

THE LONG TRANSITION:  
PLURALISM, THE MARKET AND THE BULGARIAN MEDIA  
20 YEARS AFTER COMMUNISM

by

Velina Nacheva

A thesis submitted to The Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research  
in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Journalism

School of Journalism and Communication  
Carleton University  
Ottawa, Ontario

December 2008



Library and  
Archives Canada

Published Heritage  
Branch

395 Wellington Street  
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4  
Canada

Bibliothèque et  
Archives Canada

Direction du  
Patrimoine de l'édition

395, rue Wellington  
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4  
Canada

*Your file* *Votre référence*  
*ISBN: 978-0-494-47531-7*  
*Our file* *Notre référence*  
*ISBN: 978-0-494-47531-7*

**NOTICE:**

The author has granted a non-exclusive license allowing Library and Archives Canada to reproduce, publish, archive, preserve, conserve, communicate to the public by telecommunication or on the Internet, loan, distribute and sell theses worldwide, for commercial or non-commercial purposes, in microform, paper, electronic and/or any other formats.

The author retains copyright ownership and moral rights in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

**AVIS:**

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque et Archives Canada de reproduire, publier, archiver, sauvegarder, conserver, transmettre au public par télécommunication ou par l'Internet, prêter, distribuer et vendre des thèses partout dans le monde, à des fins commerciales ou autres, sur support microforme, papier, électronique et/ou autres formats.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur et des droits moraux qui protègent cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

---

In compliance with the Canadian Privacy Act some supporting forms may have been removed from this thesis.

Conformément à la loi canadienne sur la protection de la vie privée, quelques formulaires secondaires ont été enlevés de cette thèse.

While these forms may be included in the document page count, their removal does not represent any loss of content from the thesis.

Bien que ces formulaires aient inclus dans la pagination, il n'y aura aucun contenu manquant.

  
**Canada**

## **Abstract**

The mass media in Bulgaria have experienced a dramatic change in the aftermath of the overthrow of the communist regimes across Eastern Europe post-1989. Amidst a societal shift from totalitarianism to democracy, the media themselves embarked on a democratization project, reshaped their structure and recast their creed.

A decade after the release from the party ideology, the media succumbed to a new master: the market and new editorial constraints. Today, 20 years later, as the political and economic transition of the country has ended, the functioning of the media in an open market has brought about a new set of challenges. These challenges, such as self-censorship, economic and political interference are addressed in this research within the context of the 2008 press landscape. This thesis uses media content analysis and interviews with journalists and scholars to uncover these issues in Bulgarian media.

The main concept in this research is the role that the media should play in enhancing civil society and devising the processes of democratization in a fledgling democracy.

## Acknowledgements

This research would not have become a reality without the ongoing encouragement and outstanding support from my supervisor and mentor, Professor Kirsten Kozolanka. My deepest appreciation goes to Professor Kozolanka for her helpful suggestions, devoted interest and great insights.

My cordial gratitude goes to all the professors in the School of Journalism and Communication at Carleton, whose scholarship and numerous discussions have been a great source of inspiration for me in this endeavour.

I am sincerely grateful to the Carleton's Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for providing the financial assistance that enabled me to complete this project.

I earnestly thank my wonderful friends and housemates for their friendship and care, and my landlady for giving me a home away from home. I am also thankful to the many individuals I encountered along the way whose words have challenged some of my assumptions and have inspired alternatives. I also want to thank the journalists and media analysts who took their time and shared their experiences with me.

Above all, I owe my most heartfelt gratefulness to my incredibly fantastic and one-of-a-kind parents, Rossen and Jana, who have always believed in me and in the completion of this project, for their endless support, encouragement, perseverance, patience, and upon whose love I am completely dependent and have always warmly cherished.

Finally, my deepest gratitude goes to my most beloved D. John, who has not only provided invaluable help throughout but whose unconditional love, support and dedication I am truly honoured and blessed to have.

This research stems from the love of truth-seeking and journalism.

## Table of Contents

|                                    |            |
|------------------------------------|------------|
| <i>Abstract</i>                    | <i>i</i>   |
| <i>Acknowledgements</i>            | <i>ii</i>  |
| <i>Table of Contents</i>           | <i>iii</i> |
| <i>List of Newspapers</i>          | <i>v</i>   |
| <i>List of Acronyms of Parties</i> | <i>vi</i>  |

|                      |   |    |
|----------------------|---|----|
| <i>Chapter One</i>   | The juggernaut of media democratization           | 1  |
|                      | Overview  |    |
|                      | Background  |    |
|                      | Conceptual framework                              |    |
|                      | Chapter summary                                   |    |
|                      | Research questions and methodology                |    |
|                      | Limitations of research and contribution          |    |
| <i>Chapter Two</i>   | The post-perestroika era                          | 24 |
|                      | The totalitarian legacy                           |    |
|                      | Political polarization                            |    |
|                      | The socioeconomic framework                       |    |
|                      | Annals of the transition                          |    |
|                      | The media upheaval                                |    |
|                      | Establishing the marketplace of ideas             |    |
|                      | 24 Chassa (Hours) of modern journalism            |    |
|                      | Trud: the family tribune                          |    |
| <i>Chapter Three</i> | Media revolution and media growth: 20 years later | 53 |
|                      | In media we distrust                              |    |
|                      | Hush little baby, don't say a word                |    |
|                      | Too many cooks in the kitchen                     |    |
|                      | The power of advertising                          |    |
|                      | Tabloidization compounds the information deficit  |    |

Advertising: he who pays the piper calls the tune  
Ownership shackles and editorial embargoes

|                     |   |     |
|---------------------|---|-----|
| <i>Chapter Four</i> | The media's "ostrich" approach                      | 88  |
|                     | The populist context                                |     |
|                     | Results of content analysis                         |     |
|                     | Results of qualitative analysis                     |     |
|                     | The absence of the black sheep                      |     |
|                     | Circus stunts in the public discourse               |     |
|                     | Does the public have the right to know?             |     |
|                     | The favouritization-absence dichotomy               |     |
|                     | Conclusion  |     |
| <i>Chapter Five</i> | The media and democracy locked in a euro-transition | 122 |
|                     | Corruption, corruption, corruption                  |     |
|                     | Lost in restrictions                                |     |
|                     | In the interest of owners                           |     |
|                     | Freedom of speech vs freedom to speak               |     |
|                     | Code of ethics and professionalization              |     |
|                     | Conclusion  |     |
| <i>References</i>   |   | 147 |

## List of Newspapers

**Dnevnik** (Agenda) daily is a leader in the business segment offering objective and reliable information. It is a national daily from the quality press niche with a circulation of 12,000.

**Express** daily was launched in 2007 and is part of a consortium of media owned by one conglomerate. It is business oriented and tries to provide non-partisan information. It has modern style and visually attractive layout.

**Kapital** (Capital) weekly is the leader of the quality press publications. It features right-wing business orientation. It is the preferred medium of the business decision-makers. It has modern style and objective information.

**Klassa** (Class) is a business-oriented daily that was launched in 2007. It offers serious reading, analyses and objective information. Its ownership is linked to the media tycoon Krassimir Gergov.

**Standart** (Standard) is published by the country's third largest press group. With a circulation of 53,000, *Standart* has the most modern, up-to-date online version among the dailies in the country. It publishes online in English, too.

**Telegraf** (Telegraph) national daily is constantly growing in popularity. It is a mass-oriented newspaper with a predominance of light news and entertainment. It is one of the few publications with an increasing circulation.

**Trud** is published by the Bulgarian subsidiary of the German conglomerate Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung (WAZ). *Trud* is the newspaper with the longest lifespan in the Bulgarian press market. Today, it is the leading newspaper with a circulation that amounts to more than 100,000 copies. Media analysts call it a hybrid between serious and tabloid content as it often mixes serious news investigations and interviews and scandalous items and infotainment.

**24 Chassa** (24 Hours) is part of the family of WAZ publications in Bulgaria. It is the biggest rival to *Trud*. *24 Chassa* is often described by media analysts as a broadloid because of its editorial approach to publish serious analyses and interviews, investigative reports and sensational interviews alongside on its pages. It is the first modern newspaper in Bulgaria. *24 Chassa* does not feature specific leaning because it has shifted its editorial policy. It has a circulation of 84,000.

**Weekend** weekly is a tabloid newspaper with the highest circulation at the press market (236,000). *Weekend* has achieved a stellar reputation in the past two years publishing investigative reports about the political and economic elites in the country.

