

RSF's 10 recommendations to rescue press freedom in Bulgaria

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) is publishing ten new recommendations on how to improve press freedom in Bulgaria with the aim of helping to make this the subject of a political and societal debate in next month's decisive general elections. While drafting the recommendations, which are targeted primarily at Bulgaria's political parties and movements, RSF consulted with Bulgarian media experts. They are intended to be combined with the proposal - submitted by RSF to the Bulgarian government in March 2020, but left without a response - [to create an independent and pluralistic national commission for improving press freedom in Bulgaria](#).

Security of journalists

- 1. Increase the security of journalists and accelerate the treatment of crimes committed against them**, for example by
 - a. ensuring institutional independence and accountability of the police, prosecutor's office and courts and promote in general the rule of law;
 - b. allocating cases of police violence against journalists to a centralised and independent police inspection unit;
 - c. creating a system of rapid alert mechanism allowing journalists to report violence against them immediately to the police via a dedicated phone line or mobile application;
 - d. denouncing physical and verbal attacks against journalists publicly and promptly, and restraining from political attacks against journalists which may expose them to further online and offline threats;
 - e. opening a public debate on increasing the sentences sanctioning physical violence against journalists.

- 2. Protect the media from judicial harassment in the form of arbitrary lawsuits or criminalisation of their work**, for example by
 - a. increasing the transparency and accountability of law-enforcement procedures targeting journalists, media owners and managers, as well as private persons donating to the media;
 - b. asking the European Commission to propose legislation establishing European-wide minimal standards of protection by introducing procedural guarantees for the victims of Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) and by combining preventive measures to block abusive lawsuits;
 - c. reducing the legal fines for defamation of public officials to the level of fines for defamation of other persons.

Funding of the media

- 3. Distribute the public advertisement and communication funds according to clearly defined and transparent criteria**, for example by
 - a. publishing on a regular basis, at least every 6 months, raw data and analysis of the funding of the media from the EU, public procurement, and from advertising by the State and State-owned enterprises;
 - b. adopting a clear and transparent regulation on the financial relations between the national and local authorities on one hand and the national and local media on the other hand;
 - c. stopping the widespread practice of “buying” friendly coverage by placing advertisements in certain media outlets; *
 - d. putting an end to the use of intermediary companies which distribute EU funds in an opaque and non-transparent way.

- 4. Reconsider the allocation of the public funds to the media that are systematically violating the ethical standards of journalism** such as the Bulgarian Code of Ethics and the Munich Declaration of the Duties and Rights of Journalists, for example by
 - a. acting on the basis of possible recommendations of the Media Ethics Committee which should determine which media intentionally and repeatedly disseminate false information, use hate speech and promote discrimination of certain groups of the society.

Media’s access to public information

- 5. Improve access to information in consultation with media professionals**, for example by
 - a. amending the Freedom of Information Act to broaden its scope and limit the possible grounds for refusing access;
 - b. increasing the accessibility of property declarations of high-ranking officials, commercial register, property register and court and prosecutors registers.

- 6. Ensure all journalists’ and all media’s queries are treated equally by press offices of public institutions**, for example by
 - a. adopting clear and press-freedom-oriented standards and making sure that journalists who are critical towards the government are not subjected to restrictions in access to information.

Media ethics and professionalism

- 7. Strengthen the independence of the public media - Bulgarian News Agency (BTA), Bulgarian National Television (BNT) and Bulgarian National Radio (BNR), for example by**
 - a. clearly stating the mandate of public media in the legislation, while ensuring the transparency of their funding;
 - b. strengthening their financial independence and guaranteeing greater transparency of expenditures (in particular spending on external contractors which in some cases are suspected of syphoning public funds);
 - c. ensuring that the budget of the public media is approved by an independent body using a transparent methodology without the possibility for the government to amend the budgetary allocations, thus limiting the political influence over the management of the public media;
 - d. modifying the procedure and the criteria for selecting top managers in order to ensure that they are media professionals with moral integrity and no political ties;
 - e. providing guarantees that the expression of criticism by journalists against the management will not be considered an act of disloyalty and lead to administrative sanctions, as stipulated in the law.

- 8. Promote the work of the National Council for Journalism Ethics in order to build confidence in journalism, for example by**
 - a. encouraging citizens, public authorities, politicians, activists and entrepreneurs to submit their concerns with the media coverage to the Media Ethics Committee as an alternative to Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs), smear campaigns and other forms of pressure (the existing Code of Ethics of the Bulgarian media and the practice of the commission should be reviewed by reputable international media organizations).

- 9. Open a dialogue with the media community on strengthening professionalism, pluralism and independence of the Council of Electronic Media (CEM), for example by**
 - a. making substantial changes to its structure (selection of the members and their appointment);
 - b. making it possible for the media, NGOs and academia to nominate recognized media professionals;
 - c. build sufficient administrative and professional capacity in order to guarantee efficient monitoring of hate speech in the media content.

10. Modernise the media curriculum in the national education system, for example by

- a. supporting academic efforts towards introducing courses on media ethics, investigative journalism and data journalism;
- b. allocating sufficient funding to universities in order to guarantee that lecturers have access to the best and most up-to-date practices in journalism;
- c. improving opportunities in Bulgaria for Bulgarian experts teaching journalism and related subjects in internationally recognized foreign educational institutions;
- d. opening a public debate on the introduction of media literacy courses, fact checking and general critical thinking at high schools.

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