



Activity report 2023

Association of European Journalists - Bulgaria

In 2023 the Association of European Journalists – Bulgaria (AEJ-Bulgaria) continued following its mission - to enhance the media freedom in the country and to strengthen the local journalistic community. During the reporting period we have kept implementing our priorities such as organizing events and trainings for journalists and students, monitoring the media sector in the country and issuing critical statements each time we detect an infringement of ethics and freedom of speech; publishing and popularizing media analysis on our website, publishing information about opportunities for journalists, who want to develop their professional skills, exploring new opportunities for partnerships and common projects.

Among the priority activities of our organization are developing the platform for media literacy and journalism for high-school students called sCOOL Media. The initiative started 5 years ago and continues to gain trust among its target group of young people. The second crucial initiative Factcheck.bg, which started in 2021, remains the first and only fact-checking platform in the country and it is part of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) powered by the Poynter Institute. Factcheck.bg has its independent editorial team that works on a daily basis for debunking major disinformation and propaganda statements, it has successfully positioned itself among the sources of information that are trusted by the Bulgarian readers in recent years.

During the reported period AEJ-Bulgaria has conducted its traditional survey on freedom of speech among Bulgarian journalists, which is a biannual research that has been started back in 2011. The most recent study was supported for the second time by the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Bulgaria. The analysis was entitled "Media under fire" and reflected the pandemic, the war in Ukraine and the spiral of political crises in the country, that has become leading factors with a deep imprint on the media environment in Bulgaria. Bulgarian journalists face a series of challenges - stress, online harassment, attempts to interfere with editorial content, self-censorship, financial difficulties - are among the conclusions of the report.

Since 2022 AEJ-Bulgaria has started a legal aid fund to support the journalists who face SLAPP charges, which have become a common occurrence in the country in recent years. On World Press Freedom Day (May 3, 2023), we announced a campaign to raise awareness about this problem and how the SLAPP trials are making journalists' silence dangerous for the whole society. There are current lawsuits against Bulgarian journalists and media with a total value of several million leva. Claims for one million leva have been filed by the insurance company Lev Ins against a small independent editorial team of Mediapool. These are not ordinary lawsuits, but "slap suits," or SLAPPs, aimed at silencing the voices of journalists. These cases are led by politicians or persons with economic power. This is why the legal support fund will be an important strategic activity of AEJ-Bulgaria in the years to come.



Current projects and partnerships

- GOOGLE and the Association of European Journalists - Bulgaria (AEJ) have launched a new partnership aimed at supporting efforts to improve media literacy and counter disinformation in Bulgaria. The project was launched in June 2023 and focuses on two of the key initiatives of AEJ - Bulgaria's first specialized fact-checking platform Factcheck.bg and sCOOL Media - a national bilingual platform that promotes journalism and media literacy in schools across the country.
- Project for organizational capacity "Supporting Journalism to Strengthen Democracy in Bulgaria" funded by America for Bulgaria Foundation.
- The project "Strengthening the fact-checking community in Bulgaria" implemented by Factcheck.bg, in cooperation between the FactCheck.bg platform, with the financial support of the US State Department and in partnership with Poynter to organize a series of trainings for fact-checkers. The "Boosting the fact checking community in Bulgaria" initiative lasts until November 2023.
- Preparation of an international conference, jointly with the World Press Institute and the "America for Bulgaria" foundation, planned for November 8, 2023.
- The project "Science and journalism: together against the infodemic", which was launched in October 2021, with the support of the Active Bulgaria Citizens Fund under the Financial Mechanism of the European Economic Area and in partnership with Norsensus Mediaforum, Norway; Thrace University, Center for Plant Systems Biology and Biotechnology (CBSBB), Association for Career Development and Training (ACRO), has been extended until the end of October 2023 due to a successful application for additional funds to promote its activities.
- Active partnership with the media organization Internews in the field of digital security.
- Working with the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Bulgaria, which supported an intensive course on investigative journalism in partnership with the Investigative Reporting Lab (IRL) – an innovative investigative collective from North Macedonia, part of the International Organized Crime and Corruption Journalism Project (OCCRP).
- In partnership with the GLAS Foundation, the Bilitis Foundation and Oslo Pride continued the final reporting activities of the "Community Voices" project, implemented with financial support provided by Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway under the EEA Financial Mechanism.
- In September 2023, we launched the Media Lab platform, which gathers all the organization's training initiatives in one place. The new educational unit at AEJ-Bulgaria aims to provide you with quick and easy access to practical and targeted trainings, which have been developed specifically for the needs of the Bulgarian professional community. The initiative is supported by the America for Bulgaria Foundation.
- A new direction in Lidl Bulgaria's socially responsible program "You and Lidl for our tomorrow" supports media and journalistic projects, with AEJ-Bulgaria partnering in the new program, which will start collecting proposals in September 2023

