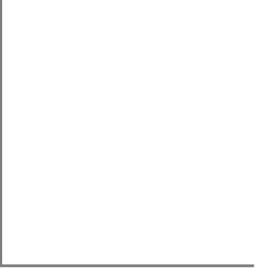




JOURNALISM WITHOUT A MASK*

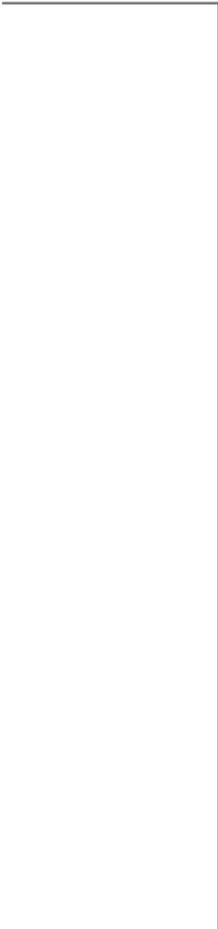
2020 ANNUAL SURVEY OF MEDIA FREEDOM IN BULGARIA



ASSOCIATION OF EUROPEAN JOURNALISTS (AEJ) BULGARIA

STATISTICAL DATA PROCESSING – ALPHA RESEARCH

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PERCEPTION OF FREEDOM

Stagnation is a fitting description of the current state of play of the media environment in Bulgaria in 2020. The snapshot which has emerged from the replies of the respondents in the fifth freedom of speech perception survey conducted by AEJ Bulgaria is almost identical to that in 2015. Nearly one out of two Bulgarian journalists described the situation in the media industry as 'poor' or 'very poor', with a mere 3 % of respondents describing it as 'excellent'.

In 2020, the culture of pressure appears to have grown perceptibly stronger. Against the backdrop of a slight improvement in 2017 following the strongly negative trends outlined by the survey conducted two years earlier, a dangerous trend of further deterioration is gaining momentum.

Outside pressure on the media from political actors has not only failed to subside but has in fact doubled compared to other centres of influence on editorial content, such as economic players, advertisers and central and local government bodies.

The self-censorship and self-limitations journalists impose on themselves in their work have evolved into a disquieting unwritten rule. In extraordinary situations and periods of unrest, both have become more visible.

The measures against the concentration of printed media ownership and distribution continue to be regarded as an instrument for improvement of the media environment in Bulgaria. Hope is bestowed on alternative forms of journalism (media that offer a different angle and a more in-depth analysis of events, seek independent financing through donations, monthly subscription plans, etc.). Regional media are now a truly 'endangered species'.

WHAT IS YOUR ASSESSMENT OF MEDIA FREEDOM IN BULGARIA?

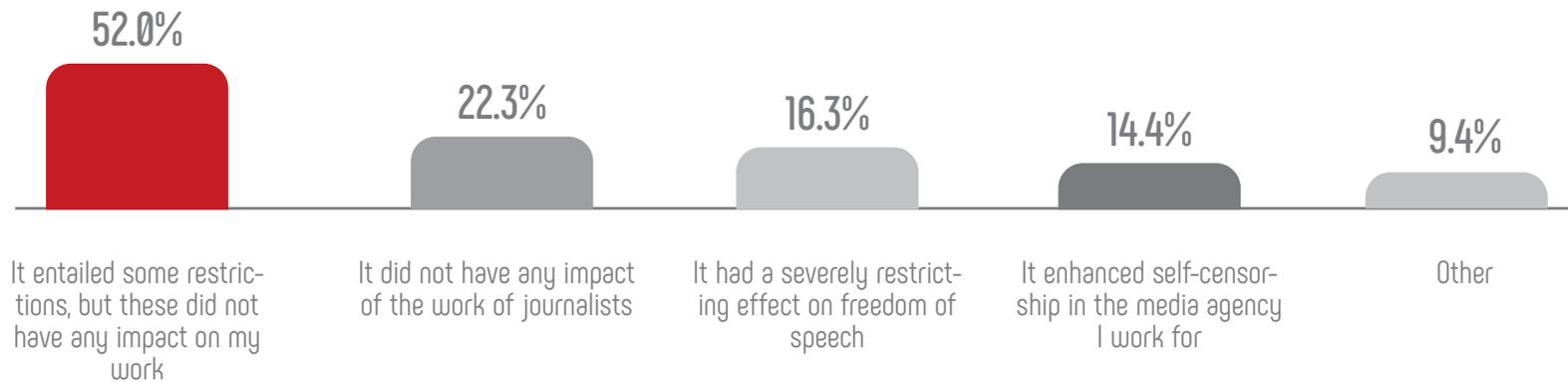
	2011	2013	2015	2017	2020
Excellent	4%	0.59%			3%
Good	4%	5.3%	5.6%	4.5%	5.9%
Average	36%	28.9%	31.5%	25.3%	32.2%
Poor	43%	65.09%	42.0%	42.4%	37.6%
Very poor	1%		21.0%	27.8%	21.3%

For the first time this year, AEJ Bulgaria has added two new indicators to the survey – attitude of the central and local government bodies to critical journalism and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on media and work in the newsroom.

Another highly worrisome trend that is becoming more visible comprises government institutions refusing to provide information or demonstrating a different, dismissive or arrogant attitude to critical media. More than 80% of the journalists who responded to the survey stated that they had been 'frequently' or 'occasionally' at the receiving end of such treatment.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also taken a toll on the financial stability of media and triggered changes in the modus operandi of journalists. Some respondents mentioned having to handle excessive workloads. Every other respondent (52 % of the total) believes that the lockdown imposed in March 2020 entailed restrictions on freedom of speech. Some 16.3 % believe that the pandemic had a suffocating effect on freedom of speech, and 14.4 % that it enhanced self-censorship. Only 22.3 % of respondents believe that the lockdown did not have any effect.

WHAT WAS THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION?



METHODOLOGY

This was a nation-wide, non-representative survey. The survey was conducted online, and journalists were asked to participate in it voluntarily. In 2020, a greater number of journalists and media experts responded to the survey. In 2020, a total of 204 participants completed the survey as opposed to 200 in 2017. The survey was opened on 3 May and closed on 10 June. It could only be completed online via the link posted on the website of AEJ Bulgaria.

In keeping with the previous four surveys, this year the questions sought to elicit the respondents' opinions and appraisal of the media environment in Bulgaria, the independence and modus operandi of journalists, problem areas, such as inside and outside pressure on the media, self-censorship and the overall working environment. One of the main goals of the survey was to produce a snapshot of the media industry in Bulgaria, the levels of perception of freedom of speech and the way in which journalists assess their work.

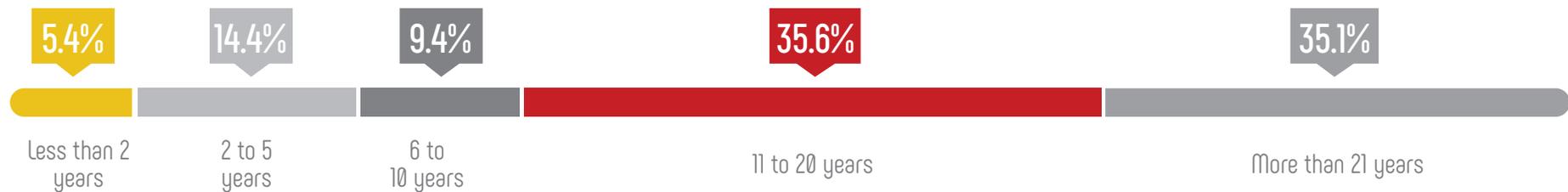
The anonymity of all respondents is fully guaranteed. The information obtained from all participants in the survey has been used in aggregated form. During the survey, protection has been ensured against possible online attacks and attempts at data tampering.

