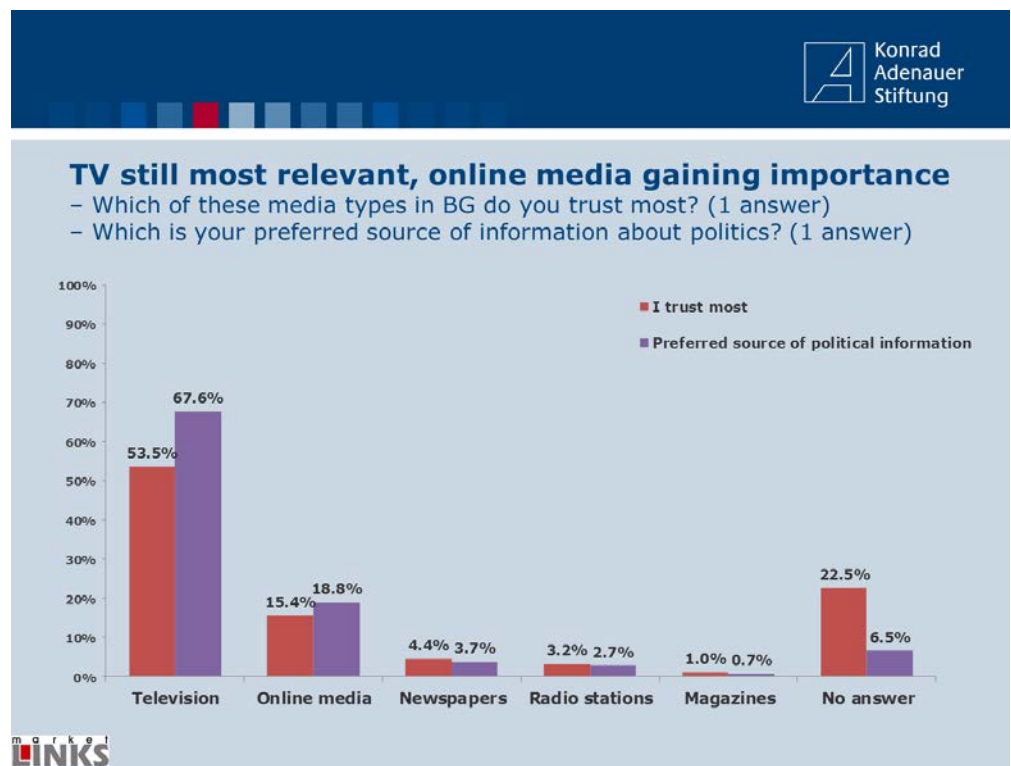
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eight citizens believes in the independence of the media (the survey was conducted in December 2015). A year earlier this was still one in six (17 percent) – which was already a bad value. At a time when the circulations of the print media are sharply declining and many TV and radio stations are in the red, the industry is unable to improve its reputation. The proportion of the population who regard the media as “wholly” or “rather dependent” bears little relationship to the party-political environment – in the past three years it remained constant at around 60 to 70 percent under three different governing constellations. The proportion of optimists with respect to press freedom varies between 12 and 17 percent. Normal, small statistical fluctuations in the survey have to be taken into account. To this extent, there is much to indicate that the media industry, to a large degree, shares responsibility for the crisis of confidence. Many observers agree, the country’s politicians, companies and media, to an equal extent, enter into mutual relationships of dependency in pursuit of their own advantage. This applies primarily to the traditional media (print and TV) and to a lesser extent to the online media.



At least every second Bulgarian uses the Internet, and digital build out is making great strides. But television is still the political medium number one for broad circles of the population. For two thirds (68 percent) of Bulgarians it is the preferred source of news about politics, 19 percent name the Web and 4 percent, the newspapers. The balance has shifted slightly – television is losing a few percentage points in relevance, while the online-media are gaining in significance. This is related to peoples changing habits of media use, not primarily to the level of trust: the online media could not record any increases in this respect compared with the previous year. Numerous news portals in South East Europe suffer from inaccurate research, biased presentation of opinion and plagiarism – but there are also examples of independent, increasingly professional sites.