Projects that have been successfully finished within the reporting period:

- In April, the initiative of the "Anti-Corruption Fund" (ACF) Foundation to create a report dedicated to slapping cases, or so-called, was completed. SLAPP (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation). It was part of a project implemented in partnership with the Association of European Journalists - Bulgaria and with the support of the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Bulgaria.
- The first event of the new Sofia Talks Media conference format was dedicated to the topic of young people in journalism and journalism for youth and children. The international conference took place on June 30, 2023 with the support of the Friedrich Naumann Freedom Foundation and the America for Bulgaria Foundation.
- Collaboration with Zinc Network and the Central European Media Program (CEMP) to organize an intensive workshop on open source intelligence gathering techniques (OSINT) for investigative journalism. The training was also held in partnership with DFRLab on 10 and 11 June 2023. Second collaboration during the review period with Zinc Network in partnership with Google News Initiative to organize a workshop "Sustainable Media: Innovation in Audience Building and Revenue Generation for Independent Media ", which will be held on September 30 and October 1.
- The "Citizen Hitchhiker" initiative is jointly organized by the Bulgarian Center for Non-Profit Law and the Association of European Journalists - Bulgaria. The monthly meetings of the Citizen Hitchhiker's Club will be held in a discussion format with a leading journalist, an expert on the chosen topic and a citizen with a position. The initiative is implemented with financial support provided by Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway under the EEA Financial Mechanism.
- The project "Ukraine on focus: tracking the disinformation in Bulgaria" is supported by the structure of the European Parliament in Bulgaria with a duration until the end of June 2023. The goal of the initiative is to limit disinformation related to the war in Ukraine by providing verified information to the Bulgarian media.
- Cooperation between the FactCheck.bg platform and the US Embassy in Sofia to create the PolitCheck section. The initiative is supported by the Countering State Disinformation Innovation Fund (CSDIF).

Events

During the reported period 2022-2023 AEJ-Bulgaria has organized and participated (as a partner or by providing a lecturer) in a total of 68 events, including trainings, webinars, conferences, internal meetings of the AEJ-Bulgaria members community, discussions and lectures within the community of Scoolmedia, etc.

The full list of organized events includes:

- October 10, 2022 Meeting with journalist: Mirolubna Benatova Participants: 40
- December 5, 2022 Online meeting "Log in to the newsroom". Training students who wish to join the media team. Number of participants: 16
- December 6, 2022 Online meeting "Enter the newsroom". Training of students who wish to join the media team. Number of participants: 16
- December 12, 2022 Media Literacy in the Classroom. Media literacy training at a school in Ruse. Lecturer: Christian Yulzari. Number of participants: 25



- December 12, 2022 Media Literacy in the Classroom. Media literacy training at a school in Ruse. Lecturer: Christian Yulzari. Number of participants: 24
- December 16, 2022 Media Literacy in the Classroom. Media literacy training in school. Lecturer: Christian Yulzari. Number of participants: 18
- December 16, 2022 Media Literacy in the Classroom. Media literacy training in school. Lecturer: Christian Yulzari. Number of participants: 19
- December 17, 2022 "How to write news" workshop. Training students who wish to join the media team. Lecturer: Petar Georgiev Number of participants: 7
- January 21, 2023 Workshop "How to write news". Training students who wish to join the media team. Lecturer: Petar Georgiev Number of participants: 4
- February 6, 2023 Media Literacy in the Classroom. Media literacy training in the 97th secondary school. Lecturer: Dara Sapundjieva. Number of Participants: 19
- February 6, 2023 Media Literacy in the Classroom. Media literacy training in the 97th secondary school. Lecturer: Dara Sapundjieva. Number of Participants: 21
- February 8, 2023 Media Literacy in the Classroom. Media literacy training in the 97th secondary school. Lecturer: Ekaterina Vasileva Number of Participants: 15
- February 8, 2023 Media Literacy in the Classroom. Media literacy training in the 97th secondary school. Lecturer: Ekaterina Vasileva Number of Participants: 13
- February 15, 2023 Media Literacy in the Classroom Media Literacy Training at 31 SUCHEM. Lecturer: Ekaterina Vasileva Number of Participants: 47
- February 16 Media literacy in the classroom Media literacy training in the 7th grade. Lecturer Dara Sapundjieva. Number of participants: 40
- February 18, 2023 Full-day media literacy training for young people in Kardzhali. Lecturers: Kristian Yulzari and Ekaterina Vasileva. Number of participants: 34
- February 23, 2023 Media literacy in the classroom Media literacy training at American College, Sofia. Lecturer: Dara Sapundjieva. Number of participants: 16
- February 23, 2023 Meeting with the media club of the 1st English High School, Sofia. Lecturer: Maria Milkova, editor-in-chief of sCOOL Media Number of participants: 7
- March 16, 2023 Meeting with journalist - Zhivko Konstantinov. Number of participants: 12
- March 17, 2023 Media Literacy in the Classroom. Media literacy training at NPMG, Sofia. Lecturer: Dara Sapundjieva. Number of participants: 25
- March 24, 2023 Information meeting, a meeting to clarify the application for the sCOOL Media summer camp in 2023. Lecturer: Boryana Jambazova. Number of participants: 15
- March 25, 2023 Media literacy training for teachers Lecturer: Ivan Radev, expert from AEJ-Bulgaria Number of participants: 11
- November 15, 2022 How to Investigate with Video and Images Workshop. Guest speaker Atar Mirza, reporter at the American newspaper Washington Post Number of participants: 30
- November 24, 2022 Fact-checking training on "Science and Journalism" in Sofia. Lecturers: Maria Cheresheva (journalism and part of the AEJ team - Bulgaria); Georgi Marchev (from the Factcheck.bg fact-checking platform); Associate Professor Vesela Kazashka, Ph.D. (Center for Plant System Biology and Biotechnology, CSRBB), Milena Ilieva (AKRO). Number of participants: 25



