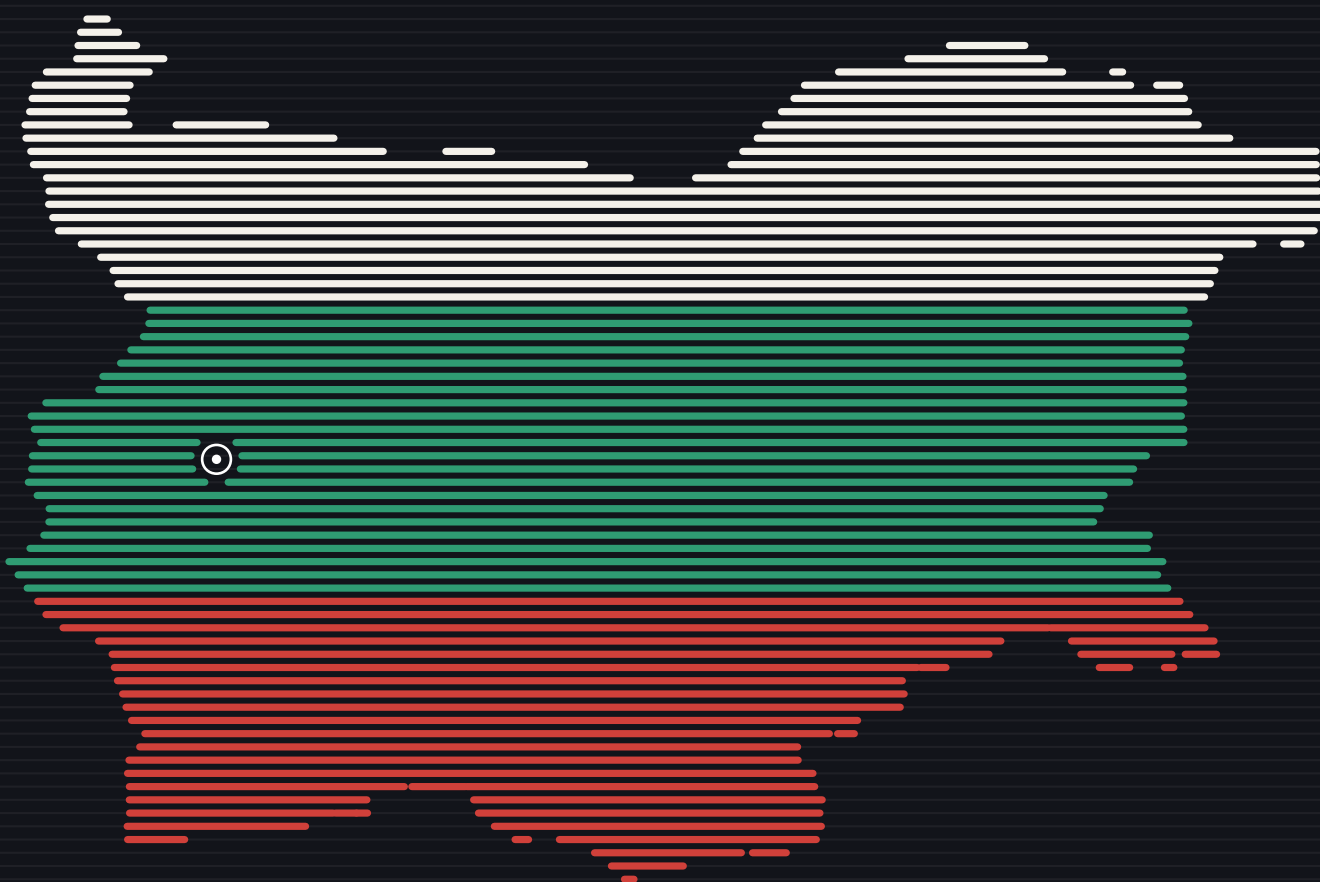


Bulgaria



*Measuring compliance with the
European Media Freedom Act (EMFA)*

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An annual measure of media capture in the EU, and of how far Member States meet the standards the European Media Freedom Act sets against it.

The **Media Capture Monitoring Report (MCMR)** is produced by the International Press Institute (IPI) and the Media and Journalism Research Center (MJRC). Each country report assesses the four safeguards in the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA) that bear most directly on media capture: the independence of public service media, the independence of media regulators, protection against the misuse of state funds to influence the media, and transparency of media ownership and safeguards for media pluralism.

