

THE BULGARIAN PRESS MARKET – WHERE IS THE QUALITY?

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Bulgaria is situated on the Balkan Peninsula. As a part of the region, named because of political correctness Southeastern Europe, over the last 14 years it underwent economic, political and social changes. The Bulgarian media landscape can be described as a mirror of these changes, which happened during the years – nearly completed privatization, entry of local and foreign private investors, a huge variety of radio and television programs and print publications, an identity crisis and a noticeable lack of quality journalism. The Bulgarian media on its road to Europe is like the Bulgarian citizen – confused, with a lost sense of time, overcome by a feeling of indifference and intuitively finding the right direction in chaos.

The Bulgarian Press market in 2004 is relatively stable. After the stormy nineties, when newspapers were created and ceased to exist almost every year, at the present moment there are nine national dailies, three national weeklies and over 50 regional publications. The market is dominated by the German media holding Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung (WAZ), which entered Bulgaria during the 1997 crisis. Afterwards, it practically established a monopoly of circulations, as well as advertising revenues. WAZ owns the two major dailies – “24 chasa” (24 Hours) and “Trud” (Labor), and the weekly “168 chasa” (168 Hours). The political party press practically does not play any role in the formation of public opinion. In 2002 the party issue of the conservative Union of Democratic Forces (UDF), “Demokratsia”, folded. The daily “Duma” (Word), which inherited the party publication from the Communist era “Rabotnichesko Delo” (Worker’s Deed), remained a tribune of the reformed Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), but suffered a series of cataclysms after changing its owners twice in the last six years (companies close to the BSP). The future of the paper is rather uncertain at the present moment. Circulation figures for the party press are low and their influence is directed towards a

relatively small social group of hardliners. The overall disappointment in politics and the political system and the reducing enthusiasm from the nineties, when there was a serious polarization in society between people with right and people with left political convictions, deprived the party press of readers and thus of advertisements. The party press has disappeared, but this does not mean that politicians' interest in the media has faded. On the contrary – control over state-owned national television has even increased and many surveys carried out by non-governmental organizations describe the situation in Bulgaria as risky for freedom of speech.

Unlike the electronic media, ownership in the press is rather clear and contains fewer question marks. This does not mean, however, that pressure on freedom of speech is lesser. Together with WAZ and some serious Bulgarian investors, there are people in the market whose capital is questionable. For example, investments of the Israeli businessman Michael Corni. Michael Corni was put on trial in Israel for money laundry (and later acquitted). In the US, Corni was accused by his former partners “Trans World Group”, the Rubin Brothers, of blackmail and murder. The American court, however, refused to put him on trial because the alleged crimes were committed in Russia. Corni was expelled from Bulgaria in 2000 after having been designated as posing a threat to national security. This, however, was not a holdback for his further investments in the country and into two dailies – “Standart” (Standard) and “7 Dni Sport” (Seven Days Sport). The daily “Novinar” (Journalist) is also brought in connection with some economic interests. The newspaper is owned by companies connected with former municipal structures. There are allegations that some of the municipal property of Sofia was privatized by companies related to the Bulgarian mafia. The aim of these stories is to show that there is not as much political, as there is economic pressure on the Bulgarian press. Because of business interests of newspaper owners, the editorial crew refrains from investigating or commenting on certain problems in the state or does exactly the opposite – it overexposes and gets to the bottom of things, leads as if it serves public interest or a willingness to protect justice. Such conduct is possible for different reasons. The advertising market in Bulgaria is chronically unstable and is determined by the will of a small group of people. The subscription base for newspapers is rather low and is estimated at 10 to 20 percent, according to official data from newspapers themselves. In fact, these percentages might be even lower. This all means that advertising seems to be the only serious income generator, especially with regard to the constantly low

circulation figures. Considering, however, that WAZ publications make up, according to official statistics, over two-thirds of advertising revenues, there seems to be no choice left for the other publications but to be financed by owners having interests in various other economic fields.

This closed economic circle and the trend to serve as a corporate PR issue are witnessed by a survey of the non-governmental organization Freedom House, conducted in the beginning of 2004. The most pronounced problems in the Bulgarian media landscape, according to the study, are political control over state broadcasters and manipulation of advertising, which threatens the position of independent media, especially at local and regional levels. Pressures on the press come from both the government and from criminal organizations. Violence against journalists still exists, mostly due to organized crime and a climate of impunity fostered by a weak judiciary. A number of journalists were attacked in 2003 as a result of their investigation into the criminal underworld. In such an environment, many journalists practice self-censorship and investigative journalism about corruption and organized crime is rare.

The self-censorship leads to a quality decline of the published articles. The drop in quality automatically leads to a drop in readers' attention. Decreasing circulation figures are a fact, although there is no official statistics to give precise figures on the change. The Circulations Audit Office was created in the beginning of 2003, but it still cannot start functioning properly and present independent data on the market situation. There is no doubt that the decline in circulations has affected all participants in the market and there is a surprising rise for the tabloid press. A special place in the press landscape is reserved for newspapers attending to the problems of retired people in the country. As in all former socialist republics, these people fared the worst in reforms and on the other hand they are large in numbers. The publishers of these papers manage to run on profit, although they sell their issues at prices less than 30 stotinki (under 15 euro cents).

The majority of publishers always tend to explain the movement of circulation figures with the impoverishment of the Bulgarian customer. It is a convenient explanation, often accompanied with the reasoning that real circulations may decline, but that the so-called social circulation (i.e. the number of people reading one copy of the paper) increases. The price of papers (between 20 stotinki and 2 lewa or 10 euro cents and 1 euro) is one

more reason for the Bulgarian not to buy in these difficult times – in the country you can buy bread, milk or even two cups of coffee for the price of one paper.

Two and a half years before officially entering the European Union, there are still too many unsolved issues facing Bulgarian society. In the meantime, the media does not have to fear for its survival despite the falling circulation figures. The tendency to see a publishing house as just a common enterprise, which has to be profitable first, jeopardizes its social function. It is true that nowadays a journalist independent of exterior influences is utopian. Bulgarian publications, however, have yet to face the challenge of creating and forming authors capable of expressing an opinion and a civil position – despite or because of the interest of their publishers.

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