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF THE RESPONDENTS

The largest group of respondents is in the age group of 30 to 40 (32.2 %), followed by the group of respondents in the age group of 40 to 50 (24.3 %). Respondents younger than 30 years and older than 60 years of age have equal shares of 17.8 % of the total. Women made up a greater share of respondents than men, respectively 54.4 % vs. 45.5 %. The majority of respondents (75 %) have university degrees, including 53 % who hold master's degrees. A total of 8.9 % indicated that they hold doctoral degrees; 3 % have completed secondary education; and 5 % have college degrees. Approximately 70 % of respondents have more than 10 years of professional experience in the media industry, and one out of four respondents indicated that their work experience is between 2 and 10 years.

Figure 1

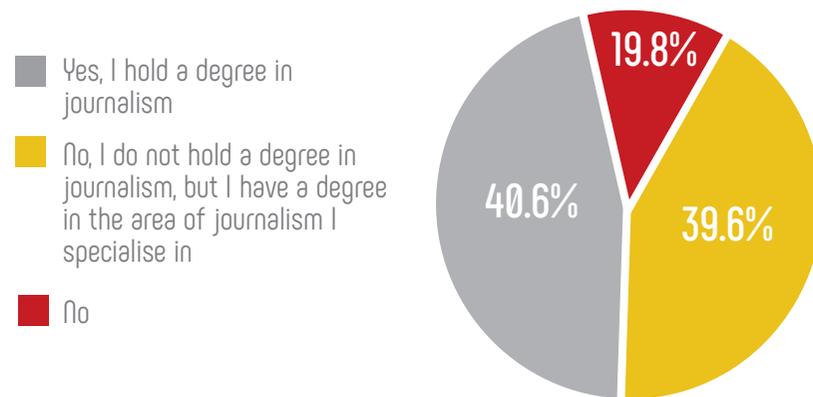
HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN WORKING IN THE MEDIA INDUSTRY?



The number of journalists holding degrees in journalism is declining. Where the percentage of journalism graduates in 2017 stood at 46 %, three years later this number went down to 40.6 %. Those journalists holding degrees in the area they specialise in have increased their share of total respondents in the survey to 39.6 % (see Figure 2). This change is a somewhat curious indicator, which should be taken into consideration by the universities with journalism faculties.

Figure 2

DO YOU HOLD A DEGREE IN JOURNALISM OR IN ANOTHER DISCIPLINE?



JOB MOBILITY

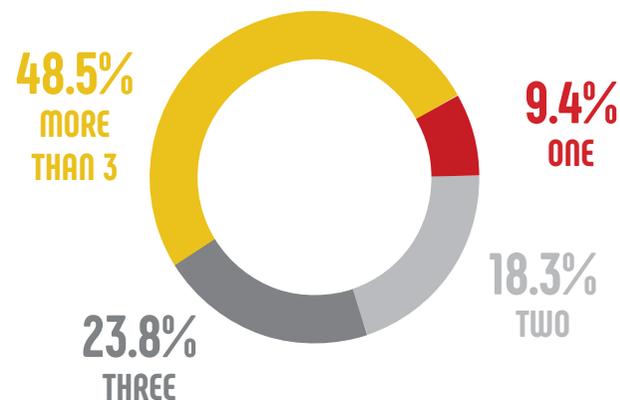
The questions relating to job mobility – frequently switching workplaces, years of professional experience and continued work as a journalist have been used as indicators of the stability of the media environment (e.g., pay and employment relations).

The problems in the media environment, the fewer permanent positions available, higher workloads in the newsroom, dwindling advertising revenues and lower pay, along with waning professional standards are all factors that push journalists to seek other professional and career opportunities in areas such as public relations or outside the public communication domain.

The percentage of journalists who have worked for three or more media at the time of the survey remains high. The 2015 survey also registered a trend of journalists changing three or more newsrooms over a period of 10 years. In 2017 this group had a share of 71.7 % and in 2020 the trend remains unchanged (figure 3).

Figure 3

HOW MANY MEDIA HAVE YOU WORKED FOR, TO DATE?



The centralisation of the media environment in Sofia has not become an established trend. Where in 2015, two out of three respondents stated that they work in the capital, in 2017 three out of four respondents (76.3 %) stated that this is the case. The results for 2020 are very similar to those of the survey conducted three years ago. Approximately 70 % replied that they work in Sofia, while 25.7% reported working in another provincial centre (as compared to 2017 when the corresponding percentage was slightly above 17 %).

A large majority (75.7 %) of respondents noted that they work for a national media agency, with 15.8% working for a regional one. Only 3 % stated that they are correspondents of national media and 5.4 % of international media in Bulgaria. The data largely indicates that **regional journalism is a craft on the brink of extinction.**

The instability of the media market and the rising new global economic crisis as well as the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have taken a toll on the pay of journalists. Where three years ago most respondents shared that 'There has been no change in the level of income of journalists (36.9 %)' and there was even a hint of optimism in the answer 'Incomes tend to have increased' (21.1 %), in 2020 the situation is much less optimistic.

Many respondents in the survey noted a drop in their income in the last three years and one in three stated that their income has remained the same (Figure 4). Although respondents expressed largely negative opinions on their earnings in the media industry, their answers to the second question (How has your personal income changed in recent years?) reveal a more positive picture. One of four respondents stated that their personal income has increased (Figure 5).

A change has been noted in the employment status of journalists. In 2017, a total of 52.5 % stated that they had an employment contract. Three years later, this number is 45.5 %. There has been a slight increase in the number of journalists working under fixed-term employment contracts (3 % in 2017 vs. 4 % in 2020) and in the number of those working on a free-lance basis without their employer paying any social, pension or health insurance contributions (9.1 % in 2017 vs. 10.4 % in 2020). The number of journalists working on fixed-term (civil) contracts has remained the same (20.8 %).

Figure 4

IN LIGHT OF YOUR PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE, HOW HAS THE LEVEL OF PAY OF JOURNALISTS IN BULGARIA CHANGED IN THE LAST 3 YEARS?

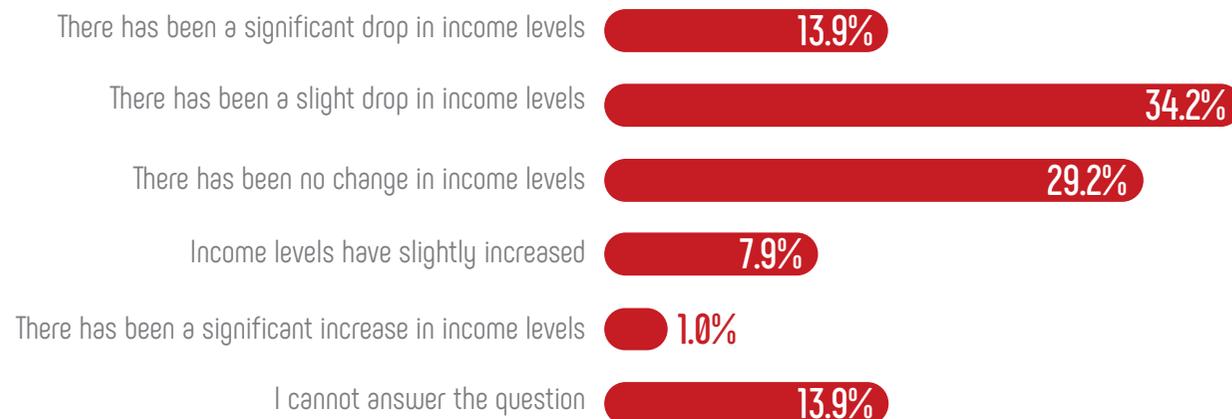
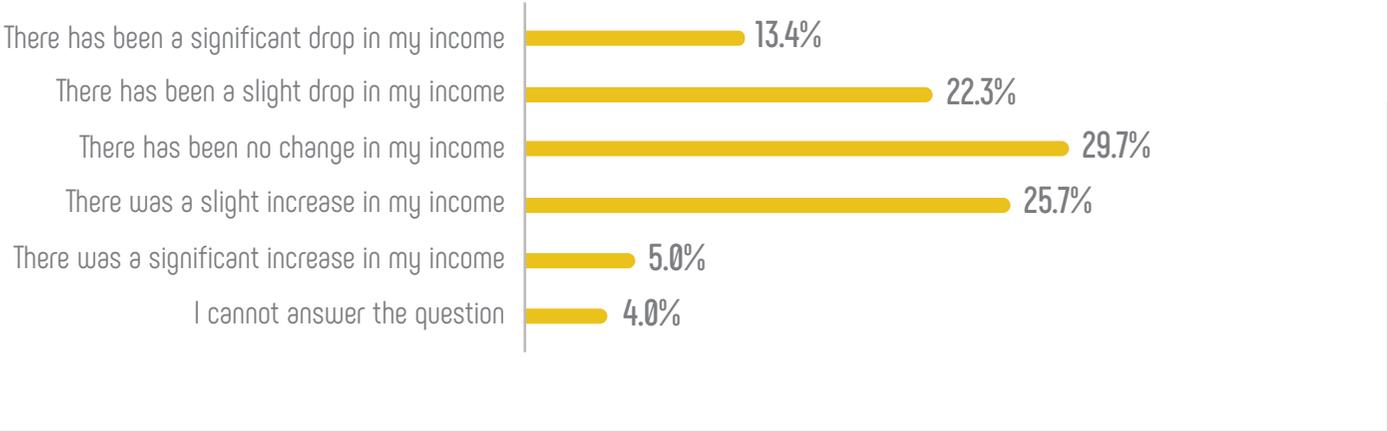


