

Hashtag against media: Political rise of social networks

BULGARIAN MEDIA MONITORING 2013

As in previous years, Foundation Media Democracy and Media Program South East Europe of Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung present their annual report on the state of the media environment.

Again, in 2013 the monitoring remained loyal to the principles to analyse the media not only within a framework of making general conclusions, but also paying close attention to the details. The monitoring is based on quantitative and qualitative data prepared by Market Links Agency, ordered by the Media Democracy Foundation and Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung. The main focus of the report is placed on the trends in the media coverage of Bulgarian political life. The analyses in the sub-sections of the report are prepared by the team of the Media Monitoring Laboratory (Nikoleta Daskalova, Gergana Kutseva, Silvia Petrova, Marina Kirova, Bogdana Dencheva, Vasilena Yordanova, Eli Aleksandrova and Vladimir Kasimdarov). Experts, such as Georgi Lozanov, Vyara Angelova and Todor P. Todorov, were also invited to share their appraisal of the media developments throughout the year.

In brief, the general conclusions in the monitored areas include:

MEDIA DISCOURSE

The dominant tone of the media language in Bulgaria over the past year gave new power and energy to the collective effervescences. Effervescence means inflow of festive spirit, overexcitement, escaping from everyday life problems and from the encounter, the collision with more powerful and more

fearful forces. At media level, this implies the revival of a language that is rapid, easy, very efficient and functional, which does not require an audience with special readers' skills, able to interpret, think critically, with background knowledge, political literacy, etc. The scope of this language includes plain symbols and division lines.

Under these circumstances the division between the centres of corporate and political dependence in the media discourse became crystal clear. Such division, evolving as a declared war, came to existence as a face-to-face confrontation between the media and "tearing" of the audiences on the axis TV - Internet - print media.

The television, as the most powerful (and visual) donor of public imagination and language, reproduced and multiplied the scales and dimensions of public effervescences. The Bulgarian national broadcast TV channels, in particular in the period prior the end of the summer, competed with each other to broadcast directly from the streets the biggest reality show - the anti-government protests and the counter-protests, the momentum and symbols of the street and its radical confrontations, which were transferred and engineered on the screen. The typical Bulgarian features, such as psychotic and hysterical excitement, were reinforced. With the coming of the autumn, however, the TV channels shifted their attention from this subject matter, in order to start the new seasons of the traditional, outdated, yet polished, reality formats.



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The partisan genre continued its existence in "campaign" Internet websites and in the social networks (mainly on Facebook). A boom of pseudo-information dwarfs appeared in this environment. Numerous ad hoc, situation-driven websites, groups and trolls, as well as other voices, appeared and kept the confrontation tone. The information and communication conflicts on the internet reached the limit of normality. The newspapers happened to be in the most apparent politically biased "campaign" position and showed the least flexibility. An axis of conflict between online media and print media emerged – the war between *Dnevnik/OffNews* vs. *Lafka*, the latter turning into a symbol and a totem of the print media monopoly and its editions.

NATIONAL DAILIES and TV CHANNELS

The monitoring of the traditional media focused on the period July – December 2013¹ and covers the central news programs of BNT, bTV, Nova TV, TV7 and the national daily newspapers *Trud*, *Telegraph*, *Sega* and *Presa*.

Several more important trends could be outlined with regard to the TV channels. All monitored TV channels would give the biggest information-coverage advantage to the government and would present the government-related news in a relatively neutral mode. Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (Grazhdani za evropeysko razvitie na Balgariya, abbreviated GERB) managed to topple the Bulgarian Socialist Party (Bulgarska Sotsialisticheska Partiya, BSP) in terms of intensive presence in all TV channels. Negative attitude towards GERB was observed in BNT, bTV and TV7, while Nova TV remained rather neutral to the major opposition party. Except for TV7, Prime

Minister Plamen Oresharski was much more in the limelight than President Rosen Plevneliev. TV7 would report news about the president quite often, however, in a negative aspect, while the premier benefited from a relatively positive or neutral attitude in all of the monitored TV channels. The attitude to BSP remained relatively neutral in BNT, Nova TV and TV7, but clearly negative in the central news programme of bTV.

