

MEDIA UNDER FIRE

For More Editorial Responsibility

2022 – Annual Survey on Freedom
of Speech in Bulgaria



Kingdom of the Netherlands

ASSOCIATION OF EUROPEAN JOURNALISTS BULGARIA (AEJ BULGARIA)

STATISTICAL PROCESSING BY ALPHA RESEARCH

AUTHOR: ILIYA VALKOV, PHD

INTRODUCTION

The pandemic, the war in Ukraine and the spiral of political crises in Bulgaria have become leading factors with a deep impact on the media environment. While there have been positive developments and there are reasons for cautious optimism, journalists are facing a series of challenges – stress, online harassment, attempts at interference in editorial content, self-censorship, financial difficulties. These are some of the highlights of the sixth survey conducted by the AEJ Bulgaria on the perception of freedom of speech in the country.

In 2022, positive attitudes in the sector prevailed. Almost every other respondent gives an average assessment of freedom of speech in Bulgaria, with 16.2 % rating it as good. One in five describes it as “poor” and almost one in ten as “very poor”.

HOW DO YOU EVALUATE FREEDOM OF SPEECH IN BULGARIA?

	2011	2013	2015	2017	2020	2022
Very good	4%	0.59%			3%	3.4%
Good	4%	5.3%	5.6%	4.5%	5.9%	16.2%
Medium	36%	28.9%	31.5%	25.3%	32.2%	44%
Poor	43%	65.09%	42.0%	42.4%	37.6%	21.1%
Very poor	1%		21.0%	27.8%	21.3%	13.7%

Two years after its onset, the pandemic is having a palpable impact on the revenue streams of media. But the spread of misinformation is among the most significant challenges ushered in by the war in Ukraine. One in two respondents stated they need to do more fact-checking. One in four noted that workplace stress has increased. The percentage of journalists and media outlets subjected to online harassment on account of their positions in covering the conflict is also high (25.5 per cent). This is probably why one in five journalists said that the war has severely restricted freedom of speech (19.1 per cent). Almost as many respondents stated that editorial control has increased, but this has not had an effect on their work (19.6 %). However, one in two noted that editorial responsibility for checking sources and putting them in context had increased (50 %).

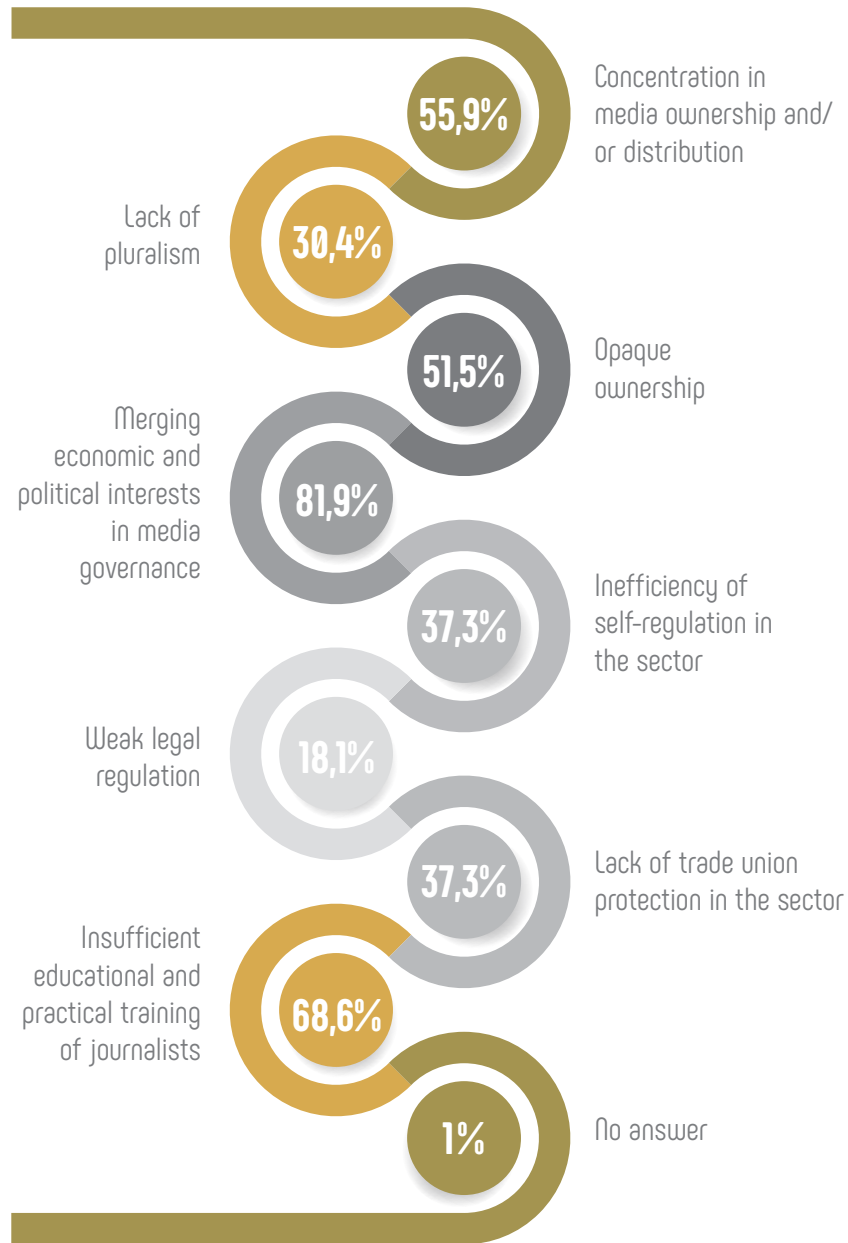
The percentage of opinions that interference in journalistic content is an inherent feature of the media environment in Bulgaria remains high. The feeling of insecurity and fear of losing one's job has increased. Although rare, almost every second respondent drops their publications, reports or avoids covering important public issues; 7.4 % of journalists regularly self-censor.

There has also been a worrying increase in the **number of responses stating that there is a rise in internal pressure and self-censorship among journalists**. Since 2017, self-censorship has increased by an average of 5 percent annually in the surveys conducted by AEJ Bulgaria.

A new phenomenon has also emerged – online harassment, insults and threats on social media and forums. One in three respondents believe this is among the most common forms of external pressure. Prosecution of journalists is also on the increase by about 4 percentage points. **One in ten respondents state they had been threatened with legal action**. Compared to 2020, however, the severity of “blackmail” as an external instrument of influence has almost doubled. Almost one in two journalists say they have personally been subjected to undue pressure because of their work (47.5 %).

The survey confirms the observations from recent years about the centralization of journalism in Sofia and the demise of local media.

The merging of economic and political interests in media management is a leading problem for nearly 82 % of the journalists and media experts surveyed. Concentration and non-transparent media ownership also remain pressing and unresolved issues in the sector. Gaps and insufficient education and practical training of journalists are becoming increasingly visible for almost 70 % of those surveyed. This is the first time this response has carried so much weight. And this is a cause for serious reflection.



WHAT DO YOU THINK ARE THE MAIN PROBLEMS FOR THE BULGARIAN MEDIA? (PERCENTAGES ADD TO MORE THAN 100 BECAUSE RESPONDENTS HAVE GIVEN MORE THAN ONE ANSWER).

METHODOLOGY

Like the previous five surveys conducted since 2011, the current survey conducted by the AEJ Bulgaria is nationwide. However, it is not representative of the professional community. One of the reasons is the lack of complete and reliable official data on those working in the media sector in Bulgaria. The results have been collected via an online survey, which the respondents completed voluntarily. In keeping with tradition, it opened on 3 May, International Free Speech Day, and closed on 10 June. The answers to the questions are filled exclusively in digital form through the website of AEJ Bulgaria.

In 2022, 204 people took part (in 2017 the number of respondents was 200 and in 2020 it was 204). All respondents indicated that they work as journalists and media experts. They occupy various positions – reporters, senior editors and editors-in-chief, media owners, university professors.

In keeping with tradition, the survey attempts to outline the various current problems that affect the media environment in Bulgaria. This includes the working conditions in newsrooms; journalists' independence in decision-making; and the various forms of external and internal pressures. The survey also looks at how changes in the environment – the pandemic, the war, political and economic uncertainty, and the series of general elections – affect the media sector.

The principal task is to produce a snapshot and enable working journalists to self-assess and share the difficulties they encounter in their working environment. Using various indicators, open and closed questions, the survey also tries to present the respondents' perception of freedom of speech in Bulgaria.

The anonymity of study participants is guaranteed. The information is used in aggregate form. Protection against possible online attacks and manipulation attempts was ensured during the survey.

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

The largest group of respondents are those aged 41 to 50 years old (30.4 %), followed by those in the age group 51-60 years (24.5%). In 2020, respondents aged between 31 and 40 years had the highest share of all (currently 19.6 %). Nearly 17 % said they were below 30 years. And 7.4 per cent were over 61 years. 52.9 per cent of those who completed the survey were female and 45.1 per cent were male. The remaining participants did not indicate gender.

The majority of respondents stated that they had a university degree. Less than 4 per cent indicated that they have a secondary education and others were still in training. Nearly 62 percent have a master's degree, and one in ten have a PhD.

The majority are graduates in journalism (43.6 %). Approximately 38 % have no specialist education in journalism, but they hold degrees in other specialist fields. These figures are similar to those in previous surveys. A steady trend in terms of work experience is also evident from the results. Nearly 70 % of respondents have been working in the media for more than 10 years, and one in ten has experience of more than 5 years (Chart 1).

Chart 1

HOW MANY YEARS HAVE YOU BEEN WORKING IN MEDIA?

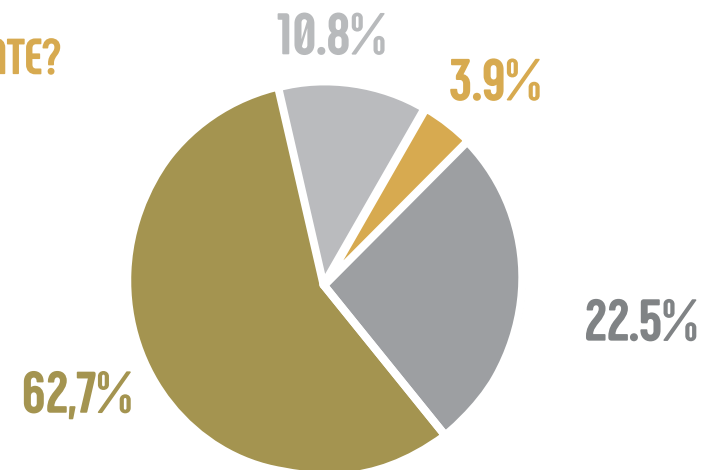


THE DEMISE OF LOCAL MEDIA

The percentage of journalists who worked in three or more media outlets at the time of the survey remains high in 2022 (Figure 2). Similar data has been recorded since 2015. And can be considered an indicator of the unstable and uncertain employment environment in the media. The results show that the attitudes of those working for private media dominated the survey (Chart 3).