Figure 5

HOW HAS YOUR PERSONAL INCOME CHANGED DURING THIS PERIOD?



CULTURE OF PRESSURE

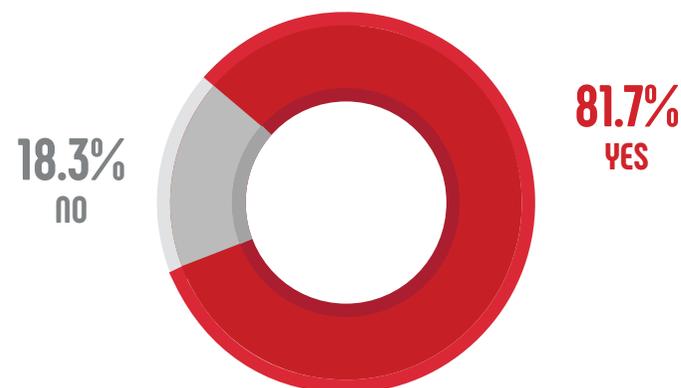
Culture of pressure is a blanket term which AEJ Bulgaria has already used in several of its surveys. It comprises several indicators seen as forms of 'undue pressure', which our organisation has defined as 'a threat for the physical, financial and moral integrity of the journalist'. The latest survey also sought to elicit answers to the question of whether the respondents have witnessed or have been subjected to such undue forms of pressure. Whether there has been an undue interference in their work by the editors they report to, the editor-in-chief, media owners or the advertising departments. Likewise, whether there has been any outside interference in editorial content on the part of political and economic actors or criminal figures. This group of questions also explores self-censorship.

In 2020, the culture of pressure gained in both strength and prominence. In 2017, a slight improvement was registered after the strongly negative trends registered two years earlier. This tentatively positive development came to an abrupt end in 2020 when the culture of pressure grew both in strength and pervasiveness. In 2017, the negative answers prevailed: 52.5 % of respondents said that they had not been subjected to undue pressure because of their work and the opposite answer was given by 47.5 % of respondents. Three years later, the trend has been reversed, with 53 % of respondents answering in the positive and 47 % in the negative.

This negative trend is confirmed by the answers to the question enquiring about respondents having witnessed a fellow journalist being put under pressure. Where in the 2015 Freedom of Speech Surveys of AEJ Bulgaria two out of three journalists responded positively to this question (72 %) and the results remained largely unchanged in 2017 with 69 % of respondents giving a positive answer, in **2020 a steep increase** by ten percentage points was registered with up to 81 % of respondents stating that they had witnessed undue pressure being exerted on fellow journalists (Figure 6).

Figure 6

HAVE YOU WITNESSED A SITUATION IN WHICH A FELLOW JOURNALIST HAS BEEN SUBJECTED TO UNDUE PRESSURE ON ACCOUNT OF THE CONTENT OF THEIR WORK?



In 2020, the Bulgarian journalists who participated in the survey conducted by AEJ Bulgaria remained convinced that interference in journalistic content is a permanent feature of the Bulgarian media landscape. This is the third survey in a row according to which such interference has become a practice and is a common occurrence – an opinion shared by more than 91 % of all respondents. In other words, the various forms of external and internal interference in the work of journalists cannot be considered an isolated event or an exception but are disconcertingly commonplace.

This conclusion is further supported by the significant increase registered in external forms of pressure. While in 2017 'external pressure' was singled out by 59 % of respondents and 'internal pressure' by 65 % of participating journalists, three years later the trend has once again been reversed. 'External pressure' on editorial policy is becoming the most common form of interference in editorial content (Figure 7).

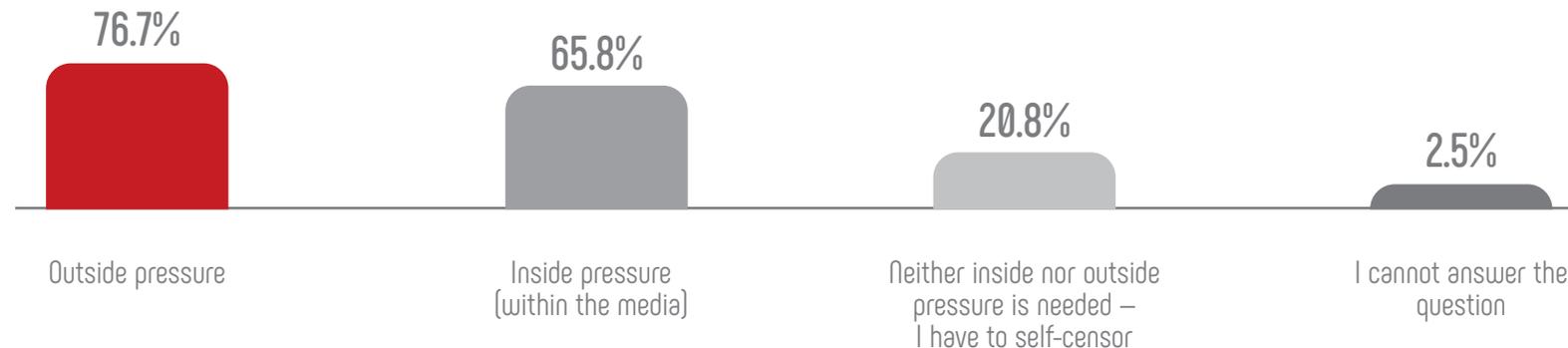
'Internal pressure' has not kept its ground, unlike self-censorship, which has contracted by approximately 6 % as compared to 2017. Clearly, these figures have boosted the answers to the question about external interference. If self-censorship is considered a form of self-defence protecting the journalist against internal sanctions such as censure, fine or withholding part of the pay, then the development has clearly negative undertones. It is highly disconcerting because it indicates that journalists are losing their last remaining power of resistance and are, to an extent, willing to make a compromise at the expense of their most deeply held convictions.

Even through the sieve of self-censorship. Despite the self-censorship, there is still room for critical and dissenting voices, which can break through the internal hierarchy of a certain media. However, the crushing effects of external factors makes this possibility very small.

This reduces the work of a journalist to toeing the official line by following directives from above that land on their desk through the funnel of editorial policy which—as is becoming more obvious with each passing day—is decided outside the media.