## **List of Acronyms of Parties**

|       |    |  |
|-------|----|--|
| ATAKA | -- | ATAKA (Attack) Party   |
| BSP   | -- | Bulgarian Socialist Party (formerly the Bulgarian Communist Party) |
| CBPU  | -- | Coalition Bulgarian Popular Union                                  |
| DSB   | -- | Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria                                    |
| GERB  | -- | Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria                      |
| MRF   | -- | Movement for Rights and Freedoms                                   |
| NMSII | -- | National Movement for Simeon II                                    |
| UDF   | -- | Union of Democratic Forces   |
| UtDF  | -- | United Democratic Forces   |

## Chapter 1

### The juggernaut of media democratization

#### Introduction

Since the launch of the democracy venture almost two decades ago, 2008 has proved to be the most memorable year so far in the history of post-communist journalism in Bulgaria. The debate about free speech and the media's role in a democratic society has been reinvigorated since the emergence of a possible comeback of communist-style practices, the long-awaited public release of the dossiers on journalist-spies, the closure of a newspaper publication by a minister,<sup>1</sup> and lastly, *Gallery-gate*—an operation conducted by Bulgaria's FBI to spy on journalists and MPs. This debate rekindled my interest in examining the complicated media labyrinth and in paving the way for future explorations of independent media, especially as I had walked away four years ago from a career as a journalist in Bulgaria. Overall, this study aims to narrate the story of the most tumultuous years of Bulgaria's media democratization through the lens of media practitioners, scholars and a period of personal observation.

In May 2008, Stefan Gamizov, a business consultant and analyst, predicted the threat of political assassination<sup>2</sup> or physical 'mob law' directed at those who dared challenge the omnipotence of the powers that be or the "oligarchic interests."<sup>3</sup> Gamizov based his argument on the experiences of countries with problems similar to Bulgaria's and, in an odd twist of fate,

---

<sup>1</sup> Under the pretext that some of the articles in the *Bulgarian Army* newspaper would affect Bulgaria's diplomatic relationship with Russia, Macedonia and Turkey, the Minister of Defence, Nikolai Tsonev censored and stopped the publication of the newspaper in September 2008. (Bulgarian National Television, "Bulgarian Army Newspaper Stopped." <<http://news.bnt.bg/content/view/full/257414>> (10 October 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Elitsa Savova, "Bulgarian Morning TV soundbites," *The Sofia Echo*, May 30, 2008, <[http://www.sofiaecho.com/article/bulgarian-morning-tv-soundbites-may-30-2008/id\\_29649/catid\\_66](http://www.sofiaecho.com/article/bulgarian-morning-tv-soundbites-may-30-2008/id_29649/catid_66)> (14 August 2008).

<sup>3</sup> See Mila Geshakova, "I am Hurt to be Attached to Stanishev," *24 Chassa*, June 9, 2008, 13.

his prophecy materialized some four months later. The target, not surprisingly, was not a politician or an oligarch, which by Gamizov's definition was someone who during the transition from communism to democracy "accumulated wealth at the expense of citizens,"<sup>4</sup> but instead was Ognian Stefanov, the editor-in-chief of the investigative news site *Frognews*. Stefanov miraculously survived a savage assault by a death-squad armed with hammers, and journalists instantly concluded that such a beating was reminiscent of the suppression techniques inflicted during the communist era by the then State Security, known by the sinister initials DS,<sup>5</sup> to clamp down on citizens who strayed from the totalitarian ideology. A fortnight prior to the attack, Stefanov was identified as one of the people involved with the anonymous website *Opasnite.net63.net* (The Dangerous) by Bulgaria's newly-founded FBI, aka DANS,<sup>6</sup> which had investigated and closed down the site on the pretext<sup>7</sup> that some posts included "classified information."<sup>8</sup> Stefanov and his partner in *Frognews*, the arms trader Milen Mutafchiiski, whose name was also linked to The Dangerous, both denied any affiliation with the controversial website,<sup>9</sup> which ran posts on corruption and provided intricate details about links between national security cadres, oligarchic circles and criminal networks.

In the immediate aftermath of the assault, speculation and various explanations of the motives behind the crime were rife. According to Mutafchiski, Stefanov was attacked because of his investigative reports, the last of which had focused on corruption.<sup>10</sup> Much of Stefanov's

---

<sup>4</sup> See Geshakova, "I am hurt."

<sup>5</sup> DS stands for Durjavna Sigurnost, which is translated from Bulgarian as 'state security services.'

<sup>6</sup> DANS is the acronym for the Bulgarian equivalent of State Agency for National Security.

<sup>7</sup> See *Tema*, "The Dangerous Journalists," October 6-12, 2008,

<<http://www.temanews.com/index.php?p=tema&iid=488&cover=1>> (15 November 2008).

<sup>8</sup> Raiko Baychev, "The Closure of Opasnite.net Suggests Censorship," *Klasa*, September 8, 2008. Denka Katsarska, "DANS found out who are the publishers of Opasnite," *Focus*, September 5, 2008, <<http://www.focus-news.net/?id=n1033006>> (7 October 2008).

<sup>9</sup> Iren Delcheva, "Mutafchiski Involved With a Dangerous Site," *Standart*, September 5, 2008,

<<http://paper.standartnews.com/bg/article.php?d=2008-09-05&article=246893>> (19 October 2008). "Mutafchiiski Was the

Target," *Dnes.dir.bg*, September 24, 2008, <<http://dnes.dir.bg/2008/09/24/news3405605.html>> (3 October 2008).

<sup>10</sup> "The Journalist Ognian Stefanov Beaten up in Front of a Restaurant in Sofia," *Netinfo.bg*, September 23, 2008

<<http://news.netinfo.bg/?tid=40&oid=1235416>>.

work in recent years had varied from coverage of the president and the ruling coalition to stories exposing DANS and internal scandals in the Ministry of the Interior.<sup>11</sup> In “the most brutal assault” on a journalist since the beginning of the transition, the Union of Bulgarian Journalists saw an attempt to muzzle media freedom a year ahead of Parliamentary elections;<sup>12</sup> a similar interpretation offered by a media scholar forecast that, with the onset of an election, “the pressure on the media would intensify” with the application of a tool like DANS.<sup>13</sup> Others saw in the attack the delivery of a message to the media and civil society that the same fate would befall all those daring to launch investigations into corruption, the security organs and the ruling elite.<sup>14</sup>

At the time of completion of this research, the investigation into the assault was continuing and no official data identifying the perpetrators and their motives for the crime against Stefanov was available. However, the investigation had uncovered what would become a notorious phone-tap operation known as *Gallery*—the code name for the “information file” assembled by DANS.<sup>15</sup> Media reports described how the exhibits of the four-volume ‘*Gallery-gate*’ included phone-logs of journalists along with media owners, and even transcripts of journalists’ telephone conversations.<sup>16</sup> Lack of information as to the real use of the *Gallery* file and the actual reasons why DANS tapped journalists’ phones, other than a tight-lipped “classified information,” prevents any informed conclusions at the time of completion of this thesis. That said, what instantly came to light from *Gallery-gate* was that DANS, which was

---

<sup>11</sup> “The Publications,” *Monitor*, 24 September, 2008, 4-5. “A Journalist Was Beaten up,” *Focus*, September 23, 2008 <<http://www.focus-news.net/?id=s2087>> (15 October 2008).

<sup>12</sup> “The Union of Bulgarian Journalists ‘Podkrepa’ Condemned the Assault on Ognian Stefanov,” *Focus*, September 23, 2008 <<http://www.focus-news.net/?id=s2087>> (15 October 2008).

<sup>13</sup> See Marta Mladenova, “Georgi Lozanov: There is Pressure on the Media, Which will Heighten Before Elections,” *Focus*, September 23, 2008 <<http://www.focus-news.net/?id=s2087>> (3 October 2008).

<sup>14</sup> Edvin Sugarev, “‘The event’ with Ognian Stefanov and the DANS Indulgences,” *Mediapool*, September 25, 2008 <http://www.mediapool.bg/show/?storyid=144026&p=6> (2 October 2008).

<sup>15</sup> “DANS Taps Journalists Within the Gallery File,” *Sega*, October 2, 2008, <http://www.segabg.com/online/article.asp?issueid=3109&sectionid=2&id=0000201> (3 October 2008).

<sup>16</sup> Miglena Slavova, “DANS Makes a Gallery of Journalists,” *Monitor*, October 2, 2008.

formed to combat corruption in the highest echelons of power, was instead spying on national security reporters, the so-called “criminal” beat, and political reporters covering the opposition.<sup>17</sup> The speculations and opinions expressed by various journalists on *Gallery-gate* affirm one view clearly: no other subject alarms the leadership of the country as much as the mention of corruption. This finding raises the following questions: Are threats of investigative media reports into the corrupt practices entrenched in the gray economy currently bringing back communist-style attempts to stymie the media’s watchdog role, which is vital for democracy? How are the media in a democratic society to perform their traditional function of objective truth-seeking, including ferreting out and exposing wrongdoing at the highest levels, in the face of death threats? Such questions sparked the current research exploring the maturation of the media’s Fourth Estate function in the democratic chapter of Bulgarian history that began in 1989.