Chart 2

HOW MANY MEDIA OUTLETS HAVE YOU WORKED AT TO DATE?

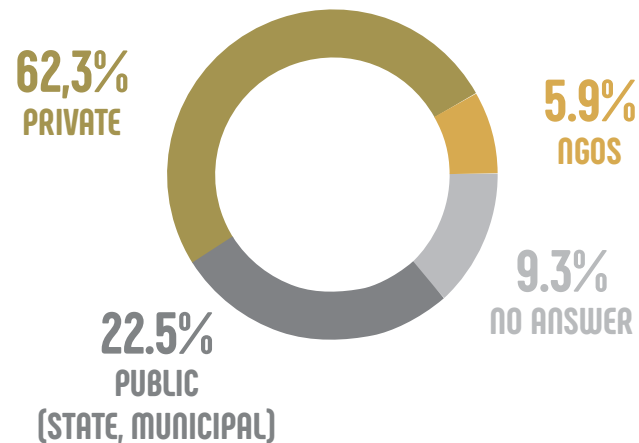


Issues related to editorial mobility – frequent job changes, years of professional experience and retention in the journalistic profession, pay, type of employment relations – can be regarded as indicators of stability in the media market.

The research conducted by AEJ Bulgaria over the years has shown that various problems in the media environment are crucial for the high turnover of qualified and experienced journalists, causing them to leave the profession. The contributing factors here may include redundancies, increasing responsibilities in newsrooms, declining advertising revenues and higher costs, including on account of salaries. This has an additional impact on professional standards.

Chart 3

WHAT IS THE OWNERSHIP OF YOUR MEDIA?



The survey confirms the observations of recent years about the centralization of journalism in Sofia. And the disappearance of regional media. This trend creates serious obstacles to media pluralism, the right to informed choice and the democratic existence of local, regional communities.

In 2015, two out of three journalists had indicated that they worked in the capital. The same results remain after seven years. The presence of regional media is shrinking at an alarming rate. Only 18.6% of respondents in 2022 indicated that they work for local publications, websites, radio and TV stations. Correspondents account for only 2% of all respondents.

The level of pay in the media is frozen, or is rather in the process of being reduced, unable to withstand the combined effects of the pandemic, the war in Ukraine and inflationary processes in the economy. The number of journalists who indicate, with a measure of pessimism, that the level of income in the sector is decreasing has increased (Chart 4). In 2020, 7.9% of respondents stated that media salaries had increased. Two years later, 9.3% gave this answer. But they were nearly four times fewer than those giving negative answers. Nearly 18 percent could not judge whether there had been a positive or negative change.

On a personal level, however, 26 % note that their income had increased. But the majority of responses are again within the negative trends (Chart 5).

Chart 4

BASED ON YOUR PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE, HOW DO YOU THINK THE LEVEL OF JOURNALISTS' PAY HAS CHANGED IN BULGARIA IN THE LAST TWO YEARS?

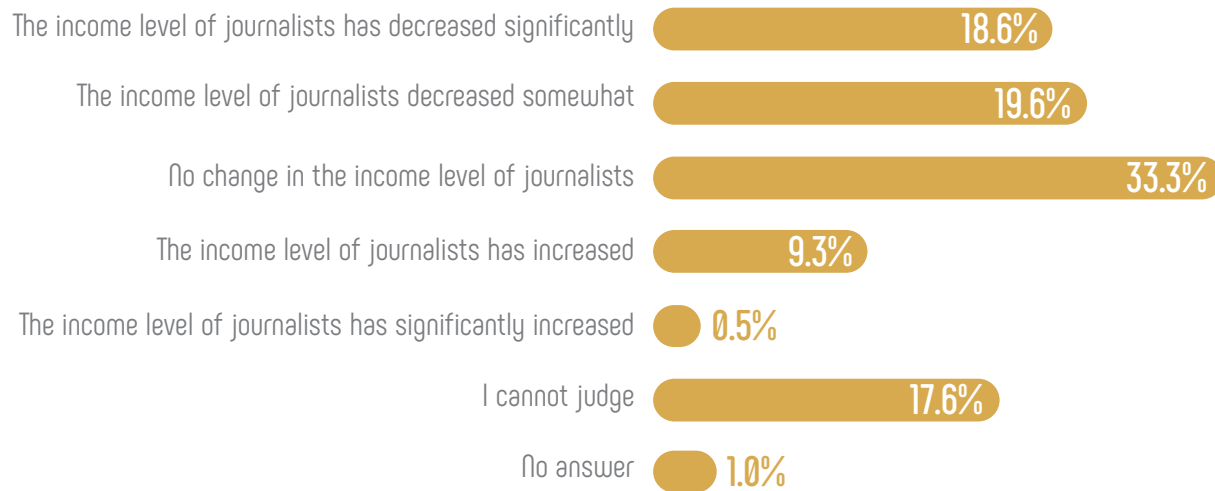
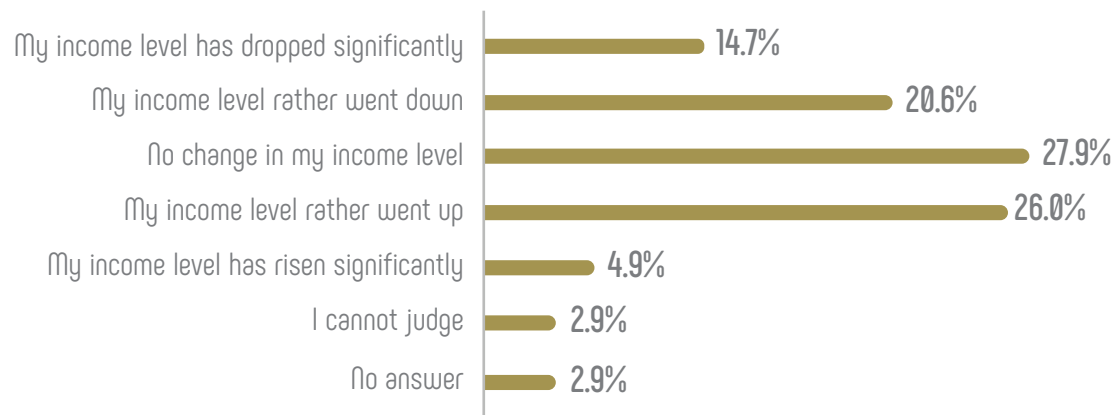


Chart 5

AND HOW HAS YOUR PERSONAL INCOME CHANGED DURING THIS PERIOD?



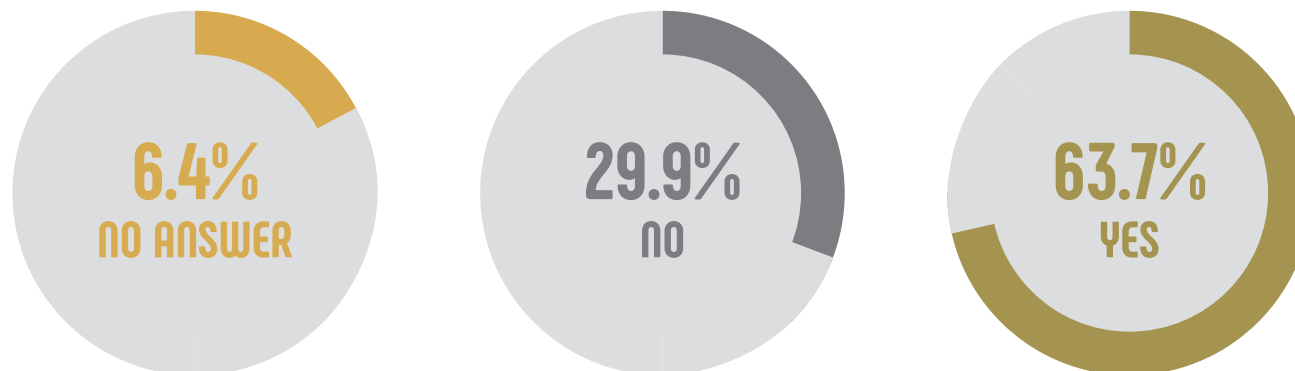
Data about the respondents' employment relations appear unchanged from 2020, when the last AEJ Bulgaria survey was conducted. Most journalists indicated that they work for one media outlet (62.3%), 18.6% for two, and 7.8% for three or more. In 2022, every second journalist who participated in the survey worked on a contractual basis. The results have remained unchanged since 2017. Nearly 15 per cent are freelance, working on a part-time (civil) contract. Around 6 per cent stated their employer does not provide them with any kind of insurance (the figures here are different – 9.1 per cent in 2017 against 10.4 per cent in 2020).

AN INCREASE IN SELF-CENSORSHIP

Almost every second journalist says he or she has personally been subjected to undue pressure because of his or her work (47.5 %). Over the years back, this question has often divided participants into two relatively equal groups. However, the difference is much greater and more visible when it comes to the question concerning the pressure exerted on “fellow journalists”. In 2015, two out of three (72 %) respondents gave a positive answer; in 2017, the results held up by a very small margin (69 %). Two years ago, we saw a sharp jump by approximately ten points – 81 % of journalists surveyed had witnessed undue pressure on a colleague. In 2022, there was a decrease – 63.7 % gave a positive answer against 29.9 %. However, the percentage of this negative media phenomenon remains high (Chart 6).

Chart 6

HAVE YOU WITNESSED UNDUE PRESSURE EXERTED ON A FELLOW JOURNALIST BECAUSE OF THE CONTENT OF THEIR WORK?



