

Bulgaria

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INTRODUCTION

The political situation in Bulgaria has been rather turbulent in the last decade or so. There have been as many as seven snap elections since 2021 with no stable government in place over that period of time. Prior to that, while there was a period of political stability, it was notable that media freedom significantly deteriorated in the country and for years Bulgaria had the lowest press freedom country ranking among all European Union member states according to Reporters without Borders annual press freedom index.

While the initial period of democratization after the end of the Cold War led to a burgeoning of private news media in the country and an influx of foreign investors who had a reputation for not interfering in editorial policy, these trends changed in the aftermath of the global recession. Most news media were appropriated by local business moguls with very strong political interests with the most notorious example being of oligarch Delyan Peevski.

These processes inevitably contributed to a significant deterioration in journalistic freedoms and standards coupled with financial precarity and an overall depletion of journalism as a social institution. The number of journalists in Bulgaria significantly fell from 5,800 in 2016 to 3,800 in 2020 according to official data from the National Statistics Institute. In the previous wave of the Worlds of Journalism Study, Bulgarian journalists described the state of journalism in their country as “dire”, “lamentable”, “at rock bottom” and “critical”.

BACKGROUNDS OF JOURNALISTS

Our sample of Bulgarian journalists includes more women than men (61% vs. 39%, respectively). On average, journalists were 49.8 years old (SD = 11.6; Median = 50). They are generally very well educated: 16% of them held a Bachelor’s degree or equivalent, 74.2% a Master’s degree or equivalent, and an additional 5.7% have obtained a doctorate. Moreover, 59.6% of the respondents have acquired formal education or professional training in journalism. This education or training is usually obtained at university or in college (68.9%) but also via apprenticeships or cadetships (50.8%) and short-term courses (48.7%).

JOURNALISTS IN THE NEWSROOM

The Bulgarian journalists in our sample were predominantly in middle management (37.3%) or no management roles (40.5%) with only 22.2% being in a top management role. The majority of journalists worked for national media (60.1%) although still a significant minority worked for local and regional media – 38.1%. Over two-thirds were employed by private/commercial media (65%), 19.7% by public service media, 6.7% by state-run media and 5.4% by non-profit media. Roughly a third of journalists in Bulgaria (31.6%) worked for an organization with a background of native online media, a fifth (19%) for an organization focused on newspaper publishing, 16.5% for a radio outlet, 14.9% for a TV organization, and 10% for news agencies, respectively. Very few journalists worked for magazine companies (2.8%) and outlets with a tele-communications background (1.3%, respectively). Finally, 2.1% worked for other type of media and 1.3% of the interviewed journalists claimed not to have a main employer.

More than three quarters of the interviewed journalists in Bulgaria had a full-time contract (69.2% permanently and 1% temporarily employed). 21% worked as freelancers or were self-employed, and an additional 4.9% had other forms of employment. Finally, 3.4% had a part-time permanent contract, and 0.5% had a part-time temporary contract. In addition, 33.8% of the respondents reported that they had additional jobs outside journalism, which suggests an increasingly precarious working environment.

Bulgarian journalists are very experienced. On average they had 22.8 years of professional experience (SD = 10.6; Median = 23). 26.8% worked on a beat. Slightly more than a third (37%) were union members.

The average working week of Bulgarian full-time journalists was 47.1 hours (SD = 14.0; Median = 45). Over a third of the respondents (38.8%) reported they felt stressed out at work often or very often during the previous six months, 31.1% sometimes felt stressed out, 19.5% rarely felt that way and 10% had never felt stressed out at work.

SAFETY AND WORK-RELATED CONCERNS

Attacks such as demeaning or hateful speech or public discrediting of journalists’ work fared among the most common safety threats experienced by Bulgarian journalists (see Table 1). Other types of threats experienced were surveillance, hacking or blocking of social media accounts or websites, legal actions against them and others disseminating their personal information.

The vast majority of Bulgarian journalists were concerned that those who harm journalists would go unpunished. Less than half were worried about their emotional and mental well-being, and about a third about their physical well-being (see Table 2). 16% of the surveyed journalists were concerned about losing their job in journalism in the next 12 months.