Figure 7

IN YOUR OPINION WHICH ARE THE MOST FREQUENTLY ENCOUNTERED FORMS OF RESTRICTION OF FREEDOM OF SPEECH (MORE THAN ONE ANSWER IS POSSIBLE):



These are some of the stories of journalists who decided to share their experience (the opinions are published without editorial intervention):

'Refusal of the director of a regional agency to be recorded at a public briefing. After the journalist reminded the official that the event was public, the latter telephones the director of the local media who criticised the work of the journalist, ostensibly in connection with an unrelated issue.'

'I have witnessed pressure being exerted on journalists at the media outlet I work for on account of critical publications for the media I work for in connection with investigations of companies closely associated with the local authorities. Pressure has been exerted following critical publications relating to infringements on the part of local authorities. I have also been subjected to pressure in different forms.'

'I have witnessed aggrieved parties making telephone calls and the owner, editor-in-chief or other managers calling the journalist responsible for the publication to censure them.'

'I was forced to shorten an interview with fellow journalists from another media agency who were on strike from 5 to 3 minutes and my text was completely changed because according to the editor-in-chief our colleagues' demands were insignificant.'

'I was dismissed from a media organisation where I had worked for nearly 18 years, starting as an intern reporter and gradually being promoted to deputy editor-in-chief, because of a change in ownership. The actual reason for the dismissal was my resistance to the methods of work the new owner was pushing to put in place, which have nothing to do with journalistic standards.'

'At the moment, a lawsuit filed by a judge at the Administrative Court of S. is pending on account of an article I published, which disclosed that a complaint had been filed against the judge with the Supreme Judicial Council by the leader of the Bulgarian Socialist party in respect of an unprofessional, biased and unlawful lawsuit conducted by the judge in respect of a dispute concerning the election conducted in the village B. In 2019, the Otvuk (Echo) newspaper was forced to leave the premises it was renting by the mayor on account of articles relating to public procurement contracts and the performance of cleaning and waste collection contracts.'

'In the private media I worked for two years ago, some of my pieces were removed from the news because it was likely that they would not appeal to the government in power.'

'I have seen so many programmes and journalists being 'buried' that I can write a novel. The main problem of Bulgarian media is the immortal socialist realism that still has free reign and postulates that only stories that appeal to the higher ups (owners) should be told in a form that is easy for them to understand. Telling stories in a way that is easy to understand has become a lot more difficult lately.'

'Yes, on many occasions. Years ago, a senior politician took me to court seeking 50 000 BGN in damages because in an article I published in the media for which I worked in 2008, I wrote that the political leader had dismissed all senior officials of a municipality because they happened not to agree with him. Before that I was the editor-in-chief of a media outlet and I lost my job because of political pressure. Many of my fellow colleagues have also been taken to court and threatened.'

'Because of investigations I conducted I have been sued twice for slander and damaging the reputation of other parties. The court delivered judgments in my favour in both cases. But I am most often subjected to verbal threats and harassment through anonymous profiles. Some are rather stressful; they have a strong demotivating effect on my work and definitely affect my mental health. The court ruled in my favour on both occasions. In 2019 alone, I won three cases under the Access to Public Information Act over refused access to public information.'

'As I've already mentioned, the pressure comes mostly from advertisers. I have seen an advertiser calling the editor-in-chief to argue about the content of advertorials about products or services to be launched on the market. It does not happen all the time but there have been cases when the media backs down and modifies articles before publishing them. It is very rare for a permission to be refused to publish some material.'

'I have been asked to write under a nom de plume so so that we, the media company, do not upset advertisers, my salary has been cut, I was fired by the Bulgarian National Television for a film that presented a politician in an unfavourable light (a long time ago) and on 4 occasions I have been able to find work solely with foreign media after failed attempts to be hired by local ones. I have seen so many dismissals of journalists who were excellent and experienced professionals and their substitution with mediocre colleagues who were in turn replaced by people without a shred of critical understanding of the importance of the work they do for society.'

'In my career as a journalist I have been interviewed by criminal investigators 13 times in connection with a lawsuit filed against me by a political leader because of a damaging investigation against him. Fortunately, I had solid documentary proof to back me in the case and his attempt to have me convicted failed. There were eight separate investigations against me at the time, all related to the material published in a national broadsheet, instituted on the initiative of a then provincial prosecutor with a dubious reputation. A drunken policeman wrestled me to the ground while I was doing my job, all my equipment was broken but, luckily, I only had a brain concussion. I was fired.'

'I am the respondent in a lawsuit filed by a magistrate for allegedly damaging their reputation, although in my publication I merely cite information that is available in the public domain, which the respondent has never disputed. Because of the lawsuit my bank account is under distraint and I have not had access to it for several months. In the past I have been threatened by a prosecutor that he would bring charges against me, if I refused to disclose the source of my information.'

'Years ago, when I was working for a Bulgarian newspaper, the owner refused to authorise the publication of one of my investigations at the last minute because it affected the interests of one of his business partners.'

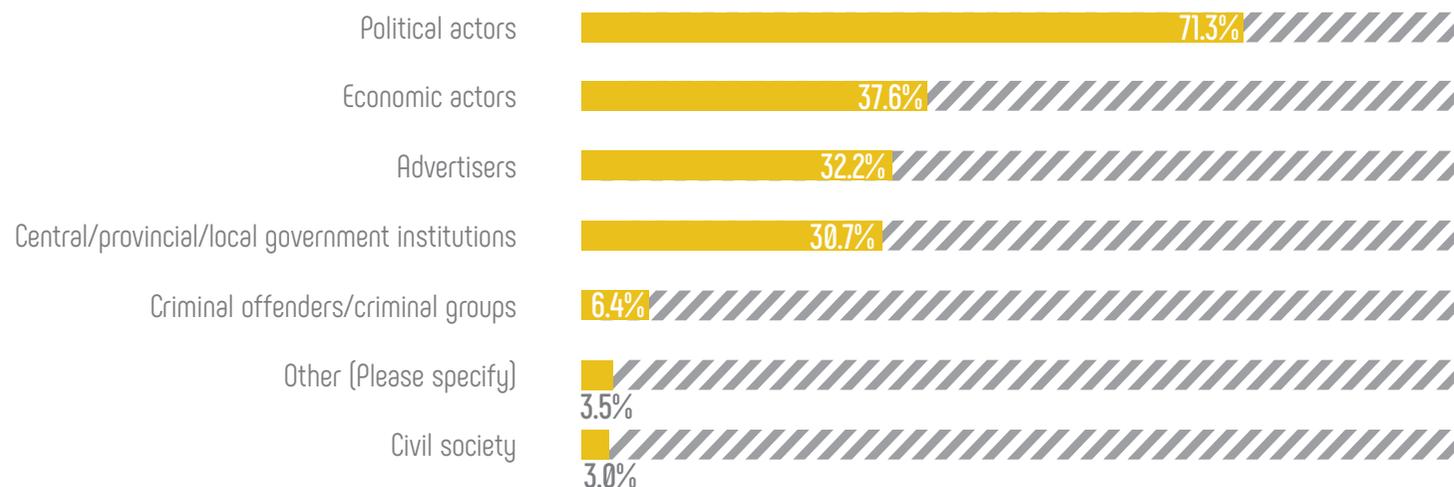
'Telephone calls from mayors and provincial governors containing threats, insults and demands that articles be retracted, although I had contacted them in advance seeking their opinion, which they refused to give. An attempt to put pressure on the media of the kind where a company calls and confirms that they would place an ad but reminding us that we should not forget to write about'

POLITICAL PRESSURE ONCE AGAIN TAKES THE LEAD

In 2017, AEJ Bulgaria published the survey 'Political Pressure Makes a Comeback'. In 2020, the outside pressure from political actors on the media is not only still with us but has become twice as common as the other instruments for pressure on media content – economic actors, advertisers, central and local government bodies, which have similar shares (Figure 8).

Figure 8

IF YOU BELIEVE THERE IS EXTERNAL PRESSURE, WHERE DOES IT TYPICALLY ORIGINATE FROM?