## Overview

In the wake of the lifting of the Iron Curtain and the demise of communist regimes across Eastern Europe,<sup>18</sup> Bulgaria, a country with a population just shy of eight million people, underwent a monumental change from totalitarianism to democracy. The media, departing from its previous role as a propaganda tool wielded by dictatorial ideologues, bore witness to the euphoric overnight<sup>19</sup> transition triggered by the makeover of the socioeconomic

---

<sup>17</sup> Slavova, “DANS Makes.”

<sup>18</sup> Ray Hiebert, “Transition: From the End of the Old Regime to 1996,” in *Eastern Journalism: Before, During and After Communism*, Jerome Aumente et al., (New Jersey: Hampton Press, 1999), 79-122.

<sup>19</sup> Dean Mills describes the media changes in Eastern Europe, which mirror the Bulgarian experience. (Dean Mills, “Post-1989 Journalism in the Absence of Democratic Traditions,” in *Eastern European journalism: Before, During and After Communism*, ed. David Paletz (New Jersey: Hampton Press, 1999), 124-144.)

environment. At the same time, however, this social transformation challenged the function and structure of the mass media.<sup>20</sup>

Social changes greatly impacted the media system, and vice-versa. In the process of adopting a new identity, the media began to serve the triple role of “transmitter and stimulator of political changes”<sup>21</sup> and agenda-setter.<sup>22</sup> In this regard, perhaps the strongest claim for the media’s agenda-setting function was made by a media scholar, who stated that “instead of showing us what is going on around us, journalism is trying to tell us what to think... Instead of serving the reader, journalism places itself above the reader.”<sup>23</sup>

While the media were performing their task of informing society about the ongoing transformation, they were themselves grappling with the challenges presented by the transition they were trying to insightfully communicate.<sup>24</sup> No one better summarizes the role of the media during such tumultuous times than the Polish media scholar Karol Jakubowicz, who has extensively examined the process of media change in Central and Eastern European countries within the context of social and political transformation.<sup>25</sup> Jakubowicz concludes that, in the first years of transition “when the social conditions were ripe, social or political change triggered media change which then gave crucial, and in some cases, irreplaceable additional impetus to further change in society. Thus, social and media change can be said to have fed on

---

<sup>20</sup> It is worth noting that this research was greatly inspired by Ekaterina Ognianova’s study of the impact that the political and economic changes in Bulgaria had on the media system during the first five years after the overthrow of communism. In her study, Ognianova dwells on the influence that the media had after the introduction of an open market and party pluralism. (Ekaterina Ognianova, “The Transitional Media System of Post-communist Bulgaria,” (Columbia, S.C., Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Journalism and Mass Communication Monographs, June 1997).

<sup>21</sup> Lilia Raycheva, “Turn-of-the-Century Challenges Facing the Mass Media in Bulgaria,” *Media Development* 46 no.3 (1999), 9-12, 9.

<sup>22</sup> Orlin Spassov, “The ‘Serious’ Press, the Tabloid Context, and Qualities of the Public Sphere,” in *Quality Press in Southeast Europe*, ed. Orlin Spassov (Sofia: The Southeast European Media Centre, 2004), <<http://soemz.euw-frankfurt-o.de/media-see/qpress/articles/pdf/ospassov.pdf>> (20 May 2008).

<sup>23</sup> See Roumiana Deltcheva, “New Tendencies in Post-Totalitarian Bulgaria: Mass Culture and the Media,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 48 no. 2 (1996): 305-315, 312.

<sup>24</sup> See Hiebert, “Transition: From the End.” The reference to Hiebert’s scholarship is with regards to the media change in Poland, which was symptomatic of the media system in Bulgaria, too.

<sup>25</sup> Karol Jakubowicz, “Media Within and Without the State: Press Freedom in Eastern Europe,” *Journal of Communication* 45 no. 4 (1995): 125-139. Karol Jakubowicz, “Media as Agents of Change,” in *Glasnost and After: Media and Change in Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. David Paletz, Karol Jakubowicz and Pavao Novosel (New Jersey: Hampton Press, 1995), 19-47.

each other.”<sup>26</sup> Amid the turmoil in the first years after the party-state divorce, the mass media set out to democratize society, recast its own credo and decentralize its structure.

In this context, the sudden societal shift after the overthrow of the party-cum-state supremacy resulted in the economy’s outright transformation from state-planned to decentralized private enterprise, thus “initiating the beginning of a free [media] market.”<sup>27</sup> Ray Heibert’s comment about the media transition to independence in post-1989 Russia is indicative of the case in Bulgaria: “The simple key to editorial freedom was usually economic independence.”<sup>28</sup> More to the point, it is widely accepted that liberalization and privatization go hand in hand. Applying this maxim, the press in Bulgaria launched themselves into the free-market domain.<sup>29</sup> “Spurred as much by political as by commercial motives,”<sup>30</sup> the media’s fast-paced quasi-privatization “could be seen as a pre-emptive defense against expected retributive legislation punishing old-regime organizations.”<sup>31</sup> However, the lack of a clear framework for the political and economic transformation of the mass media system impacted the democratization of the media.<sup>32</sup> As Slavko Splichal puts it,

Although privatization is firmly against the former authoritarian or paternalistic (state) control, it cannot genuinely democratize communication processes because it retains control in the hands of a minority rather than ‘the people’, and reduces the ‘public interest’ to the interest in the maximization of profit.<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> Jakubowicz, “Media as Agents,” 43.

<sup>27</sup> Lilia Raycheva and Todor Petev, “Mass Media’s Changing Landscape in Bulgaria (1989-1999),” in *Business as Usual: Continuity and Change in Central and Eastern European Media*, ed. David Paletz and Karol Jakubowicz (New Jersey: Hampton Press, 2003), 73-109; Lilia Raycheva, “Fifteen Years of Televised Political Advertising Developments in Bulgaria,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Political Advertising*, ed. Lynda Lee kaid and Christina Holtz-Bacha (London: Sage Publications, 2006), 359-375, 76.

<sup>28</sup> Heibert, “Transition: From the End,” 88.

<sup>29</sup> Raycheva and Petev, “Mass Media’s Changing.”

<sup>30</sup> Peter Gross, *Entangled Evolutions: Media and Democratization in Eastern Europe* (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2002), 61.

<sup>31</sup> See Gross, *Entangled evolutions*, 62.

<sup>32</sup> Elizer Alfanderi, *Media and Power: Journalism Between the Freedom of Speech and the Social Responsibility* (Sofia: Tilia Publishing House, 2000).

<sup>33</sup> Slavko Splichal, “Media Privatization and Democratization in Central-Eastern Europe,” *International Communication Gazette* 49 no. 3 (1992), 3-22, 9.

Inasmuch as the press pioneered the shift to private ownerships,<sup>34</sup> the clash of various political interests delayed privatization in other fields of the restructuring economy<sup>35</sup>—a delay that would inevitably hobble the media’s development as well.

It could be argued that the process of policy-related (free) media development that took place over four centuries in the Western world<sup>36</sup> was fast-tracked in Bulgaria over a mere decade in sync with the technological and global information revolution, which Jakubowicz calls the “Information Society.”<sup>37</sup> In a study on post-communist media development in Central and Eastern Europe, Jakubowicz describes this rapid progress, establishing eight processes of development that signify the different stages of change within the post-communist media system:

- De-monopolization
- Commercialization and marketization of media systems
- Change with regards to media freedom and independence
- Democratization
- Pluralization and diversity in the media
- Professionalization of journalism
- Development of public service broadcasting (not discussed in the current research)
- Internationalization and globalization.<sup>38</sup>

Bulgarian media represent a good example of these processes of change. The new economic environment and the birth of party pluralism, which ended 45 years of single-party dominance, led to the proliferation of hundreds of state-independent newspapers offering a plethora of opinions from diverse ideological spectrums and embracing a pluralistic world-

---

<sup>34</sup> Orlin Spassov, “The ‘Serious’ Press, the Tabloid Context, and Qualities of the Public Sphere,” in *Quality Press in Southeast Europe*, ed. Orlin Spassov (Sofia: The Southeast European Media Centre, 2004), <<http://soemz.euw-frankfurt-o.de/media-see/qpress/articles/pdf/ospassov.pdf>>.

<sup>35</sup> Emil Giatzidis, *An Introduction to Post-Communist Bulgaria: Political, Economic and Social Transformations* (Manchester University Press, 2002).

<sup>36</sup> Karol Jakubowicz, “Post Communist Media Development in Perspective” *Europäische Politik | Politikinformation Osteuropa* 3 (March 2005): 1-16.

<sup>37</sup> Jakubowicz, “Post Communist Media.”

