

BULGARIA: FRAGILE MEDIA FREEDOM PROGRESS AT RISK OF BACKSLIDING WITHOUT URGENT REFORM



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INTRODUCTION

This report was prepared by the partner organisations of the [Council of Europe's Safety of Journalists Platform](#) and the [Media Freedom Rapid Response \(MFRR\)](#). It follows a media freedom mission to Sofia conducted between 24-26 September, which was joined by the following international organisations: ARTICLE 19 Europe; Association of European Journalists (AEJ); European Broadcasting Union (EBU); European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF); European Federation of Journalists (EFJ); International Press Institute (IPI); Reporters Without Borders (RSF); Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa (OBCT) and Index on Censorship. The local partner was the Association of European Journalists Bulgaria.

The visit to Bulgaria was organised within a context of relative political stability following three turbulent years in which seven elections failed to result in stable governments. The mission sought to assess the climate for media freedom, pluralism and the safety of journalists, among other themes. Following the entry into full force in August 2025 of the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA), the mission also aimed to assess the level of preparation by authorities in Bulgaria to implement the EU regulation, as well as the EU's 2024 Anti-SLAPP Directive.

During the mission to Sofia, the delegation met with a range of professional media stakeholders, including leading journalists and editors from print, online, broadcast and investigative media, as well as media associations and unions, media experts and civil society. Separate meetings were held with the Bulgarian National Radio and the Bulgarian National Television.

Meetings were also held with the President; Ministry of Justice; Ministry of Interior; Council of Electronic Media (CEM); Office of General Prosecutor; Commission for Personal Data Protection; Central Election Commission and representatives of embassies. The mission regrets that repeated requests for a meeting with the Ministry of Culture in Sofia were rejected. The Ministry did provide a written response to questions sent after the mission, after the original requested deadline set by the delegation, which are included in this report.

A press conference was held at the National Press Club of the Bulgarian Press Agency in Sofia on 26 September. The delegation extends its thanks to all stakeholders who met with them during the mission and welcomes the statement issued by President Radev following the meeting, which stressed the importance of free and independent media for the democratic development of society.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

While Bulgaria has experienced modest progress on media freedom in the last four years, the situation remains undermined by persistent structural, legal and political challenges, with urgent action needed by government and public authorities to push forward both domestic and EU-mandated reforms.

Deep political polarisation continues to shape the media environment, fuelling hostility toward journalists and obstructing consensus on key developments. However, a window of opportunity exists to consolidate recent gains and implement long-overdue changes.

Despite the recent progress, Bulgaria continues to suffer from one of the lowest levels of media freedom in the European Union, according to both the World Press Freedom Index and the Media Pluralism Monitor.

To solidify these gains, measures are needed to prevent and prosecute attacks on journalists, resolve the ongoing dispute over the leadership of the public broadcaster, guarantee the independence of the Council for Electronic Media, pass and effectively implement anti-SLAPP legislation to curb vexatious lawsuits against journalism.

Verbal attacks by politicians remain common, while trust in law enforcement is low and investigations into attacks are often slow. No system exists to track such cases. Bulgaria has not yet nominated a national focal point or engaged actively in implementing the Council of Europe's Journalists Matter campaign. Threats from organised crime persist and concerns remain over reports of the use and hosting of digital surveillance technologies in Bulgaria.

The recent approval and then withdrawal of controversial amendments to the penal code to introduce fines and prison sentences of up to six years for disseminating personal information about an individual without their consent would have, if approved, seriously undermined media freedom and risked the imprisonment of journalists carrying out public interest reporting.

Overall, the country's media landscape remains characterised by the corrosive influence of political and economic interests over editorial independence and media pluralism, resulting in persistent media capture challenges.

Key issues include opaque media ownership, non-transparent distribution of state advertising, and weak protections against interference and pressure on independent journalism, all of which are contributing to low levels of public trust in media.

Economic pressures on Bulgarian media are exacerbated by the technological challenges posed by digital platforms and AI generative models, both of which threaten their revenues and business models.

Continued uncertainty over the management of Bulgarian National Television (BNT), the repeated inability of the CEM to reach a majority vote in selecting a new Director General, as well as ongoing appeals and legal battles over the appointment process, reflect Bulgaria's broader media governance challenges, including politicised regulatory bodies and the fragile independence of public broadcasting. The ongoing deadlock and drawn out legal disputes are undermining the trust in both institutions.