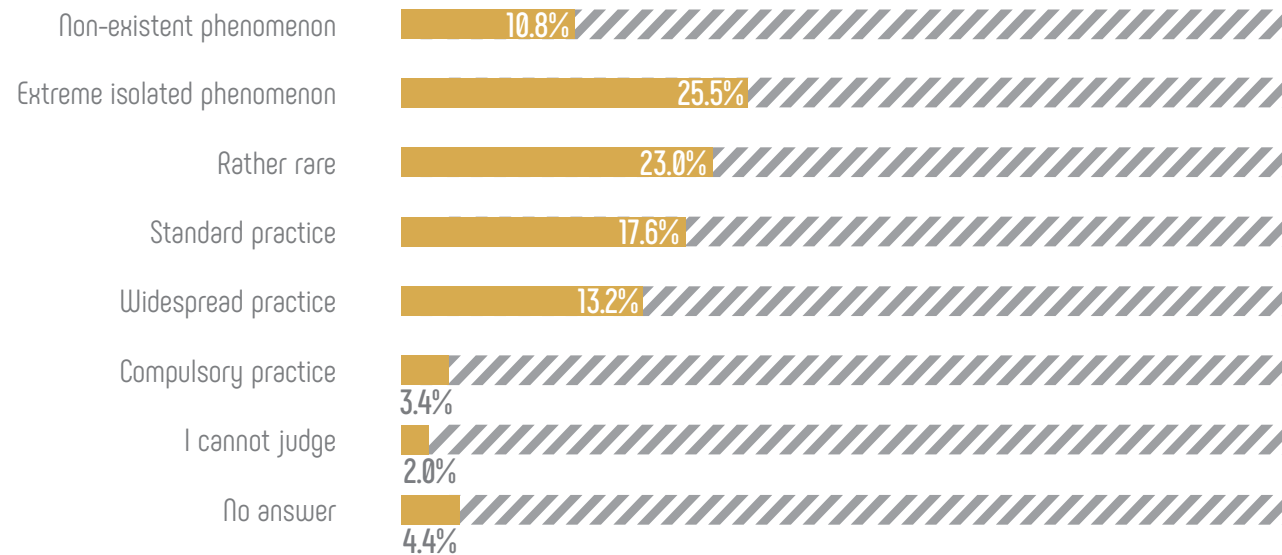
The culture of pressure is a concept that the AEJ Bulgaria uses in its research on media freedom. It includes various indicators. They measure various forms of “undue pressure” that we consider “a threat to the physical, financial and moral integrity of journalists”. We seek answers to questions about whether the respondent has witnessed or been personally subjected to pressure. Whether there was undue interference in their work by a line editor, editor-in-chief, media owner, advertising department, etc. Have there been any cases of outside interference in editorial content by political, economic, criminal entities. The problem of self-censorship is also addressed in this group of questions.

In 2022, the share of opinions that interference in journalistic content is an inherent feature of the Bulgarian media environment remains high. Similar to the last survey conducted two years ago, the responses “standard practice” and “widespread practice” garner nearly 82 %. One in ten sees the phenomenon of interference as “rather rare”. And those who see it as an “extremely isolated phenomenon” are the only ones – only 0.5 % of respondents gave this answer.

However, when it comes to the respondents’ personal experience and the practice of the media they work in, the picture is different. Here, negative opinions as a non-existent, isolated phenomenon, as well as a “rare phenomenon”, gather a larger share of the responses (Chart 7).

Chart 7

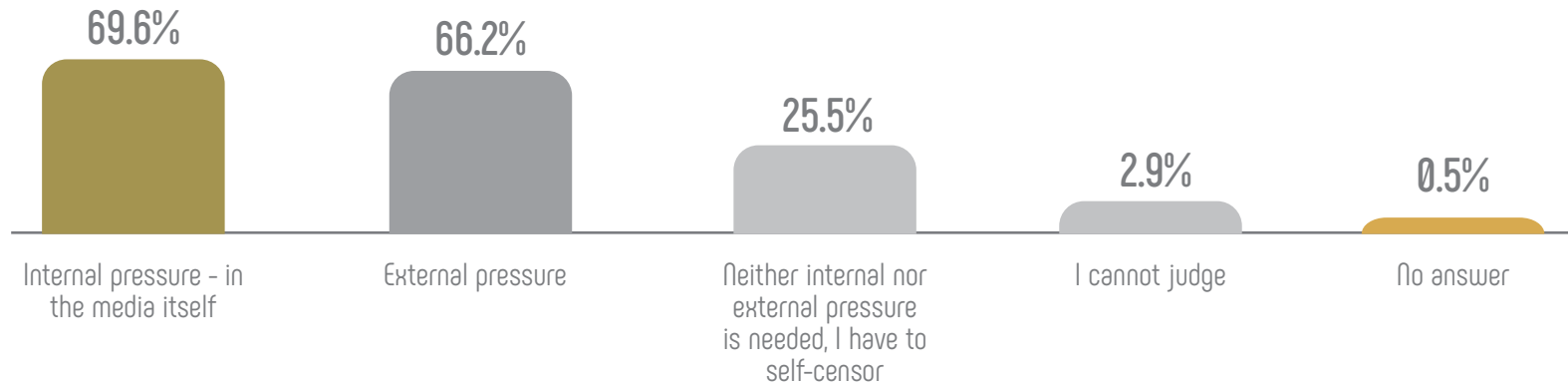
IN YOUR OPINION, THE INTERFERENCE IN THE WORK OF JOURNALISTS AND ATTEMPTS TO INFLUENCE THE CONTENT OF THEIR MATERIALS IN YOUR MEDIA IS...



In 2022, the severity of “external pressure” as a form of restriction on freedom of speech decreased. But there is a worrying increase in **responses suggesting that there is a rise in internal pressure and self-censorship among journalists**. Since 2017, self-censorship has been on an increase by an average of 5 percent in surveys conducted by AEJ Bulgaria. In a previous survey, “external pressure” received the greatest number of responses (76.7 percent) compared to “internal” pressure (65.8 percent) and “self-censorship” (20.8 percent). **In 2022, the survey registered a significant increase** (Chart 8).

Chart 8

WHAT DO YOU THINK ARE THE MOST COMMON FORMS OF RESTRICTION ON FREEDOM OF SPEECH IN BULGARIA?



A EJ Bulgaria has already noted that self-censorship is a form of self-defence against the imposition of internal editorial sanctions - reprimands, fines and pay cuts. But it seems that with each passing year journalists are losing their resistance to external and internal interference in their work. Feelings of insecurity and fear of losing their jobs are increasing. Almost every second respondent (46.6%) in the 2022 survey indicated that, although rare, it happens to them that they stop their own publications, reports or avoid covering important public issues. 7.4% regularly engage in this practice, the data show. And nearly 40% of respondents indicate that they have never experienced such instances in their professional careers. With minor outliers, the results remain unchanged from 2020.

Of the internal sources of pressure on the work of journalists, the practice of removing **or altering content by a more senior editor** continues to be the leading one. 'Coercion' by a media owner was cited second, followed by 'briefings' by the advertising department. Scolding and reprimanding were also common tools for 'regulation' and interference in publications and videos (Chart 9).

Chart 9

IN YOUR MEDIA, WHAT DO YOU THINK ARE THE POSSIBLE "INTERNAL" SOURCES OF INTERFERENCE AND PRESSURE ON JOURNALISTS?



Here is how respondents described the reasons for self-censorship (opinions here and below are shared without editorial intervention):

"1. Economic/political interests of the owners; 2. Fear of being sanctioned/ dismissal; 3. Threats from economic/criminal groups."

"A form of self-limitation that, regardless of the reasons, impedes the normal creative process. This happens most often when government, advertisers or other institutional or business stakeholders are involved."

"It is practiced by journalists because they have the feeling that a certain material will not be perceived well by a political figure and/or party, or by the public. Self-censorship in journalists is something that has been built up over years and, at some point, just becomes an integral part of those who practise the profession. I even think self-censorship is far worse than someone else exercising censorship over you. Journalists are afraid of losing their jobs, especially in these difficult times and amid all the competition and fighting for a place in the media. Self-censorship is a combination of many things, including compromising with oneself, etc."

"In smaller towns most people know each other, some truths can be uncovered with informants, and this also influences..."

"In the media enjoying greater freedom – the reluctance of the editors to affect the interests of large advertisers, owners or sponsors of the media. In the media used as 'baseball bats' – an obvious editorial policy in the service of specific political parties and business circles to the detriment of their political opponents and representatives of civil society."

"In private local media, funding and economic survival is linked to good relations with businesses and local authorities. Businesses advertise and local authorities publish adverts, press releases, etc. To get someone's opinion, they have to want to share it with you, and if they don't want to talk to you – you can't do the material. The reasons for self-censorship are trivial – to be able to do your job, to work and get your salary – you have to be on good terms with local government and businesses."

"Media cooperation agreements with the central government, municipalities, political parties and other bodies and organisations through which independent citizen newspapers have to seek revenue..."

"Deeply ingrained conformism, but also a misunderstanding of the function of the media."

"The requirement for 'political correctness', the requirement 'not to contradict EU decisions', and more recently the requirements relating to the coverage of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine."

"There are all manner of reasons and, unfortunately, they have become part of the daily routine of quite a few journalists. It is no longer felt as something that should be resisted. Don't be an angry editor, don't be offended by an outsider who more or less has some influence on editorial policy."

"The instinct for self-preservation and social fear that generally is prevalent in society at large. This gives rise to malice and envy as social behaviour, and these in turn give rise to hate speech and a lack of internal unity within the guild itself."

"Phenomena of a completely different order can be defined as self-censorship. For example, if sufficient professionalism is lacking, any attempt to work according to internal editorial rules may be misinterpreted by some as pressure. If, for example, I judge that the material I am preparing lacks something in the way of facts and evidence, and hold it back to get to that point, that would not be self-censorship, but simply a job well done. However, there are also practices associated with inviting certain guests for some fictional balance that become very visible in the mainstream media. Likewise, some colleagues, in order to accommodate a particular editorial line, turn down certain guests at the expense of others who are a regular presence in a particular media outlet."

"Whoever wants to be a journalist must necessarily meet two requirements: first, to be a normal person (in the sense of not being distorted) and accept the world around them with a degree of normality; secondly, not to be a coward (if they are hardworking, there will be no price, but this is already an "extra"!). If a journalist does not possess these qualities, it is very easy to give in and succumb to outside influence."

"The specific stance of the media most often depends on the interests of economic or political entities, which it defends in order to finance or obtain public contracts, EU funds, etc."

"The small media market and the real possibility that if a journalist loses their job, it will be difficult to find employment in another media. I think this is also a reason for the lower pay in the sector. It also makes it easier to influence the journalist's daily work."

"The marginalization of the journalism profession in recent years and the fear of repercussions for journalists' actions."

"Political bias, extra pay that is not officially declared but is linked to political entities, and the fear of losing a job. One of the disturbing trends is the loss of qualifications resulting from insufficient or inadequate training provided by the employer, as well as the unwillingness or lack of initiative to update knowledge on the part of journalists themselves."

"The fear of being out of work. A number of my former colleagues say that when they propose more than once a topic that the editorial team tacitly rejects, they simply stop themselves from proposing stories that they think will not be approved or will be tacitly rejected."

"Fear of whether the material will appeal to the audience."

The results, which provide an overview of the answers to the question whether critical publications and materials in the media are allowed against actual advertisers and other financial contributors, are also significant. Almost one in three journalists surveyed noted that "tend not to be allowed" (27 %). Nearly 17% noted "not at all." And about 20 % stated that it is only by exception.

POLITICAL INTERFERENCE IS HERE TO STAY FOR A LONG TIME

State, regional and municipal institutions are increasingly becoming the leading sources of external pressure. If in 2020 they were mentioned by 30.7% of respondents, two years later **there has been a significant increase and the share reaches 47.5 % of respondents** (figure 10). With each passing year, local and central government institutions are increasingly using different pressure tools that were previously attributed to economic entities and advertisers.

The serious influence of the local government in some media is clearly evident from the results of the question “Does the municipality pay media in your area to publish prepared press releases?”. One in three respondents gave a positive answer. A further 30.4 % indicated that they did not know but had heard of such practices (Chart 11).