The 2026 edition follows the EMFA's first year of full application, from 8 August 2025. Written by national experts and edited by MJRC and IPI, the reports are deliberately short: they track what has changed since the 2025 baseline assessment and identify the problems that remain.

The project is part of the **Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR)**, a Europe-wide mechanism which tracks, monitors and responds to violations of press and media freedom in EU Member States and Candidate Countries. It is co-funded by the European Commission.

This report covers developments up to October 2026.

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READ THE BASELINE

Media Capture Monitoring Report: Bulgaria 2025

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Bulgaria's new government has put media reform on its agenda, but more than a year into the full application of the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA), none of the changes it requires have been adopted. Mass protests brought down the Zhelyazkov government in December 2025, and former president Rumen Radev's new party won an outright majority in April 2026. The new government is the first to list media among its priorities, pledging EMFA-aligned amendments to the Radio and Television Act, and a Ministry of Culture working group has prepared a bill, but no text has yet been published. Public television has a new director, years after her predecessor's term expired. Yet pressure on newsrooms persists: BNT has removed a programme host, a deputy prime minister has disparaged public radio, the head of the state news agency is running for vice president, and the dismissal of a leading presenter at the private broadcaster bTV raised concerns about political interference. One important development for the country's journalism, yet not EMFA-related, is the adoption of an anti-SLAPP bill in September 2026 after the European Commission opened infringement proceedings.

THE YEAR IN BRIEF

DEC 2025	Mass protests force the Zhelyazkov government to resign. bTV takes presenter Maria Tsantsarova off air and then dismisses her.
FEB 2026	CEM appoints Milena Milotina director of BNT, replacing Emil Koshlukov, whose term had expired in 2022.
APR 2026	Rumen Radev's new party wins 44.6% of the vote and 131 of 240 seats. Gabriela Naplatanova is elected chair of CEM.
JUL 2026	The European Commission opens infringement proceedings over the anti-SLAPP directive. Leaked chats show bTV's news director barring a guest.
AUG 2026	Deputy Prime Minister Ivo Hristov disparages public radio in an interview with BNT; CEM condemns his remarks.
SEP 2026	Parliament adopts anti-SLAPP amendments. Kiril Valchev, head of the state news agency BTA, runs for vice president, on leave rather than resigning. BNT removes host Georgi Angelov.
OCT 2026	The Ministry of Culture's EMFA bill, due by the end of September, is still unpublished. The presidential election is due on 25 October.

01

Media is on the agenda

April 2026 election

131

OF 240 SEATS FOR RADEV'S PARTY

With 44.6% of the vote, in the country's eighth election in five years: the first outright majority in years.

The government's media pledges

- 1 Ownership
transparency of media ownership
- 2 Public service media
independence
- 3 Newsrooms
protection of editorial independence
- 4 State advertising
transparent allocation
- 5 Sources
protection of sources and investigative journalism

Deadline

End of 2027

A year after the European Media Freedom Act became fully applicable in August 2025, Bulgaria has yet to make any tangible progress on its implementation. A new government has committed, at least on paper, to the legislative changes needed to bring the country in line with the regulation, but no actual amendments have been adopted so far. At the same time, several developments over the past year raise questions about whether that commitment will be translated into practice.

The current reform push follows a period of acute political turmoil. In December 2025, a massive wave of protests swept through the country and forced the coalition government of Prime Minister Rosen Zhelyazkov to resign. The election that followed in April 2026, the country's eighth vote in five years, broke a long-running pattern: the newly formed party of former president Rumen Radev took 44.6 percent of the vote¹. This decisive result, one that the country has not seen in years, allowed his party to secure 131 seats in the 240-seat Parliament and form a majority government.

Radev ran on an anti-corruption ticket and vowed to rid the country of endemic graft. When his cabinet published its programme² for the remainder of its term, it listed media among its priorities, unlike previous governments. The 200-page document pledges to “recover” the media industry through a package of changes to the law covering transparency of media ownership, the independence of public service media, protection of editorial independence, transparency in the allocation of state funds for advertising, and protection of journalistic sources and investigative journalism. It also promises to “amend and supplement the Radio and Television Act in accordance with EMFA”, “ensuring media pluralism, editorial independence and transparency of the ownership of media service providers”. The deadline for adopting those changes is the end of 2027, according to the programme.

