

**Ambassador Marcie B. Ries's remarks at Media Ownership in Bulgaria: State  
of Play and Challenges discussion**

March 11, 2015

Thank you Ognyan and thank you all for being here today to talk about a topic which is certainly very important to all of us. I happen to be a former radio journalist myself, and I certainly have a deep admiration for the work of reporters and editors and real respect for the fundamental role that the media plays in democratic societies.

Moreover, the free flow of information is central to modern life virtually everywhere and so freedom of the media is a topic of practically universal relevance and importance.

You have chosen to focus today on the “concentration of ownership” of media. This is an important topic – I agree – and certainly has a bearing on the concept of freedom of the media, which is a value I think all of us who are here today endorse.

Although I have been asked just to introduce the topic – I would like to offer a few observations about it and about the relevance of this concept here in Bulgaria. In a

democracy, the media has a critical role to play in informing citizens and voters and in playing host to or even provoking open and honest debate on public policy. We talk often about this wonderful phrase that we have a government of, by, and for the people. A democracy is a representative government but it can't be a well-functioning government unless there is an open debate about public policy, unless the voters really understand the positions of the people for whom they are voting. And beyond that really understand the concepts, the leaderships, the topics they have been following, they hear different points of view, different editorials, different people speaking on the topic, that's the way our system works.

Beyond that, the media can help people better understand the world around them, both from a high level perspective in terms of foreign and security policy and world developments but also local and societal issues like corruption, public health, poverty, education and civil society and how all of that impacts the average reader or viewer. Particularly today, with the proliferation of electronic media, people have the possibility of much greater access to information and from many more sources. In fact there're so much available and in some respect there's difficulty choosing how you're going to spend your time, your reading time.

So far so good. So why are we talking about concentration of ownership? We are talking about it because concentration in ownership of media means that despite the rich menu of information available today, citizens in a market in which ownership is limited to one or to a few get the subjective opinion of only one segment of society. And if that segment of society is deliberately using the manner in which it presents the news to influence public opinion then we have to question the existence of media freedom. To put it another way, if we accept that the purpose of the media is to inform, but citizens are only receiving only part of the story, then they cannot be said to be “informed citizens”.

I think we can acknowledge that in Bulgaria, there is a problem in that in many cases we do not know who really owns the media and therefore consumers cannot have an informed opinion about the objectivity – or lack of it – of what they are reading. So let’s imagine for a moment that you want to buy a new car and are reading a review of a model that you are considering. The review of this model extolls the virtues of it compared to all its competitors. You may be swayed by the review and tempted to buy the car. But what if you knew that the car company was owned by the same person who published the review, wouldn’t that change your mind, would that at least provoke you to question what you’ve read?

That may be a simplistic example, but it points out one of the disturbing consequences of the concentration of media ownership in the hands of a few -- it limits the average viewer's or reader's access to multiple, diverse opinions so that they can freely make up their own minds.

Over the past decade, the acquisition of a number of media outlets by a small number of groups affiliated with business and political interests has had the effect of limiting the variety of views available in print and on television. This especially can happen if owners use their position to dictate editorial content or to prescribe how the news is to be reported, for whatever reason – whether it be to impart political beliefs, to advance business interests, or in the worst case, to settle scores. This can apply to anything from a local land dispute to the most important international news. If the reader gets only one side, or worse doesn't know they are only getting one side, then they cannot be said to be truly informed.

This is where transparency of ownership becomes important. You should know who the owners are and how the outlets are funded, to truly be in a position to judge what you are reading or hearing. And I want to make clear that when I speak about transparency, I mean of course real transparency. Citizens should know who pays the bill, who are the advertisers, where does the money come from, who calls

the editorial shots, not just the name of a previously unknown company or an individual who runs the outlet, but we don't know where the source of financing comes from.

I would not argue that news outlets in the United States are completely unbiased. Far from that. However, for the most part, when you turn on a television channel or pick up a paper, you know what you're getting. If there is a particular point of view, you know what it is and in the end, you have the choice to watch it or not to watch it, or to change the channel and get a completely different perspective. And importantly, there are other channels that present other perspectives. I have to admit it's a little different situation than we used to have in the United States. We used to have a feeling that all news that is presented should be objective and shouldn't have any particular bias at all. Now we have something that's a little different from that but people are not shy about presenting what position they are coming from and so the average viewer has a choice "well I'm going to watch this or I'm going to watch that because it comes close to my views or I want to hear the other side's views or whatever."

Bulgaria has good laws on the books which should shed light on the ownership of media outlets, but the law can only work when a proper regulatory framework accompanies the laws and when journalists are in a position to report on these

matters. If citizens cannot readily determine who owns the media they are reading or watching, then a more effective regulatory mechanism is needed. I know that your Institute has done some work on this topic and it bears some further examination. It should be possible to know who really owns the papers, television stations, and internet platforms that provide the news so as to put the information provided in perspective. And, ideally there should be a menu of media providing a range of perspectives.

As you will undoubtedly discuss, concentration of ownership may well affect overall media freedom. If reporters perceive that owners want – or require – a particular point of view, then we have self-censorship in the media.

Because of its importance, civil society measures media freedom regularly and the rankings are seriously considered, and they should be. My colleague here mentioned the reporting from Reporters Without Border and I think this bears repeating. In 2013 in their index, Bulgaria fell seven places to be ranked 87th out of 179 countries. In 2014 it saw a decline, with the ranking declining to 100 out of 180 countries rated.

In the last month, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Representative on Freedom of the Media, Dunja Mijatovic, raised concern over large fines imposed on newspapers in Bulgaria for publishing news stories on

companies' financial activities and the banking sector. In one case, a media outlet was ordered to pay a record fine of 150,000 leva and an additional 10,000 leva for refusing to disclose its sources. Here's what Mijatovic said: "Large fines imposed on media outlets may lead to censorship in reporting on issues of public interest." And then he continued: "My office has been calling for laws protecting media from displaying their sources as a means to guarantee the public's access to information."

According to a 2014 Media Monitoring Survey carried out by the Media Democracy Foundation and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, only one in six Bulgarians thinks that the media is free. The Foundation's conclusions were among other things as factors leading to this opinion: journalists are perceived to be too affected by outside interests, self-regulation is too weak, and they argue that all parties, including government, ought to invest in modern and transparent information policies and regulations. So these reports point to some serious problems that are worthy of consideration.

Where press freedoms are seriously challenged or doubted, civil society certainly has a responsibility to act. I commend the Conrad Adenauer Stiftung and the other organizers and participants for holding this seminar. As you continue your

discussions today, I hope that you will develop ideas to increase transparency in media ownership and I hope your discussions will give encouragement to those journalists and editors in Bulgaria and elsewhere who are committed to informing and educating their fellow citizens and to letting them – the readers and listeners – draw their own conclusions.

As Thomas Jefferson wrote in 1823, “the only security of all is in a free press. The force of public opinion cannot be resisted when permitted freely to be expressed...it is necessary to keep the waters pure.”

Thank you and I wish you all success in your discussions today.