If effectively implemented, the EMFA, in full force since August 2025, offers potential remedies to this and many of the other structural challenges that continue to affect the Bulgarian media landscape. However, the authorities' preparedness for alignment with the EMFA remains low. While the Ministry of Culture confirmed to the mission that a new working group has been formed to implement EMFA reforms to the Radio and Television Act (RTA), no information was provided about plans for wider implementation of any other Articles of EMFA and the timeline for additional reforms remains unclear.

It remains unclear what the difference between the two working groups is and how much the previous strategies would be followed or not.

To push forward reforms, media professionals must unite with journalistic associations, unions and other representative bodies to strengthen solidarity and cooperation within the journalistic profession, to monitor progress, document violations and push for better working conditions for the industry.

Breaking this legislative inertia will require cross-party support and a shared understanding of the role that a free and independent media play in democracy. Any marginal advancement of reform in Bulgaria must be accompanied by a shift in political culture which views critical and watchdog journalism as a core pillar of the country's democratic fabric that requires attention and additional safeguards.

SAFETY OF JOURNALISTS

The climate for the safety of journalists in Bulgaria has seen an improvement in recent years, though concerns remain over political pressures and online harassment. Serious physical attacks on journalists and media workers remain relatively uncommon and no life-threatening attacks have been documented in recent years. Several media stakeholders informed the mission that the overall climate for the safety of journalists had improved, though others said that general hostility against the journalistic profession remains a challenge.

The Council of Europe's Platform for the Safety of Journalists currently has 34 [active alerts](#) involving attacks on journalists or threats against media freedom. Physical attacks account for one third of the cases, although their number has also dropped compared to previous years, confirming the overall downward trend in attacks on the press. The Mapping Media Freedom platform has so far [documented](#) eight press freedom violations in Bulgaria in 2025.

Political pressures including intimidation and [insults](#) against journalists by different politicians and public figures remain a [cause of concern](#). In a polarised political climate, reporting from protests has posed challenges to reporters and media crews. On 31 August 2025, journalist Blagoy Bekriev and camera operator Kaloyan Kalchev from NOVA TV were spat on, kicked and [beaten](#) by demonstrators while reporting on a protest in Sopot, during the visit of the European Commission President.

Online harassment and abuse of journalists in Bulgaria on social media platforms remains an issue, particularly against women journalists. A September 2024 case involving the publication online of a [deepfake image](#) of Nova TV investigative journalist Marieta Nikolaeva was cited as a toxic example of the gender-based harassment faced by women journalists. On this occasion, action by law enforcement authorities ensured the image was removed, though it continued to be shared and circulated online on social media.

Stakeholders told the mission that threats also persist from mafia and organised crime groups, though no recent cases have been recorded in Bulgaria. The arrest and 2025 imprisonment in the UK of three Bulgarian nationals for running a Russian spy ring and [planning to kidnap](#) well-known Bulgaria-born investigative journalist Christo Grozev, who lives outside the country, are a worrying reminder of the threats posed from Bulgarian crime groups. Investigative journalists reporting on corruption continue to deploy safety measures, the mission heard.

To improve the institutional framework for the safety of journalists, the Bulgarian government should encourage the establishment of, and support the operation of, early-warning and rapid-response mechanisms, such as hotlines, online platforms or 24-hour emergency contact points, by journalists' organisations or civil society, to ensure that journalists and other media actors have immediate access to protective measures when they are threatened.

The mission notes the low levels of trust by journalists in the law enforcement authorities and prosecutors to secure justice in cases of attacks. Previous cases involving attacks on journalists by police have suffered from delayed justice, most prominently that of freelance journalist [Dimitar Kenarov](#), who was beaten and detained by police while covering a protest in 2020. Many media stakeholders were critical of what they described as slow and ineffective investigations into attacks. Certain stakeholders raised ongoing concerns about politicised investigations by prosecutorial authorities against the media.