<sup>38</sup> Jakubowicz, “Post Communist Media.”

view.<sup>39</sup> It also created a new niche in the press industry—partisan publications—where previously only the communist party’s publication existed.<sup>40</sup> The growth of the political press was aided by the mushrooming of new party establishments using the media as an outreach tool to meet the great demand sparked by the public’s interest in the political changes.<sup>41</sup> Hence, party organ publications and sensational newspapers, non-existent during communism, were among the fastest growing media forms and helped to transform the print market into one of the most vibrant businesses in the country.<sup>42</sup> From 108 newspapers in 1987, news outlets offering subscriptions had increased dramatically to 2,664 by 1994;<sup>43</sup> of these, some 1,449 were daily newspapers.<sup>44</sup>

The plurality of voices in the initial years of change was not synonymous with pluralism, which plays a pivotal role in any democratic state. As Lilia Raycheva and Todor Petev write, “without being held politically or socially responsible, the mass media actually shaped the dynamics of public social and political space; its nurtured pluralism occasionally resembled a labyrinth of one-way streets.”<sup>45</sup> Additionally, in the midst of political and economic instability and in the *terra incognita* of the free market, the press landscape was battling a money-starved advertising market. Regardless of the initial impetus driving the rapid change of media ownership, in the dawn of the transition “tight ideological control over the

---

<sup>39</sup> Ivan Nikoltchev, “Polarization and Diversification in the Bulgarian Press,” in *Post Communism and the Media in Eastern Europe*, ed. Patrick O’Neil (London: Frank Cass, 1997), 124-144; Ivan Nikoltchev, “The Post-communist Bulgarian Journalist” (PhD diss., University of Maryland at College Park, 1998); Raycheva, “Fifteen Years.”

<sup>40</sup> Maria Bakardjieva, “The New Media Landscape in Bulgaria,” *Canadian Journal of Communication* 20, no.1 (1995), <http://www.cjc-online.ca/index.php/journal/article/viewArticle/845/751>; Nikoltchev, “Polarization and Diversification;” Nikoltchev “Post-communist Journalist;” Raycheva and Petev, “Mass Media’s.”

<sup>41</sup> Raycheva and Petev, “Mass Media’s;” Nikoltchev, “Polarization and Diversification;” Nikoltchev “Post-communist Journalist.”

<sup>42</sup> Nikoltchev, “Polarization and Diversification;” Nikoltchev “Post-communist Journalist.”

<sup>43</sup> See Ognianova, “The Transitional Media System.”

<sup>44</sup> See Nikolai Genov and Anna Krasteva, *Recent Social Trends in Bulgaria 1960-1995* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001).

<sup>45</sup> Raycheva and Petev, “Mass Media’s,” 77.

mass media was soon replaced by economic motives.”<sup>46</sup> The market became the sole regulator of the press and the catalyst for the shrinking of partisan newspapers and the flourishing of independent and modern publications of the likes of *24 Chassa* daily, the first sensational tabloid in the country. Towards the latter part of 1997, media ownership concentration, particularly the unchallenged domination of one foreign publishing giant, added to the woes of the already struggling press industry as it fought to maintain a foothold under unfavourable market conditions.

As market-driven news values dictated a commodified information output, informing the constituency on issues of public interest took a back seat to selling a product. More important, the media shifted from being party-controlled and was put under the control of the market.<sup>47</sup> Anecdotal evidence and empirical observations suggest that the enthusiasm for reclaiming the free press following the regime overthrow was soon overtaken by the media’s flirtatious tango with power, chequebook journalism, and the lack of serious efforts to keep a watchful eye on the powers that be. This clash of priorities is precisely where the divide between the social role of journalism and its functioning in an open market lies, and all the more so in a country that, having broken free from totalitarianism, was striving to establish well-informed, democratic self-governance based on critical reasoning and a pluralistic public debate. Moreover, concentrated media ownership, which has consistently been pinpointed in Western countries<sup>48</sup> as an obstacle to the media’s Fourth Estate function, was also an issue in Bulgaria, and the media status quo here offered no exception to the international trend. In this former communist state, however, the values of the market system were espoused by

---

<sup>46</sup> Lilia Raycheva, “Bulgaria: The Online Mirror Image of The Printed Newspapers,” in *Print and Online Newspapers in Europe: A Comparative Analysis in 16 Countries*, eds. Richard van der Wurff, and Edmund Lauf (Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, 2005), 67-78, 69; Raycheva, Petev, “Mass Media’s.”

<sup>47</sup> Ognian Zlatev, managing director *Media Development Centre*, Skype interviews by author, June 11, 2008 and March 10, 2008.

<sup>48</sup> Ben Bagdikian, *The New Media Monopoly* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004).

journalists themselves, who having long been subordinated to the party-state, now succumbed meekly to the interests of their ownership or editorial leadership. As a result, not only was a band of media outlets spouting political and/or economic propaganda generated by the vested interests represented by the media ownerships, but pluralistic debate was confined anew to a paucity of voices. Today, the mainstream press in this poorest of Eurostates is characterized by populist, mass-oriented and profit-driven information flow.

Press freedom was “the first and only triumph” of Bulgaria’s democratization.<sup>49</sup> Inspired by the newly acquired freedom in the first years of the changes, independence and free speech became the daily adrenaline rush for the long-suppressed newsfolk. Paradoxically, 20 years later, with the country’s transformation from a party-state via a country in transition to a full-fledged member of the European Union, the media are now manifesting the return of self-censorship, constraints on editorial independence and lack of ownership transparency. In effect, critical debate and public reasoning have been myopically discarded by the media, and issues of primary public interest—such as taming rampant organized crime and prevalent corruption, including in the highest echelons of power—make less frequent appearances in the public discourse. Whether such a disconnect between the media’s public role and its complacency with political and/or corporate interests interferes with the media’s quintessential role of contributing to democratization, is the central question addressed by this thesis.

## **Background**

In its broadest strokes, this research is inspired by a series of revisits to the debate on freedom of expression, increasingly seen as entangled with the issue of media ownership concentration,

---

<sup>49</sup> Filip Panayotov, “Pages From Trud’s Biography” in *Daily Trud: The Leader*, compilers Georgi Lozanov and Orlin Spassov (Sofia: Trud Publishing House, 2002).

which scholars, journalists and civic organizations claim poses a threat to cultural and political pluralism.<sup>50</sup> In a 2005 report entitled “Media Power in Europe: The Big Picture of Ownership,” the world's largest organization of journalists, headquartered in Belgium, described the information landscape in ‘United Europe’ and the current trend of accelerated media ownership concentration, the lack of ownership transparency, “interwoven and fuzzy” European media markets, and the impact of foreign ownership dominating national press markets within the member states.<sup>51</sup> In the report, Aidan White, General Secretary of the International Federation of Journalists, noted that “many politicians, particularly those in the European Parliament, have repeatedly expressed concern over the growth of huge media companies that are exercising unprecedented levels of political and commercial influence. In this process they threaten diversity and pluralism in society.”<sup>52</sup>

The debate on media pluralism was again high on the agenda when the European Parliament, at the end of September 2008, adopted a non-legislative resolution on concentrated media ownership and its controversial impact on media pluralism and freedom of expression. In the resolution, MEPs<sup>53</sup> state that “media pluralism must be safeguarded and all citizens should have access to free media... To prevent owners, shareholders or governments from interfering with editorial content, MEPs advocate creation of editorial charters.”<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup> I apply Gillian Doyle’s paradigm of political and cultural pluralism. Doyle defines the former as a necessity for democracy, “for a range of political opinions and viewpoints to be represented in the media,” and the latter as a necessity “for a variety of cultures, reflecting the diversity within society, to find expression in the media. Democracy would be threatened if any single voice, with the power to propagate a single political viewpoint, were to become too dominant... Cultural diversity and social cohesion may be threatened unless the cultures and values of all groupings within society are reflected in the media.” (Gillian Doyle, *Media Ownership: the Economics and Politics of Convergence and Concentration in the UK and European Media* (London: Sage Publications, 2002, 12).

<sup>51</sup> International Federation of Journalists, “Media Power in Europe: The Big Picture of Ownership,” (2005) <http://www.ifj.org/assets/docs/245/202/08737f5-ec283ca.pdf> > (17 August 2008).

<sup>52</sup> International Federation of Journalists, “Media Power in Europe,” 4.

<sup>53</sup> Member of a European Parliament.

<sup>54</sup> European Parliament, “MEPs Defend Media Pluralism and Call for Discussion of Blogs” (press release, Brussels, September 25, 2008) <[http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/expert/infopress\\_page/039-37795-266-09-39-906-20080922IPR37794-22-09-2008-2008-true/default\\_en.htm](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/expert/infopress_page/039-37795-266-09-39-906-20080922IPR37794-22-09-2008-2008-true/default_en.htm)> (20 August 2008).

