

# Reporters Without Borders

<http://www.rsf.org/bulgaria-car-bomb-and-hate-campaign-mark-21-10-2011,41267.html>

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Europe & ex-USSR - Bulgaria

Hate and violence

## Car bomb and hate campaign mark disturbing evolution in climate for media

21 October 2011

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Reporters Without Borders is very concerned about a new deterioration in the media freedom situation in Bulgaria in the run-up to the presidential and municipal elections due to be held on 23 October. There has been a surge of hatred and violence against journalists in recent days although so far there have been no victims.

A continuing social media hate campaign against **Mirolyuba Benatova**, a reporter for privately-owned *BTV*, in connection with her coverage of a conflict involved Roma, and the bombing of TV host **Sasho Dikov's** car on the night of 13 October have revived the fears of violence that Bulgarian journalists have so often felt in the past.

Reporters Without Borders firmly condemns the bombing, which could have had tragic consequences. No lead should be neglected in order to identify those responsible. As it coincided with a visit by European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso, those in charge of the investigation should examine the possible links with previous explosions targeting news media while European Commission delegations were visiting Bulgaria.

These coincidences are at the very least suspicious and deserve close attention. European Union officials must also end their silence on this subject. Although Bulgaria is an EU member state and the European Commission's powers in such matters are limited, the EU cannot continue to say nothing about such a dangerous situation within its own borders.

The impunity prevailing in Bulgaria in all cases of violence against the media must end. A thorough investigation is needed into the **Dikov** car bombing so that both perpetrators and instigators are identified. The other murder attempts against journalists must also be thoroughly investigated.

Reporters Without Borders reiterates its appeal to the presidential candidates to firmly and publicly undertake to ensure that the police and judicial system will make more determined efforts to find those responsible for these abuses. While the difficulty of such investigations is understandable, the judicial system complete laxness is intolerable.

Without taking a position on the substance of the accusations against **Benatova**, Reporters Without Borders is very worried by the virulence of the hate campaign that has been waged against her ever since her coverage of clashes in the village of Katunitsa on 24 September.



Demonstrations outside *BTV* headquarters demanding her head and the hatred of her being voiced on social networks, particularly Facebook, are disturbing and unacceptable. She has been called an “enemy of the Bulgarian people” and a “Jew corrupted by the Roma.” Some people have even called for her children to be run over, in reference to the car accident that triggered the violence in Katunitsa.

A journalist’s professionalism and conduct can always be the subject of a debate, but it should be conducted in a legal manner and without hate messages. In this case, the limits have been widely overstepped and some of the comments clearly constitute death threats that should not be minimized. Administrators deleted **Benatova**’s Facebook profile several times because of what had been posted on it.

Because of her fear of reprisals, **Benatova** has not appeared on the air since 24 September and is no longer able to work. It is vital that she should quickly recover her freedom in both her private and professional life. We urge *BTV* to continue to support her and not to yield to pressure.

#### **Interview with Sasho Dikov**

**Reporters Without Borders** : Mr. Dikov, lots of people are talking about the circumstances of the bombing of which you were the target, and several explanations are being offered. According to the semi-official version, the aim of the explosive that was detonated beneath your car was just to scare you. Others see it as a murder attempt. What do you think?

**Sasho Dikov** : So far there is not enough evidence to support the murder attempt theory. Only the facts are clear. At around 10 p.m. on 13 October, a powerful bomb was set off and my car was blown up. It is clear that if any passers-by had been near the car at the time, they would have been killed. And if I had been inside the car, I would be dead.

On the basis of these facts, you can suppose all sorts of things. I may have been the target because of certain things I may have said. It may have been to scare me and to make me shut up. It is also possible that the aim of the explosion was just to discredit the government, because we were receiving the president of the European Commission at the time. Those responsible may have chosen me because of my popularity. They knew it would cause a stir. My mind is not made up.

**Reporters Without Borders** : Nonetheless, it was the third case of an explosion coinciding with high-level official visits since the start of the year.

