

Media under their own momentum: The deficient will to change

Foundation Media Democracy (FMD) and the Media Program South East Europe of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) present the joint annual report on the state of the Bulgarian media environment in 2014. The study summarises the trends in the coverage of socio-political developments in the country. During the monitored period dynamic processes unfolded – European Parliament elections and early elections to the National Assembly took place, three governments changed in the country's governance.

The unstable political situation has also affected the media environment, in which a number of important problems have failed to find a solution. During the year, self-regulation was virtually blocked. A vast majority of the media continued operating at a loss. For many of them the problem with the ownership clarification remained unresolved. In this context, the corruption and the effects of external factors on the media – political, economic and administrative – remained an integral part of the Bulgarian media landscape.

The analyses in this report have been prepared by the team of the Media Monitoring Laboratory to the FMD (Nikoleta Daskalova, Gergana Kutseva, Silvia Petrova, Marina Kirova, Bogdana Dencheva, Eli Aleksandrova, Maya Tsaneva, Vladimir Kisimdarov, Liliya Lateva and Tanya Dimova). The team leader is Orlin Spasov. This year, too, the experts Georgi Lozanov and Todor P. Todorov were invited to share their appraisal of the current developments in the media environment. Part of the monitoring is based on quantitative and qualitative data prepared by Market Links Agency for the joint analysis of FMD and

KAS. In summary, the main findings, by areas of monitoring, include:

MEDIA DISCOURSE

Among the most striking images constructed by Bulgarian media in 2014 was the presentation of patriotism as the sanctuary of identity. Among the most watched television events during the year turned to be the Klitschko-Pulev boxing match. The event inflamed social networks, morning shows, commentary journalism. It was presented not simply as boxing, but as an occasion for national euphoria. Such discourse fitted into the more general trend of nourishing patriotic passions which through the stadium language, but also through the media language, are easily mobilised into street and political forms of symbolic and physical violence against others (Roma, refugees, the sexually and ideologically different). At the same time, by virtue of the conflict between the different stories, the opposite trend was also manifested in the media field – the distancing and withdrawal from the neurotic nationalism.

2014 was also the year of the return of the theme of the great enemy and the diversity of its media transformations. In line with the common trends in the western media, Russia and the Islamic State (and through it, the Islam, too, as the image of the Different) were most frequently recognised as the perfectly different, big enemy. The tension that this theme provoked fed many micro-wars and confrontations between media, journalists and speakers of different communities.

**NATIONAL TV CHANNELS AND
DAILIES**

The data on the media coverage of political actors in national TV channels and dailies prepared by the Market Links agency illustrate the most important trends in the media-politics relations. Boyko Borisov continues to have the leading media presence in 2014, too. His advantage is significant (3,908 references to 2,176 for the second in the ranking, Rosen Plevneliev). Borisov the most frequently expresses attitudes to key issues on country's agenda, as well. In 2014, he did not need a comeback in the media; he only came back to power.

Among the parties and institutions, Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (Grazhdani za evropeysko razvitie na Bulgaria, abbreviated GERB) has a leading position in the expression of attitude, followed by the Bulgarian Socialist Party (Bulgarska sotsialisticheska partiya, BSP). GERB is also the party the most frequently mentioned both in the press and television. Thus the organisation is now strongly dominating Bulgarian media discourse. At the same time, the attitude towards GERB is different in different media. Overall, however, the media have warmed their attitude towards the party, compared to 2013, and in 2014 it is mostly neutral now.

The data also show that the media attitudes towards Boyko Borisov, Rosen Plevneliev, Mihail Mikov and Lyutvi Mestan are improving in 2014, while the attitude towards Sergey Stanishev and Nikolay Barekov is deteriorating. The attitudes towards Volen Siderov remain negative.

In 2014, too, some media (both electronic and print) again abruptly changed their political orientations, choosing the opportunism to the responsible criticism of abuses of power.

Bulgarian National Television is among the most critical media of the three major parties and the different governments. Thus, it takes a leading position as regards

the possibilities for public scrutiny and correction of the political elites' actions.

After the informationally euphoric 2013, 2014 decreased the political action emotional strength to a great extent. The year passed as a kind of completion of 2013. The two election campaigns were bland for the most part and without memorable debates. The lively civil discussions remained developed mainly on Facebook. The personality clash between Borisov and Stanishev, central to the Bulgarian publicity, which fed the media for several years in a row with stories of the type "the battle between good and evil", dropped. Without his main opponent, Borisov himself shrank as a symbol and switched to a more businesslike public image and to more pragmatic political actions.

