



PRESS RELEASE

The concentration on Bulgaria's media market and the country's lamentable performance in international media freedom surveys are indicators of the state of democracy, and the Bulgarian presidency of the Council of the European Union is a good opportunity to put those issues in their pan-European context. This is one of the conclusions of a discussion with international participants which took place on Wednesday at Sofia Hotel Balkan upon the presentation of *The White Book of Media Freedom in Bulgaria* by the Union of Publishers in Bulgaria (UPB). The forum was attended by representatives of the diplomatic missions of the EU, Canada and the U.S., Bulgarian and international organizations, journalists from Bulgarian and foreign media. Theodore Zahov and Ivo Prokopiev, co-publishers of *Capital* and *Dnevnik*, Sasho Donchev, publisher of *Sega*, Ognyan Donev, publisher of *Club Z*, and Stoyana Georgieva of *Mediapool* explained the reasons for drafting the document.

“Systemic pressure has been exerted on independent media in Bulgaria for more than a decade and is so sophisticated that some people cannot grasp it, while others cannot believe,” UPB chairman Theodore Zahov said. In his words, a comprehensive pressure mechanism exists, which includes damaging a publisher's reputation through fictitious charges by the prosecuting authorities, the activation against them of legislation aimed to fight terrorism – the so-called civil forfeiture - to the positioning of a media conglomerate through a deal that offers comfortable media environment to the powerholders in exchange for the provision of opportunities for business and financing, including from EU funds.

The White Book traces the development of this process since 2006 when Bulgaria was ranked 36th in terms of media freedom to its plummeting to the 113th place in 2016 and the 109th place in 2017 – and constantly at the bottom among EU member states over the past years. Over this period Bulgaria acquired the main characteristic features of a captured state. Meanwhile, a powerful scheme for servicing the powerholders was formed around the fourth biggest lender in the country, Corporate Commercial Bank, which subsequently went bankrupt. In the period after 2007 the family of Delyan Peevski started to acquire media with credits from Corporate Commercial Bank. Furthermore, it currently controls 80% of the national newspaper distribution network.

The Union of Publishers in Bulgaria proposes several possible solutions to this problem:

- Media freedom should become one of the main criteria for the EU and the European Commission when determining their policy towards the member states;

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- The EU should send independent monitors – international prosecutors to monitor the indictments and pre-trial investigations against journalists and publishers;
- The European Commission should request bigger transparency and tighten control over the way the communication funding under EU programs is being spent in Bulgaria;
- The European Commission should launch an investigation into concentration and unfair competition on Bulgaria's media market;
- A Digital Transformation of Media program should be set up within the EU aimed at the technological strengthening of traditional media, avoiding the mediation of the local governments.

"I would like to express our strongest solidarity. [...] We call on the EU, all the institutions - parliament, commission, national decision-makers, to analyze the risks and concerns that the Union of Publishers in Bulgaria has highlighted in this White Paper presented today, which could put our democratic values in jeopardy. We hope that the recommendations in the paper will be adequately addressed by concrete steps which will ensure diverse media landscape in Bulgaria, free from any governmental pressure on journalism," Valdo Lehari, Vice-president of the European newspaper publishers' association (ENPA), said.

Pauline Adès-Mével, Reporters Without Borders' head of EU and Balkans desk, recalled a report by the organization dating from 2016 that describes the Delyan Peevski case in Bulgaria, and called for a deeper scrutiny of the problem during the Presidency of the Council of the EU and finding ways for its solution.

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