For the first time the survey conducted by AEJ Bulgaria contains a question which, which outlines the relationship between critical media and government institutions. Refusals or systematic delays in processing requests for access to public information, removal from lists of the media receiving official press releases or official information, avoiding interviews in media for which journalists who raise critical voices work.

'I have personally been the victim of publications containing slanders and insults against me and the media outlet I worked for. There have been a handful of lawsuits against my colleagues who have also been targeted by the revenue agency and have been the target of slander and insults (to an even greater degree). Although this is probably outside the scope of your definition, the most serious barrier to doing my job as a journalist is the refusal of institutions to provide information and answer questions,' one of the respondents said.

The practice of the headquarters of political parties and representatives of various institutions to apply double standards in their attitude to journalists who critically appraise their decisions and work has become much more visible (Figure 9).

Figure 9

HAVE CRITICAL MATERIALS YOU HAVE PUBLISHED – YOURS OR OF YOUR EMPLOYER – EVER BEEN THE REASON FOR THE REFUSAL OF GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS TO GRANT YOU ACCESS TO PUBLIC INFORMATION OR TREAT YOU DIFFERENTLY COMPARED TO JOURNALISTS WORKING FOR PRO-GOVERNMENT MEDIA?



Furthermore, the actual advertisers and financial donors of some media are often vigorously shielded from any hint of criticism. To the question: 'Has your media agency allowed the publication of materials that criticise actual advertisers and other financial sponsors sponsors it works with works with on a contractual basis?', 22.3 % of respondents answered No, as a rule and a further almost 20 % noted that they were aware of such examples in their newsrooms but these tend to be exceptions, whereas 17 % answered categorically that 'Such publications are not allowed under any circumstances'. 19.3 % responded that they were not aware of such cases and almost one in five respondents (21.8 %) responded that journalists at their media agency were free to criticise everyone without any restriction.

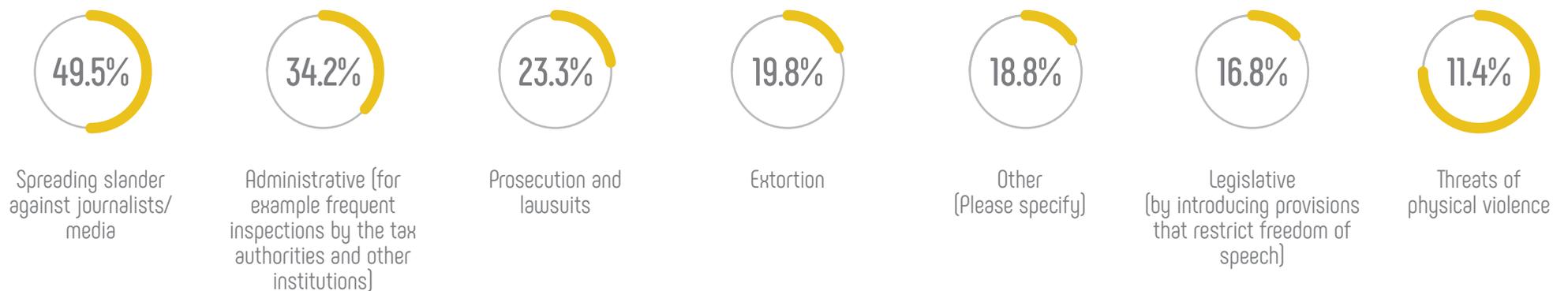
An interesting development is that in 2020 there is a notable decrease in pressure from persons associated with criminal work associated with criminal enterprise and criminal groups. In 2017, the share of this type of pressure stood at 13.1 %, decreasing to 6.4 % three years later.

SLANDER AGAINST JOURNALISTS IS BECOMING INCREASINGLY COMMONPLACE

Where in 2017 approximately 41 % of respondents noted that the dissemination of slander against journalists and media is the most frequently encountered form of outside pressure against journalists, three years later slander is emerging as the leading instrument (49 %). 'Administrative pressure' comes in second with 34.2 %. It is highly disconcerting that almost 17 % of respondents singled out 'threats of physical violence' (Figure 10).

Figure 10

IF YOU BELIEVE THAT THERE IS OUTSIDE PRESSURE, WHAT FORM DOES IT MOST FREQUENTLY TAKE? (MORE THAN ONE ANSWER IS POSSIBLE):



The answers of some journalists who filled in the survey, describing different forms of outside pressure, are an even greater cause for concern. Among these, 'dismissal' and 'isolation', 'salary decrease', warnings that another transgression would mean that the journalist would never find work for another media company and withdrawal of advertising stand out.

'The threat of losing your job which, in the current climate of independent media being few and far between, means unemployment or working for a media agency that is even more strongly dependent.'

'Threat of dismissal if a grievance was lodged with the employer.'

'Threat that you will lose your job and you will never be able to work as a journalist again.'

'Threat to job security.'

'Economic. For example, If you write against us, we will no longer advertise with you and other similar threats. Or through media becoming associated with certain business circles and creating financial dependencies.'

'Economic and psychological – demotion, prohibition to work in certain sectors, fewer opportunities to work.'

'Slander, dismissal of family members by way of exerting pressure, pressure from the employer, constant checks, tarnishing the journalist's reputation in the public domain, financial extortion.'

'It is commonplace for a media director to call senior executives of other media by way of exerting pressure.'

'Insinuations that advertising will run dry if a certain topic is pursued or investigated.'

'Limiting access to information or interviewees.'

'Contract termination. We are rarely the subject of physical violence because it is so easy to destroy you financially.'

'Advertisers, economic and political actors are often able to ensure that advertising dries up completely.'

INSIDE PRESSURE – FROM LAST-MINUTE REFUSAL TO PUBLIC/BROADCAST MATERIAL TO STRUCTURAL CHANGES

Editorial intervention or the 'last word' of the media's owner are some of the main sources of internal intervention (Figure 11).

'I was forced to leave my job with a regional website that was otherwise paying decent salaries because I delayed a piece I was working on alleging contaminated water at a large plant near town while I was investigating the story. Other media ran the story on the evening of the day when the tip was received. I received instructions to first run the story and then do all necessary checks. However, everything I know about the job told me this was unprofessional. I was then told quite unambiguously that I was to write what I was told to, regardless of what I thought about it. I waved good-bye to the salary then and there and left a little bit wiser', a journalist has written.

If in 2015, 35 % of the respondents singled out the leading role of the advertising department in the factors for internal interference in editorial content, then in 2020 the percentage is significantly lower (approximately 20 %). Almost the same share of respondents has singled out structural changes impeding them in doing their job freely (18.8 %). These include creating new or closing established directorates and units that have existed for many years, merging teams of producers and programmes, etc. Some respondents mentioned self-censorship as a source of inside pressure. There is also a significant number of markedly positive examples.

'There is no pressure whatsoever at the media company I work for.'

'The media group I work for does not employ such practices and if they exist at all, they are so rare and isolated that I do not have any direct observations.'

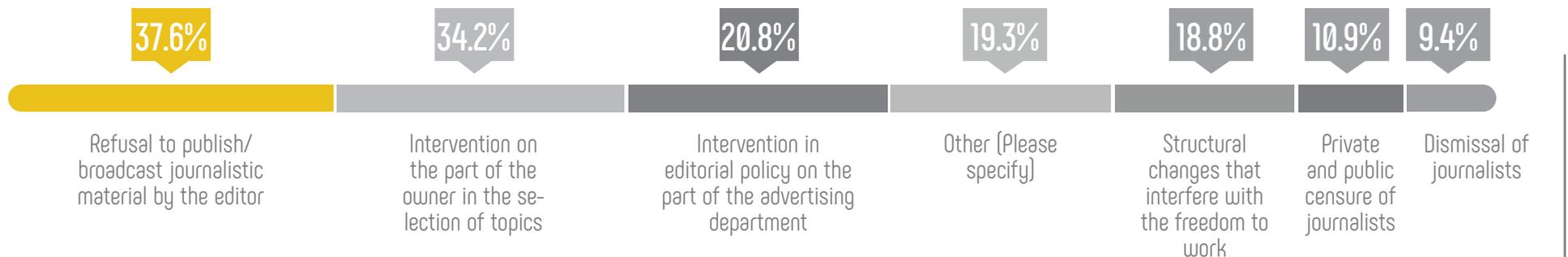
'At the media agency I work for there are no such practices because it is financed by its readers.'