During a meeting with a representative of the Chief Prosecutor's Office, the mission heard that no system was in place to allow the tracking of data on attacks on journalists or the number of prosecutions and convictions. Bulgaria is yet to join the Council of Europe's [Journalists Matter Campaign](#), an initiative aiming to promote media freedom and protect journalists from violence, threats, and harassment while performing their duties. The mission welcomes the verbal support of both the Chief Prosecutor's Office and the President of the Republic for proposals to strengthen provisions within the Bulgarian criminal code to introduce higher sanctions for those convicted of attacking journalists.

To date, no cases of spyware or other advanced digital surveillance tools being used to illegally surveil or monitor the private communications of journalists have been recorded in Bulgaria by media freedom or human rights organisations. However, Bulgaria has emerged as a [significant player](#) in the global spyware ecosystem, as both a host for surveillance technology companies and as a user of intrusive surveillance tools. While the use of NSO Group's Pegasus spyware by the Bulgarian government has not been officially confirmed, [reports](#) indicate that the Ministry of Interior has used the software and there is an ongoing prosecution probe.

The mission also notes the recent [effort](#) by MPs from Delyan Peevski's DPS-New Beginning to establish an ad hoc inquiry committee to probe the funding of media and NGOs by Hungarian-American investor and philanthropist George Soros and his Open Society Foundation, which some media stakeholders criticised as a political stunt aimed at eroding public trust in legacy media. Previous proposals have been [voted down](#) in parliament. The far-right opposition party Vazrazhdane has also [proposed](#) similar investigatory initiatives in the past, drawing criticism from media freedom groups.

COUNCIL FOR ELECTRONIC MEDIA AND PUBLIC BROADCASTER

Ongoing uncertainty over the management of Bulgarian National Television (BNT), the inability of the CEM to reach a majority vote on appointing a new Director General for the public broadcaster, as well as continuing legal challenges and disputes between the two institutions, are all reflective of the current dysfunction in independent media governance and regulation in Bulgaria. Two elections by the CEM have failed to reach a majority on appointing a new Director General, most recently in July 2025. As a result, by law the incumbent, Emil Koshlukov, has remained in the role three years past his original mandate, meaning he has now served the equivalent of a second mandate. In both votes by the CEM, none of the candidates received the required three out of five votes to secure a majority, resulting in a deadlock. This has been complicated by numerous appeals from certain candidates and subsequent suspensions of the process by the courts.

Shortly after the mission ended, the Sofia District Administrative Court [suspended](#) the newest procedure for the election of a Director General, which had originally been planned for 16 October 2025. This ruling followed an appeal by one of the candidates in a previous vote. Koshlukov, the current director, has also appealed the procedure. He also submitted his candidacy to participate in the newest election process, along with four other candidates. The CEM has since said it will appeal the latest ruling to the Supreme Administrative Court. Until then, the legal challenges continue and Koshlukov remains in the post until a majority vote is reached.

This drawn-out election saga, coupled with recent court interventions and legal warnings, illustrate the intense struggle over future management of BNT. During the mission, different stakeholders raised concerns about politicisation and the level of independence of the CEM and the management of BNT. After holding meetings with both institutions during the mission, the partner organisations call on all parties involved to act in good faith and in accordance with the rule of law. The mission concludes that the ongoing deadlock has weakened public confidence in the independent operations of both institutions, and requires urgent attention to resolve the situation in a swift, transparent and democratic manner.

Bulgarian National Television (BNT) and Bulgarian National Radio (BNR) do remain the most trusted sources of news in the country. However, the level of trust has fallen in the last couple of years, [according to reports](#). Monitoring [assessments](#) of election coverage in recent years found that overall the broadcasters' reporting has been in line with guidelines outlined in the Radio and Television Act (RTA) and strict rules set by the agreements with the parties have ensured equal access to the airwaves for different political parties. However, the mission also heard criticism from some stakeholders about the editorial independence of BNT and political affiliations of its management, reflecting [concerns raised](#) in the EU Rule of Law Report and the Media Pluralism Monitor. Other stakeholders criticised perceived politicisation of the management boards of BNT and BNR. Specific criticism centred on allegations that a recent documentary on Russian disinformation had been deliberately aired during a late-night evening slot, reducing its visibility and viewership, drawing claims of undue management interference.