Asked for the single kind of media in which they had the “greatest trust”, more people still name television (54 percent) than other media (Internet 15, newspapers 4, and radio 3 percent). Trust in online media is greatest in the younger generation of under 35-year-olds. Older people, as expected, have the least trust in the Net.

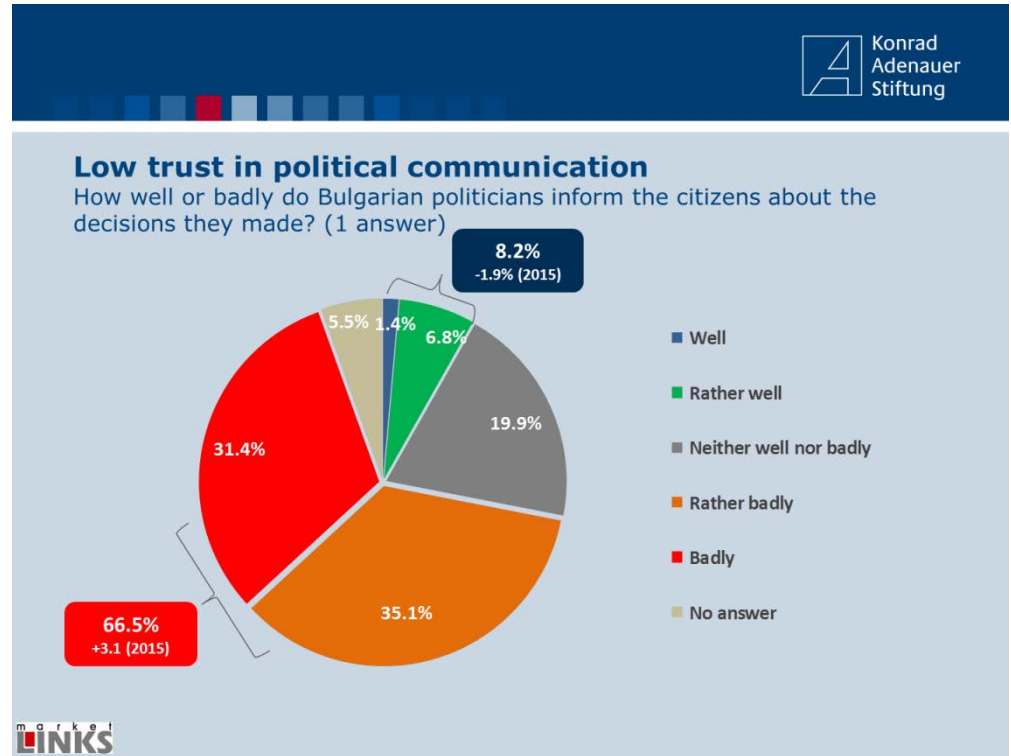
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That television is the preferred source of information about politics is not in itself evidence of quality. It has a lot to do with the fact that it is altogether the dominant medium and firmly embedded in people's everyday life. In addition, many people have greater trust in pictures than in words. The role of newspapers in the media-mix is also not as strong as in Germany, and willingness to pay for journalism is less pronounced.



 **Konrad Adenauer Stiftung**

Imprint

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung
 Media Program
 South East Europe

19, Konrad Adenauer street
 1st floor, apt. 2
 1504 Sofia
 Bulgaria

Phone +359 2 94249-69/70
 Fax +359 2 94249-79
media.europe@kas.de

Professional journalism is not the only important pre-condition to enable citizens to form their opinions and enable them to take part in political activity. Communication by politicians and state institutions is also extremely important for the transparency of political processes. Two thirds of Bulgarian respondents rated political PR as "poor" or "rather poor". Only 8 percent gave positive ratings. The questions in the survey were about the political class in general and did not distinguish between government authorities and political parties.

This accords with a general picture of political communication in South East Europe as being in need of improvement. The professional profile of a press officer is not yet sufficiently established in political life. Those responsible for public relations are often insufficiently involved in the strategic and programmatic planning of government authorities and parties. Communication is not yet regarded as a cross-sectional task. But society is changing. Active communication and transparency are more and more in demand. Propaganda and the suppression of bad news are often no longer the way to achieve results. The KAS Media Program South East Europe encourages a more modern form of political communication, for example through the professional association SEECOM (<http://seecom.info>) and by means of workshops for communications experts of political parties.