The question of media pluralism in Bulgaria is particularly important because, given the lack of ownership transparency, corporate interests take over the public sphere, curtailing the media's role to safeguard democracy and, in so doing, posing a threat to the country's yet-to-mature democracy. Even more worthy of consideration are the "concealed" entities behind the sale of such "information" products, as Bulgarian media analyst Georgi Lozanov, a proponent of a plan for transparency in press ownership, affirms: "If you set up a media outlet and sell a product which is directly related to freedom of speech, it is normal to be able to track the business from the very beginning, that is, to be able to track the genealogy of the message in the business sense."<sup>55</sup> Such "concealed"<sup>56</sup> media ownerships threaten the independent flow of ideas and lead to the journalists' betrayal of their loyalty to the traditional journalistic ethos. Grounding the current analysis in media scholar Robert McChesney's formulation of good journalism—mainly that it "hold[s] people of power accountable," offers a diversity of opinions, and relies on objective fact-checking and fact-presenting<sup>57</sup>—this research argues that the media in Bulgaria narrow the debate on topics of public interest that fail to register on the radar of corporate interests. How these hidden interests have recast the democratic function of the media in a young democracy is the central point of departure of this research.

### **Conceptual framework**

In order to study the current media landscape in Bulgaria, this study draws from two different scholarly approaches that provide a complementary analysis for the current discussion on the media's role in a country undergoing cultural, political and socio-economic democratization.

---

<sup>55</sup> See Velislava Popova, "Concentration of Media Ownership and its Impact on Media Independence and Pluralism" (report presented at the South East European Network for Professionalization of Media Conference, Bled, June 11-12, 2004), 94-117, 94.

<sup>56</sup> Popova, "Concentration of Media Ownership."

<sup>57</sup> Robert McChesney, interviewed in *Rich Media, Poor Democracy*, Media Education Foundation, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uwadfoSK96E&NR=1>> (7 August 2008).

This study connects the structure of the present day media system, as framed by media scholar Denis McQuail, and its functioning in a new democracy as formulated by the German philosopher Jurgen Habermas. Overall, this research is based on Habermas's theoretical framework of the "public sphere," which he formulates in *The Public Sphere: an Encyclopedia Article (1964)* as a forum where "public opinion can be formed."<sup>58</sup> In addition, this discussion applies McQuail's model and analysis of the influences imposed by market forces<sup>59</sup> on information output.

In Habermas's worldview, the "public sphere" is the province between society and the state authority where an enlightened citizenry is enabled to express and form its opinions freely, which, after being communicated by newspapers, magazines, radio and television, lead to critical decision-making on matters of "general interest."<sup>60</sup> The nucleus of Habermas's "public sphere" and its democratic application is presented as a triad consisting of uninterrupted access by the "public body;" freedom of expression on matters of public interest; and the media's moderation between the critically-reasoning constituency and the state authority.<sup>61</sup>

The central pillar of Habermas's "bourgeois public sphere" framework was later critically examined by Craig Calhoun, who asserts that this very same public sphere "institutionalized a practice of rational-critical discourse on political matters" as well as a variety of interests and undercurrent of state-society antagonism.<sup>62</sup> This thesis, which is premised on Habermas's concept of the public sphere, also incorporates a formulation

---

<sup>58</sup> Jurgen Habermas, "The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article (1964)," in *New German Critique* 3 (autumn 1974), trans. Sara Lennox and Frank Lennox, 49-55, 49.

<sup>59</sup> Denis McQuail, *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory* (London: Sage Publications, 2005); Denis McQuail, *Mass Communication Theory: An Introduction* (London: Sage Publications, 1994).

<sup>60</sup> Habermas, "The Public Sphere."

<sup>61</sup> Habermas, "The Public Sphere."

<sup>62</sup> Craig Calhoun, "Introduction: Habermas and the Public Sphere" in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 1-51, 9.

borrowed from his influential examination of societies in transition in his book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeoisie Society*, which dwells on the transformation of the “public sphere” in Western Europe from the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> to the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>63</sup> This research applies Habermas’s concept of the “public sphere” in that the media is expected to take up the role of a platform for critical reasoning where public-opinion formation remains dependent on the “general interest.”

To explore the role of the media during Bulgaria’s transitional state, this research relies on Habermas’s conceptualization of media as integrated in the “public sphere” within the context of societal transition in Great Britain, France and Germany. Although the historical period analyzed by Habermas and the linguistic, political, socioeconomic and cultural systems of these European countries were different from those of 20<sup>th</sup> century Bulgaria, there is a certain commonality between the Western experience and the transition in this former communist state. The shift from one social system to another and the accompanying socioeconomic changes—particularly the transformation of ownership in the aftermath of industrialization and the emergence of capitalist norms—is the key point of comparison for this research. To affirm such a notion, this research further draws on Calhoun who, borrowing Habermas’s view of what constitutes the core of the public sphere shift, asserts: “Transformations of the economy produced transformations in all of civil society.”<sup>64</sup> Consequently, this research draws a parallel between the transformation in countries that moved from a monarchical feudal social system to a liberal bourgeois model (as discussed by Habermas), and Bulgaria’s shift from communism and state-owned planned economy to an open market.

---

<sup>63</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeoisie Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (The MIT Press, 1992), 74.

<sup>64</sup> Calhoun, “Introduction: Habermas,” 8.

The shift away from a state-controlled media system to private ownership led to the introduction of “critical reasoning” in Bulgarian society, as determined by the mass media, which not only reshaped societal relations but also reshaped, to borrow Raycheva’s words: the mass media’s “structure, management and social functioning.”<sup>65</sup> Whereas in Habermas’s view such a media represents an independent domain, in Bulgaria, this thesis argues, different dependencies shaped the information output, hence in the purely Habermasian sense of “public sphere,” the Bulgarian version undermined the platform for critical reasoning.

Theoretically, this study is informed by McQuail’s concept of the critical political economy of the media which “directs research attention towards the empirical analysis of the structure of ownership and control of media and to the way media market forces operate.”<sup>66</sup> In general, McQuail’s conceptualization of the media as being “at the centre of three overlapping kinds of influence—economic, political and technological”<sup>67</sup>—provides the premise for discussing the media system as a business and as being part and parcel of the economic system which, he argues, functions in close proximity to the political system. Furthermore, McQuail contends that although the mass media “generally have to operate wholly or partly within the dictates of market economics,”<sup>68</sup> they are “not just any other business, and [they] tend to be burdened with a considerable weight of public responsibility, whether they like it or not.”<sup>69</sup> Such an observation, according to McQuail, reflects the role of the media in a democracy to place issues of public interest on the agenda.

---

<sup>65</sup> Raycheva, “Bulgaria,” 67.

<sup>66</sup> McQuail, *McQuail’s Mass Communication Theory*, 99.

<sup>67</sup> McQuail, *McQuail’s Mass Communication Theory*, 219.

<sup>68</sup> McQuail, *McQuail’s Mass Communication Theory*, 219.

<sup>69</sup> McQuail, *McQuail’s Mass Communication Theory*, 233

Overall, McQuail's identification of the major premise of political economy theory provides support for an analysis of the media system in Bulgaria. His summary of the feature elements of the political economy of the media accurately mirror the media system in Bulgaria:

- Economic control and logic are determinant
- Media structure tends toward concentration
- Global integration of media develops
- Contents and audiences are commodified
- Diversity decreases
- Opposition and alternative voices are marginalized
- Public interest in communication is subordinated to private interests.<sup>70</sup>

McQuail further dwells on the major consequences of viewing the media as an enterprise within the context of the media-society approach and its role in social communication.<sup>71</sup> Focusing on other media scholars, he summarizes the impact of the commercialization of the media system as market-oriented and profit-driven news output, commodification of news, tabloidization of newspaper content and trivialization of information.<sup>72</sup> When applied to the experience of a country undergoing a tectonic transformation in all spheres of life, viewing news merely as business creates a vacuum of understanding, accentuates commodification, and outright discards issues of less concern to the market.

Discussing the media within the context of its dual significance to public opinion formation and agenda-setting, Peter Gross remarks,

In a democracy, the media's agenda is to combine, and interrelate, with the public's agenda (what the public wants, what it perceives and thinks) and with the policy agenda (what is being proposed and carried out by those in power, or what is being proposed by those who wish to be in power) to form society's agenda.<sup>73</sup>

---

<sup>70</sup> McQuail, *Mass Communication Theory*, 83.

<sup>71</sup> McQuail, *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory*, 100.

<sup>72</sup> McQuail, *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory*, 124-126.

<sup>73</sup> Gross, *Entangled Evolutions*, 117.