However, politicians hold the first place in terms of centres of influence on editorial content (72.5 %). However, it is evident that clusters of persistent negative influences on the media are forming. There has also been an increase in the pressure exerted by criminal groups (by nearly 10 per cent compared to 2020). According to data, there has even been a sharp increase in the number of respondents who state that the same practices are employed by civil society representatives (by more than 8 points compared to 2020).

Chart 10

IF YOU THINK THERE IS EXTERNAL PRESSURE, WHAT IS MOST OFTEN ITS SOURCE?



In the last two years, the results of the question that outlines the **relationship between critical media and state institutions** have remained almost unchanged. Rejections or systematic delays in receiving public information, removal from lists of the recipients of press releases or official information, avoidance of being interviewed in media known for the critical stance of their journalists. There is also a practice of party-political central and local government institutions not informing editorial offices in a timely manner about press conferences or topical issues of public interest. One in three journalists responded that they are often treated differently than representatives of media outlets that support the authorities. 40.2% said "sometimes" and 11.8 % said "never." Approximately 16 % of respondents refused to answer this question.

Some of the journalists in the survey reported various cases of interference in their work. From “personal calls and explanations being demanded”, “extortion from advertisers and government funding institutions”, to “withdrawal of advertisers”. “By virtue of hierarchy, pressure dressed up in power,” says another respondent. “Bribed owners select compliant editors who enforce desired editorial policies,” stated a third respondent. Here are more comments:

“The pressure in the media I have worked in has never been more pronounced. But it is clear that there is one media when it became clear to me from a conversation with the editor-in-chief that a person on whom the media depends on would have a serious problem if I wrote a piece of information. And it just doesn’t get published.”

“Psychological pressure.”

“Sabotaging the work process.”

“NGO tactics, pressure through pseudo democratic practices.”

Chart 11

DOES THE MUNICIPALITY PAY MEDIA OUTLETS IN YOUR REGION TO PUBLISH FINISHED PRESS RELEASES?



With no visible change compared to 2020, the dissemination of concealed PR publications and video reports in the media has persisted; 18.6% of journalists indicated that this was a widespread practice in their newsrooms. One in three said it was an exception, but they still had to do it; 20.1% reported similar cases, but in the portfolios of their colleagues; and 30.4 % described it as a “non-existent practice” in their media.

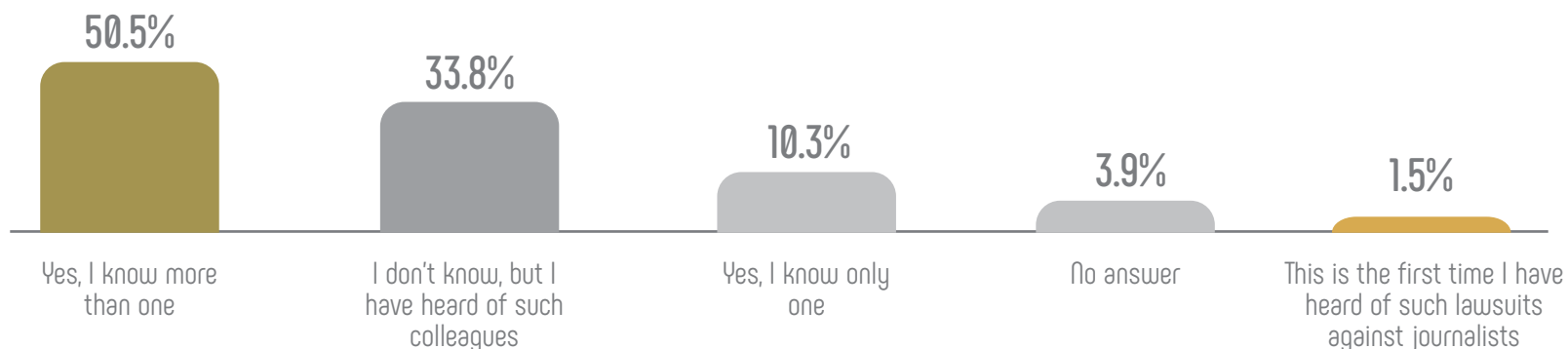
ONE IN TEN HAS BEEN THREATENED WITH TRIAL

Lawsuits against journalists aimed at intimidating them or making it harder for them to do their job and carry out their public tasks are on the rise. These lawsuits, also known as *Strategic Lawsuits against Public Participation (SLAPP)*, are protracted and slow. They often have a chilling effect, cause psychological harassment, and sometimes result in the financial blockade of a media. In late 2021, the European Parliament initiated the adoption of uniform European legislation to protect journalists against SLAPPs. That is why A€J Bulgaria decided to check the effects of these cases in the Bulgarian media community.

The results show that one in two respondents (50.5 %) indicated that they knew a colleague against whom an intimidation lawsuit had been brought and one in three had heard of such lawsuits (33.8 %) (Chart 12). The “chilling effect” of these lawsuits affect one in four respondents. Nearly 25 % of respondents self-censor and avoid problematic topics because they know a lawsuit may be brought against them. For the majority (65.7%) of respondents, however, information about lawsuits against journalists has no impact (Chart 13).

Chart 12

DO YOU KNOW A COLLEAGUE WHO HAS HAD AN INTIMIDATION LAWSUIT BROUGHT AGAINST THEM?



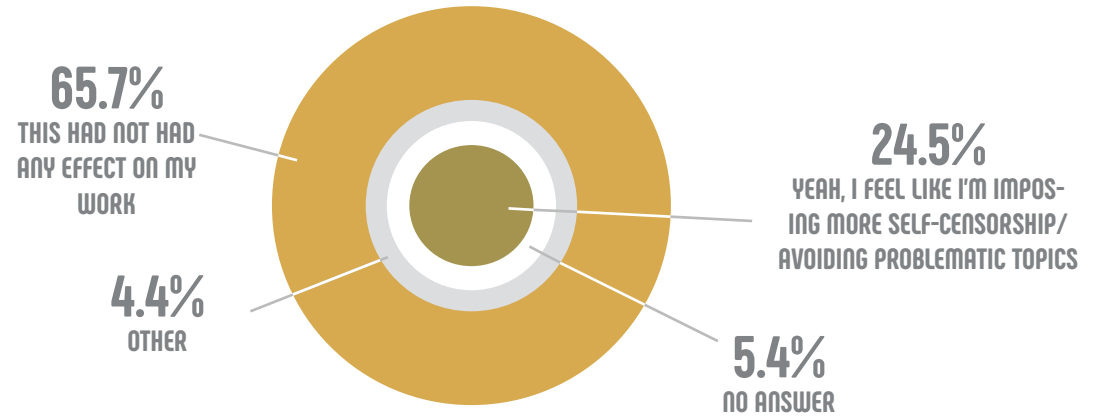
The answers to the open-ended question “Have you personally been influenced by the information that cases have been filed against journalists?” have evolved, ranging from “It strengthens my resolve”, to “I don’t report on current political developments”, to “I don’t avoid topics, but I have it in mind”.

One journalist stated he has started working with greater precision. Another has called for “journalists to band together for better protection”. A third one noted that they cannot imagine it is right for lawsuits to be brought against journalists for doing their job. “Against the backdrop of the media environment in Bulgaria, that makes him a brave man,” the respondent added.

Other respondents noted that it is important to know what the lawsuits are about. “Some colleagues/editors write scary nonsense”, “Journalists should be held responsible for the effects they cause through their publications”, two of the respondents commented.

Chart 13

HAVE YOU PERSONALLY BEEN INFLUENCED BY THE INFORMATION THAT JOURNALISTS HAVE BEEN SUED?



LIMITED LEGAL ASSISTANCE, TARNISHED REPUTATION, BLOCKED ACCOUNTS

Approximately 17 % of the participants in the survey conducted by AEJ Bulgaria stated that they have had intimidation lawsuits brought against them because of their journalistic work (Figure 14). Half of the journalists in this group noted that the reason was political or economic interests (Chart 15). Some of the answers pointed to 'defamation', 'professionalism and a level of qualification higher than that of their superiors, desire to develop new subject areas', 'publishing property declarations of the mayor and municipal councillors'.

In 38.2 % of the cases, the lawsuit was tried in a criminal court. However, the majority of cases (58.8 %) were decided in the civil divisions of courts.

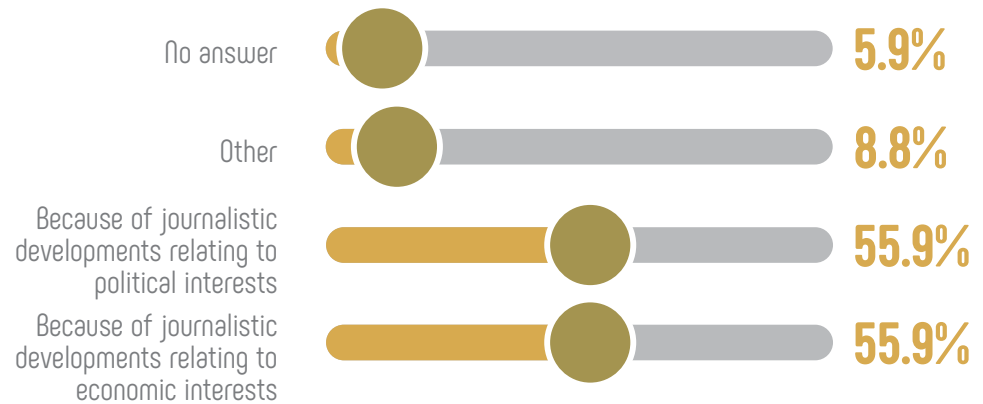
Chart 14

HAS AN INTIMIDATION LAWSUIT BEEN BROUGHT AGAINST YOU BECAUSE OF YOUR WORK?



Chart 15

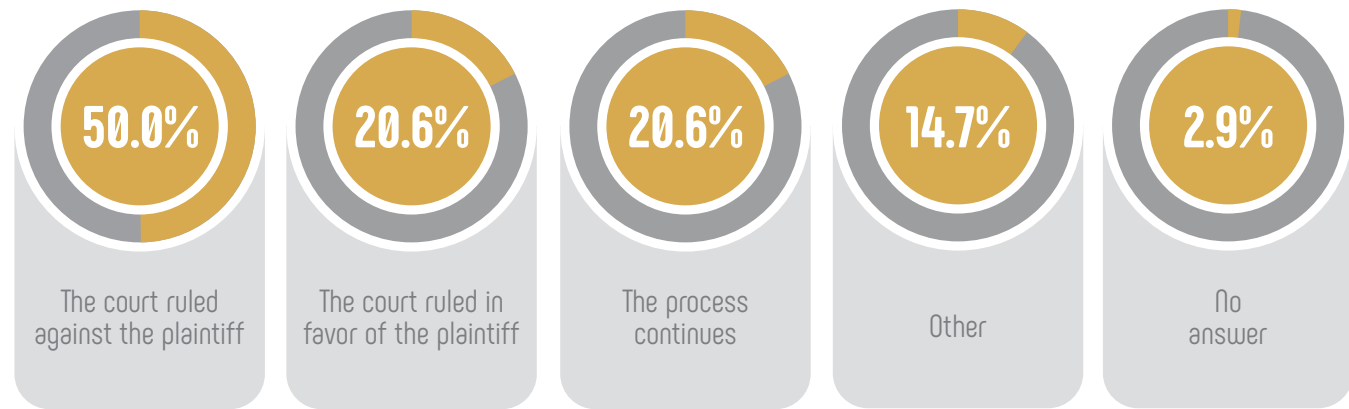
IF THERE WERE ATTEMPTS AT JUDICIAL INTIMIDATION, WHAT WAS THE REASON?