TABLE 1. EXPERIENCED THREATS

	N	Very often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Demeaning or hateful speech directed at you	390	11.3%	15.4%	30.0%	25.6%	17.7%
Public discrediting of your work	388	5.9%	9.3%	19.1%	23.7%	42.0%
Surveillance	367	2.2%	5.7%	12.3%	17.2%	62.7%
Hacking or blocking of social media accounts or websites	387	2.6%	4.1%	12.7%	18.3%	62.3%
Arrests, detentions or imprisonment	386	0.0%	0.0%	0.5%	1.3%	98.2%
Legal actions against you because of your work	389	2.3%	3.3%	8.5%	16.2%	69.7%
Stalking	385	1.6%	1.8%	5.7%	10.1%	80.8%
Other threats or intimidations directed at you	355	1.1%	3.4%	12.1%	23.7%	59.7%
Sexual assault or sexual harassment	389	0.5%	0.5%	2.3%	4.4%	92.3%
Other physical attacks	358	0.3%	0.0%	2.0%	6.7%	91.1%
Coercion	385	0.5%	0.5%	4.2%	16.4%	78.4%
Questioning of your personal morality	382	0.5%	2.1%	7.3%	17.5%	72.5%
Others using your byline for fabricated or manipulated stories	386	1.8%	2.6%	8.8%	10.6%	76.2%
Others disseminating your personal information	385	2.9%	2.6%	9.9%	16.1%	68.6%
Workplace bullying	385	0.3%	1.0%	2.1%	11.2%	85.5%
Abductions	389	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100%
Office raids or seizures or damage to equipment	388	0.3%	0.5%	2.3%	5.4%	91.5%
Intimidation that targets family	386	0.8%	1.8%	1.8%	5.2%	90.4%

Question: "In the last five years, how often have you experienced any of the following actions related to your work as a journalist?"

TABLE 2. WORK-RELATED CONCERNS

	N	Agree/ strongly agree	Mean	SD
Worried about losing job in journalism within the next 12 months	387	16%	2.29	1.15
Concerned about physical well-being	386	31.1%	2.69	1.26
Concerned about emotional and mental wellbeing	387	41.9%	3.03	1.25
Concerned that those who harm journalists in Bulgaria go unpunished	386	87.3%	4.36	0.85

Question: "Thinking about your work, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements." (Scale: 5 = Strongly agree; 4 = Agree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 2 = Disagree; 1 = Strongly disagree.)

JOURNALISTIC ROLES

Bulgarian journalists showed the strongest support for the countering disinformation role, which is understandable in the context of the current war in Ukraine and in the aftermath of the Covid19 pandemic (see Table 3). The next most popular roles were shine a light on society's problems, educate the audience, let people express their views and provide analysis of current affairs. More Bulgarian journalists say their role is to support national development than to monitor and scrutinize those in power. Support for national development does not equate support for government policy, which is very low or indeed convey a positive image of political leaders, which has the lowest level of support by Bulgarian journalists.

TABLE 3. JOURNALISTIC ROLES

	N	Very/extremely important	Mean	SD
Be a detached observer	384	85.9%	4.38	0.89
Monitor and scrutinize those in power	383	67.1%	3.90	1.04
Shine a light on society's problems	389	92.8%	4.58	0.70
Motivate people to participate in politics	384	30.5%	2.96	1.21
Provide analysis of current affairs	389	90.0%	4.45	0.74
Let people express their views	386	90.4%	4.49	0.73
Provide information people need to form political opinion	382	81.2%	4.27	0.94
Advocate for social change	382	72.5%	4.02	0.99
Influence public opinion	382	57.1%	3.68	1.07
Set the political agenda	372	26.3%	2.80	1.20
Promote peace and tolerance	388	85.8%	4.39	0.88
Educate the audience	387	91.7%	4.52	0.73
Point toward possible solutions to society's problems	386	76.7%	4.12	0.94
Speak on behalf of the marginalized	381	62.5%	3.71	1.13
Support national development	380	78.4%	4.14	0.95
Support government policy	381	6.0%	1.93	1.04
Convey a positive image of political leaders	377	2.9%	1.59	0.88
Provide entertainment and relaxation	386	26.7%	2.77	1.23
Provide the kind of news that attracts the largest audience	385	45.5%	3.26	1.23
Provide advice, orientation and direction for daily life	387	34.1%	3.02	1.17
Tell stories that emotionally move the audience	387	54.3%	3.51	1.14
Support efforts to protect public health	389	84.3%	4.29	0.88
Counteract disinformation	389	95.9%	4.75	0.52
Discuss future implications of current events	385	81.8%	4.21	0.85

