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## **BULGARIA IS LAST ON MEDIA FREEDOM IN EU AND IN THE BALKANS**

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Euractiv (25 April 2018)

Bulgaria continues to slide in the Reporters Without Borders media freedom index and occupies 111th place in the 2018 ranking, marking a drop of two places compared to 2017.

Corruption and collusion between media, politicians, and oligarchs is widespread. The most notorious embodiment of this aberrant state of affairs is Delyan Peevski (an MP from the DPS), a former head of Bulgarias main intelligence agency and owner of the New Bulgarian Media Group, the report said.

His group has six newspapers and controls nearly 80% of print media distribution. The governments allocation of EU funding to certain media outlets is conducted with a complete lack of transparency, in effect bribing them to go easy on the government in their reporting or refrain from covering certain problematic stories altogether. Threats and attacks against journalists have intensified in recent months. It can prove dangerous to be a journalist in Bulgaria, the report continued.

Peevski was nominated to run the new intelligence agency, DANS, by Sergei Stanishev, the leader of the Party of European Socialists, in June 2013. Stanishev was influential in 2013 as the leader of the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), at a time when the country had a caretaker socialist-supported cabinet. But the media mogul did not take the office, because the nomination triggered huge protests.

government to appoint a controversial media mogul as security chief.

Last December, Bulgarian opposition parties exposed what they saw as an attempt to silence and close down media considered unfriendly to the government of Boyko Borissov.

At the beginning of the year, the European Center for the Freedom of the Media proposed that the European Commission should take control over the allocation of EU funds to the media in Bulgaria.

Part of the EU funds for projects in Bulgaria are distributed only to government-friendly media. This should stop. The Bulgarian government should distribute funds equally to all media, including those who criticise it. We also urge the EU to actively monitor how European taxpayers money is spent in Bulgaria, said Lutz Kinkel of the European Center at the end of January.

Bulgaria has fallen from 36th in the annual Reporters Without Borders ranking on the Freedom of Speech Index in 2006 to the current 111th place.

In the wider Balkan region, Romania is ranked highest (44), followed by Bosnia and Herzegovina (62), Croatia (69), Greece (74), Albania (75), Serbia (76), Kosovo (78), Montenegro (103), Macedonia (109)

The latest case of harassment of a Bulgarian journalist took place a month ago. Hristo Geshov, a reporter from the town of Cherven Bryag, said that he and his family were subjected to pressure after publishing a series of exposés about irregularities in the municipal government.

Geshov revealed that three municipal councillors from Cherven Bryag were using EU funds to renovate their houses. According to the Commission for conflicts of interest, everything was above board, though the Ministry of Regional Development disagreed.

The journalist runs a channel for investigative journalism on YouTube to reveal irregularities in the municipality. One of the videos is about the purchase of an expensive new car for the director of a local hospital, which has in the meantime run up €250,000 in debt.

Police have so far filed more than 130 complaints against the journalist. This week, Geshov said several municipal officials who have shared his Facebook posts have been fired.

Bulgaria has actively supported the accession of the Western Balkan countries to the EU and the biggest highlight of its presidency is the EU-Western Balkans summit in Sofia on 17 May.

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