TELEVISION POLITICAL PROJECTS

The past year was symptomatic of the state of the television political projects. They relate to leadership-type parties such as Bulgaria Without Censorship (Bulgaria bez tsenzura, BBT), Ataka, The National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria (NFSB), whose leaders perform active television activities, owing to which the parties win parliamentary quotas. The common genealogy of such public projects is complemented by similarities in the speaking of the respective leaders: it is aggressive, tending to go into the hostile speech registers, with Siderov (Ataka) and Simeonov (NFSB) constructing an "enemy" in the plan of the nationalism, and Barekov (BBT) – in the plan of the socio-political criticism. In 2014 it became clear that there are serious grounds to diagnose the decline of this kind of public projects. The emblematic example of the TV7's failure and the conflicting relationships between that television and the BBT party delivered by it clearly demonstrated the risk that a television takes when it deletes the borders between politics and journalism. Such inherently contradictory formats are now more or less doomed to marginality and their survival depends on coalition and para-coalition compromises that often

threaten them with the collapse of their own ideologies. Furthermore, in 2014, the case with TV7 made it more recognisable to viewers the nature of the television policy and the danger that they can easily fall victims to mythological manipulations.

RADIO

Some of the most important developments in the radio sector in 2014 refer to the Bulgarian National Radio (BNR). The discontinuation of the commentary programme "Deconstruction" on BNR in September, on the eve of the campaign for the early parliamentary elections, has become a hot case. It provoked polemic public reactions and raised controversial comments both on the political positions of the programme presenter Petar Volgin and on the interventions of the management of the radio. Another important episode is connected with the appointment of Slavi Binev as the Chairman of the Parliamentary Committee on Culture and Media. The BNR did not hesitate to express disagreement with the disputed appointment. The third key moment is the resumption of the journalist association "Svobodno slovo" ("free speech"). The association, in which a number of radio journalists are members, leveled sharp criticism at the BNR's management. The charges refer to the deficit of transparency in the management, non-observance of the collective labour agreement and the creation of new structures that can take away the editorial independence of the programme teams. However, despite the problematic issues in the media, in 2014 the programme "Horizont" was the radio channel the most trusted by the audience.

ONLINE MEDIA AND NEWS SITES

In 2014, too, Bulgarian news sites showed stable affinity to the coverage of the status quo figures. In the year when three governments changed, media attention was being refocused according to the changes in power configurations. Against the background of the news attention shifting from one government to another, constantly high remained the interest solely to Boyko

Borisov. In the online media headlines, the largest was the presence of the persons from the BSP. The formation attracted the media interest primarily in the context of internal instability and the election of a new Chairman of the party. As actors reflected in the polemical light (spokespersons or objects of evaluative attitude) emerged Boyko Borisov (GERB), President Rosen Plevneliev, Sergey Stanishev (BSP) and Lyutvi Mestan (DPS). The Member of Parliament from the DPS Delyan Peevski and banker Tsvetan Vasilev were also among the central objects of evaluation.

An apparent trend during the year was the continuing politicisation of online news, particularly pronounced in the previous 2013. The unstable political landscape led to steady instrumentalisation of the media for the purposes of the party campaigning and propaganda. Throughout 2014, the politics coverage often passed through the speech of hate.

A new phenomenon during the year was the evaluative media framing of the image of Russia in the context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the relations with the EU and the South Stream energy project. While the central news discourse was dominated by the critical tone to Russian policy, in the user comments in online media there was strong mobilisation of uniform pro-Russian opinions.

Compared to 2013, the share of sports news in the information files increased. The focus on economic news also strengthened, dictated exclusively by the crisis in the banking system and the failure of Corporate Commercial Bank.

EUROPEAN THEMES

The crisis in Ukraine, energy policy (the South Stream project) and the absorption of EU funds in the new programming period were among the main accents in the media coverage of the EU-related news in 2014. The actuality of such themes was supported not so much by the accumulation of expertise as by the repetition of known facts. The elections to the European

Parliament (EP) in May and the National Assembly in October provided an excellent opportunity to communicate – both for the media and politicians – on European themes of importance to society. But the vote for the EP was used by the public actors as a platform for the politicisation of significant social issues, but without reflecting on the supranational framework of the possible solutions to address the major economic, social and institutional challenges facing the country. The national elections confirmed this trend.

During the year, the media content on European issues remained largely informational, with the publication of ready-made press releases. The authentic journalistic commentary, which presents a different view to the facts, was scarce. The main source of analyses and commentaries were translated texts from foreign media. At the end of the year, after the formation of the new Cabinet of GERB, Reformist Bloc and ABV, a new stage began of active PR promoting of the visits of the European institutions key representatives. There are expectations for increasing the weight of the European context in the communication strategy of the Government.

LIFESTYLE MEDIA

In 2014, the media continued the practice of using lifestyle rhetoric in the coverage of political events and topics. As a novelty it can be highlighted the tendency to put the focus more often on the appearance (e.g. the clothing of the MPs) rather than on the details of the politicians' private lives. The media were presenting the issues of the political figures' image and lifestyle as equally important with their ideological messages. National dailies and editions pretending for seriousness actively used lifestyle tools in shaping the images of the main political leaders. At the same time, the specialised lifestyle journalism was retreating from the area of politics.

During the year, popular culture was used as legitimization of politics. For example, the reality format "VIP Brother" aired during the campaign for the parliamentary elections

and formed in a socialist style became a powerful tool for the formation of ideological attitudes and fitted in the fashion of the nostalgia for the period of socialism. The propaganda of the political messages reached out even among people who refused to accept "plain" political information in the form of news, interviews and analyses.