Question: "Please tell me how important it is to do each of the following in your daily work." (Scale: 5 = Extremely important; 4 = Very important; 3 = Moderately important; 2 = Slightly important; 1 = Not at all important.)

JOURNALISTIC EPISTEMOLOGIES

Bulgarian journalists' responses to the epistemological questions place a heavy emphasis on the need to alert audiences when a source's claim is untruthful (Table 4). The majority of journalists also believed that it is possible to represent objective reality in reporting while the smallest percentage of journalists said that they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that truth is inevitably shaped by those in power.

TABLE 4. JOURNALISTIC EPISTEMOLOGIES

	N	Agree/ strongly agree	Mean	SD
Interpretation is necessary to make sense of facts	385	76.4%	4.01	0.99
Truth is inevitably shaped by those in power	386	8.5%	1.98	0.94
It is impossible for journalists to withhold their personal beliefs from reporting	386	28.2%	2.82	1.08
Things are either true or false, there is no in-between	383	30.3%	2.92	1.16
It is possible to represent objective reality in reporting	388	89.4%	4.27	0.76
Journalists should trust their instincts in deciding what's true and what's not	387	45.0%	3.28	1.05
Journalists should intuitively know what the final story will be	386	42.7%	3.24	1.03
Journalists should let the facts speak for themselves	388	78.1%	4.05	0.90
Journalists should be part of a community to portray it accurately	384	15.4%	2.57	0.94
Journalists should make their standpoint transparent in their work	385	76.9%	4.04	0.88
Journalists should alert audiences when a source's claim is untruthful	386	95.3%	4.53	0.60

Questions: "The following statements deal with beliefs related to how journalists know what they know. For each of them, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree." / "Using the same scale, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree with the following beliefs." (Scale: 5 = Strongly agree; 4 = Agree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 2 = Disagree; 1 = Strongly disagree.)

JOURNALISTIC ETHICS

Journalists in Bulgaria strongly agreed on the importance of professional standards rather than subjective and situational considerations for ethical reporting (see Table 5). Slightly less than half said that extraordinary circumstances might require disregarding those professional standards. When it comes to the justification of controversial reporting methods, accepting money from sources and using the personal materials of ordinary people were most strongly rejected (see Table 6). The majority of journalists found it acceptable to use hidden recording devices and use confidential documents without authorization on occasion.

TABLE 5. ETHICAL ORIENTATIONS

	N	Agree/ strongly agree	Mean	SD
What is ethical for journalists should always be determined by professional standards regardless of situation and personal judgment	389	81.2%	4.19	0.94
What is ethical for journalists should be determined by professional standards unless extraordinary circumstances require disregarding them	384	48.7%	3.24	1.22
What is ethical for journalists should depend on each specific situation	383	32.4%	2.72	1.30
What is ethical for journalists should be a matter of personal judgment	381	21.0%	2.39	1.24

Question: "The following statements describe different responses journalists may have to ethical problems. For each of them, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree." (Scale: 5 = Strongly agree; 4 = Agree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 2 = Disagree; 1 = Strongly disagree.)