As in the case of other Eastern European countries, according to Gross, the Bulgarian media's agenda-setting goals in the first decade following the regime change have been more predominantly tied to the policy agenda than to the public's agenda.<sup>74</sup> Today, anecdotal evidence, interviews with media practitioners and international media scholarships point out that the agenda of the public is further sidelined by the corporate agenda of the mainstream press, favouring mainstream information output over viewpoints that might challenge the political and economic status quo.<sup>75</sup> As a result, the topic of a party leader who, for example, questions privatization deals and capital accumulated from unknown sources during the transition, is treated with minor interest compared to more mainstream issues. McQuail elucidates the agenda-setting hypothesis as follows:

Public debate is presented by salient issues;  
The agenda derives from a combination of public opinion and political choice;  
Mass media news and information reflect the content and order of priority issues;  
The representation in the mass media exerts an independent effect on issue content and on relative salience in public opinion.<sup>76</sup>

Applying McQuail's "media structure reality" in the Bulgarian context, one could argue that the media defines issues of public interest with reference to events that "shape impressions in favour of one interest or another."<sup>77</sup> As McQuail concedes, the assumption that mass media confirm the status quo and leave certain agendas unquestioned could be discussed within the presence-absence frame of analysis of media content. Moreover, basing his analysis on the research of other scholars, McQuail maintains that "'power' and 'class' are protected by media performance."<sup>78</sup> The same logic could be applied in the case study reviewed in Chapter 4,

---

<sup>74</sup> Gross, *Entangled Evolutions*, 117.

<sup>75</sup> Robert McChesney, "The Mythology of Commercial Broadcasting and the Contemporary Crisis of Public Broadcasting," The 2001 Spry Memorial Lecture, University of Montreal, <<http://www.com.umontreal.ca/spry/spry-e.html>>.

<sup>76</sup> McQuail, *Mass Communication Theory*, 357.

<sup>77</sup> McQuail, *Mass Communication Theory*, 364.

<sup>78</sup> McQuail, *Mass Communication*, 368.

which describes how the press treats one political group and its leader with little interest, while directing much greater interest to another political player by favouring him and his party.

### **Chapter Summary**

To this end, the research is organized as follows: Chapter 2 provides a historic overview of Bulgaria's liberalized market by discussing the liberalization of the economy with an emphasis on the press market in the context of the political and societal changes that the country has undergone since 1989. This chapter first examines the process of the transition of civil society from a communist controlled state to an evolving democracy embracing political pluralism and an open market economy; it later narrates the history of the print media in Bulgaria after the launch of the spontaneous mass privatization.

Chapter 3 broadly outlines the post-1999 media landscape in Bulgaria, when the country's political and economic transition formally ended with the opening of negotiations for accession to the European Union. Through the lens of journalists, media scholars and sociologists, this chapter describes the current situation of press independence and the challenges the media face today, starting with market concentration, lack of ownership transparency, and the return of self-censorship. Chapter 3 also presents a snapshot of the present-day press landscape in Bulgaria, focusing on a number of paradoxes in media development overall, and posits the following essential questions: How has concentrated media ownership reshaped the print media landscape in Bulgaria, and what is the impact of concentrated media ownership on media pluralism and diversity in a nascent democracy such as Bulgaria?

Chapter 4, which focuses on a case study of press content in four daily publications (*Standart, Klasa, 24 Chassa* and *Trud*), explores and proves the hypothesis that the mainstream press marginalizes certain viewpoints and thus fails to fulfil the traditional functions of the media. The case study focuses on content analysis of news reports discussing the politics of the extreme right-wing nationalist ATAKA party, formed in 2005, and its leader Volen Siderov. This part of the study demonstrates how the mass media's agenda serves to frame topics that make less economic sense, compared to those that are more commercially viable, and looks at how such laxity of journalistic standards recasts the role of the media in the formation of public opinion and democratic statehood.

Chapter 5 concludes this study with an emphasis on the professionalization of media practitioners in the context of the media's Fourth Estate role as a corrective to power in a self-governing society. In this same context, the chapter analyzes the correlation between media owners, journalists and publishers. The issues discussed in this chapter are linked, first, to the *Access to Public Information Act* legislation (2000), which facilitated information seeking; and secondly, to the decriminalization of libel and defamation as seen by recent changes to the *Penal Code*, which create a better environment for investigative reporting, but impose a chill through monetary fines. In addition, public release of the dossiers of media owners and journalists who were related to the former state security mechanisms finally ended the communist-era dependencies of the media. After being kept on hold for almost two decades, such developments, this chapter argues, point towards media professionalization, which may provide an opportunity for greater media democratization. In summarizing the study's findings, the latter part of the research aims to show whether such media trends and recent changes have

had a significant impact on journalists' willingness, readiness and commitment to act as watchdogs for the public and to serve in their traditional role as the Fourth Estate.

### **Research questions and methodology**

The discussion in this study is situated in the context of Bulgaria's 2008 media landscape and emphasizes the press's functioning and structure. The timing is significant—over a year after Bulgaria joined the European family; almost a decade after the first foreign press entered Bulgaria's market; and almost two years after the launch of the Code of Ethics, the self-regulatory mechanism of the media.

The overall aim of this research is to study the shift from party-led media to media governed by corporate interests interlinked with political dependencies, and how such a makeover has restructured the press market and intruded on the traditional conceptualization of the free press. This research discusses the many challenges the media continues to face almost 20 years after the Bulgarian revolution—challenges that are magnified by severe competition, migration to online media and globalization. Furthermore, this research takes up the task of explaining the media economy within the context of the press market and how this market has threatened unbiased communication in the country since the political transition from totalitarianism to genuine democracy, which was intertwined with an economic revolution from central state-planned economy to an open market system. To sum up, this research focuses on three major questions:

1. Whose interests do mainstream newspapers in Bulgaria serve today—the public's or those of the political and economic elites?

2. How has concentration of media ownership influenced the media landscape in Bulgaria and what is the impact of media ownership on media pluralism and diversity in a fledgling democracy?
3. Have Bulgarian journalists now succumbed to the interests of a new master—no longer the party, but the market—as they continue to self-censor?

The most significant aspect of this research pertains to the debate about journalists' self-censorship and the evolution of this remnant of communist times from party-dominated control to market-imposed control, where power is in the hands of a small group of corporate ownerships. This study examines how the media outlets that once served as communist party mouthpieces are currently governed by both political and economic interests dictated mainly by big market players, and how these political interests are entwined with economic interests in Bulgaria. These interests, it is argued, often represent an old-timers' web of political-turned-plutocratic power and therefore threaten pluralism and diversity in the media in a still fledgling democracy. The overarching task of this research is to explore the impact of such dependencies on the democratization of the country.

For my primary research, which is the basis for the major findings, this analysis rests on a case study and a non-representative survey of interviews with media analysts, media practitioners and sociologists from Bulgaria in addition to a sample of news reports, commentaries and interviews from the mainstream media. The purpose of the case study is to explore whether one of the largest oppositional parties and its leader were being marginalized in the mainstream press while another political entity of similar genesis was being favouritized. In this part of the research, coverage of the extreme right-wing nationalist party ATAKA is examined and compared with the coverage of another personality-led political entrant—the

centre-right opposition group Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB). A content analysis of some 235 articles published in four national daily newspapers for a period of 63 days, from 18 April 2008 to 20 June 2008, was conducted for this study. This timeframe was selected for two reasons: 1) it marked a year after the first elections for the European Parliament were held in Bulgaria when the two new political groups sent their own members to the European Union; and 2) it did not feature any of the political polarization that customarily surrounds elections.

In addition to the primary research, this analysis relies on secondary research by media scholars and NGOs from Bulgaria and the West.

### **Limitations of research and contribution**

As with any study, the current research features a number of limitations. Although the subjects interviewed for this study represent a host of media practitioners working for different media outlets and media analysts, they do not form a representative survey but rather constitute a snapshot of the current state of media affairs. Also, because the media are undergoing dynamic changes, shifts of ownership, restructuring and forced migration online, some of the conclusions should be seen as reflecting today's reality in Bulgaria and may have to be revisited in the future as the terrain continues to shift.

This study provides an overview of the debate pertaining to the impact of market forces, paradoxical developments, and the unique economics of the mass media on information output in the Bulgarian press. Much ink was spilled over the media's quest to establish independence in the first years after the fall of communism. Studies of press freedom plateaued sometime following the entry of Germany's publishing giant Westdeutsche Allgemeine

Zeitung, the first foreign investor to enter Bulgaria's press market. Finally, the issue of press freedom remained largely undiscussed in the wake of Bulgaria's negotiation phase and subsequent accession to the European Union. One probable explanation for the paucity of extensive scholarship and media research on Bulgaria—beyond the occasional radio talk-show or column dedicated to media affairs, there's not much—could be the launch of the country's first self-regulatory body on media ethics, which was seen as the closure of a media cycle that had assigned to the journalists the task of their own governance. Another possible reason could be, in the words of Bulgarian scholar Georgi Lozanov, the adoption of the mantra "transition is over,"<sup>79</sup> with relation to media-society development.