Despite increased state funding in recent years, multiple stakeholders told the delegation that financial resources remain insufficient. It is essential that EMFA-mandated reforms are implemented to strengthen the broadcaster's editorial independence, which must be also guaranteed by adequate, sustainable and predictable financial resources. Doing so will reduce the ability of any government present or future to exert undue influence over the public media through budgetary changes. Although multiple draft laws for the reform of the Radio and Television Act (RTA) have been developed in recent years by different working groups, no political action has yet been taken to introduce the bills to the National Assembly.

In its response to questions sent after the mission, the Ministry responded that it had formed several working groups of experts on national level to prepare a draft amendment to the RTA. "In 2025, two large groups already worked on the preparation of an Amendment for the implementation of EMFA to RTA. The second one presented its work by the end of September and right after was established a new smaller, focused on the legal formulation of the text elaborated until now by the other groups. The new working group meets since October 1." The mission understands that this reform remains limited to only amendments of RTA, rather than wider implementation of additional EMFA Articles. No concrete information was provided on other working groups or plans or timelines for broader alignment of national legislation with EMFA. Overall, the strategic vision of the Ministry for EMFA media reform remains unclear.

The Council for Electronic Media (CEM) is the media regulator responsible for licensing, registering and supervising the media service providers. The mission concluded that reforms are required to both protect the CEM from political influence and bolster its operational resources. In principle, the council's structure, with staggered appointments from the parliament and the president, is supposed to insulate its autonomy from political interference. However, multiple stakeholders noted overt political affiliations of certain council members. The delegation supports legislative proposals for reforms to strengthen the independence of all future candidates, in line with the provisions of the EMFA. In Sofia, the mission heard that legislative reforms intended to reinforce CEM's independence and mandate have stalled. Moving forward, any future changes to the makeup or election process for the CEM must be conducted under the principles of independence, legality and pluralism. The healthy functioning of the CEM is vital for the effective regulation of the media ecosystem in Bulgaria. The regulator also requires greater operational resources to carry out its expanded mandate. Proposals to merge the CEM with other regulatory bodies risks disrupting its mandate and weakening its regulatory powers.

The independent management and sustainable financial operations of both the Bulgarian public broadcasters, and the Council for Electronic Media, are essential for the healthy functioning and regulation of the media ecosystem in Bulgaria. Measures to guarantee the independent governance of both institutions, in line with the new rules outlined by the European Media Freedom Act, should be a matter of urgency for political leadership in the country. Doing so would help add safeguards to limit the future politicisation of the two institutions and limit the likelihood of situations such as the current deadlock over the BNT Director General election from occurring in the future.

LEGAL THREATS, SLAPPS AND DEFAMATION

The legal environment in Bulgaria creates persistent risks for journalists and media outlets. While there has been some encouraging progress in recent years, the overall lack of judicial reform means the legislative framework continues to allow for vexatious lawsuits and Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) against the press. A recent attempt to reform the penal code to introduce fines and prison sentences for the publication of private information without consent, without public interest exceptions, raised serious alarm and underscored the fragile progress made on protecting journalists in Bulgaria from abusive criminal defamation threats.

The Association of Journalists Bulgaria continues to document SLAPPs against media, which involve vexatious and unfounded claims aimed at silencing legitimate watchdog reporting. According to journalists the mission met, there are dozens of active SLAPPS targeted at media and journalists. No comprehensive monitoring of the phenomenon in Bulgaria is currently being conducted. Investigative journalists and those probing crime and corruption are among the [most targeted](#) by SLAPPs, with major businesses and insurance companies, politicians, and judges among the most common plaintiffs. Many of these cases involve extortionate demands for financial compensation.

The mission welcomes the preparations by the Ministry of Justice for the transposition of the 2024 [Anti-SLAPP Directive](#). During the visit the delegation was informed of the resumption of the working group tasked with preparing the legal reform and positive progress made in this regard. Some stakeholders informed the delegation that the plans for the transposition were quite advanced. The mission organisations also express concern that the focus appears to be primarily on the implementation of the EU Directive without equal attention to the [Council of Europe Recommendation on SLAPPs](#). Transposition of the EU Directive on SLAPPs must be combined with additional reform of the Bulgarian civil code to introduce provisions for early dismissal procedures for SLAPPs and prevention of excessive interim measures such as freezing of bank accounts and assets of journalists and newsrooms, among other measures.

