

Chapter 44

Bulgarian Journalists Under Pressure: Threats, Violence, and Freedom of Speech

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ABSTRACT

Bulgarian journalists are under pressure. Although the country has been a member of the EU for 13 years and the legislation on freedom of speech corresponds to Western practices, the country ranks 111th in the annual Freedom of Speech Index. While the cases of work-related physical violence against journalists are rare, the cases of direct political pressure are increasing. The unification of ownership into large media cartels and the lack of transparency in the movement of financial flows from the state to certain media are among the main factors affecting the freedom of speech. The analysis of publications covering six cases of physical and verbal aggression on the websites of the five most visited online media in Bulgaria outlines the scheme for inducing self-censorship and the transition from active to passive news coverage within a short period of time. The survey, conducted with students in journalism and professional journalists, aims to show their experience with aggression, as well as to identify the forms of pressure they face on a daily basis.

INTRODUCTION

On 6th October 2018 a young TV presenter, Victoria Marinova, was murdered after being raped, beaten and strangled while jogging in the northern Bulgarian city of Ruse (CPJ, 2018). The news was covered internationally by media outlets such as BBC, CNN, Reuters, etc. While the investigative authorities quickly managed to prove that the murder was not work-related, thousands of people gathered in the central parts of the capital Sofia to commemorate Victoria as well as to call for measures to ensure the safety of journalists and to protect the freedom of speech.

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The events of October 2018 were the culmination of journalists' safety issues dating back to the first years after the fall of communism in Bulgaria. While murders of journalists are very rare, physical attacks and attacks on the property of journalists occur more often. For example, in 1998 journalist Anna Zarkova suffered significant burns after being attacked with acid (AP, 1998). In 2013 (Ognyanova, 2013) and 2014, the car of TV reporter Genka Shikerova was put on fire. In 2017, TV reporter and presenter Ivo Nikodimov suffered severe facial trauma after being beaten by three unknown men in a park at the center of Sofia (COE, 2017), and most recently, in 2020, Slavi Angelov, Editor-in-Chief of *168 Chasa* weekly and investigative reporter, was severely beaten in front of his home (CPJ, 2020).

In the recent years, the threat of political pressure is also growing. It is usually exerted at a high level, but there are an increasing number of cases of politicians directly threatening journalists without even trying to cover it. In October 2017, Parliament member Anton Todorov threatened TV presenter Victor Nikolaev during the morning talk show of *Nova TV* that he should be careful with his questions unless he wanted to be fired. Later in the show Valery Simeonov, Vice Prime Minister at the time, threatened the TV presenter once again implying that he should not "shake the state" with questions about the appointment of relatives to government posts. Six months later Victor Nikolaev was indeed fired from *Nova TV*. Sometimes threats also get sexual in nature. In the beginning of December 2019, instead of answering a question by journalist Radoslava Marinova, Parliament member Petar Petrov asked her in front of the camera "And what underwear did you go out with this morning?"

According to the 2019 annual index, published by Reporters without Borders, Bulgaria ranks 111th in terms of Freedom of speech, i.e. last amongst the EU countries (Reporters without borders, 2019). This chapter aims to examine the most common threats that Bulgarian journalists face in their day-to-day work and to what extent do they affect the freedom of speech. Do these threats cause fear, which results in self-censorship, or does media owners' commitment to political parties and business interests exert greater influence?

Another important goal is to determine what (if any) steps are taken by the state to ensure the safety of journalists and the freedom of speech. While there are two codes of media ethics in Bulgaria, there is still no law to protect journalists. The two most important non-governmental journalistic organizations in the country – The Union of Bulgarian Journalists and the Association of European Journalists - Bulgaria have the right to initiate legislative changes, which are usually not accepted by the Parliament. How do these organizations react to the cases of threats and violence against journalists except for issuing declarations and resolutions? Do they really ensure the safety of journalists, or are they also politically committed?

BACKGROUND

Freedom of expression is one of the most important achievements of Western civilization, both from social and state perspective (Jamil, 2019a, 2019b, 2016, 2015, 2014). Development of societies and freedom of expression are connected and affect each other (Carlson, 2016). Digital and social media rapidly changed the communication models used by traditional media and thus drew a clear line between democratic and authoritarian/totalitarian countries (Jamil & Muschert, 2020; Jamil, 2018, 2017a, 2017b; Carlson & Poyhatri, 2017). Participatory and citizen journalism provided content sources, which are much more difficult to track or censor. The traditional gatekeepers became just one of many players with equal access to information and publishing (or should we say posting) opportunities. The fluidity of roles in modern mass communication provides freedom of speech and limits the possibilities for centralized censorship.

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