The practical work was delegated to yet another working group, established by the Ministry of Culture, which is in charge of media policy. It brings together representatives of state institutions, the Council for Electronic Media (CEM), public service media, professional organizations and academia. According to the Ministry, the group “has reviewed the national legal framework and prepared a consolidated bill”. Previous working groups established to examine and coordinate EMFA implementation have been disbanded and recreated amidst repeated election disruption and changes in government over the past few years.

In a statement, the ministry acknowledges gaps in the current framework across a wide range of topics, including “editorial independence, protection of journalistic sources and confidential communications, the status and resources of the media regulator, the independent functioning of public service media, transparency of media ownership and state advertising, and the framework for

1. Rumen Radev's party wins Bulgarian election, BBC, 20 April 2026, www.bbc.com/news/articles/cm2kgm1zpgro
 2. “Програма за управление на Република България 2026 -2030” (Governance Programme of the Republic of Bulgaria 2026-2030), www.gov.bg/files/common/%D0%B7%D0%B0%20%D1%83%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B2%D0%BB%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%B5%20%D0%BD%D0%B0%20%D0%A0%D0%B5%D0%BF%D1%83%D0%B1%D0%BB%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%B0%20%D0%91%D1%8A%D0%BB%D0%B3%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%B8%D1%8F%202026%20-%202030.pdf

assessing media concentrations”, all of which were identified as areas of concern in the previous two reports.³ It also says that a “mechanism is being developed to assess the impact of certain concentrations on media pluralism and editorial independence”.

At the same time, the ministry has not set out what those changes might involve, and no concrete proposals have been made public. The “effective implementation of the EMFA”, however, the ministry argues, depends on “clear division of responsibilities among the relevant authorities, effective coordination, adequate resources, and reliable, up-to-date information on media ownership and public funding”, which it describes as one of the “main practical challenges.”

The working group was due to conclude its work and finalize the bill by the end of September 2026, but no information has been released before the issue of this report in mid-October 2026. The ministry expects the changes to be adopted by the end of the year, the statement reads.

One important development for Bulgarian journalism, albeit not EMFA-related, was the adoption of the amendments⁴ offering protection against lawsuits designed to intimidate critics. The Parliament approved law changes two months after the European Commission launched in July an infringement procedure⁵ against Sofia for failing to align its national legislation with the anti-SLAPP directive.

At the end of 2025, amendments to anti-trust legislation⁶ allowed for an in-depth examination of concentrations where an assessment is required from a specialized state authority legally mandated to regulate the relevant sector. No corresponding amendments were made to the Radio and Television Act, however, so CEM has no power to carry out such evaluations in the media market.

Overall, the current cabinet appears to show more political will to align Bulgarian legislation with the EMFA than its predecessors. Will alone, however, won't be enough. The sector is plagued by structural problems that legislation cannot resolve on its own.

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3. Dzhambazova, B. (2025). Media Capture Monitoring Report: Bulgaria 2025. IPI and MJRC. journalismresearch.org/media-capture-monitoring-report-bulgaria-2025/
 4. “Парламентът прие окончателно правила за защита срещу т.нар. дела шамари” (Parliament adopted the so-called anti-SLAPP bill), Bulgarian National Radio, 30 September, 2026, bnrnews.bg/horizont/post/535265/parlamentat-prie-okonchatelno-pravila-za-zashtita-sreshtu-tnar-dela-shamari
 5. Commission Opens Infringement Proceedings Over Anti-SLAPP Directive Transposition, the European Association of Private International Law, 16 July, 2026, eapil.org/2026/07/16/commission-opens-infringement-proceedings-over-anti-slapp-directive-transposition/
 6. Spassov, Orlin, Ognyanova, Nelly, Daskalova, Nikoleta, EUI; RSC; Research Project Report; Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom (CMPF); 2026; Country Reports, cadmus.eui.eu/server/api/core/bitstreams/b8901241-08c8-4b54-9709-f3a16f6476e0/content/

02

New leadership, old problems

PUBLIC SERVICE
MEDIA

EMFA ART. 5

BNT director

2022

YEAR THE PREVIOUS TERM
EXPIRED

Emil Koshlukov stayed in post through court disputes until CEM appointed Milena Milotinova in February 2026.