When asked "What was the outcome of the lawsuit?" the results show that courts decided every other case in favour of the journalist or the media. But one in five cases (20.6 %) was won by the plaintiff. For another 20 % of the journalists sued, the trial is still pending (Chart 16).

Chart 16

WHAT WAS THE OUTCOME OF THE LAWSUIT?



Here is what some of the respondents said when asked what the outcome of the case was in their case:

"They paid off a judge and a lawyer in 15 minutes. I paid the costs of the case and refused to appeal to a superior court, although my lawyer tried to talk me into it. He was already using the language of whoever signed my dismissal order."

"The plaintiff and the media owner have entered into a settlement agreement."

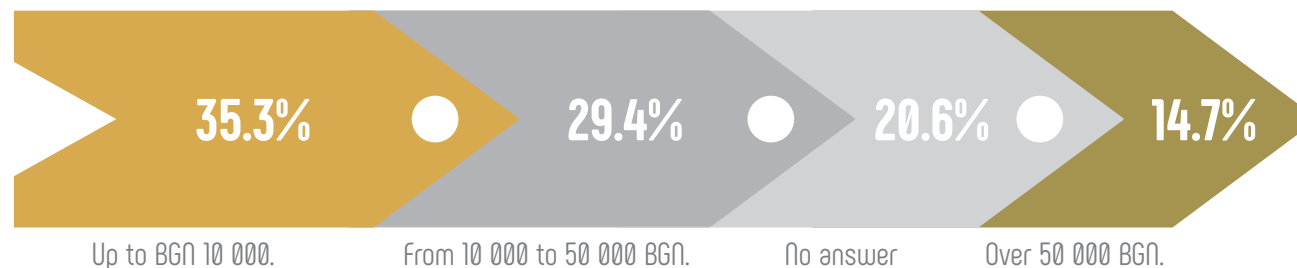
"The plaintiff withdrew their claims."

"The lawsuits were terminated."

The most common are claims seek compensation of up to BGN 10 thousand. Almost one in three of the respondents sued has also faced lawsuits with claims between BGN 10 thousand and BGN 50 thousand. But it is striking that one in ten lawsuits against a journalist or media seek a compensation in excess of 50 thousand BGN (Chart 17).

Chart 17

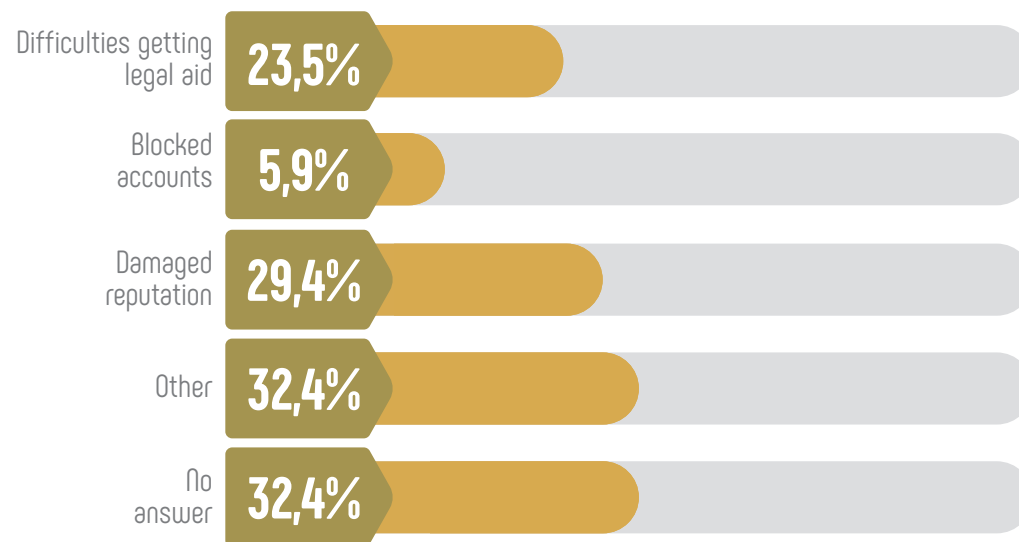
WHAT WAS THE VALUE OF THE CLAIM?



One in three journalists who have gone through a trial stated that their “tarnished reputation” is the most serious hardship they have encountered. For approximately 23 %, the obstacle was securing legal aid. Nearly 6 %, on the other hand, noted that their accounts were blocked because of the lawsuit (Chart 18). But there is more. Self-censorship, emotional distress, loss of time and energy. And even being banned from writing in a particular economic sector. Journalists who have experienced a lawsuit tell us about all this in the survey. “I did not encounter any difficulties. The owner of the media also took care of the legal aid,” commented a colleague.

Chart 18

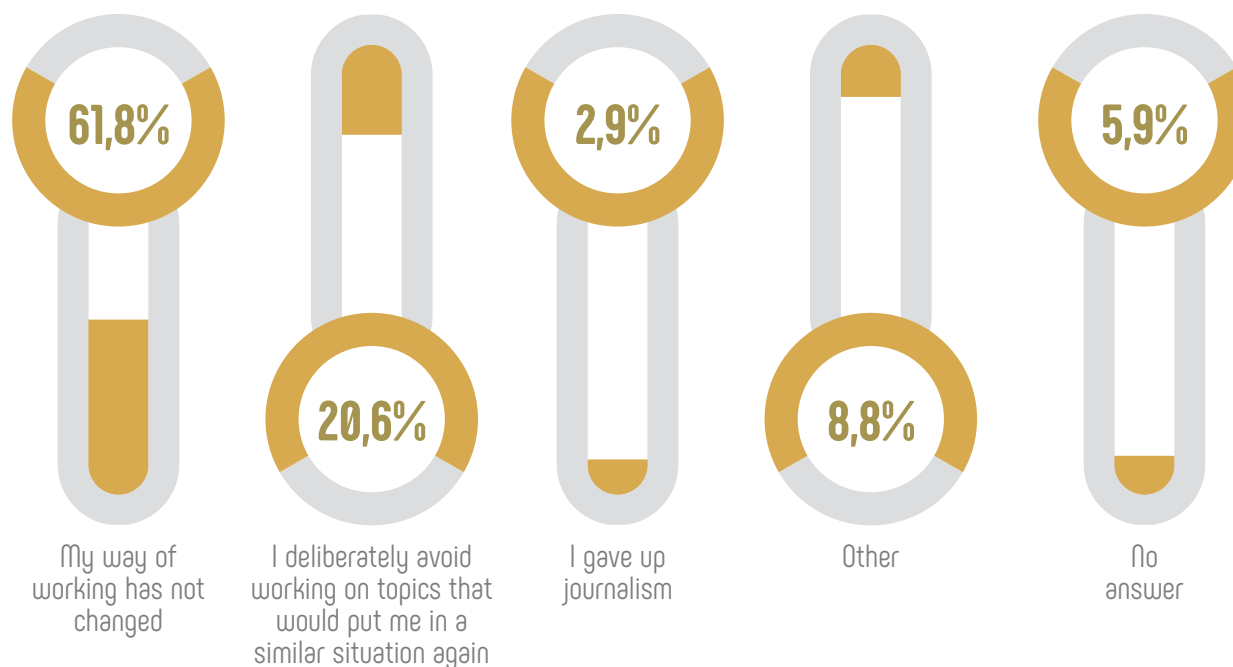
WHAT DIFFICULTIES DID YOU ENCOUNTER DURING THE TRIAL?



After the trial, the majority of journalists on trial did not change their modus operandi. However, one in five now avoids working on topics that would put them in a similar situation. In other words, the lawsuits did produce the desired effect. Nearly 3 % stated they had given up journalism (Chart 19).

Chart 19

WHAT WERE THE IMPLICATIONS FOR YOU AFTER THE TRIAL?



Here's more from what the sued journalists had to say:

"There was a one-year period when I had doubts about myself and the quality of my work."

"I'm out of a job"

"I try to be completely precise in the facts I state and the means of expression I use. Not because I'm afraid, but because I don't want to be vulnerable. I did not realise before that certain words - in my opinion quite out of place - could lead me into the courtroom. But essentially my work hasn't changed, I write about the same topics. I don't self-censor, I'm just a lot more careful."

ONLINE HARASSMENT – THE NEW BASEBALL BAT AGAINST JOURNALISTS

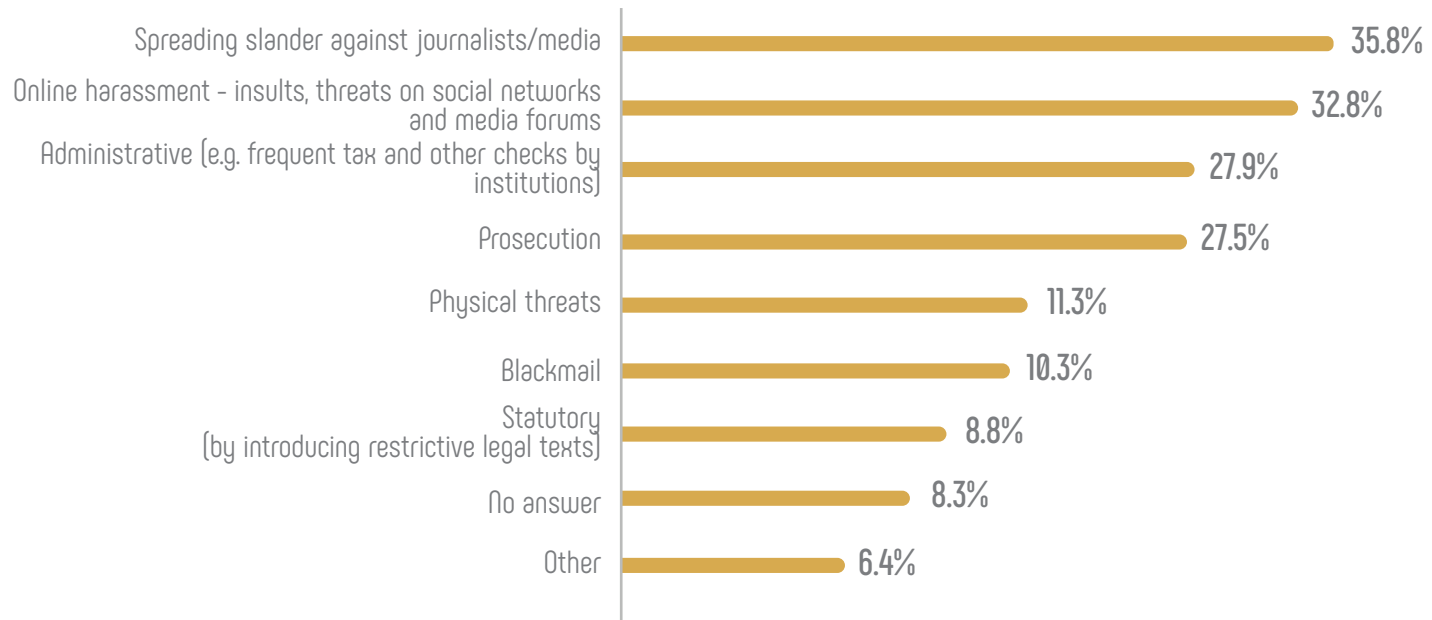
Several consecutive surveys of AEJ Bulgaria have confirmed widespread slander against journalists as the most common form of external pressure. This form of harassment is now clearly visible. If in 2017 it was mentioned by 41 % of the respondents, in 2020 defamation has increased to 49 %. Two years later, a decrease by nearly 15 % (to 35.8 % in 2022) was registered.

