

REPORT

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and
Foundation Media Democracy

MEDIA MONITORING
LABORATORY

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THE DILEMMA OF THE MEDIA: JOURNALISM OR PROPAGANDA

The Foundation Media Democracy (FMD) and the Media Program South East Europe of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) present their joint annual report on the state of the Bulgarian media environment in 2015. This study summarises the trends in the coverage of socio-political developments in the country.

The analyses in the report are conducted by the research team of the Media Monitoring Laboratory of FMD: Nikoleta Daskalova, Gergana Kutseva, Eli Aleksandrova, Vladimir Kisimdarov, Lilia Lateva, Marina Kirova, Ph.D., Silvia Petrova, Ph.D., Assoc. Prof. Todor Todorov, as well as by the guest experts Assoc. Prof. Georgi Lozanov, Prof. Snezhana Popova and Prof. Totka Monova. The team was led by Assoc. Prof. Orlin Spasov. A part of the monitoring is based on quantitative and qualitative data, prepared by Market Links Agency for the joint analysis of FMD and KAS.

The monitored period was characterised by some important developments, including:

- Increased polarisation in society because of instability in domestic policy, as well as in foreign policy. Use of hate speech in the media intensified, which opened the door for a widespread voicing of extremist views, close to racism and xenophobia, and further radicalised the public space.
- The still ongoing restructuring in the media sector as a result of the bankruptcy of Corporate Commercial Bank in 2014. The connection of many media with the bank led to ownership transformations in 2015. The financial dependency of some media increased, important publications were discontinued.

- An apathetic campaign for the local elections which were held in October, where media proved themselves to care more about how they could profit from political advertising funds, allocated by the parties, than about providing a stage for genuine debates among participants in the election race.

- Examples of unprecedented attacks against the Council for Electronic Media (SEM) in the context of political strife. Media regulation was seriously threatened. At the same time important debates and long-needed amendments to the media legislation were not initiated.

In light of the above, the main conclusions by areas of monitoring can be summarised, as follows:

NATIONAL TELEVISIONS, DAILY NEWSPAPERS, NEWS WEBSITES (DATA PROVIDED BY MARKET LINKS)

In 2015 Prime Minister Boyko Borisov maintained his extremely massive media presence, including in terms of expressing opinion on the main political topics in the country. His media coverage increased in comparison to 2014 and in 2015 he was mentioned in 23 percent of all monitored programmes and publications. In comparison, President Rosen Plevneliev, who is ranked second, was only present in 7 percent of the monitored media, i.e. more than three times less than Boyko Borisov (the results are based on monitoring of the Bulgarian National Television, bTV, Nova Television, the Trud and Telegraph newspapers, in 2015).



The politicians with positive media ratings during the year were Borisov (3.1) and Rosen Plevneliev (1.9). Negative media ratings were registered for Mihail Mikov (-1.5), Lyutvi Mestan (-1.6), Radan Kanev (-4.3), Volen Siderov (-8.6) (the data are based on monitoring of the Bulgarian National Television, bTV, Nova Television, the Trud, Telegraph and 24 Chasa newspapers, the electronic publications BLITZ, Dnevnik and OFFNews, for the period April - December 2015).

Compared to 2014, the Borisov 2nd government was a lot more successful in attracting media's attention in 2015. In connection with the elections, the local government achieved a substantial increase in media coverage as well. The Ministry of Interior was also more frequently present in the media in 2015. All major political parties, with the exception of the coalition of the nationalist National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria and Bulgarian National Movement (NFSB-VMRO), registered a significant drop in their mass media presence.

The eminent topic of refugees was neutrally presented in every monitored media, with the exception of the news website BLITZ, where it was rather negative. In the monitored media the most positive attitude towards refugees was expressed by Rosen Plevneliev. The most negative and critical attitude was expressed by the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, by representatives of the Police and by the Ministry of Interior as an institution. However, Minister of Interior Romyana Bachvarova expressed a neutral and positive attitude. Prime Minister Borisov showed a balanced attitude towards the refugee topic, where his critical comments on one hand equalled the positive and neutral attitude on the other.

TELEVISION

In 2015 the television channels were a stage for scandals and continued political and corporate pressure. Some major events received little attention. Serious coverage of fields such as culture and business and investigative journalism remained

insufficient. The unification of content was strengthened up by the imposed commercial model, counting on reality shows, competitions, games, lifestyle discussions, etc. TV7 continued to experience the negative effects of the situation which arose after the bankruptcy of Corporate Commercial Bank. In April, the TV station was dangerously close to stop broadcasting after the National Revenue Agency distrained some of its assets. The Police and a private judicial enforcer broke into the TV network's building, in order to seize the main TV server as part of the mortgaged property. The police raid stirred public discontent and a team of journalists found itself in a position of long-term insecurity.