Bulgarian National Television (BNT), the public broadcaster, has seen its first leadership change in years. In February 2026, CEM finally appointed a new director at BNT.⁷ The change came after protracted court disputes that allowed Emil Koshlukov, the previous head of the broadcaster, to remain in the post even though his term expired in 2022. The new director, Milena Milotinova, worked as a BNT reporter and news anchor between 1990 and 2001. Like her predecessor, she later moved into politics, serving as a member of parliament between 2001 and 2005.

Because Koshlukov's tenure had been marred by concerns over biased news coverage and the broadcaster's independence, the change of leadership was broadly welcomed. The goodwill, however, has not gone untested. In September 2026, the removal of Georgi Angelov from his position of host of a long-running history programme and a foreign-affairs talk show raised questions about the reasons behind it. BNT cited "programming changes"⁸ and denied that any BNT journalists would be dismissed.

Politicians have added their own pressure. In August 2026, Deputy Prime Minister Ivo Hristov used an interview with BNT,⁹ where he used to work as a TV host around a decade ago, to share his views on media freedom.

"The oligarchy has captured the Bulgarian media. I'm afraid that this is also being felt in public service media. BNT is one of the last places where certain principles are respected and upheld. It is difficult for me to say the same about Bulgarian National Radio," he said. His remarks drew criticism from both the journalistic community and opposition parties. CEM issued a statement¹⁰ condemning them, saying that "it's unacceptable for high-ranking government representatives to pit the two public broadcasters against each other".

The proximity of media and politics is becoming more visible in the run-up to the presidential election scheduled for October 25. Iliana Iotova, Radev's former vice president and herself a former journalist, who is currently serving as president, is among the main contenders. She nominated Kiril Valchev, the current head of the Bulgarian News Agency (BTA), as her running mate for vice president.¹¹ Rather than stepping down from his post at the public service news agency, he took leave for the duration of the campaign.

MEDIA PLURALISM AND
POLITICAL INFLUENCE

EMFA ART. 6 & 22

7. "Директорът на БТА Кирил Вълчев е кандидатът за вицепрезидент на Илияна Йотова" (Head of BTA, Kiril Valchev, is Iliana Iotova's pick for vice president), Svobodna Tochka, 3 September 2026, svobodnatochka.bg/novini/kiril-valchev-kanidat-vitseprezident-iliyana-yotova/
8. ""Честит 9 септември!" Новото ръководство на БНТ изхвърли водещия на "ИсторияБГ" Георги Ангелов", "Happy September 9th!" BNT's new management ousts Georgi Angelov, host of IstoriyaBG, Mediapool.bg, 9 September, 2026, www.mediapool.bg/chestit-9-septemvri-novoto-rakovodstvo-na-bnt-izhvarli-vodeshtiya-na-istoriyabg-georgi-angelov-obnovena-news387344.html
9. Video of Ivo Hristov's interview available online at: bnt.bg/news/ekskluzivno-vicepremierat-ivo-hristov-v-studioto-na-bnt-348689news.html
10. CEM's statement about Ivo Hristov's remarks available online at: cem.bg/displaynewsbg/1151
11. "Директорът на БТА Кирил Вълчев е кандидатът за вицепрезидент на Илияна Йотова" (BTA's Head Kiril Valchev is Iliana Iotova's pick for vice president), Svobodna Tochka, 3 September, 2026, svobodnatochka.bg/novini/kiril-valchev-kanidat-vitseprezident-iliyana-yotova/

Iotova and her main competitor, Andrey Gyurov, announced their bids for the presidency with the backing of so-called nomination committees, groups of public figures who endorse a particular candidate. Their respective committees include a number of working journalists. Briefly among them was a political reporter for the public broadcaster who covers the presidency. She promptly withdrew her support, citing ethical reasons. These instances raised doubts¹² about journalists' objectivity in their work, given their stated political leanings.

In the meantime, fears about pressure on newsrooms remain a key concern. The most prominent case involves bTV, one of the leading private TV channels in the country.