**Sasho Dikov** : Yes, there were other cases such as the bomb outside Galeria, a recognized opposition newspaper [on 10 February 2011, during a visit by four European commissioners]. I

am known for not stinting in my criticism of the government. It is serious that these events have taken place precisely when European commissioners were visiting. What's really regrettable, really appalling, is that none of these cases has been solved.

The journalist Ani Zarkova wrote a very moving letter that the newspaper Trud ran on page one. Ani was attacked a few years ago. Someone threw acid in her face to disfigure her. This criminal act was not solved. Twenty years ago someone torched the car of Petar Blaskov, one of the founders of Bulgaria's democratic press. Again, those responsible were not found. Three of four years ago, another journalist, Vasil Ivanov, found his apartment blown up. Same situation. Then we had the attack on Ognian Stephanov.

The impunity is total. None of these cases I've just mentioned has been solved. Ani Zarkova summed up the situation very well. Journalists are caught between the masterminds who write the scenarios for the attacks and use servile underlings to carry them out, and the approximately 15,000 state employees, police officers, who fail to identify them. We have special services with an enormous budget, of which millions are allocated to phone tapping. And nothing, no result. This is very worrying.

After the Galeria explosion, they tried to portray it as if those running the newspaper had set off the bomb themselves. It was the same thing with me. They said I did it to attract attention to myself. Me, Galeria... [The centre-right opposition party leader] Yane Yanev may also have blown up his own office. If you believe them, all these cases were the work of the victims themselves.

**Reporters Without Borders** : Do you think it could happen again ?

**Sasho Dikov** : Without a doubt. And I'm afraid that we may not always be so lucky.

**Reporters Without Borders** : Are you and your family receiving protection from the police or special services ?

**Sasho Dikov** : Not at all. And I don't think it would serve much purpose, inasmuch as my guards would not have been able to protect me from this bomb. What's more, I haven't really had any threats. *Kanal 3's* owner offered me protection but I refused.

**Reporters Without Borders** : No threats ? But has pressure been put on you ? In your work, by the staff or by others ?

**Sasho Dikov** : I don't want to portray myself as a martyr who is being attacked because of his work. I have always respected the rules of this trade, which I have practiced for the past 34 years. I am convinced that journalism is above all and by its nature meant to be in opposition to every kind of authority. A professional journalist just has a duty to reflect different points of view.

I have always respected journalistic ethics and I have always worked according to my conscience, without yielding to outside influence. I may have been mistaken in the comments I have made or in the way I have evaluated certain things, by they were my own opinions. Within *Kanal 3*, I have always enjoyed an exceptional situation, complete freedom of expression. It's fairly unusual here and should be emphasized. There are no taboo subjects. No obstacles are put in my path. It was already that way before the elections.

**Reporters Without Borders** : Has the situation of the Bulgarian media deteriorated ?

**Sasho Dikov** : I will give you some examples that illustrate the situation. The latest is the most striking. The presidents of the Union of Bulgarian Painters decided to award an honorary title to Prime Minister Borisov and the culture minister. A painter, the head of their supervisory commission, wrote an open letter to the media describing this as a servile decision taken under pressure. None of the state-owned media dared publish the letter.

So I wrote two articles about the case during the weekend, as the award ceremony was due to take place on the Monday. I spoke to the open letter's author, Professor Minev. It turned out that journalists had already interviewed him but their interviews had been spiked. It was totally absurd. I wrote that they were trying to make Borisov look ridiculous with all this submissiveness. It may seem like boasting to you, but I have reason to believe that it was because of me that Borisov turned the prize down at the last moment.

A conference on freedom of expression was held in Brussels a few months ago. The

newspapers Trud and 24 Chasa sent representatives but their articles were not published. Why? Another example: last year, I think, the deputy culture minister appeared at a concert bringing flowers on behalf of the prime minister. He was greeted with loud whistles. No one dared to report that. There was video of it on YouTube. No one aside from me and [famous show-business personality, singer, actor and talk-show guest] Slavi Trifonov even dared to comment on this event or circulate the video.

So, quite frankly, the situation has not improved one bit. The media continue to be in a position almost identical to what we knew 20 years ago. This is deplorable.

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