A new phenomenon is emerging – online harassment, insults and threats on social media and forums.

One in three respondents believe this is among the most common forms of external pressure. Prosecution of journalists is also growing by about 4 points. But compared to 2020, the severity of 'blackmail' as an external tool of influence has nearly doubled **(Chart 20)**.

Chart 20

IF THERE IS EXTERNAL PRESSURE, WHAT DO YOU THINK IS ITS MOST COMMON FORM?



STORIES OF JOURNALISTS UNDER PRESSURE

"I have personal experience of this. The reason was an investigation of misuse of EU funds in the implementation of a municipal project. The familiar methods were applied literally by the book – publishing false, rude and defamatory information. Flooding social networks with slander, aimed at compromising integrity, respectively, belittling the abuses that were brought to light. Worst of all, however, was the fact that colleagues from other media outlets did not support me and my team, but instead acted as if no such topic (I mean investigation) existed. Some of them enthusiastically joined the smear campaign. The reason is clear – they were all receiving handouts from the then mayor. When a new mayor was elected, they all very flexibly renounced the old one and renewed their contracts with the new one. And the abuses and crimes continued. What freedom of speech? What free media and journalists? Something is deeply wrong."

"At the end of September 2020, I was laid off by the media outlet I was working for at the time after a phone call from a minister. The reason? Two published articles about the non-transparent concession of critical State infrastructure. Of course, the dismissal happened "cunningly", by "mutual agreement", without any fuss being raised, etc... And what is the point of these enquiries at all? Everyone knows, for example, that journalists in some media outlets are not being paid and have not been paid for years. And everyone is silent like lambs being taken to the slaughter?!? And these people call themselves "journalists"! Sad! Repulsive! Disgusting!!!"

"I have not lived in Bulgaria in recent years, and I have not had any problems with censorship or other forms of pressure. It has happened in the past though that my material was taken down because a politician or a businessman did not like it. I had entire topics prepared and ready to be aired live in a TV studio that were dropped at the last minute because of the risk of damaging the image of an advertiser. I've had a producer drop a guest on a conflicting topic without replacing them with another guest, giving the viewer only half of the story, half a version of the truth, and the sense that the host is a party to the conflict. Lawsuits have been brought against some of my colleagues at times when the inability to consider the facts impartially was apparent to the naked eye. For example, a colleague of mine is being sued for allegedly slandering a public figure because in a piece that outlines a number of known and easily verifiable facts about that person's work contrary to public interest. The judge in the case is someone who has also been the subject of a journalistic investigation by my colleague. At the end, an article was published, outlining facts that raise legitimate questions about the judge's integrity. Why did the judge not recuse himself from the case, and can anyone assume that he can be impartial?"

"I have been embroiled in several idiotic lawsuits with the Data Protection Commission, for example. One of the sanctions these scoundrels imposed on the newspaper I run was for publishing the salaries in a municipal administration – the "servants of the people" complained that their salaries were "personal data", and the Commission fined us. The lawsuit lasted about two years and came to...nothing, of course, except for the massive amount of wasted time. Various local "VIPs" have sued us for the moral damages suffered, allegedly on account of our publications, but the lawsuits fell through. There was a time when I rather enjoyed all this nonsense, but it weighs on me now – I've grown old, and I realise I don't have much time to waste on trivia anymore."

"In order to keep our media going, we are developing other lines of business that have been attacked by administrative structures because of certain critical publications. We have managed to withstand the pressure so far!"

"Various deputy mayors and chairmen of municipal councils have called to threaten me with lawsuits and suchlike."

"The story dates back to the 1990s in a now-defunct newspaper: the editor-in-chief (now deceased) warned me to carefully consider what I was going to write about the attorney general because he has "gotten the owner by the balls," also and against the owner himself, who was an important figure in the community. This is the genesis of today's state of play of the media."

"When I published an article in a national daily newspaper showing, on the basis of numerous examples and with reference to scientific research, that the proposals to introduce "Internet voting" would not in practice significantly change politics in Bulgaria, representatives of my direct employer held a special meeting with me, in which they reproached me that since our organisation in principle "SUPPORTS" technology and innovation, meaning that we should automatically have a positive stance towards the issue of the possible introduction of "Internet voting".

"The media I manage is one of the few in the region that do not have and do not want to have a contract with the municipality in the regional centre. Any criticism of the mayor and the administration he leads is given the 'right of reply', which requires the publication of its full content, which includes unacceptable qualifications about the media, the professionalism and ethics of its staff, not a rebuttal of the facts. In this way, the administration indirectly exercises censorship and pressure on the media and its staff. And at the same time, it is damaging its reputation, as this 'right of reply' is also spread through the media's news channels. Municipality-dependent officials, people and trolls are also involved in the attack. In addition, a member of the mayor's staff, in his capacity as a citizen, attempted to exert indirect pressure by asking other municipalities in the area for a reference to the media outlet's contracts with them."

"Recently I was accused by my direct supervisor of making propaganda with the arrangement of the news. The rationale was that the theses expressed by the interlocutors from the top echelons of government and business quoted in the news did not correspond with the views of the chief character in question on the events. For my convenience, the 'correct talking points' were also conspired for me to follow."

"The pressure on journalists is from regional media is widespread in the smaller municipalities of the country. From threats of physical reprisals to threats of prosecution - all these ploys are commonly used by 'victims'."

"Mainly social media is used as a tool of vilification. Labelling, the naming of a colleague who is put as a target for the powers that be."

"Denial of accreditation and suspended access to important events, high-level complaints about questions "incorrectly" asked by one of the parties in the story, high-level censure for questions "incorrectly" asked, censure for the selection and presentation of news stories, prohibition from covering specific events or issues, pressure on editorial policy."

"These are not one-off cases. Most often they are linked to political pressure not to publish something. Access to information from public institutions is extremely difficult. I also interpret this as pressure. I suppose you know about the Law on Access to Public Information, which was passed to facilitate citizens, but in fact the state administration turned it against journalists and delayed answers to important questions for two weeks. It goes to court sometimes."

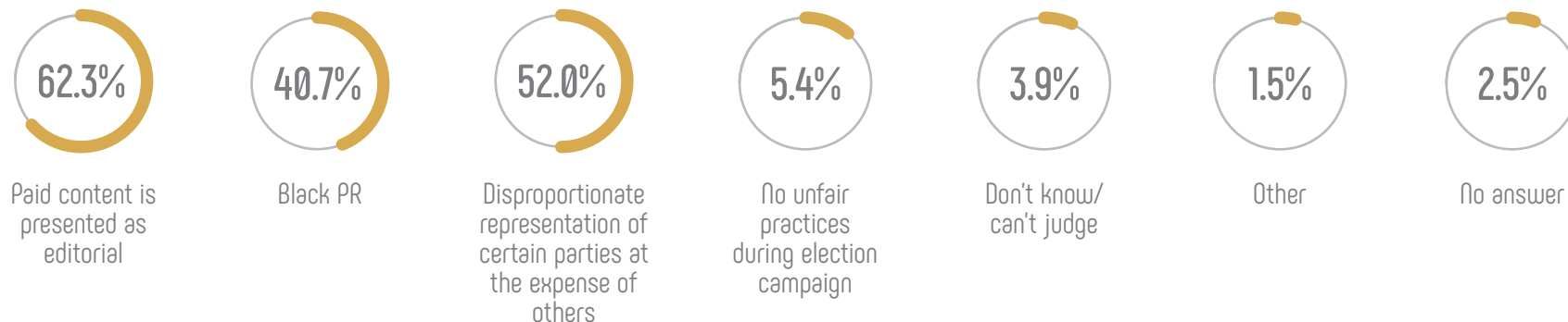
AN ENDLESS SERIES OF ELECTIONS

It is an open secret that election campaigns are a serious source of funding for some media. And this calls into question the impartial, fair and balanced coverage of local and national campaigns. Ensuring that citizens make informed choices in every election. The AEJ-Bulgaria 2022 study is taking place in the context of a serious political crisis and a series of unstable parliaments and election campaigns. This is a serious factor that cannot but influence the results of the survey.

The majority of the journalists surveyed (71.1 %) are adamant that their media outlet does not allow unfair practices during the election campaign. But one in ten admitted that sometimes there are. Compared to 2020, there is no change in the answers to the specific question of what they are in cases where deviation from professional journalistic standards is allowed. Paid content and disproportionate representation of some campaigners over others are the most common practices. The proportion of black PR is also not small (Chart 21).

Chart 21

WHAT ARE THE MOST COMMON UNFAIR PRACTICES?