As to the daily newspapers, the government was in the limelight for *Trud* and *Sega*. Both newspapers covered the government in a moderately negative and critical light. *Telegraph* and *Presa* would pay little attention to the government, however, the former had positive and the latter neutral coverage about it. GERB managed to topple BSP in terms of presence in print media, too. All four daily newspapers demonstrated a clearly negative attitude towards GERB. Prime Minister Oresharski was more often presented than the President in all editions, except for *Telegraph*, where in fact the attitude to President Plevneliev was the most negative. In its position vis-à-vis the president, *Telegraph* followed a policy analogous to that of TV7. The remaining daily newspapers demonstrated neutral attitude towards the president in their publications. All four media kept a neutral attitude to Prime Minister Oresharski. *Telegraph* demonstrated the most positive and *Sega* the most negative attitude to BSP. *Trud* and *Presa* were relatively critical towards the socialist party

The overall picture clearly showed that in the second half of the year the government and the Prime Minister enjoyed some media comfort: they were not overtly criticised, and some means of information (TV7, *Telegraph*) even supported them unconditionally. At the same time, those media were the ones that were the most critical towards GERB, Boyko Borisov and President Plevneliev. Generally, GERB was presented in a much more negative aspect than BSP. The largest opposition party received much more unfavourable media coverage than the ruling coalition. To a certain extent this was compensated by the

¹ The data for the period January – March 2013 is presented in the report of the Media Democracy Foundation and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung *Bulgaria Media Monitoring: Elections 2013*, which can be found at: <<http://www.fmd.bg/?p=7900>>. You may find a summary in English at <http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_9957-1442-1-30.pdf?130531150905>.

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fact that Boyko Borisov still remained the second politician in terms of media presence, the leader being Prime Minister Oresharski, and GERB won a leadership position in terms of media statements on key issues of the national agenda.

RADIO

In 2013 the radio showed that it could still play a role on the media stage – equally, independently and unpredictably. As early as the beginning of the year, in connection with the live broadcasting of the January congress of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (Dvizhenie za prava i svobodi, DPS), when an attempt on the life of the party honorary chairman Ahmed Dogan was made, it became clear that journalistic witness on the radio can make people imagine pictures much more frightening than the reality itself is. This leads to the conclusion that bearing witness in journalism should always be considered as an approximation to truth and not as the truth itself. The developments during the year led to one more conclusion: there has been a material change in the standards of covering the protests in comparison to the years of transition, when the radio played a key role. During the 1997 protests, the privately-owned *Darik Radio* was one of the major media outlets to cover the events – at that time this radio, enjoying a very high level of confidence and popularity, acted not so much just as coverage of the conflict between citizens and police, but as a third party having its own position. In the coverage of the 2013 protests most of the media, including the radio stations, pretended to be unbiased professionals, who take no sides. Against this background, the clearly and aggressively anti-protest position of Petar Volgin, journalist of the Bulgarian National Radio, was a radical departure from the standards of the media status quo. As a result of this, he was strongly criticised by journalists and the radio audience for misusing the radio to represent his own opinion, instead of presenting all viewpoints of the case. This case is still topical in the beginning of 2014.

ONLINE MEDIA AND NEWS SITES

In 2013 the coverage of the online media reached a new level of importance with the coverage of the social and political protests. The websites proved to be one of the major generators of information and interpretation of the events. In the same time, the internet became a venue of more and more intensive manipulation, propaganda and misinformation. In response to the increasing opportunities for the regular citizen to be creator of copyright content and distributor of information, news sites were born, which were supposed to maintain the monopoly of the government over the official version of the facts by mutual re-publishing of anonymous materials. Several streams of simultaneously structured 'public realities', interpreting the events in compliance with the provided 'talking points' have been created in the online environment, which resulted in a division of society and the emergence of unprecedented intolerance.