YELLOW PRESS

In 2014, tabloid press made sudden twists in its attitude towards political actors. The Vseki Den ceased its negative campaigns both against President Rosen Plevneliev and Meglena Kuneva (Reformist Bloc). The liking for Sergey Stanishev and the BSP, seen throughout 2013, was replaced by an abrupt change in tone after the resignation of the BSP's government. A new shade in the year is the editions' sneering at the political actors who lost the elections. This tendency is combined with clearly expressed support to the winners at the elections, especially to the GERB's leader Boyko Borisov. Overall, tabloid dailies showed some fatigue of the political turbulence.

BLOGOSPHERE

The political instability during the year affected the attitudes in the civil blogosphere and on the Twitter microblogging platform. For the European Parliament elections, bloggers actively called to vote, apparently with the expectation that the results of the vote will be a catalyst for political changes. The resignation of Oresharski's government and the formation of the Bliznashki caretaker cabinet calmed passions. After the parliamentary elections, the newly formed government led by Borisov was accepted in the blogosphere controversially. It raised skepticism but was met with a relative tolerance, too. The doctrine of compromise replaced the ultimate political criticism in the bloggers' views.

During the year, the bloggers' attitude to the Reformist Bloc underwent the biggest transformation. Although initially the coalition enjoyed strong support among

bloggers, after the National Assembly elections, a number of RB's actions and statements caused strong disappointment. The attitude to other political formations remained in the negative nuances.

In 2014, too, the themes exciting civil blogosphere and Twitter continued to disagree with the agenda of politicians. Bloggers were not satisfied with the lack of answers to a number of important public issues. The symptoms of nostalgia for socialism and the restoration of socialist mythologems on celebrating the 25th anniversary of the beginning of the transition were heavily criticised by bloggers.

During the year, the tendency for politicians to abandon informal blogs and replace them with official sites with predominantly imaging and informational functions strengthened. The presence of political actors on Twitter increased, but still one cannot speak of a distinctive activity.

FACEBOOK

In 2014, Facebook established itself as a form of a party semi-official organ which Bulgarian politicians often used to promote their messages among voters. The network was a preferred information channel for many of the party head offices and quite a few important political events were originally communicated on someone's Facebook wall before they reach the audience of the traditional mass media.

Bulgarian Facebook users strengthened their political preferences without any major deviations from the already established trends. The most appealing party in the social network continued to be Glas Naroden ("voice of the people"). Boyko Borisov retained his leadership position among politicians, the number of his supporters exceeding by multiple times the results of his rivals.

Overall, the two election campaigns in 2014 took place under the conditions of reflux of civil energy and enthusiasm characteristic of the Bulgarian political life in the previous

year. While in 2013 social networks were an arena for the expression of discontent, organising of protests and attracting supporters for various causes, in 2014 the civil society on Facebook showed far more subdued political activity.

VIDEO-SOCIAL NETWORKS

The natural disasters, accidents and the crisis with Corporate Commercial Bank were the topics of public importance which in 2014 excited the most the Bulgarian users of the video sharing sites Vbox7 and YouTube. The civil interest increasingly moved outside the sphere of politics. The ironic attitude towards the parties and the government strengthened. At the same time, political actors themselves were the most active during the election campaigns when the biggest number of video clips were uploaded whose main focus was on the party leaders. Among the most watched political video clips was a material incriminating BSP of vote-buying in the context of the EP elections. During the year, as in Facebook, the users' positive attitude towards the political party Glas Naroden continued. The political figure who drew the strongest civil interest was Boyko Borisov. More than 1,000 video clips were dedicated to him. Compared to 2013, in 2014 the attitude towards Boyko Borisov was more positive, although ironic materials were not missing. Nikolay Barekov was also with relatively high presence in video-social networks in 2014.

As one of the most important video phenomena during the year emerged the song of Maria Ilieva and rapper Krisko "Vidimo Dovolni" ("apparently pleased"). The video clip, which provoked criticism from the Council for Electronic Media and aroused from extremely negative to extremely positive civil comments, generated the impressive over 13 million views.

POLITICAL ADVERTISING

As a whole, the political advertising during the year can be described as naive, but positive. During the campaign for the

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European elections, distancing from Europe was observed. The European issues remained in the background. Instead, the accent in the messages was on the domestic political situation. On its part, the campaign for the National Assembly elections was lifeless and boring and did not offer any memorable examples in the field of political advertising.

In their advertising messages, the parties avoided serious problems. The exploitation of common themes, such as unemployment and low income, seemed as an end in itself and close to the demagogy. The problems of the young were scarcely present in the parties' advertising messages. A more frequent object of the advertising courtship were farmers. The theme of Russia in the context of the events in Ukraine and Crimea remained scarcely covered.

The largest means for advertising during the two election campaigns were spent by the new formation Bulgaria without censorship.

As the preferred channel for advertising of the MP candidates emerged the Internet. In the political advertising on the Internet, the graphic banner dominated; it resembles the traditional political poster and has an identificational and informative character. A new trend in the Bulgarian political advertising on the Internet was the campaigning for the preferential voting. An impression was created that the candidates engage in their online campaigns on their own and act independently of their parties.



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