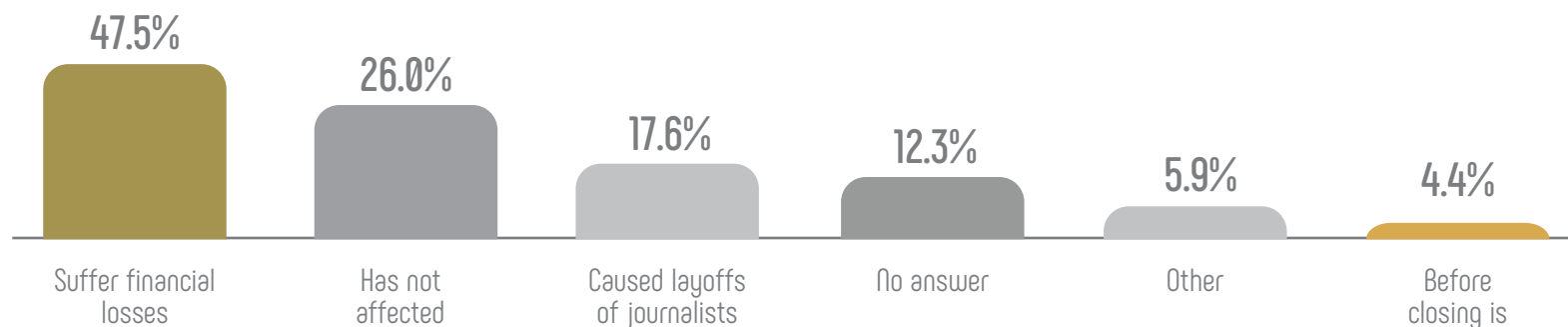
"All of the above, as well as a number of other "behind-the-scenes" practices. I think there is a lack of sustainable professionalism in journalism in Bulgaria, the turnover is huge and usually through well-known techniques - social parachuting and lobbying on the principle "everyone in parliament likes me", commented a participant in the study.

FINANCIAL LOSSES FROM THE PANDEMIC

After two years since its beginning, the pandemic is having a serious impact on the financial revenues of the media. This is also the most serious factor that gathered the highest number of responses in the second survey of AEJ-Bulgaria. This question was also asked in 2020, when the effects of the contagion on the economy and the media market had not yet unfolded. Two years on, pessimistic attitudes among respondents continue. The results follow the 2020 data. One in two indicated that the media outlet where they work is experiencing financial losses (47.5 %). Over 17 per cent noted that there had been redundancies. For another 26 per cent there has been no change (Chart 22).

Chart 22

HOW DID THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC AND THE EMERGENCY SITUATION AFFECT YOUR WORK?



"The media team never returned to work in the newsroom and to this day perform their duties at home," says a respondent. Another points out that his media outlet was shut down and continued as another outlet with greater frequency. Others tell of activities being cut in half, reorganizations in the newsroom, travel and travel in the country cut, and opportunities for change squandered. Some note that the pandemic has heightened interest in their medium. A freelance journalist emotionally summed it up as follows:

"This does not affect freelance journalists. We are NOT paid by the media, with very few exceptions - we work for FREE! Despite the volume of work we do and the fact that we are SELF-FUNDED in/for everything! Including buying a recorder, batteries, tickets for city transport to go to an event, paying for our own internet etc..."

In one way or another, coverage of the pandemic has influenced editorial content. The issue continues to create hesitation and divide positions. Two years since it began, one in ten respondents to the AEJ Bulgaria poll said the contagion had severely limited freedom of speech. Almost the same percentage of respondents said they had begun to self-censor. Nearly 37 % said there were restrictions on the subject, but it had not affected their work. Some 29 per cent of respondents said that COVID-19 had in no way affected their freedom of opinion.

The opportunity to comment on the issue, however, provides a much richer picture of sentiments and assessments. Increasing disinformation and fake news, imposing restrictions on the diversity of information sources, increased distrust in institutions and authorities - this is what some respondents share. "Filling the media space with more conspiracy material and more polarization of preferences for material," "Increases the bubble effect of social media and paid content on social media," noted others. A colleague adds, "They have turned people into hypochondriacs."

Others note that the pandemic has given "an alibi to the institutions and they have shut down even more". It also proved the unpreparedness of journalists and media to respond to crises, as well as the lack of knowledge on how to deal with sources of information.

"There seems to be an increase in getting information online at the expense of getting information at meetings, press conferences, etc. This is also suggested by developments in technology (years ago it was unthinkable to cover a parliamentary committee meeting online for example, now they are all broadcast) but the pandemic has intensified this process and the physical distancing from the venue. Of course, this is not true for every type of media. For example, broadcasters need to be on location and have a picture, for me - as a representative of an online media - it is much easier and quicker to look at a screen and write in real time," commented a journalist.

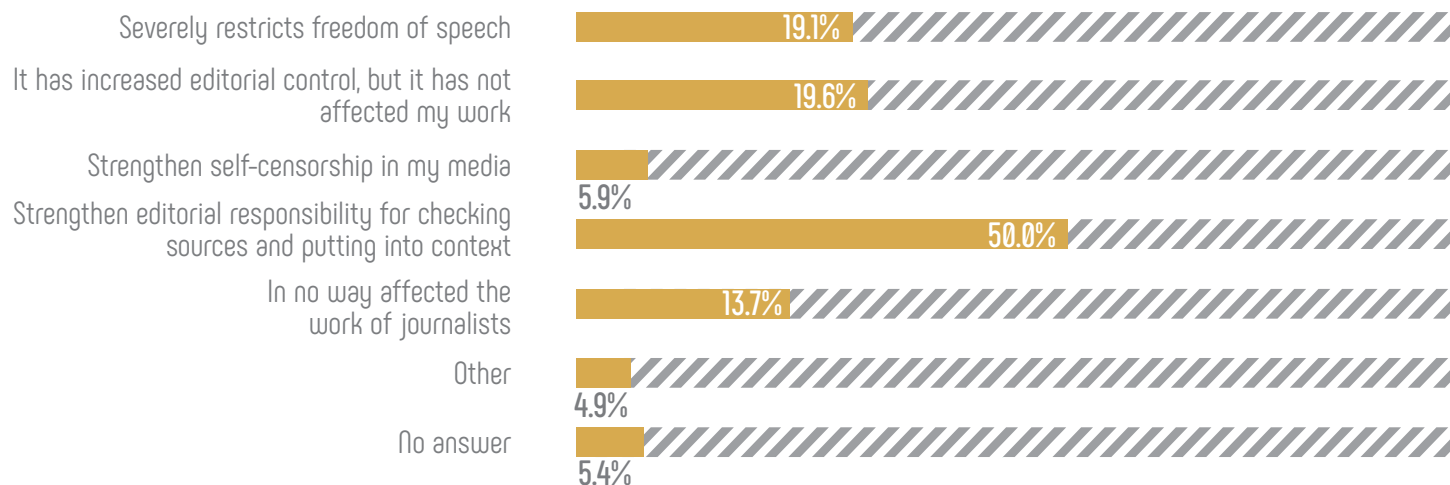
THE WAR HAS INTENSIFIED EDITORIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Compared to the pandemic, the war in Ukraine has caused a far more serious shift in the understanding of freedom of expression. The media sector faces a new challenge to expose misinformation. Trying to soften the blows to public attitudes coming from the effects of fake news that disseminates stories without context, selectively handles facts, and influences people's emotions. The war in Ukraine has shown that warfare can also be fought on social networks, from Facebook to TikTok to Telegram. After the pandemic against journalism, another front has opened up. And society is polarised once more.

Every fifth participant in the AEJ-Bulgaria poll indicated that the war had severely limited freedom of speech (19.1 %). Almost as many respondents said it had also increased editorial control, but this had not affected their decisions (19.6 %). For 13.7 per cent, their way of working has not changed. And 5.9 per cent said that the issues surrounding the conflict between Ukraine and Russia had increased self-censorship in their media. But one in two journalists say that editorial responsibility for checking sources and putting them in context has increased (50 %) (Chart 23).

Chart 23

HOW DOES THE WAR IN UKRAINE AFFECT FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION?

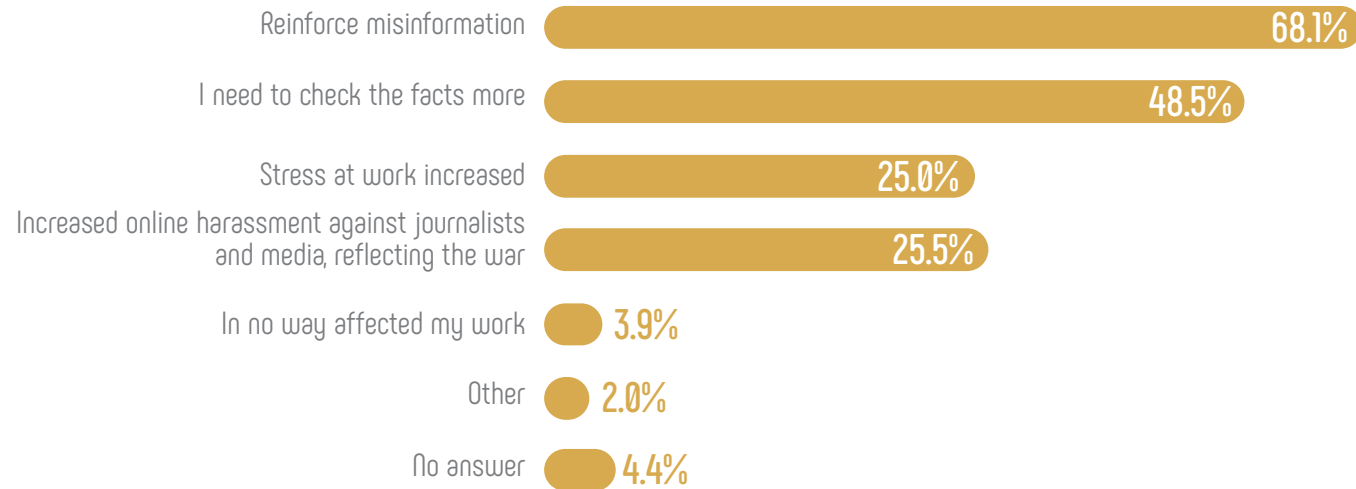


“Spreading fake news across the board”. “The media show bias and lower their criteria for the credibility of content that coincides with their positions”. They have adopted one viewpoint that enjoys complete dominance. The other point of view is typically demonized.” This is what some respondents commented.

The spread of misinformation is among the most significant challenges unleashed by the war in Ukraine (Figure 24). One in two respondents said they needed to do more fact-checking. One in four noted that workplace stress has increased. The percentage of journalists and media who are subjected to online harassment is also worryingly high (25.5 per cent).

Chart 24

WHAT ADDITIONAL CHALLENGES HAS THE WAR IN UKRAINE UNLOCKED IN YOUR WORK?



Respondents pointed out that the need to monitor and moderate comments to posts on the website and articles shared on Facebook has increased many times. Even in the first days of the war in Ukraine, some media outlets shut down their forums altogether.

"We were literally flooded with a wave of pro-Russian comments by "trolls", especially at the beginning of the war." "There is a "war" being waged in the field of trolls as well, they have multiplied. Or at least their comments are many times more than before the war. Even the pandemic and the 'scary' vaccines did not cause such an 'avalanche' of verbal sloppiness," journalists noted.

Here are more comments:

"He made a laughing stock of the TV stations and much of the rest of the Bulgarian media, which are afraid to say a word about the real reasons that triggered the final phase of the 8-year civil war in Ukraine."

"More polarization among the public and a tendency to condemn unedited material."