The media politization process was further strengthened over the year. The political topics largely dominated the online information blocks. Leading code in the coverage was the conflict: defamation, compromising materials and lies proved to be an integral part of the arsenal of political instrumentarium. The coverage of the work of the institutions, which gives an advantage on the information pitch to those in power, became a rule in the presentation of social life, thus legalizing the status quo. Quite symptomatic is the insignificant volume of economic information, in comparison with the previous year, despite the increasing social inequality and deterioration of the economic well being.

The coverage of the political figures experienced several U-turns over the year. Most of the political subjects changed their role in the public debates – from subjects giving appraisal they became objects of appraisal expressed by others. The recent media favourites, Boyko Borisov and Rosen Plevneliev, lost a major part of their glamour. The President proved to be one of the most disputable figures in the media re-

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presentations, and the attitude towards him was a clear indication of the editorial partisanship. The leaders of DPS and ATAKA (Politicheska partiya Ataka) made a breakthrough in the information environment in 2013. At the same time, the representatives of the new executive power could not achieve a distinguishable media image, with the exceptions of Prime Minister Plamen Oresharski and Minister of the Interior Tsvetlin Yovchev.

LIFESTYLE MEDIA

In 2013 politicians avoided appearing in lifestyle media. However, the way of presenting political events by means of lifestyle strategies continued to develop as a trend and proved to be strong. As a result thereof, the media analyses and comments often made reference to the appearance of things, persons and events. The aesthetic definition 'beautiful' was often linked to moral categories. Appearance was declared a major personality index: of virtues and vices, qualities of the character, idea positions and political affiliation. The stereotypical thinking and speaking in categories 'beautiful and smart' and 'ugly and stupid' – mostly in the context of covering of the anti-government and pro-government protests over the year – devaluated the significance of the political events and their presentation. The year also launched another trend – the political journalists turned into the new lifestyle stars. Some of them created around themselves the aura of demiurges of the social reality, which overlapped with the reality of their own private life. In addition, the specialised lifestyle editions themselves loaned topics and plots from the political reality. In the course of this process, the political symbols and slogans were understood as accessories necessary to create a personal fashion style.

YELLOW PRESS (The *Vseki Den* and *Bulgaria Dnes* daily newspapers)

The politically turbulent 2013 was of course covered in the daily yellow press. *Vseki Den* made a U-turn in its political partisanship and after the early parliamentary elections

in May began to sympathise BSP, the party that was object of the newspaper's habitually negative attitude just a couple of months earlier. Simultaneously with this U-turn and following the emergence of the Reformist Block, the edition re-launched its negative campaign against Meglena Kuneva, well-known from the previous years. The new face attracting the attention of the yellow press was Nikolay Barekov, a former journalist who moved to politics. *Vseki Den* helped Barekov to define his political image. However, the person who attracted the strongest interest of the tabloid daily newspapers was President Rosen Plevneliev. *Vseki Den* would scrutinize each step he made, and where there was nothing to condemn, the newspaper would examine his personal property and relationships. The edition would persistently link the president with the anti-government protests and the student occupation, implying that he was behind all this. The protests were labelled riots, and the protesters – rebels. The approach assumed by *Bulgaria Dnes* was a bit different: it also would not take its attention off the president and the protests, however, the coverage of the everyday topics was closer to the ideology of the protesters. In general, both issues stayed loyal to their tabloid habit to predict the worst development of the political scenario. The difference in the quality of the contents gave a slight advantage to *Bulgaria Dnes*

BLOGOSPHERE

The year 2013 was the year when the social media greatly facilitated the wake-up call to the civil society. A single event - the appointment of Delyan Peevski as chair of the State National security Agency (DANS) - provoked protests of unprecedented duration and scale.