TABLE 6. JUSTIFICATION OF CONTROVERSIAL REPORTING METHODS

	N	Always justified	Justified on occasion
Claiming to be somebody else	388	2.3%	41.8%
Using hidden recording devices	389	3.1%	68.4%
Using confidential business or government documents without authorization	387	4.9%	54.5%
Using the personal materials of powerful people, such as documents and photos, without their permission	388	0.5%	37.6%
Using the personal materials of ordinary people, such as documents and photos, without their permission	388	0.0%	14.2%
Paying people for confidential information	388	2.6%	32.7%
Accepting money from sources	386	0.0%	4.7%
Accepting a free product or service from sources	385	0.5%	21.0%
Producing content that mimics news stories but hides its promotional nature	387	0.5%	23.0%
Publishing or broadcasting stories with information that is not yet verified	387	0.0%	19.6%

Question: "Which of the following, if any, do you think may be always justified, or justified on occasion, and which would you not approve of under any circumstances?"

EDITORIAL AUTONOMY AND MEDIA FREEDOM

Bulgarian journalists reported that they had a great deal or complete freedom in selecting the news stories and which aspects of a story should be emphasized but only 14.4% said there was a great deal or complete media freedom in Bulgaria. This is one of the lowest percentage of media freedom worldwide, which is a clear reflection of the over decade-long trend of diminishing media freedom in the country despite recent improvements.

TABLE 7. PERCEPTIONS OF EDITORIAL AUTONOMY AND MEDIA FREEDOM

	N	A great deal/ complete freedom	Mean	SD
Freedom in selecting the news stories	387	84.8%	4.26	0.78
Freedom in deciding which aspects of a story should be emphasized	388	87.6%	4.40	0.77
Media freedom in Bulgaria	374	14.4%	2.75	0.80

(Scale: 5 = Complete freedom; 4 = A great deal of freedom; 3 = Some freedom; 2 = Little freedom; 1 = No freedom at all.)

EDITORIAL INFLUENCES

Bulgarian journalists found journalism ethics and personal beliefs and values to fare highest among the internal factors influencing news production (see Table 8). Among the external factors, most journalists considered access to information and media laws and regulation as being extremely or very influential. The lowest influence was attributed to terrorist groups and the military.

TABLE 8. EDITORIAL INFLUENCES

	N	Very/extremely influential	Mean	SD
Peers on the news staff	351	32.5%	2.90	1.15
Editorial supervisors and higher editors	317	39.4%	3.07	1.15
The business managers of the news organization	316	40.2%	3.02	1.26
The owners of the news organization	297	33.0%	2.75	1.36
Editorial policy	350	54.3%	3.43	1.20
Advertising considerations	331	26.3%	2.52	1.32
Profit expectations	321	25.9%	2.56	1.27
Audience research and data	349	40.1%	3.12	1.17
Availability of news-gathering resources	354	50.8%	3.37	1.16
Time limits	359	51.5%	3.39	1.21
Journalism ethics	374	85.3%	4.20	0.92
Self-censorship	342	28.4%	2.67	1.28
Personal values and beliefs	372	75.3%	4.09	1.09
Colleagues in other media	364	9.6%	2.22	1.02
Friends, acquaintances and family	367	15.0%	2.28	1.13
Feedback from the audience	378	51.9%	3.52	0.98
Competing news organizations	361	28.0%	2.81	1.11
Media laws and regulation	368	61.4%	3.65	1.12
Access to information	373	76.7%	4.04	0.90
Government censorship	316	21.8%	2.33	1.34
Government officials	320	15.0%	2.12	1.22
Politicians	339	13.3%	2.08	1.18
Business people	330	13.0%	2.01	1.16
Public relations	366	22.4%	2.49	1.23
Relationships with news sources	355	42.0%	3.12	1.24
Police	298	9.4%	1.80	1.07
Issue advocacy groups	326	5.8%	1.82	0.98
Scientists or health experts	345	36.8%	2.98	1.20
Religious groups and institutions	282	4.3%	1.52	0.89
Military	262	4.2%	1.38	0.82
Organized crime and criminal groups	249	4.0%	1.34	0.80
Terrorist groups	221	2.3%	1.18	0.61

Question: "Here is a list of potential sources of influence. Please tell me how much influence each of the following has on your work as a journalist." (Scale: 5 = Extremely influential; 4 = Very influential; 3 = Moderately influential; 2 = Slightly influential; 1 = Not at all influential.)