

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

The law provides for freedom of speech and of the press; however, there were reports that individuals with political and economic interests intimidated journalists. NGOs reported that journalists practiced self-censorship or took money from political and business leaders and from organized crime groups to plant positive stories about the leaders and criminal groups. **In addition media owners forced journalists to pervert the facts. In many cases, the true owners of media companies could not be identified. On October 22, the National Assembly passed the Print Periodicals Media Bill, which seeks to enforce transparency in media ownership.**

Individuals criticized the government freely without reprisal. However, in rural areas offering fewer employment opportunities, individuals were more hesitant to criticize local governments.

Media organizations and in a few cases political parties freely published a variety of newspapers. Private television and radio stations provided a variety of news and public interest programming. **However, the acquisitions in June of a number of media outlets by groups affiliated with business and political interests led to further monopolization of private media and limited the variety of views available in print and on television.** Both print and electronic media were susceptible to economic and, to a certain degree, political influence. Although the state-owned electronic media presented opposition views, observers believed that the law was inadequate to protect their programming independence and left these media vulnerable to government pressure.

During the year there was one killing of a journalist reported. On January 5, Boris "Bobbie" Tsankov, the controversial author of tabloid publications on the country's underworld and a former radio show host, was killed by unknown persons. Authorities accused one person of contracting the killing. The investigation was ongoing at year's end.

During the year there were reports of threats or attempts to intimidate journalists.

On February 8, Bulgarian news agency journalist Ivan Yanev was investigating the killing of a police officer in the village of Enina when a police spokesman from the nearby city of Stara Zagora threatened him, stating that Yanev was a "dead man." Authorities accused Yanev of reporting on the killing before the official police version was released and prohibited him from returning to the crime scene.

In July Nova Television reporter Diliانا Gaytandjieva alleged that the deputy speaker of the National Assembly, Lachezar Ivanov, pressured her to stop the broadcast of a program that revealed luxury real estate and vehicles owned by six customs officers. Ivanov's motive for exerting pressure on Gaytandjieva was alleged to be a personal relationship with one of the targets of the program. Under pressure from his party, Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria, Ivanov stepped down as deputy speaker and committee chair.

During the year the police closed the investigation into the 2008 assault on *Frognews* editor in chief, Ognian Stefanov, whom authorities suspected of affiliation with www.opasnite.net, a Web site closed for reportedly releasing classified information. Police stated that they were unable to find the attackers.

Libel is legally punishable. Usually the courts interpreted the law in a manner that favored journalistic expression. Many defamation cases were prompted by journalists reporting about corruption or mismanagement; the most frequent plaintiffs were government officials and other persons in public positions.

Internet Freedom

There were no government restrictions on access to the Internet or reports that the government monitored e-mail or Internet chat rooms. Individuals and groups could engage in the peaceful expression of views via the Internet, including by e-mail. Internet Society Bulgaria estimated that approximately 45 percent of the population had access to the Internet on a regular basis. According to the European Commission's 2009 report on the single European electronic communications market, the broadband penetration rate rose to 13 percent in January compared to 11.2 percent in 2009. However, many less-developed rural areas did not have the infrastructure to support Internet services.

In 2008 the Supreme Administrative Court struck down a government decree that allowed security services to gather data on Internet users' activities. On May 10, amendments to the Electronic Communications Act restored security services' access to electronic traffic data. However, the legislation imposed strict judicial control over this authority. There were no reports that the government attempted to collect the personally identifiable information of a person in connection with that person's peaceful expression of political, religious, or ideological opinion or beliefs.