- November 25, 2022 Fact-checking training on "Science and Journalism" in Blagoevgrad. Speakers were: Ivan Radev (journalist and part of the AEJ team - Bulgaria); Georgi Marchev (from the Factcheck.bg fact-checking platform); Associate Professor Vesela Kazashka, Ph.D. (Center for Plant System Biology and Biotechnology, CSRBB), Milena Ilieva (AKRO). Number of participants: 7
- December 2, 2022 Seminar "Investigative journalism in a hostile environment" Guest speaker Alexey Kovalev, investigative editor of the Russian media Meduza Number of participants: 26
- December 2, 2022 Workshop "How to Grow Successful Podcasts" Guest Speaker: Brian Beutler, Editor-in-Chief of Crooked Media Number of Participants: 25
- January 27, 2023 Media literacy training for Lidl management Lecturers: Ivan Radev and Yulia. Number of participants: 7
- 04 February 2023 Seminar "LGBTI people in the media: coverage beyond prejudice" in Plovdiv Lecturers: Maria Cheresheva and Irina Nedeva. Number of participants: 15
- February 8, 2023 Seminar "LGBTI people in the media: coverage beyond prejudice" in Sofia Speakers: Maria Cheresheva and Irina Nedeva. Number of participants: 15
- February 16, 2023 Training of digital communicators with "Impactdrive" Lecturers: Ivan Radev and Georgi Marchev Number of participants: 15
- February 15, 2023 Digital security training for members of AEJ-Bulgaria Lecturer: Irina Nedeva Number of participants: 20
- March 6, 2023 Training on "Fundamentals and subtleties of electoral fraud" with members of AEJ-Bulgaria Lecturers: Nikola Tulechki, Stoil Tsitselkov and Polina Paunova Number of participants: 15
- March 8, 2023 Fact-Checking Training. Speakers: Ivan Radev and Ralitsa Kovacheva Number of participants: 12
- November 2, 2022 Discussion "Civilian Hitchhiker" jointly by the Bulgarian Center for Non-Profit Law and the Association of European Journalists - Bulgaria. Moderator: Irina Nedeva Number of participants: 25
- Home of NGOs
- December 13, 2022 Press conference on the topic: "The pro-Russian disinformation and anti-democratic messages of the Kremlin in Bulgaria in the conditions of information war" jointly with the Center for the Study of Democracy Number of participants: 30
- October 17, 2022 Presentation of the results of the study of freedom of speech in Bulgaria. Speakers: Iliya Valkov, His Excellency Simon van der Burgh, Ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to Bulgaria, Darina Sarelska, TV journalist and teacher, Maria Dimitrova, editor-in-chief of Zov News from Vratsa, and Zhana Popova, lecturer at SU. Maria Cheresheva, journalist and vice-chairman of the Management Board of AEJ-Bulgaria Number of participants: 25
- November 10, 2022 International conference "New fronts in the war" with a focus on the coverage of the military conflict between Ukraine and Russia. More than 11 lecturers from Ukraine, Russia, Bulgaria and Macedonia Number of participants: 80
- November 11, 2022 Discussion with journalists from North Macedonia (Metamorphosis) and Bulgarian journalists on the topic of cooperation in the face of disinformation. Number of participants: 12