At the end of 2025, Maria Tsantsarova, a well-known presenter recognized for her probing questioning of politicians across all major parties, was removed from the air. Amid the anti-government protests that engulfed Bulgaria in December, she had appeared on air sipping from a mug with the slogan "Time to Make Real Change". Initially, the channel denied that she had been dismissed, saying it was negotiating a different role for her. The absence of Tsantsarova¹³ from the screen raised concerns about political interference and prompted a protest¹⁴ in front of bTV's building in her support. Shortly after that, bTV announced that Tsantsarova had been dismissed¹⁵ for "unprecedented violations" of the broadcaster's internal editorial standards and accused her of expressing her political views during the talk show. Stoyan Georgiev, an investigative reporter, also left the station in solidarity¹⁶.

The case proved not to be isolated. In July 2026, leaked chat conversations¹⁷ showed that Asen Ivanov, head of News, Current Affairs and Sports at bTV, instructed staff to withdraw a confirmed interview with Martin Atanasov, a 19-year-old who launched a digital platform that tracks and analyzes public healthcare spending in the country. Ivanov wrote in a chat that the guest speaker would not make it on air "as long as it depends on me"¹⁸. Ivanov later said that the guest had engaged in "a deliberate provocation and showed disrespect toward a television host", a reference to a December 2025 appearance in which Atanasov had given a substitute presenter a mug carrying the same "Time to Make Real Change" slogan as the one used by Tsantsarova.

bTV, 2025-2026

- Maria Tsantsarova presenter, taken off air and dismissed, Dec 2025
- Stoyan Georgiev investigative reporter, left in solidarity
- Martin Atanasov guest barred by the news director, July 2026

12. Statement by the Association of European Journalists in Bulgaria, available online at: <https://aej-bulgaria.org/%d0%b6%d1%83%d1%80%d0%bd%d0%b0%d0%bb%d0%b8%d1%81%d1%82%d0%b8%d0%ba%d0%b0%d1%82%d0%b0-%d1%82%d1%80%d1%8f%d0%b1%d0%b2%d0%b0-%d0%b4%d0%b0-%d0%b7%d0%b0%d0%bf%d0%b0%d0%b7%d0%b8-%d1%80%d0%be%d0%bb%d1%8f/>
13. Bulgaria: top TV anchor taken off air amid alleged political interference, European Federation of Journalists, 22 December, 2025, europeanjournalists.org/blog/2025/12/22/bulgaria-top-tv-anchor-taken-off-air-amid-political-interference/
14. Bulgarian TV host's removal sparks protests, Politico, 20 December, 2025, www.politico.eu/article/bulgaria-tv-host-maria-tsantsarova-removal-sparks-protests/
15. "bTV и Мария Цънцарова се разделят" (bTV and Maria Tsantsarova Part Ways), bTV, 22 December, www.btv.bg/za-btv/spetsialno/btv-i-marija-cancarova-se-razdeljat.html
16. "Стоян Георгиев напусна bTV в подкрепа на Цънцарова" (Stoyan Georgiev left bTV in solidarity with Tsantsarova), Mediapool.bg, 22 December, www.mediapool.bg/bulgaria/stoyan-georgiev-napusna-btv-v-podkrepa-na-tsantsarova/
17. "Този с чашата ли... никога". Директорът на новините в БТВ забранил участие на Мартин Атанасов за здравната му платформа ("The one with the cup? ...Never." The bTV news director banned Martin Atanasov's appearance to discuss his health platform), Mediapool.bg, 9 July, 2026, www.mediapool.bg/tozi-s-chashata-li-nikoga-direktorat-na-novinite-v-btv-zabranil-uchastie-na-martin-atanasov-za-zdravnata-mu-platforma-news385281.html
18. "Този с чашата ли... никога". Директорът на новините в БТВ забранил участие на Мартин Атанасов за здравната му платформа ("The one with the cup? ...Never." The bTV news director banned Martin Atanasov's appearance to discuss his health platform), Mediapool.bg, 9 July, 2026, www.mediapool.bg/tozi-s-chashata-li-nikoga-direktorat-na-novinite-v-btv-zabranil-uchastie-na-martin-atanasov-za-zdravnata-mu-platforma-news385281.html

Those worrisome examples highlight why the EMFA matters for Bulgaria. Each of its central obligations exposes a weakness the country has been unable to address on its own. The next few months will be indicative. The publication of the working group's amendments, their treatment of media ownership transparency and state advertising, and the timetable Parliament gives them will show whether the government intends to prioritize media freedom in the country or simply satisfy Brussels' concerns on paper.