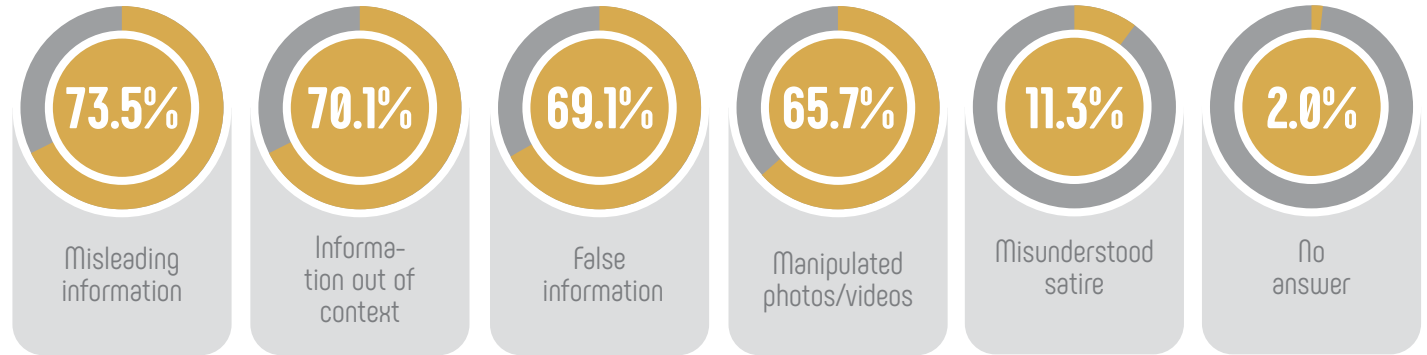
"War is the worst social crisis, yet there has not been a war in Europe for over 70 years. Make yourself aware of who knows what and how they can react in such a situation. There have been real hot proxy wars between the two super giants all over the other continents during these decades, even after the collapse of one of them."

"Again, a spectacular push in the direction of reflecting only correct Western propaganda - pro-Ukraine. Any other point of view is banned through "fact-checkers", stigmatization, insults, slander, etc. A basic principle of journalism has been violated - to give publicity to both sides in a conflict."

Journalists are most often confronted with misleading information in their work. Other forms of misinformation - false claims and information taken out of context - are almost equally common. The spread of manipulated photos and videos is also high (Figure 25).

Chart 25

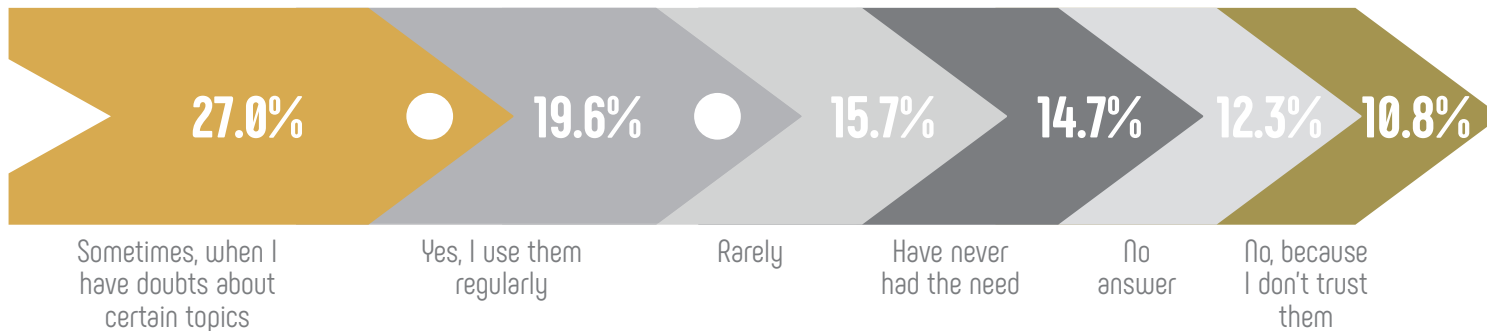
WHAT ARE THE MOST COMMON CASES OF MISINFORMATION YOU HAVE ENCOUNTERED RECENTLY?



One in five respondents regularly use fact-checking platforms, and one in three sometimes when in doubt. One in ten do not trust them, and nearly 15% say they have never had the need (Chart 26).

Chart 26

DO YOU CITE AND USE FACT-CHECKING PLATFORMS AS A SOURCE IN YOUR WORK?



The polarisation unleashed by the fighting in Ukraine, the strong politicisation and ideologization, the spread of hate speech in the Bulgarian public space does not bypass journalism. The media are a mirror image of society. And the comments and assessments shared by respondents in this segment of the AEJ-Bulgaria survey is indicative of the effects the high emotional charge that the war leaves. We publish without editorial intervention some of the comments that describe instances of misinformation:

"Every day I encounter examples of disinformation on a variety of topics – pro-Kremlin fake news, defamation of political figures through fabricated facts, pseudo-facts on health and economic issues. The phenomenon has intensified since the beginning of the war in Ukraine and the gaining of parliamentary representation by a party like Revival, which uses disinformation and manipulation of facts as its main political weapon."

"There are many examples from the war in Ukraine. On Ukraine's side - the initial announcements about the "dead" on the Snake Island, who then turned out to be alive and captured. On the Russian side, the claims that the pregnant Mariana Vishemirska from the maternity hospital they bombed in Mariupol was an 'actress'."

"An example of misinformation are all manipulative texts that present only the Ukrainian view of the war in a one-sided way. There can be no objectivity when it is "allowed" to publish only Ukraine's version and everything that comes from the Russian side is labelled as propaganda. Interpreting the information war only from the Ukrainian point of view makes current Western (and Bulgarian) journalism a propaganda tool."

"Publications about Boris Johnson's statement that Russia could use nuclear weapons and the like. The information is linked to a statement but presented backwards. Twisted."

"Distribution of a list of Bulgarians who died in a fire in Odessa, which is absolutely false."

"Dissemination of old photos and videos from various locations under the pretext that they are from the war in Ukraine."

"Scandalous accusation that everything in Bucha is staged. In Telegram, the Russian Ministry of Defense wrote that the Bucha videos were "staged and provocative."

"The case of the ship Tsarevna."

"A photo published by the Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman of Bulgarian trucks with Ukrainian grain."

"Pictures of people killed in Ukraine."

"The claim that Russia has deported 1 million Ukrainian citizens to its territory, for which there is no evidence and, given the enormous logistical problems the Russians have, clearly defies common sense."

"The events in Bucha (waving hands, etc.) Snake Island and the Russian ship. Takeover of Tsarevna."

"Fake news about bio labs in Ukraine, presenting old photos and videos of protests for new ones, news of multiple vaccine deaths, etc. The examples are countless."

"The masterpiece is: "Ukraine evacuates its last fighters from Azovstal" - I quote verbatim the website of Radio Darik. But the phenomenon is not only Bulgarian. The New York Times had to spit on its prestige in similar fashion. Shameful times for journalism!"

"The frequent inviting of people who supposedly present the other point of view on national air, but in fact speak unverified facts, without the presenters being able to detect them."

"Already on the third day of the war at the Danube Bridge border crossing, border guards claimed that Zelensky was already in Poland and had gone into hiding. This was the first misinformation that reached the Bulgarians from the Russian mass media."

"Manipulative information and commentary on national television and some well-guarded electronic and print media. Brutal servitude of fake, disgusted, "grant" sell-outs!"

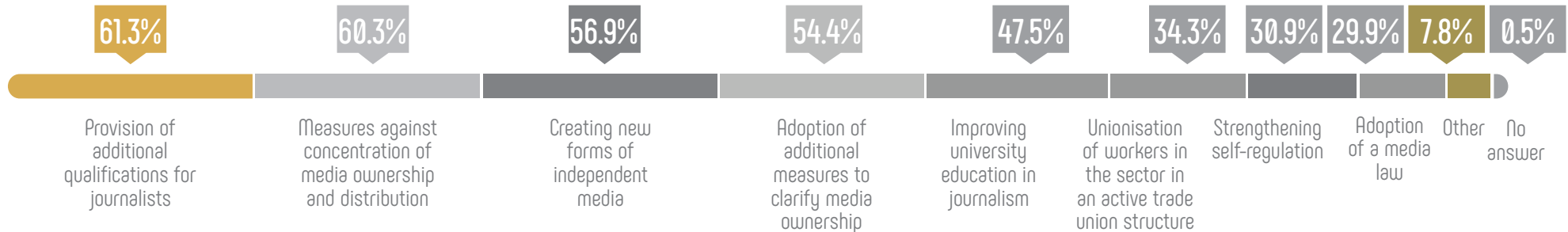
SELF-REFLECTION – PROBLEM AREAS FOR THE MEDIA

Once again, the creation of measures against the concentration of media ownership and distribution are among the most important tools that would improve the Bulgarian media environment, according to the respondents. The lack of effective action in this direction has been reported for seven years in AĒJ Bulgaria surveys. The same is true for taking activities to clarify media ownership (Chart 27).

For the first time in the AĒJ-Bulgaria surveys, the provision of additional qualifications for journalists rises to the top of the list, ahead of all other measures. In 2017, decisions in this direction were supported by 48.5%, three years after by 27.7 % of respondents. And in 2022, the growth is more than evident – by 61.3 %. The health crisis triggered by the pandemic, the disinformation storm, the new information war fronts, the merging of editorial content with the political agenda have revealed serious deficits in Bulgarian journalism. And the educational and qualification training of journalists are important tools to protect the immunity of the profession. This is probably why every second respondent sees hope for strengthening the media environment in improving university education in journalism. Here the increase since the last survey is twofold. Another solution to cutting the conflict knots in the sector is the creation of new forms of independent media – nearly 5 %.

Chart 27

AND NOW WE WANT TO KNOW YOUR OPINION ON THE MOST IMPORTANT MEASURES THAT CAN BE TAKEN TO IMPROVE THE MEDIA ENVIRONMENT IN BULGARIA.



Attitudes towards the adoption of a media law, strengthening self-regulation and strengthening the media community by building a strong trade union structure remain unchanged compared to 2020.

The topic of the actions and solutions to improve the media environment in Bulgaria gathers quite an emotional charge. It can be seen from the comments left by the respondents. Some believe that intolerance should be created towards "inboxers in journalism", "private owners should not be allowed to own other businesses if they want to own media". "More freedom (not more "fact-checking")", "a working judiciary", exclaim others. There are also demands to "ban funding from foreign foundations, or governments, and pledge state subsidies in exchange for meeting ethical standards and responsible journalism."

"The problem is all about funding," another respondent noted. According to him, "media with misleading and fake content actually attract much more traffic". "They can earn a lot more than standard ads - GOOGLE ADS. Facebook and Google cannot be regulated by our humble little country," he adds.

It is also proposed to provide support for regional and specialised media. "There one finds what one needs and can easily distinguish the fake from the real news", a journalist commented. And a colleague of his wishes meekly: "a smarter public".



Kingdom of the Netherlands

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