This thesis also offers a contribution to the field of journalism. Much to my surprise, while I discovered an abundance of material on the market changes following the immediate embrace of capitalist incentives in the 1990s, there was very little research on press freedom in relation to press economics in Bulgaria surrounding the country's joining the European Union and the prolonged process of synchronization of much of its legislation with the EU bloc. Research on the print media is important not only because of the issue concerning diverse and pluralistic media, which is being increasingly debated by the European institutions at present, but because of the quest to identify the reasons for the downward spiral of press freedom experienced by the media in Bulgaria in the last few years. The most significant contribution of this research lies in its timeliness. This research not only reflects on the trends in such an iconic moment for the media in Bulgaria—a time when the transition is being completed—it also offers insights into the media's new values within the new societal context.

---

<sup>79</sup> See Andreana Mihailova, "State Media are Like the Museum of Madame Tussaud," *Klasa*, May 9, 2008.

## Chapter 2

### The post-perestroika era

On November 10<sup>th</sup> 1989, a small Balkan state brought down the single-party reign and jump-started the engine of nascent social-cum-state relations. This bold and outright makeover of the social nexus came as a reaction to the winds of change blowing across Central and Eastern Europe and testified to the masses' growing frustration with isolationism.

According to observers' memories, participants in the Bulgarian *velvet revolution*<sup>1</sup> included people of several generations and many different backgrounds who rallied to one call: to end Communist domination and move forward into a new era of self-determination. In Bulgaria, as elsewhere in the former communist bloc, democracy instantly became the ideological mantra underlying the changes of the day. Posters, tent-villages and chants of "45 years are ENOUGH" added to the collective euphoria as the political and social apathy of the last half century erupted into hyper-activism throughout the new civic culture. That is how the people of this tiny, long-suppressed state burst their cocoon and took flight into a long-delayed transition to democratic order. And since "a civil society can hardly be formed in a political vacuum,"<sup>2</sup> releasing the shackles of totalitarianism first and foremost established a grand plan for social reorganization that introduced political democratization concomitant with economic liberalization.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Georgi Fotev, "Total Crisis and the Reorganization of Society" in *Bulgaria at the Crossroads*, ed. Jacques Coenen-Huther (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 1996), 11-31.

<sup>2</sup> Alexander Gungov, "Wonderland in Southeast Europe: Civil Society in Bulgaria Emerging from a Crisis," in *Civil Society in Southeast Europe*, eds. Dane Gordon and David Durst (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), 139-147, 140.

## The totalitarian legacy

The Communists conquered Bulgaria on September 9, 1944. Step by step, they banned party pluralism, abandoned civic organizations, annihilated civil society and successively ratified two new Constitutions in 1947 and 1971.<sup>4</sup> The first “declared Bulgaria a ‘people’s democracy’” and enacted the egalitarian way of life as envisioned by one of its main provisions that “place[s] all the means of production in public ownership;”<sup>5</sup> the second identified the Bulgarian Communist Party as the “leading power in society and in the state.”<sup>6</sup>

Soon the country became known as a staunch ally of the Warsaw Pact and it overtly aligned both its domestic and foreign policies with the whole communist bloc.<sup>7</sup> Belonging to the communist club inevitably meant the “construct [of] a socialist society based on modernization, social welfare and class equality.”<sup>8</sup> In communist parlance, however, modernization entailed a centrally-planned economy—which in fact meant complete repudiation of the “market system of the capitalist world... [for being] unscientific, wasteful and geared to the gratification of private interests at public expense.”<sup>9</sup> Modernization was also translated as wide-scale construction of giant industrial plants<sup>10</sup> to help the country’s economy reach par with the communist club.

---

<sup>3</sup> Emil Giatzidis, *An Introduction to Post-Communist Bulgaria: Political, Economic and Social Transformations* (Manchester University Press, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> R. J. Crampton, *Bulgaria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Giatzidis, *Introduction to Post-Communist Bulgaria*.

<sup>5</sup> Crampton, *Bulgaria*, 325.

<sup>6</sup> Ekaterina Ognianova, “On Forgiving Bulgarian Journalists/Spies,” *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 8 no. 3 (1993): 156-167, 157; Ivan Nikoltchev, “The Post-communist Bulgarian Journalist” (PhD diss., University of Maryland at College Park, 1998); This study is greatly influenced by Nikoltchev’s research: “The Post-communist Bulgarian Journalist” as it is the first thorough study in the English language academia discussing communist-era mass media and the aftermath of the regime overthrow. Overall, the study’s structure and its provision of the political, economic and social view of the changes have helped establish a firm contextual foundation for this research.

<sup>7</sup> Giatzidis, *Introduction to Post-Communist Bulgaria*.

<sup>8</sup> Giatzidis, *Introduction to Post-Communist Bulgaria*, 24.

<sup>9</sup> Giatzidis, *Introduction to Post-Communist Bulgaria*, 24.

<sup>10</sup> Crampton, *Bulgaria*.

The Communist project was simple. It was to transform Bulgaria from a predominantly agricultural country into a highly developed technology-heavy industrial state.<sup>11</sup> In addition to the manufactured industrial revolution, private property was eliminated, private enterprises were confiscated, foreign trade was monopolized, private banks were liquidated, and ultimately the whole economy was nationalized.<sup>12</sup> More importantly, the transfer of rural private property into collective ownerships (known as TKZSSs), as R. J. Crampton explains, “involved the greatest social transformation” to occur since Bulgaria had broken free from the five-century Ottoman yoke<sup>13</sup> with the Russian Empire-led liberation of Bulgaria in 1878. In the face of such a radical shift, the people were given some consolation in the form of free medical services and free education,<sup>14</sup> social benefits, and guaranteed employment; in brief, they were appeased with limited social comforts.

Over time, the political demagoguery, over-centralization and lack of competitive market mechanisms<sup>15</sup> caused the derailment of the optimistic economic agenda. After the honeymoon period of “forced industrialization,”<sup>16</sup> which brought some sense of security, employment and a decent standard of living for a few decades, Bulgaria’s economy hit rock bottom. In effect, the centrally-organized and planned system was failing, and the lack of resources was holding back industrial growth.<sup>17</sup> Soon, the centrally-planned order crumbled.

When in the winter of 1984-85 power outages sporadically darkened the skyline, sometimes for 12 hours at a time, people started publicly questioning the price of reforms. Under the protection of the darkness, previously silenced civic groups came forth, becoming

---

<sup>11</sup> See Giatzidis, *Introduction to Post-Communist Bulgaria*; Crampton, *Bulgaria*.

<sup>12</sup> Crampton, *Bulgaria*.

<sup>13</sup> Crampton, *Bulgaria*, 329.

<sup>14</sup> Crampton, *Bulgaria*.

<sup>15</sup> Giatzidis, *Introduction to Post-communist Bulgaria*.

<sup>16</sup> Giatzidis, *Introduction to Post-communist Bulgaria*, 35; Crampton, *Bulgaria*.

<sup>17</sup> Giatzidis, *Introduction to Post-communist Bulgaria*.

the catalyst for a rising dissident movement and the *samizdat*<sup>18</sup> press in Bulgaria, which, unlike in other communist countries, had been invisible until then.<sup>19</sup> Whether this movement came as too little, too late is a question that will be debated further in this research within the context of Bulgaria's new statehood and the immediate aftermath of the changes.

During the communist reign, there were six or seven national dailies<sup>20</sup> and there were no western publications.<sup>21</sup> Even books by more progressive Western or pro-*perestroika* authors could be purchased only within a circle of close friends or acquaintances due to their great popularity and limited availability. Befriending a bookseller, middle-aged Bulgarians recall today in jest, seemed like the most rewarding subversive practice possible, since books that were in high demand were customarily sold under the counter.

Media scholars Lilia Raycheva and Todor Petev sum up the ideology-driven communist press as being "monotonous, propagandistic and totally controlled by the Communist Party."<sup>22</sup> Paradoxically, whereas the two communist constitutions ensured freedom of the press, Clause 1 of the 1971 Constitution unequivocally defined the all-pervasive role of the Communist Party in all "social and state institutions, including the press."<sup>23</sup> Though formally censorship was declared non-existent, the newsfolk learnt to self-censor and mastered other elaborate skills

---

<sup>18</sup> The underground press in the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact states during communism was known as *samizdat*, a Russian term meaning 'self-published'.

<sup>19</sup> Peter Gross, "Journalism Education," in *Eastern Journalism: Before, During and After Communism* Aumente et al., New Jersey: Hampton Press, 1999; See Ekaterina Ognianova, "The Transitional Media System of Post-Communist Bulgaria," (Columbia: Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Journalism and Mass Communication Monographs, June 1997); Crampton, *Bulgaria*.

<sup>20</sup> Orlin Spassov, "The 'Serious' Press, the Tabloid Context, and Qualities of the Public Sphere," in *Quality Press in Southeast Europe*, ed. Orlin Spassov (Sofia: The Southeast European Media Centre, 2004), <<http://soemz.eu-frankfurt-o.de/media-see/qpress/articles/pdf/ospassov.pdf>>.