Days after the delegation left Sofia, on October 7 the populist There Is Such a People party, a junior coalition partner in the governing coalition, introduced a bill to parliament which [proposed amendments](#) to the penal code which would, if adopted, have introduced prison sentences of up to six years and fines for disseminating personal information about an individual without their consent. The bill defined “personal life” broadly, covering personal, family, intimate relations or health status, and criminalised their disclosure through any medium, including print and online publications. The proposal also allowed for the use of special surveillance means, such as wiretaps, for investigating such offences, which are typically reserved for serious crimes. No exemptions were made for legitimate public interest journalism and journalist associations and unions were not consulted.

The following day, October 8, the bill was approved at the first reading by the parliamentary Legal Affairs Committee. It was supported by members of the governing majority and opposition parties. Representatives of the Prosecutor’s Office and judiciary were not present due to the extraordinary and accelerated scheduling of the session. The bill was met with strong criticism from Bulgarian media,

[journalist associations](#) and [international press freedom organisations](#), who warned it could be used to censor legitimate public interest journalism and risked jailing journalists for doing their job. The bill was later dropped on October 13 after the international outcry. However, the initial introduction of the bill and swift passing, without proper public consultation, remains highly alarming. If ultimately passed, the bill would have shattered slow progress on criminal defamation reform in recent years. The mission partners deeply regret that the bill was not raised during the visit to Sofia and remain deeply opposed to this draft legislation, which poses a serious threat to media freedom.

More widely, defamation remains a criminal offence in Bulgaria, despite repeated calls from media freedom groups and international organisations to amend the law and fully decriminalise defamation. Recent amendments to the criminal code did [lower](#) the minimum fines for insult and defamation and eliminated the automatic aggravated qualification when the person concerned is a civil servant. The reforms also introduced the possibility of waiving criminal liability and replacing it with administrative sanctions in cases concerning insult or defamation of state officials acting in their official capacity. Nevertheless, the continued criminalisation of defamation remains inconsistent with international freedom of expression standards and continues to allow the strategic use of criminal law against the media and journalists. Rather than take regressive steps backwards, further reform is needed to fully decriminalise defamation.

Previous cases in recent years underscore the dangerous landscape for legal threats and abusive defamation proceedings in Bulgaria. In a worrying verdict, in July 2025 Bulgaria's Supreme Court of Cassation [ruled against](#) private online news outlet Mediapool and journalist Boris Mitov in a defamation case filed by judge Svetlin Mihaylov. The court rejected the defendants' appeal, leaving them obliged to pay BGL 43,000 (€22,000) in damages, in a case which drew condemnation from local journalist groups. The 2023 [SLAPP](#) against Mediapool for BGN 1 million by insurance company Lev In - later dropped after an international condemnation - also underscored the legal threats Bulgarian media can face.

The mission also noted the takedown by the Ministry of Interior in 2024 of satirical website novonachalo.com without a court order, after it published content mocking Bulgarian politician and party leader Delyan Peevski. The takedown order to internet service providers, which was done without following due process, was criticised as non-transparent, unjustified and illegal. The case sets an alarming precedent for online censorship which undermines freedom of expression.

MEDIA PLURALISM AND INDEPENDENT JOURNALISM

The media landscape in Bulgaria is lively and diverse but media pluralism remains fragile. Independent journalism faces pressures from ownership interference, self-censorship, and financial insecurity, while deep political and social polarisation shape the media environment. Close links between political and business elites allow oligarchs to retain significant influence over parts of the media sector.

Repeated cycles of elections and the subsequent disruption of government working groups have resulted in repeated delays to reforms that are badly needed to bring about a healthier media environment. Though the mission understands that some initial work was done to prepare for the implementation of the EMFA, which came into full force in August 2025, the process was previously suspended by the Ministry of Culture. Requests to the Ministry to meet during the visit to discuss the preparation for the implementation of EMFA were rejected.