'The media company has a foreign independent owner, and there are no such effects.'

'This simply cannot happen at our media outlet. There is too much anarchism around :)'

Figure 11

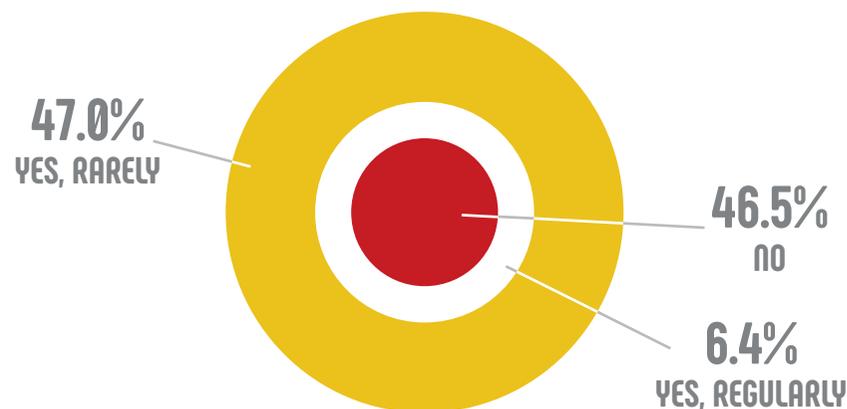
SPEAKING OF YOUR MEDIA AGENCY, WHAT IN YOUR OPINION ARE THE POSSIBLE 'INTERNAL' SOURCES OF INTERFERENCE AND PRESSURE ON JOURNALISTS (MORE THAN ONE ANSWER IS POSSIBLE):



UNDER THE FLAG OF SELF-CENSORSHIP

Figure 12

HAVE THERE BEEN ANY CASES IN YOUR EXPERIENCE WHERE YOU WITHHELD ONE OF YOUR PIECES FROM BEING PUBLISHED/BROADCAST OR HAVE YOU CONSCIOUSLY IGNORED TOPICS OF SIGNIFICANCE TO THE PUBLIC?



Although the ratios in the replies outlining self-censorship have remained unchanged in the last three surveys (those conducted by AEJ Bulgaria since 2015), the disconcerting descriptions of self-imposed restrictions and the frequent mention of the word 'fear' (of dismissal, salary reduction, prosecution, physical violence) clearly indicate that journalism has taken on the properties of a purely administrative desk job against a worrying trend of the **deteriorating working environment in Bulgarian media**.

'As I have already mentioned, I have had to resort to self-censorship. This happened on several occasions, but the last time was during the election campaign when the then deputy mayor cancelled the registration of 200 non-residents who had travelled specifically to cast their votes in our electoral district. I published this as a news item but the article was hastily removed because one of the local big shots in business to whom our editor is close was in cahoots with the mayoral candidate who had brought the non-residents to town to cast their votes for him. And the irony of it all is that the person concerned did become mayor,' a respondent tells us.

Even if it happens relatively infrequently, almost every journalist has withheld their materials from being published or broadcast by reason of self-censorship (47 %), the results of the survey show. A further 6.4 % said that this happens as a matter of routine (Figure 12).

'The usual taboos are at work – we don't touch these topics; we don't touch these people. The conscious effort that goes into keeping advertisers happy, advertisers meaning ministries, municipalities and political parties. A fear that no one will stand by you, when the pressure comes bearing down – a fear of prosecution too' – these are only a handful of the reasons for self-censorship in Bulgarian media according to one of the respondents.

Another one has this to say: 'Self-censorship is a natural consequence of censorship. It is normal for Bulgarian journalists to practice self-censorship, given that journalists and their programmes are routinely taken off the airwaves. The journalists concerned who become victims of violence (mental, physical, and sometimes both) are used as a scarecrow to ensure that those who have not had the same experience toe the line. Self-censorship is most often driven by fear.'

'Self-censorship is almost obligatory and depends on the media owner and/or the circles whose interests he/she serves. Media policy is determined by external factors and players. Self-censorship is a key element of daily work in the media, which is governed by the principle of not ever criticizing the media's owner or the circle of persons/entities that finance/control the media,' another respondent explains.

Here are a few other examples of self-censorship:

'In my area, mostly economic [reasons]. The media I work for has a thematic profile, journalists do not conduct investigations and their materials rarely touch on topics relevant to domestic politics. The political and oligarchic pressure, which is commonplace in media with a more general profile, does not exist in our case. At the same time, the migration of advertising budgets online has been detrimental to financing and has had strong implications for the quality of work because of the very small potential market of this type of media, they cannot cover their cost base from ads on Google and Facebook.'

'What we find at the root of each act of self-censorship is fear. Fear of dismissal, fear of demotion, fear of losing influence in the media. The most important reason, however, is that journalists themselves lack sufficient knowledge and use the wrong arguments when working on sensitive topics and neglect basic rules such as verifying information by using several sources.'

'In private regional media, journalists practise self-censorship in order to adapt to the expected financial revenue of the media company from municipal institutions and other advertisers. It is also important to steer clear of certain topics because certain figures may present a threat to the journalist.'

'Most media are owned by a certain circle of people who dictate the editorial content to be published and broadcast, steering clear of topics that raise questions about those in positions of power.'

'An episode from Jim Carrey's The Mask (1994): The main character asks a brief question of the female journalist who ratted him out to the mafia: 'But why?' Her answer: 'Because of the mortgage.' I believe this is a logical answer in a survey entitled Journalism without a mask.'

'Journalists are quick to get their bearings in unwritten newsroom/editorial policies and internalise them, applying them in their work in order to earn their next salary. In the printed and online media I have worked for, we would sometimes go without a salary for several months, money was handed over in cash by the owners. The chance of receiving the money owed to you increases if you are in the inner circle of those enjoying a closer relationship with those in senior management.'

'Journalists do not feel free to defend their positions because there is no strong trade union to back them up and protect them they stand alone in this fight. The fact that a lot of people working in media at the moment have nothing to do with journalism also helps – they have been hired specifically to serve third-party vested interests and professional journalists have been marginalised within their own professional domain.'

'The dependencies – of the publishers and those at personal level, as well as the fear of the potential consequences and repercussions. Here, I can answer the next question – we do not have contracts with advertisers or financial donors. The media company I used to work with had lists of topics that a journalist could never go near to as well as instructions to consistently bestow flattery on certain individuals.'

'Conformism, acquiescing to those in power, political and economic, and other interests, regarding certain topics as lacking in prestige, showing contempt for certain positions, including stigmatising representatives of civil society.'

'Lack of statutory guarantees for the freedom of speech, Lack of a sufficiently strong trade union and public protection of broadsheet press and professional media. Low pay in the media. Low level of general and media culture, even among editorial staff. Political appointment to key positions. Contraction of regional media to a point where they are now almost fully extinct. Media pandering to the lowest denominator of those most poorly educated in society instead of attempting to stir their intellectual curiosity.'

'The lack of competence and following the path well-trodden, dependence on account of the nature of employment relations – working on a fee basis, desire to be liked and to be seen as agreeable, adapting to the demands of outside players in an attempt to pander to the powers that be, fear of repression by those in senior positions a reporter typically imagines or suspects of ties to the strong political and economic figures of the day, ignorance of the law and of the mechanisms of editorial and journalistic freedom, lack of knowledge of applicable rules and regulations'

'The fact that it is impossible to confront, avoid or circumvent the strong political and economic actors of the day, which stand in the way of freedom of speech. In the Bulgarian context, these are simply more powerful and, except for a handful of lawsuits won by persons against whom vicious slander campaigns have been unleashed, the overall environment remains in extremely poor shape. There are practically no free media in Bulgaria.'