- December 1, 2022 The second annual conference "New Horizons in Journalism", organized by the World Press Institute with the support of the "America for Bulgaria" Foundation and the Association of European Journalists - Bulgaria. A total of 13 speakers from the USA, Russia, Bulgaria and Albania took part in the event. Number of participants: 140
- December 13, 2022 Discussion "Levs VS. euro what we gain and what we lose". The Citizen Hitchhiker is jointly organized by the Bulgarian Center for Non-Profit Law and the Association of European Journalists - Bulgaria. Speakers: Iliya Valkov, Romyana Trileva, Lyubomir Datsov Number of participants: 20
- December 12, 2022 Discussion: Social networks and polar opinions in the age of disinformation Lecturer: Vedat Senvicar, expert from Norsensus Mediaforum Number of participants: 47
- November 27, 2022 Fact-checking training in Bankya Lecturer: Georgi Marchev Number of participants: 20
- November 28, 2022 Fact-checking training in Bankya Lecturer: Georgi Marchev Number of participants: 20
- November 30, 2022 Fact-checking training in Hisarya Lecturer: Georgi Marchev Number of participants: 20
- December 1, 2022 Fact-checking training in Hisarya Lecturer: Georgi Marchev Number of participants: 20
- January 20, 2023 Fact-checking training Lecturers: Fani Bachvarova, Kristina Hristova, Mina Kirkova Number of participants: 25
- February 4, 2023 Training of young peace reporters of the UN Society in Bulgaria Speakers: Ralitsa Kovacheva, Georgi Marchev Number of participants: 20
- February 23, 2023 Lecture on fact-checking at UNSS Lecturer: Nikola Tulechki Number of participants: 50
- February 24 Training for teachers on the topic "Recognition and verification of online misinformation" Lecturer: Ralitsa Kovacheva Number of participants: 25
- March 22, 2023 Fact-checking lecture at AUBG Lecturer: Nikola Tulechki Number of participants: 20
- April 21, 2023; Media literacy in the classroom in the 1st grade of the 22nd SEU "Georgi Stoykov Rakovski", Sofia; number of participants: 21
- April 21, 2023; Media literacy in the classroom in the 2nd grade of the 22nd SEU "Georgi Stoykov Rakovski", Sofia; number of participants: 25
- April 26, 2023; Visit to the NFSG media club; number of participants: 11
- April 28, 2023, Training disinformation and how to write stories in Silistra; number of participants: 26
- June 5, 2023; Visit to Slivnitsa PG by transport "N.Y. VAPCAROV", number of participants: 5
- June 5, 2023; Visit to Slivnitsa "St. St. Cyril and Methodius"; number of participants: 5
- June 9, 2023; Visit to "Vasil Dechev" University in Chepelare; number of participants: 30
- June 12, 2023; Online training in partnership with Safe Playground on PR and how to reach the media; number of participants: 10
- June 28, 2023; Online training in partnership with Safe Playground on PR and how to reach the media, group 1; number of participants: 10
- June 28, 2023; Online training in partnership with Safe Playground on PR and how to reach the media, group 2; number of participants: 10



- July 1-7, 2023; Summer training camp in journalism for high school students in Blagoevgrad; number of participants: 23
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- April 4, 2023 International conference "Blurring the truth. Disinformation in Southeast Europe" in partnership with the Konrad Adenauer Foundation. Number of participants: 200
- April 8, 2023 Training of journalists and activists on the topic of slapping cases (SLAPP) in partnership with BCNP. Number of participants: 10
- April 25, 2023. Presentation of a report on the subject of slapping cases (SLAPP) in Bulgaria, in partnership with the Anti-Corruption Fund. Number of participants: 50
- April 28, 2023 Online discussion on "Countering Media Capture in Europe" in partnership with the Center for the Study of Democracy. Number of participants: 20
- June 30, 2023 Youth conference Sofia Talks Media: Youth in partnership with the Friedrich Naumann Freedom Foundation and the America for Bulgaria Foundation. Number of participants: 100

Conclusions

AEJ-Bulgaria sustains its active role in the Bulgarian media landscape by staying true to our values: defending press freedom and educating journalists. We continue to gain recognition in the society for being a reliable organization which works professionally on a local and international scale. Our capacity as a team also has been improved as we were able to organize and fulfill a record number of events.

Throughout the year, AEJ-Bulgaria continued to work in building better journalistic communities in the country. The new members of the association have increased up to 140 members. Many of them are taking active role in the discussions within the organization, as well in the activities such as issuing critical passions about the media sector in the country.

During the reporting period, AEJ-Bulgaria reports a particular intensity in the organization of trainings on various topics related to the media environment and disinformation. The interest in them is growing, especially due to the fact that most of these events are present and bring the added value of networking among the professional community that we have been building for over 10 years now. For the period April-September, we have trained a total of 2368 journalists, students and teachers (this number includes the participants in the trainings and media events organized by AEJ, sCOOLmedia, Factcheck.bg).