In April 2026 Gabriela Naplatanova¹⁹, a CEM member appointed by the president in 2022, was elected chair of the regulator. She succeeded Simona Velená in the post and will serve a one-year term. In the summer CEM organised a public discussion²⁰ on editorial independence, bringing together representatives of the public broadcasters, media organisations, and observers.

While CEM's budget increased to 1.98 million euros this year²¹, up from 1.76 million euros the previous year, its members continued to raise concerns about the regulator's chronic underfunding which they say limits its ability to carry out the full scope of its responsibilities²².

There are no significant changes in this area since the problems outlined in the 2025 Media Capture report. Although Bulgarian legislation requires transparency in the distribution of public funds, there are no specific rules governing the allocation of state advertising to media outlets. The lack of oversight raises concerns that public advertising budgets can be used to exert political and financial pressure on the press or to reward government-friendly publications. Small regional publications are especially vulnerable.

REGULATORY AUTHORITY

AVMSD ART. 30

CEM budget, 2026

€1.98m

UP FROM €1.76M

Members say chronic underfunding still limits the regulator's ability to carry out all its responsibilities.

MISUSE OF STATE FUNDS

EMFA ART. 25

19. Gabriela Naplatanova's bio available online at: www.cem.bg/infobg/375

20. Information about the forum available online at: www.cem.bg/displaynewsbg/1144

21. Information about CEM's budget available online at: www.cem.bg/files/17881780014400-pril-3-prog-format-2026-2028-iietap.pdf

22. "CEM прие проектобюджетите: 40% ръст на заплатите в БНР, 20% - в БНТ, 30% - в регулатора за 3 години" (CEM approved the draft budgets: a 40% salary increase for BNR, 20% - for BNT, and 30% at the regulator over three years), Offnews, 25 September, 2025, offnews.bg/medii/sem-prie-proektobiudzhete-40-rast-na-zaplatite-v-bnr-20-v-bnt-852212.html

03

Has the situation improved?

Only marginally, and so far only on paper. Political will for change has grown: the Radev government is the first to put media freedom and EMFA alignment in its programme, and the Ministry of Culture now acknowledges gaps in almost every area the 2025 report identified, from the regulator's status and resources to ownership transparency and state advertising. None of this has yet produced legislation. The working group's bill is unpublished, and the programme's own deadline is the end of 2027. The amendments to competition law that allow in-depth assessment of concentrations were not matched by changes to the Radio and Television Act, so CEM still cannot use them in the media market. In practice, the end of Koshlukov's long overstay at BNT removes one of the 2025 report's main concerns. But the removal of a programme host, the deputy prime minister's remarks against public radio, the BTA director's run for vice president and the bTV dismissals show that political pressure on newsrooms, public and private, has not eased.

04

Outstanding problems

MEDIA REGULATORS

AVMSD ART. 30

The 2025 report found CEM's appointment procedures politicised and its staffing, funding and administrative capacity inadequate. The Ministry of Culture now acknowledges the problem, but nothing has changed. The regulator also still lacks the power to assess media concentrations, because the Radio and Television Act was not amended alongside competition law.

PUBLIC SERVICE MEDIA

EMFA ART. 5

BNT's new director ends years in which the broadcaster was run by a director whose term had expired, but the rules for appointing public media heads have not changed, and funding still depends on annual government decisions. A host removal at BNT and the deputy prime minister's remarks against public radio show how exposed the broadcasters remain, and the BTA director's vice-presidential run, on leave rather than after resigning, blurs the line between the public news agency and politics.

MISUSE OF STATE FUNDS

EMFA ART. 25

There is still no framework for the allocation of state advertising, which the 2025 report found to be untendered, confidential and unmonitored. The government's programme promises transparency, but no proposal has been published.

OWNERSHIP TRANSPARENCY AND PLURALISM

EMFA ART. 6 & 22

Ownership disclosure rules remain weakly enforced, beneficial owners are often obscured, and the concentration in two conglomerates identified in 2025 has not been addressed. The dismissal of a leading bTV presenter and leaked messages showing a news director barring a guest raise serious concerns about editorial independence in private media.

Full disclosure: the author of this report works with the Association of European Journalists in Bulgaria.

An annual measure of how far EU Member States have fallen under media capture, and of how well they meet the standards set by the European Media Freedom Act to combat it.



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