RADIO

In 2015 the long-standing tendency for unification of the broadcast content by radio stations became even more pronounced. At the same time major television groups expanded their activity into radio broadcasting by launching new radio stations, used by them to broadcast their television programmes. The development of the local radio channels remained stagnant. Over the course of the year, tension arose between radio companies concerning the audience measurement. Two audience measurement agencies entered the market and considerable differences between the data provided by them were registered. The radio broadcasting sector was split in two camps, each with preferences for one or the other agency.

During the election campaign the radio stations were frequently approached by political forces for broadcasting their election addresses. The campaign showed a new phenomenon – agreements for campaign coverage between the political parties and some music radio stations.

In general, some of the most serious actions in the media space were related to developments in the Bulgarian National Radio. The BNR journalists initiated a protest against the salary cuts resulting from the requirement for a ten percent

decrease in payroll costs. Some journalists, unsatisfied with the management of the radio station, demanded early termination of the contract of the CEO. New tension arose at the end of the year, when, following a penalty imposed by the Council for Electronic Media for an established administrative offense, the Board of Directors of the Bulgarian National Radio adopted a resolution to discontinue the "Deconstruction" broadcast. This situation led to fierce debates on topics such as defining pluralism and the violation thereof, replacing critical journalism by propaganda, the regulation of public media. It was also used to benefit ad hoc political goals.

NATIONAL PRESS

In 2015 the press was highly ideologised. Two discourses emerged based on the geopolitical situation on the East-West axis. Russophilic, pro-European, pro-American media orientations became prominent. Neutrality was scarce and almost all facts – from purely political ones to cultural artefacts – were rendered through the respective ideological platform. Moreover, the press kept demonstrating its support of certain corporate or oligarchic circles. The emotional type of argumentation became clearly dominant. Invasion of personal space often went beyond what was acceptable. The interview remained one of the preferred genres. The percentage of negative news increased, as well as that of texts covering conflicts with minorities, refugees, household crime, school fights, abuse of minors, exemplary killings. That was also reflected in the linguistic equivalent of the events – hate speech escalated.

ONLINE MEDIA AND WEBSITES

The boom of pseudo-informational websites which was registered as far back as during the election campaign in 2013 reached epidemic impact in 2015. During the past year there were a number of successful attempts to deceive journalists with false press releases which were circulated uncritically both by news websites and by social media. Some of the most striking

examples included information launched in light of the Paris events that "Arabs had broken into" New Bulgarian University, shouting "Allahu Akbar"; the made-up "mammoth" fine for the bTV news presenter Viktoria Petrova, allegedly imposed by the EMC on account of the "offensive" expression "Gypsy summer" used by her; the shocking information about the invasion of American tanks into a kindergarten in Sungurlare, where soldiers had actually been sent to repair the playground; or the false press release that the Bulgaria for Citizens Movement was leaving the governing coalition, which managed to create serious political chaos in just a couple of minutes after the "news" had been circulated by several media without further verification.

The topic of asylum-seeking migrants and the refugee crisis was among the hottest ones worldwide. However, Bulgarian media failed in their coverage of it and in presenting balanced information. The reasons include sensationalism, populist language and hate speech, violation of some fundamental ethical principles and the overall lack of resources and professionalism.

LIFESTYLE MEDIA

One of the most pronounced trends in the monitored media in 2015 was the politicians' attempt to replace traditional media with social media, in order to create their own image and publish news about them. This process was facilitated by the fact that traditional media used social media (mostly Facebook) as one of their main sources of information. Politicians' photographs or statuses which were published on their profile pages by themselves or their teams were instantly republished, shown, analysed and commented by the media. Throughout 2015 politicians were constantly striving to achieve a patriotic/nationalist image, regardless of which party they belonged to.

During the local elections campaign persons who stood out for their peculiar and comical appearance were catapulted to celebrity

status by the media. At the same time, the year offered a striking example of the ambition to gain serious political impact through the instruments of show business. The popular TV host Slavi Trifonov initiated an idea of holding a referendum through his TV show.

YELLOW PRESS

The yellow weeklies expanded their range of topics and successfully established themselves as a source of magazine content for the general public. The trend for mixing yellow press content with serious one and establishing a politically engaged tabloid culture intensified. The high degree of appraisal with respect to political figures and processes is typical here. The annual monitoring of three weekly publications ("Weekend", "Galeria" and "Show") registered a notable concentration of political subjects (individuals and formations), represented in a negative light. The appraising attitude was also characteristic of the candidates in the local elections campaign. The main line of discrediting candidates for mayors was based on the image of wealth - accusations of embezzlement from an office held or from a business venture.