The social media played an important role in the wave of protests – the people organised themselves and coordinated, informed, united and encouraged each other. The hashtag #ДАHCwithme became the symbol and the mark of the protest for the thousands of people who every day would flock the streets of Sofia and other towns in Bulgaria, to have their say. Some of the

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most notable bloggers were often labelled as faces of the protest, and the blogger Ivo Bozhkov, who provided online live streaming of the events, was awarded by the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee with the 'Man of the Year' award. The year 2013 also saw many changes in online communication of the politicians. They gained more experience in communicating via the social media. Despite 2013 having been a year of elections, the monitoring accounted for a double drop in the number of maintained blogs and hence less publications in them, compared to the previous parliamentary elections in 2009. In 2013 Twitter, the microblogging platform, became a forum of balanced political manifestations, which were, however, initiated by just a few of the politicians.

FACEBOOK

In 2013 the active Facebook users, or the People of Facebook, as some of them called themselves, were more active than ever before. The users of the social network would monitor, respond to and speed up the pulse of the social and political processes throughout the year. For the first time the online society replaced the virtual dissatisfaction with real protests of such a scale. The strong social response to the topical events reminded the politicians that they would work in a new public environment from then on. The new media set a novel model of intermediation between the government and civil society, in which each citizen was a media. At the same time, the main problem of the noisy online communication is still the limited potential: it is a diagnosis without prescribed treatment. The People of Facebook can identify problems, protest, and demonstrate readiness to fight against things, however, they do not propose solutions. Parties and leaders are not accepted but the virtual talking shop does not propose alternatives. The year 2013 saw that although numerous, the People of Facebook was a minority. Despite frequently being labelled as the society of the young, beautiful and educated, internet rabbles and naïve idealists, they are still an insignificant part of the passive whole. They do not feel

themselves represented in parliament, and in fact this exactly is the potential of alternative parties, such as the Facebook favourite 'Glas Naroden', that is already making its first steps for the European Elections in 2014 with online casting for European MPs.

VBOX 7

In 2013 the users of the video sharing website Vbox7 labelled the protests (the February protests; the anti-government protests of the summer; the counter protests; the student occupation) as the most significant event of the year. The users sympathised much more with the protesters against government, rather than with the counter protesters supporting the government. The second most popular event, mainly in terms of irony and scepticism, was the attempt on the life of the honourable chair of DPS, Ahmed Dogan, in January. The third one was the Volen Siderov's speech at the first session of the 42th National Assembly. And it was Volen Siderov, who was the most popular political leader over the year, toppling the long-year user's favourite, Boyko Borisov. Originally attracting a positive attitude, in the second half of the year the Ataka leader gradually disappointed the audience with the endless scandals and lost much of the accumulated support. The attitude towards other political leaders, such as Sergey Stanishev, Lyutfi Mestan, Meglena Kuneva, remained extremely negative. Even the views about Boyko Borisov were mainly negative. The new political actor, Nikolay Barekov, also did not receive a warm welcome. The attitude to the leaders transferred to their political formations. Over the year the users reaffirmed their intolerance to the status quo. Still, there is no political force or figure meeting their requirements. Even the nationalists, traditionally supported by the visitors of the site, are rapidly losing support.

POLITICAL ADVERTISING

The political advertising during the election campaign in 2013 left the impression of strong resemblance between the advertising

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materials of the different parties and coalitions. There were no alternative messages. Some more modest parties tried to focus on specific single topics and problems. There were attempts to target advertising messages at the young audience. The problem of the monopolies was one of the most widely employed. Ataka placed a powerful focus on it. Another thematic focus was Russia within the context of the Russian political and economic influence in Bulgaria; this topic was important for DSB-DBF (Democrats for Strong Bulgaria-Bulgarian Democratic Forum) and the coalition incorporated it in its advertising campaign. The other thematic focuses included problems such as combating crime, corruption, unemployment, etc. The employed approaches included stressing on the weak aspects of the political competitors (e.g. BSP against GERB), stressing on the own success (e.g. GERB). In general, the campaign left the impression that the negative nuances were dominant, whether in the creative concept of the advertisements, the approach or the messages. Some parties even relied on vulgar language and cynical gestures.