In its response to questions sent by the delegation after the mission, the Ministry responded: "The implementation of the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA) in the Bulgarian legislation is of prior importance for the Ministry of Culture." It said plans for reform of the RTA, detailed above, were underway

and would be developed in November 2025. However, little additional information was provided on the plan for implementation of any other Articles of EMFA beyond amendments to the RTA. The current status of additional EMFA-related working groups remains unclear. The Ministry did not respond to a question about the reason for the suspension of the previous working groups. Implementation of the EMFA is vital for addressing many of the [systemic challenges facing media freedom and pluralism in Bulgaria](#). However, the mission concludes that Bulgaria has made no tangible progress since the EMFA came into force.

While under Bulgarian law media service providers must reveal their ownership structure and reforms in recent years have seen improved transparency, implementation remains patchy and many media have not disclosed their beneficial owners, contributing to perceptions that certain media are captured by private business or political interests. The influence of sanctioned oligarch Deylan Peevski, who leads the DPS-New Beginning party, is a major issue of concern regarding media ownership and interference. Although Peevski's media assets were formally sold in 2021, multiple stakeholders said the influence of the politician over elements of the media ecosystem remained disproportionately high and has a corrosive effect on editorial independence.

State and private advertising remain the largest source of income for media in Bulgaria, though more media titles are experimenting with subscription-based business models. On paper, Bulgarian legislation requires that public funds be distributed to media transparently and competitively. However, the framework for the transparent distribution of state advertising remains flawed and incomplete. Bulgaria does not currently have a national regulatory body tasked with overseeing the allocation of state advertising to media, providing an opaque system which remains open to exploitation. The Ministry of Culture insufficiently enforces the existing laws on beneficial ownership, which, as a result, often goes undisclosed, hiding potential conflicts of interest and political affiliations, lowering public trust in the media's integrity.

State advertising has regularly been instrumentalised by political forces to influence coverage and punish critical reporting through the withdrawal of contracts. The political turbulence at the national level and lack of stable governments has reduced the threat of advertising pressures on media in recent years. However, at the local and regional level the economic dependence of media on advertising from local authorities remains high and has exposed them to financial pressures and in many cases weakened editorial independence. The country's small advertising market continues to pose challenges for media viability and sustainability.

Media pluralism in Bulgaria is undermined by high levels of market concentration in key sectors. The media market continues to be dominated by two major groups: PPF Group and United Group. Together, the two giants own a considerable portion of the media landscape, raising questions over media concentration and its effect on pluralism, particularly within the broadcast market. Acquisitions in the telecoms sector have further increased vertical concentration in the media ecosystem. Some stakeholders told the delegation that while there are ongoing concerns about political pressures on the editorial independence at BTV and Nova, overall they continue to provide pluralistic and professional reporting. Other interlocutors argued commercial imperatives had weakened their commitment to public interest journalism, while some also criticised a perceived lack of investigative journalism by the two media giants. Both groups maintain robust audience figures and relatively high levels of trust. Television remains the primary source of news for citizens in Bulgaria.

Though the country has a small cohort of professional investigative journalists probing crime and corruption, they work in a climate of pressure, including death threats, harassment, and vexatious lawsuits. BIRD.bg and Bivol in particular conduct hard-hitting investigative journalism and are part of regional and global networks such as the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project. However, the overall number of specialised investigative journalists or projects in Bulgaria is low compared to regional neighbours. No specialised domestic schemes exist to fund investigative journalistic projects in Bulgaria, leaving media reliant on applying for European and international grants.

ACCESS TO INFORMATION, PUBLIC TRUST IN MEDIA AND DISINFORMATION

Bulgaria's access to information framework remains weak, with journalists often facing administrative obstacles and limited transparency from state institutions. Requests for interviews with political leaders are routinely rejected and Freedom of Information (FOI) requests are often either ignored or partially answered. The July 2025 [decision](#) by Administrative Court in Stara Zagora against investigative journalist Venelina Popova, which ordered her to pay BGN 1,000 (€510) in legal costs to the municipality of Galabovo after she sought information about a controversial waste incinerator project, was cited by stakeholders as an example of the challenges faced while accessing public interest information. The ruling is a dangerous precedent and has a chilling effect on public interest journalism. Parliamentary reporters continue to face disproportionate limits on their movement within the new parliament building, limiting scrutiny. Attempts to interview high level politicians are often [rejected](#) or met with [hostility](#).