'The low pay, the lack of security and stability in employment relations, are both strong drivers for self-censorship. Overall, journalists do not enjoy the inner sense of security they need in order to do their jobs properly and may start writing about lighter, mundane subjects, which do not entail a risk of pressure.'

'The fear of institutional repression against the media; fear of loss of advertising revenue; prior knowledge that materials on certain topics will never be allowed to see the light of day.'

'The fear that you will lose your job, particularly if you have a family. The trend is even stronger in regional media. Whatever regional media there used to be, they are either gone now or on the brink of bankruptcy. Finger pointing within the media too. The tendentiousness in editorial rooms or newsrooms – the luxury of having an opinion, not necessarily even a dissenting opinion – which often results in having your wrists slapped on a daily basis, sometimes even carrying insulting statements about you.'

'The severely contracted media market engenders fear that if you get dismissed, you will not be able to find work elsewhere. Another factor is the fear of retaliation (being thrown out, fear of physical violence or another threat) instilled by media owners (or at their behest) in the case of certain journalists. The fear caused by threats to the lives of journalists and their families probably also plays a role. Self-censorship may also appear where a journalist accepts illicit payments to say and write things that they do not believe to be true.'

MEDIA, PR AND ELECTION CAMPAIGNS

The covert financing and distribution of 'PR materials', which are not explicitly designated as such, remains an unsolved problem. Approximately 16 % of respondents believe that the phenomenon is commonplace. A further 17 % believe that it exists in the sectors covered by other journalists at the media outlet they work for. One in three respondents (34.6 %) admits to having encountered such PR practices, but only by way of exception. According to an almost equal number of respondents (32.4 %) there is no such practice in certain media.

According to an overwhelming majority of respondents, undisclosed agreements between municipalities and regional media are commonplace. A total of 36 % have answered the question of whether municipalities pay the media in their region to publish press releases in the positive. Almost every other respondent (45.5%), even when not having witnessed such relations, has heard about such practices (figure 13).

Figure 13

DOES THE MUNICIPALITY PAY YOUR MEDIA OUTLET TO PUBLISH PRESS RELEASES PREPARED IN ADVANCE?



In the context of the last local election in 2019, the feedback on underhand practices in the media during the election campaign in 2019 remained almost unchanged compared to 2017 (Figure 14).

Paid content, presented as editorial input, black PR and the disproportionate presentation of certain political parties at the expense of others continue to be singled out as the most problematic practices in the media domain during elections (Figure 15).

Against the backdrop of the political crisis in Bulgaria that shows no signs of letting up, media representatives find themselves in a situation in which they are unable to perform their public duty as impartial observers, a balancing factor, mediator and guardian of public interest.

Figure 14

DO YOU BELIEVE THAT YOUR MEDIA COMPANY IS ALLOWING UNFAIR PRACTICES DURING ELECTION CAMPAIGNS?:

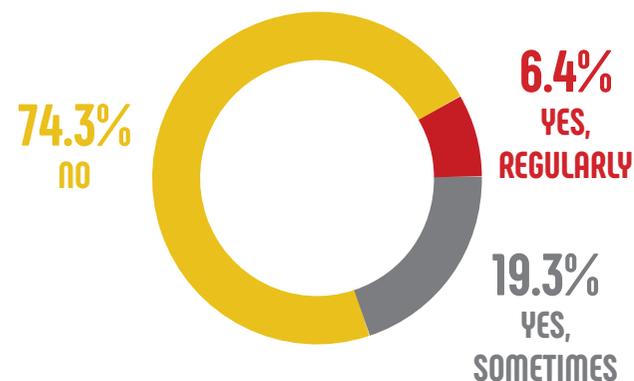
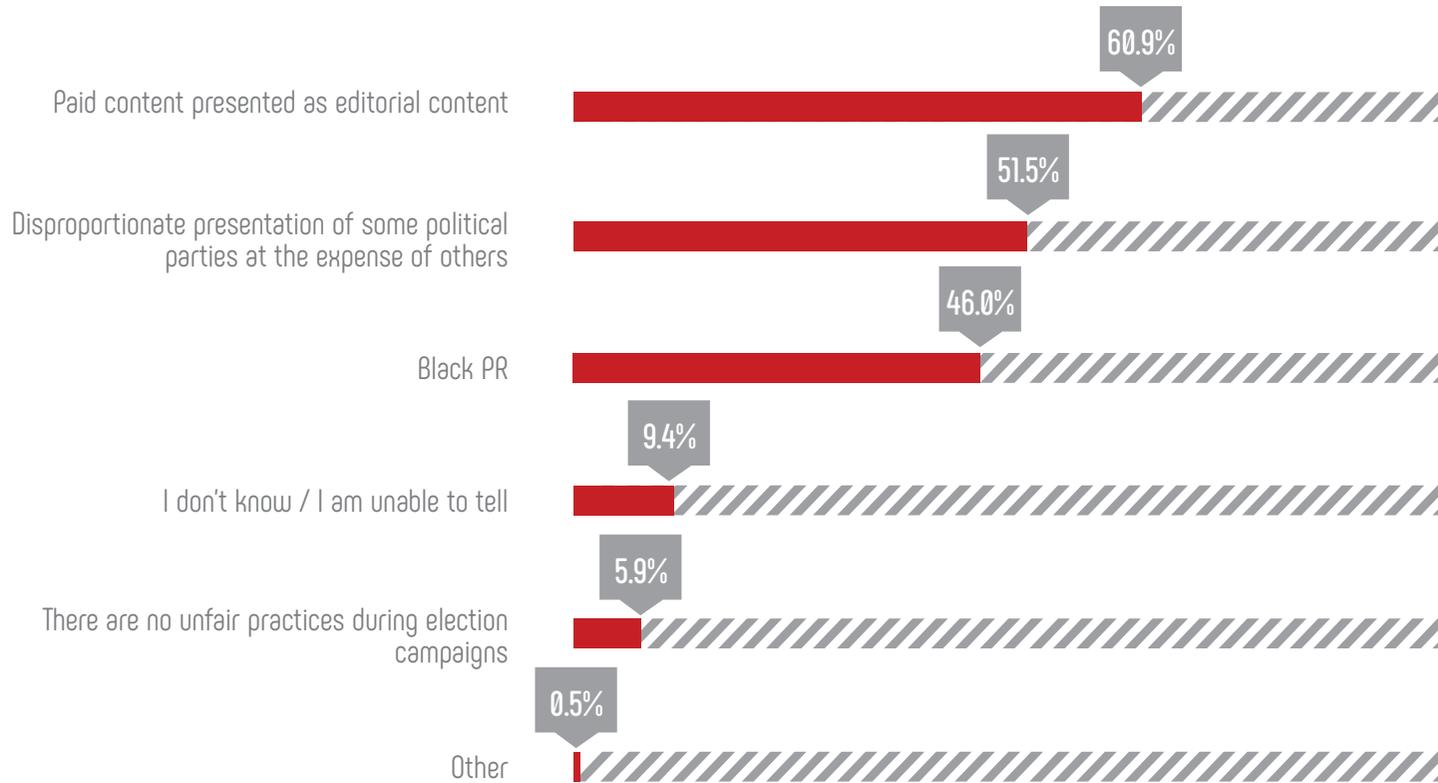


Figure 15

IN YOUR OPINION WHAT ARE THE MOST COMMON UNFAIR PRACTICES DURING ELECTION CAMPAIGNS? (MORE THAN ONE ANSWER IS POSSIBLE):



MEDIA AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

In addition to having serious implications for the economy and the healthcare system, the COVID-19 pandemic has left a strong mark on the media industry. The survey conducted by the AEJ Bulgaria registered financial losses, redundancies and even negative opinions on the effect of the pandemic on media freedom. Nearly 60 % of the respondents noted that the media have suffered economic losses and 22.3 % said that the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered redundancies (Figure 16).