In 2015 the media language radicalisation trend deepened and the yellow press media were among the main incubators in this process. Several intertwined hostility lines emerged – in the areas of domestic policy, geopolitical issues and intermedia issues simultaneously. The tabloid press created a meta image of evil, combining diverse subjects: the political class in general, but mostly President Plevneliev and the Reformist Bloc; citizens and non-governmental organisations, human rights advocates and liberally oriented activists; the EU, the USA, Turkey; minorities (Roma, refugees, migrants); the media. In this context the ideological sympathies of the yellow press became intertwined in an eclectic mixture - nationalism, socialism, populism, conservatism. This mixture was supplemented with direct support for the policy implemented by Russia and the Greek

party Syriza and an indirect defence of the Bulgarian Prosecutor General.

The instruments of the subversive tabloid discourse included frivolous concocting of compromising information, speculating with rumours and unverified information, quoting obscure sources, fear mongering, instigating extreme intolerance.

BLOGOSPHERE

The general tone of the comments made by citizens on domestic policy topics was that of pessimistic and negative. The negative attitudes towards individual politicians and political formations as a whole increased. Boyko Borisov was the most frequently ridiculed figure. The support for Radan Kanev and other leaders of the Reformist Bloc was partially withdrawn. Comments about Volen Siderov, Lyutvi Mestan and Delyan Peevski were characterised by extreme negativism.

The most discussed topic was the reform in the judicial system. Negative attitudes towards the status quo (mostly the figure of the Prosecutor General) and the impossibility to implement an in-depth reform were expressed. Other frequently discussed topics included: the refugee crisis, the terrorist attacks in France, the war in Syria, Russian geopolitics. The Russian influence on the Bulgarian domestic political processes was often criticised.

The politicians' interest in maintaining personal blogs declined further. More and more Bulgarian politicians became active on Twitter, at this stage mainly in the form of publishing formally sounding information about professional commitments and party events.

FACEBOOK

Overall, in 2015 entertainment-related topics enjoyed the most attention. The citizens were not very politically active.

The most frequently discussed global topics were the terrorist attacks in Paris, the civil war in Syria, the refugee migration, the IS,

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the upcoming presidential elections in the United States. The Bulgarian topics that emerged most often were the electronic voting referendum and refugees in Bulgaria. The local government elections did not attract much attention or discussions. The emphasis was on the eccentrically looking candidates.

In 2015 the Bulgarian politicians who received the biggest support in Facebook (by number of followers and profile page likes) were Prime Minister Boyko Borisov, European Commissioner Kristalina Georgieva, Chair of Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria Radan Kanev, and the Mayor of Sofia Yordanka Fandakova.

SOCIAL VIDEO

The main socio-political topics on VBox7 and YouTube were the refugee crisis and the terrorist attacks in Paris, the protests for defending former Minister of Justice Hristo Ivanov, the police officers' protests and the public outcry against the increase of prices for vignette toll stickers.

In videos of political parties and politicians the party leaders were most prominent. The most popular figures (the ones that generated the largest number of videos) were Boyko Borisov and Radan Kanev. The attitude towards the People's Voice (Glas Narodn) political party was distinctly positive. The trend for an active presence of the nationalist formation Ataka and National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria (NFSB) continued and the users' attitude towards them varied from extremely negative to indifferent.

The presence of the political parties during the local elections campaign intensified. In this period the largest number of videos was uploaded and the largest number of views was registered.

The ironic attitude of the citizens towards the political parties and the rulers intensified. Videos ridiculing politicians registered many more views and comments than the ones presenting their views on matters of public importance.

POLITICAL ADVERTISING

In 2015 the local elections and referendum voting campaigns provided a stage for political advertising. Advertising was one of the few points of interest during the elections campaign. Although the major political forces did not offer any original ideas in their advertising messages, the individual candidates distinguished themselves by their extravagant looks (hair styles, clothing) and approaches. This way they added a tinge of carnival to the elections campaign.

The Bulgarian National Television summarised the most important aspects of the elections campaign in its specialised programme "The Voices of Bulgaria". It included paid canvassing videos of political forces, as well as purely informative and explanative sections for acquainting the audience with the most interesting and important aspects to be aware of in connection with voting in the coming elections and the referendum.

Internet advertising was amply used by the individual candidates in their personal campaigns. Facebook established itself as the preferred place for presenting the candidates' political views in the run up to the election.



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