Media ethics in Bulgaria remains a longstanding challenge. While the country benefits from numerous high-quality, independent and professional titles producing public interest journalism, an abundance of online news websites – many with unclear beneficial ownership and political connections – disseminate low-quality and opinion-based reporting and clickbait, lowering the overall quality of media content. The National Council for Journalistic Ethics provides codes of conduct and self-regulation, but these efforts are under-resourced. Although professional media associations are providing dedicated support and advocacy, overall solidarity within the journalistic profession in Bulgaria remains relatively low, multiple media stakeholders identified.

The precarious working conditions of many journalists in Bulgaria, including low pay and weak labour protections, pose further challenges for the profession, undermining the ability of media workers to oppose threats to editorial independence in their newsrooms. Some media stakeholders told the delegation that recruiting young journalists into the profession was an increasing challenge, given the relatively low salaries and low levels of public trust in the industry. Growing concerns were also expressed by media interlocutors about the disruption of journalistic business models by Artificial Intelligence and the impact the technology would have on the industry in the coming years.

Institutional and regulatory dysfunction, problematic media ownership and political influence have combined to weaken public trust in journalism in Bulgaria, with the country consistently [ranking](#) among the lowest in the EU for [trust in news](#), and among the [highest levels of news avoidance](#). This has created a vacuum in which disinformation can more easily spread, particularly on social media. Despite this clear threat, the government has failed to create a national disinformation strategy, with the work of the multi-stakeholder Bulgarian Coalition Against Disinformation remaining frozen since 2023. It is vital that Bulgaria swiftly designate and empower a national [Digital Services Coordinator \(DSC\)](#) and establish rules for penalties under the [Digital Services Act \(DSA\)](#).

Following the mission, the partner organisations call on the European Commission to closely observe the implementation of the EMFA in Bulgaria, provide concrete and measurable recommendations within the Rule of Law Report, deepen conditionality on EU funds, and to use all tools available to ensure compliance with the EMFA, the Anti-SLAPP directive and other European standards, such as the Digital Services Act. Pressure from the European Union, through mechanisms like the Rule of Law Reports and conditionality on EU funds, continue to drive reform efforts, though progress is slow and uneven and vigilant monitoring is essential.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The mission outlines the following recommendations to improve the situation for media freedom in Bulgaria.

Safety of journalists

- Government and political authorities should refrain from and condemn all cases of denigration, vilification, intimidation and threats against journalists, including online attacks
- The Bulgarian government should join the [Safety of Journalists Campaign](#), establish contact points for journalists in law enforcement and ministerial bodies, and improve horizontal collaboration between ministries on the safety of journalists. Establish interagency coordination structures for journalist protection, as recommended by EU standards
- Review and improve legislation to strengthen the criminal code with stronger sanctions for those convicted of attacking journalists and create a system for specifically recognising and categorising cases of attacks on the press and media workers.
- The Bulgarian government should encourage the establishment of, and support the operation of, early-warning and rapid-response mechanisms, such as hotlines, online platforms or 24-hour emergency contact points, by journalists' organisations or civil society, to ensure that journalists and other media actors have immediate access to protective measures when they are threatened.
- Engage proactively with the Council of Europe Platform for the Safety of Journalists by maintaining regular dialogue with the Platform's partners and journalists' organisations, and by providing timely, detailed and substantive responses to alerts concerning Bulgaria.

CEM and public broadcasters

- The process by the CEM to appoint a new Director General of BNT must be conducted in a legal and transparent manner and all parties involved must act in good will and in accordance with the rule of law, without hindering or further delaying the procedure further without justification.
- The government should implement reforms in line with the EMFA which strengthen the safeguards for editorial and institutional independence of BNT and BNR while also guaranteeing adequate, sustainable and predictable financial resources to both broadcasters.
- The government should implement reforms in line with the EMFA which insulate the Council for Electronic Media from political influence and interference and strengthen its functional independence, while also providing it with sufficient resources for operational stability.
- This should start by adopting legislative changes to transpose Article 30, section 4 of the revised Audiovisual Media Services Directive to ensure that national regulatory authorities have adequate financial and human resources and enforcement powers to carry out their functions effectively.

Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) and defamation

- The Ministry of Justice should transpose and implement both the EU Directive and the Council of Europe (CoE) Recommendation against SLAPPs, to ensure that both cross-border and domestic SLAPPs are effectively addressed.
- The government should ensure that the indicators for identifying SLAPPs, as foreseen in the CoE Recommendation, are incorporated into national law to assist judges in recognizing such cases. During the drafting process, the Ministry of Justice should make use of the expertise available from the CoE.
- Authorities should continue to train judges, prosecutors, lawyers, and police officers on European standards related to media freedom, including defamation, SLAPPs, hate speech, access to information, and the protection of whistleblowers and journalistic sources. This is essential to ensure that court rulings and practices align with the standards of the European Court of Human Rights.
- Following the recent introduction and withdrawal of amendments to the penal code which would strengthen criminal defamation law, all political parties should refrain from developing bills which would undermine media freedom or freedom of expression or represent regression in the wider legal framework for criminal defamation law.
- Ultimately, the government and the parliament of Bulgaria should fully decriminalise defamation.

Media legislation and the EMFA

- The government should swiftly implement and align domestic legislation with the European Media Freedom Act under a transparent and inclusive process, with consultation from expert journalist organisations and civil society groups.
- Implement reforms mandated under the EMFA which require the establishment of functional media ownership registries. This should include fully operational, centralised, and publicly accessible registers of media ownership covering print, broadcast and digital sectors, with frequent updates and beneficial ownership disclosures. Legal provisions should cover indirect ownership and funding sources, ensuring clear public access to ultimate control and economic interests behind media outlets. Enforced sanctions for non-disclosure or obfuscation must be established and applied rigorously.
- Implement reforms outlined in the EMFA for fair and transparent distribution of public funds and state advertising to the media. This must include clear rules limiting the allocation of state advertising funds to impartial, transparent, and criteria-based processes, prohibiting political favoritism. Legislation must require the mandatory publication of all state advertising contracts and spending at local, regional and national levels of government, to enable public scrutiny.
- Only media companies which have registered in the ownership database and provided up-to-date information about their direct and beneficial ownership should be eligible to receive state advertising and public funds. The authorities should also consider adding a requirement for the media to sign up to the established Code of Ethics of the Bulgarian Media in order to be eligible to receive public funds or state advertising.
- Enforce existing legislation to limit cross-ownership and concentration in local and national media markets, to bolster media pluralism
- Consider specific policy measures to support regional and local media regarding their financial sustainability, distribution, and political and economic independence.
- As part of its efforts to combat disinformation, the government should swiftly designate and empower a national [Digital Services Coordinator \(DSC\)](#) and establish rules for penalties under the [Digital Services Act \(DSA\)](#).

Journalistic profession

- Media professionals should unite with journalistic associations, unions and other representative bodies to strengthen solidarity and cooperation within the journalistic profession, to better monitor reforms and document violations and push for better working conditions for the industry.
- Media and journalists' organisations should take measures to improve working conditions for media professionals in line with labour law and European standards.
- Media and journalists' organisations should strengthen protection of journalists and editorial independence by fully implementing the European Commission Recommendation (EU) 2022/1634 of 16 September 2022 on internal safeguards for editorial independence and ownership transparency in the media sector.
- Media and journalists' organisations should negotiate collective agreements in order to provide professional support for journalists in cases of stress, burnout, and other mental health challenges.
- Media and journalists' organisations should promote the adherence to the Code of Ethics of the Bulgarian Media and adopt internal self-regulatory mechanisms to enhance editorial independence from political, commercial and owners interference.



This report was jointly produced by the Council of Europe's Platform for the Safety of Journalists and the Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR).

The [Platform for the Protection of Journalism and Safety of Journalists](#) is a unique mechanism which helps the dialogue between the governments and the organisations of journalists, with the aim of stopping violations to press freedom in the member states of the Council of Europe and enabling journalists to exercise their profession without the risk of compromising their safety.

Since 2015, the Platform facilitates the compilation and dissemination of information on serious concerns about media freedom and safety of journalists in Council of Europe member states, as guaranteed by Art. 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

The [Media Freedom Rapid Response \(MFRR\)](#) tracks, monitors and reacts to violations of press and media freedom in EU Member States and Candidate Countries. This project provides legal and practical support, public advocacy and information to protect journalists and media workers.



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