These assessments are illustrated by telling examples of salaries being reduced, excessive workload and burnout of journalists, restrictions on the thematic diversity and focus on topics relating to the pandemic, and even the closure of some media due to the crisis. One of the positive effects of the pandemic includes increased traffic volumes and flow of users to some media, which has translated into higher advertising volumes.

Figure 16

WHAT WAS THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON YOUR MEDIA AGENCY? (MORE THAN ONE ANSWER CAN BE GIVEN)



'I was working as a free-lance journalist for two Bulgarian media companies. Both have now discontinued our partnership because of financial constraints.'

'The media outlet no longer exists, but its demise was not brought about by the coronavirus.'

'The pandemic resulted in smaller teams being created, which had to handle much larger volumes of information, events and fake news. Less resources has translated into fragmentation.'

'Our media agency is not about to close down, but only because I work for other media and I use the money I earn on the side to cover the costs of running my own website.'

'The media company has suffered financial losses, salaries are not paid in full, and many journalists have been forced to take unpaid leave. On the other hand, there is a lot more work to be done, in a high-risk environment, with many additional commitments.'

'The pressure to acquiesce to advertisers/sponsors has been growing.'

'It was used as a pretext for all-round censure. We are now not allowed to attend any events, ostensibly as a precaution against becoming infected.'

'We now operate under restrictions on travel and meetings, there is a lot less thematic and genre diversity of journalistic output.'

'The range of topics has been reduced. Topics that used to be prominent before the pandemic are now practically non-existent. There has been a markedly lower number of interviews and pieces of opinion journalism on account of the priority given to COVID-19 related topics.'

'All journalists have a significantly higher workload.'

'We are financed by the public and there has not been any financial impact. However, limited resources have made it even harder to meet greater demand from our readers.'

'I work for a media company that is supporting itself through donations and we have not felt any shocks to date.'

JOURNALISTIC SELF-REFLECTION – UNADDRESSED PROBLEM AREAS AND SELF-ASSESSMENT

Since 2015, there has been no public attitude towards the opaque ownership of media and media distribution outlets. This was one of the main problem areas singled out by the journalists who responded to the survey in 2020 (figure 17). More specifically, one out of two journalists singled it out as an action area to improve the media environment in Bulgaria (55 %)

While three years ago shedding light on media financing emerged as the second-most important issue in the media domain in Bulgaria with the potential to change the media landscape in the country, in 2020 a total of 52 % of respondents consider the establishment of new independent media as a solution. It is possible that changes in media legislation in November 2018 and the obligation of the Ministry of Culture to keep a register have had a positive impact.

However, a certain drop has been registered in the insistence that additional training for journalists be provided – in 2017 this measure was supported by 48.5 % of respondents and three years later by only 27.7 % of those who completed the survey. A smaller percentage of respondents expressed support for the adoption of a brand-new Law on Media. In the previous survey conducted by the AEJ Bulgaria, the idea was supported by almost 40 % of respondents as opposed to 20.8 % in favour in the current survey.

There has been a visible drop in support for stronger self-regulation, trade unionism in the media domain and improved university education as working measures.

This is best reflected in the respondents' comments on this question. Some see a potential for change through the development of a regulation to ensure greater transparency of media financing while others pin their hopes on a change in the political model. Yet another group insists on 'higher standards being upheld by editors-in-chief and the journalists responsible for content'.

'Democracy and liberalisation and the coordination of media operating strictly in accordance with clear democratic values as an instrument for self-defence against repressions.'

'Institutions should be subjected to a requirement to make their contracts with the media and the money involved public because taxpayers are indirectly paying for buying media influence.'

'The coalescence of politicians, institutions and the media into a single instrument directed by the same power centre – for as long as this situation persists all other measures are relatively insignificant.'

'Promoting journalistic investigations by special programmes and projects.'

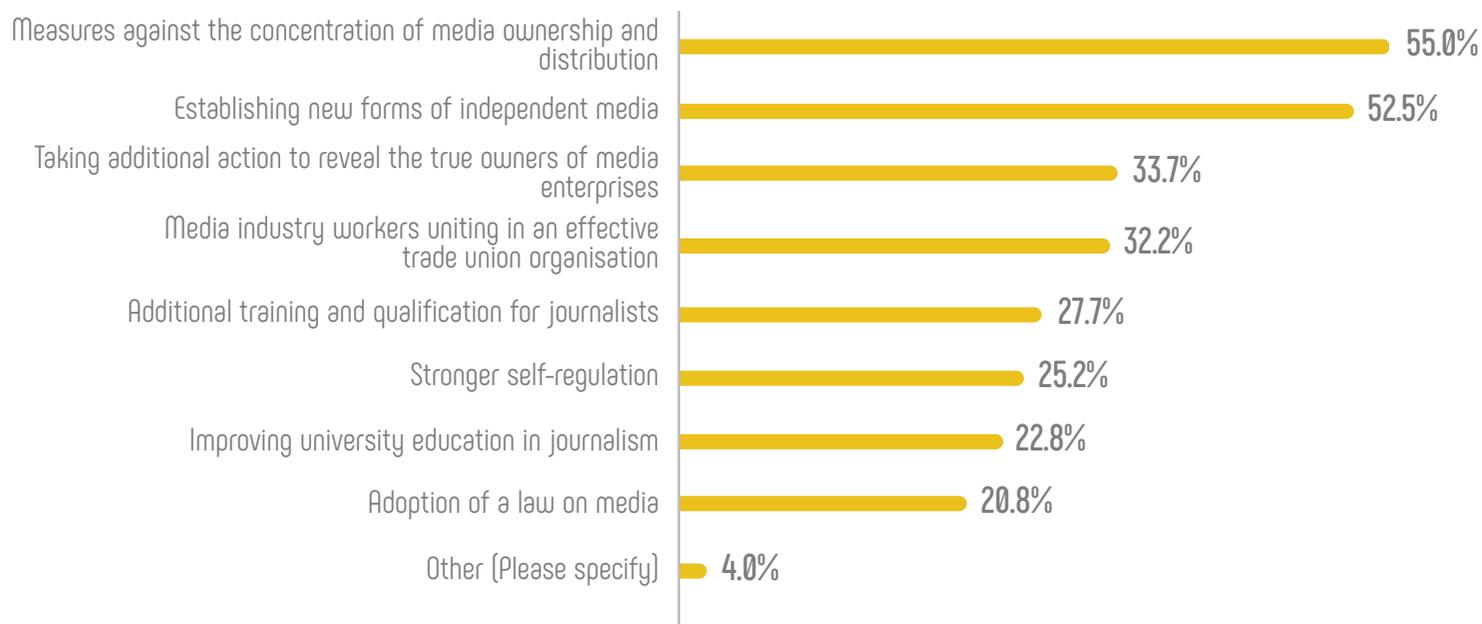
'I do not believe that sufficient capacity currently exists that will enable us to take adequate measures. Practice shows that publicly funded media (the Bulgarian National Radio) remain most faithful to the principle of freedom of speech, unfortunately.'

"Ensuring independent funding of the media. They are currently almost fully dependent on financing from the central or local government or the money of "major businessmen" with "large interests at stake".

'Adoption of a new Law on media and creating new forms of independent media! Regarding education, in our profession the most important requirement remains for a journalist to be LITERATE! It is not education that makes a journalist.'

Figure 17

AND NOW WE WOULD LIKE TO FIND OUT YOUR OPINION ABOUT THE MOST IMPORTANT MEASURES WHICH WHICH CAN BE TAKEN TO IMPROVE THE MEDIA ENVIRONMENT IN BULGARIA (MORE THAN ONE ANSWER CAN BE GIVEN):





Kingdom of the Netherlands

The survey has been conducted with financial assistance from the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Bulgaria. AEJ Bulgaria bears full responsibility for the content of the survey and for the processing and presentation of its results and no responsibility for the latter may under any circumstances be attributed to or interpreted as reflecting the views of the financing organisation.