<sup>21</sup> Nikoltchev, "The Post-communist Bulgarian Journalist;" Ivan Nikoltchev, "Polarization and Diversification in the Bulgarian Press," in *Post Communism and the Media in Eastern Europe*, ed. Patrick O'Neil (London: Frank Cass, 1997), 124-144.

<sup>22</sup> Lilia Raycheva and Todor Petev, "Mass Media's Changing Landscape in Bulgaria (1989-1999)," in *Business as usual: Continuity and Change in Central and Eastern European Media*, ed. David Paletz and Karol Jakubowicz (New Jersey: Hampton Press, 2003), 73-109, 82.

<sup>23</sup> Ognianova, "On Forgiving Bulgarian Journalists/Spies," 157. Nikoltchev, "The Post-communist Bulgarian journalist;" Raycheva and Petev, "Mass Media's Changing Landscape."

that were used to send ‘coded’ messages tucked between the lines.<sup>24</sup> Serving the communist ideology was the primary test for journalists; good writing skills and the journalistic duty of serving the public came in, respectively, second and a distant last.<sup>25</sup> Bulgarian scholar Roumiana Deltcheva encapsulates the most prominent feature of the media of the time: “Information was presented through the filters of communist ideology and facts were subordinated to the political aims of the party.”<sup>26</sup>

*Rabotnichesko Delo* (Workers’ Deed), the newspaper with the largest mass circulation, was a must-subscribe publication for Communist party members.<sup>27</sup> Not only did it serve as “the mouthpiece of the party leadership” but, in its own right, it was “the tone-setter” for the rest of the media.<sup>28</sup> Later in the country’s unfolding history, it would be this same *Rabotnichesko Delo* that would foster some of the most renowned names in present-day journalism—the men and women who reformed and totally reshaped the post-1989 landscape of the press.

### **Political polarization**

Raycheva and Petev eloquently summarize the nature of the political processes that characterized the post-communist environment: “Political activity among the population surged dramatically and its legality was no longer questioned.”<sup>29</sup>

Arising from the masses, the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF), an anti-communist alliance of 14 political organizations, and the reformed BCP (BSP),<sup>30</sup> held a series of bilateral

---

<sup>24</sup> Nikoltchev, “The Post-communist Bulgarian Journalist;” Nikoltchev, “Polarization and Diversification;” Ognianova, “The Transitional Media System.”

<sup>25</sup> Ognianova, “On Forgiving Bulgarian Journalists/Spies.”

<sup>26</sup> Roumiana Deltcheva, “New Tendencies in Post-Totalitarian Bulgaria: Mass Culture and the Media,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 48 no. 2 (1996): 305-315, 311.

<sup>27</sup> Tosho Toshev, “The Newspaper with Character,” in *Daily Trud: The Leader*, compilers Georgi Lozanov and Orlin Spassov (Sofia: Trud Publishing House, 2002); Nikoltchev, “The Post-communist Bulgarian Journalist;”

<sup>28</sup> Nikoltchev, “The Post-communist Bulgarian Journalist;” Nikoltchev, “Polarization and Diversification.”

<sup>29</sup> Raycheva and Petev, “Mass media’s,” 74.

<sup>30</sup> The Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP) adopted a new identity and called themselves Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP).

talks that tabled the country's roadmap to democracy.<sup>31</sup> This and other related planning policies called for the immediate validation of the political entities in the talks.<sup>32</sup> According to Krassimir Kanev,

The UDF wanted to use the opportunity to present itself to the Bulgarian public as the only viable contender of the political authority of the communists, ... [whereas] BSP sought to reduce the pressure from the streets and establish itself as a legitimate partner a democratic political dialogue.<sup>33</sup>

Moreover, as Raycheva argues, though a fledgling party with "an obscure political profile" the UDF became the voice of the public demanding and shaping Bulgaria's democracy.<sup>34</sup> This is how the communist-anti-communist dichotomy emerged.

The participants in the bilateral talks hammered out a deal to hold general elections that would procure the adoption of a Constitution, to separate the executive, judiciary and legislative powers, and to introduce party pluralism.<sup>35</sup> The economic system of the country as well as the basic rights and freedoms of citizens also became part of the agreement.<sup>36</sup> On July 12, 1991, the first democratic Constitution in Eastern Europe<sup>37</sup> was adopted by a national assembly with a four-party representation dominated by the former communists. The UDF and two revived political organizations, the MRF (a party of Ethnic Turkish background) and the Bulgarian Agrarian National Union,<sup>38</sup> constituted the balance of the membership. The Constitution proclaimed Bulgaria "a republic with a parliamentary government"<sup>39</sup> and vested

---

<sup>31</sup> Krassimir Kanev, "From Totalitarianism to a Constitutional State," in *Bulgaria at the Crossroads*, ed. Jacques Coenen-Huther (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 1996), 51-78; Albert Melone, "Bulgaria's National Roundtable Talks and the Politics of Accommodation," *International Political Science Review* 15 no. 3 (1994): 257-273.

<sup>32</sup> Kanev, "From Totalitarianism to a Constitutional State;" Melone, "Bulgaria's National Roundtable."

<sup>33</sup> Kanev, "From Totalitarianism to a Constitutional State," 55.

<sup>34</sup> Lilia Raycheva, "Turn-of-the-Century Challenges Facing the Mass Media in Bulgaria," *Media Development* 46 no.3 (1999): 9-12, 9.

<sup>35</sup> Melone, "Bulgaria's National Roundtable."

<sup>36</sup> Melone, "Bulgaria's National Roundtable."

<sup>37</sup> Lilia Raycheva, "Fifteen Years of Televised Political Advertising Developments in Bulgaria," in *The SAGE Handbook of Political Advertising*, ed. Lynda Lee kaid and Christina Holtz-Bacha (London: Sage Publications, 2006), 359-375.

<sup>38</sup> Melone, "Bulgaria's National Roundtable."

<sup>39</sup> Crampton, *Bulgaria*.

power in the people. Article 1 of the modern Constitution states: “No part of the people, no political party nor any other organization, state institution or individual shall usurp the expression of the popular sovereignty.”<sup>40</sup>

Because of the Constitution’s significance in establishing the paradigm of the public space, as manifested in Article 1, the act of its amendment was emblematic of the country’s sociopolitical life.<sup>41</sup> Resting on analysis by other scholars, Alexander Gungov explains why: “It [the Constitution] serves as a basis for the legislation of a state and as a primary moral code of a society, and may be compared to a bridge linking them together.”<sup>42</sup> Moreover, the guarantee of individual civil rights was adopted in Article 4 of the 1991 Constitution, which stipulates: “The Republic of Bulgaria shall guarantee the life, dignity and right of the individual and shall create conditions conducive to the free development of the individual and of civil society.”<sup>43</sup> The latter reference to the Constitution is paid special attention in the current thesis, as it is this particular part of the country’s supreme law that has been interpreting differently by the media in the various stages of its development.

The rapid ascendancy of political democracy demonstrated civil society’s eagerness for radical and democratic socioeconomic changes that were expected to quickly ‘fix’ all spheres of life. Yet in 2002, Emil Giatzidis argued that, after the communist collapse, “although Bulgaria has achieved the institutionalization of the new democratic regime, the institutions have yet to gain the genuine legitimacy which is essential for democratic consolidation.”<sup>44</sup> The disconnect came from the lack of political determination amidst the throes of change; soon, the

---

<sup>40</sup> The National Assembly of Bulgaria, “Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria,” (National Assembly of Bulgaria, <<http://www.parliament.bg/?page=const&lng=en>>).

<sup>41</sup> Gungov, “Wonderland in Southeast Europe,” 139.

<sup>42</sup> See Gungov, “Wonderland in Southeast Europe,” 139.

<sup>43</sup> The National Assembly of Bulgaria, “Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria.”

<sup>44</sup> Giatzidis, *Introduction to Post-communist Bulgaria*, 72.

changes brought about disillusionment.<sup>45</sup> In a 2002 book, Peter Gross, a researcher on the media in Eastern Europe, observed that “what quickly emerged from overlapping processes of event-driven and enacted changes ... was ‘a political society,’ civil society’s ‘other’ form, and the market.”<sup>46</sup>

As a result, scholars were right to conclude that the mass media politicized the people.<sup>47</sup> In Bulgaria, civil society grew weary of the extreme political polarization resulting from rotating rounds of power and ongoing bickering between the two political antagonists, the BSP and the UDF. As a result, the first National Assembly, which completed its full mandate in post-1989 Bulgaria, was voted into power in 1997 following large-scale social turmoil.<sup>48</sup> The “unproductive bipolar model of alternating the main political opponents,” featuring a succession of one UDF-led and two BSP-led governments that were dissolved in 1991, 1994 and 1997<sup>49</sup> respectively, gradually led to the need for a major policy rethinking.

Voting activity statistics show clearly the public’s gradual withdrawal from political life. The first post-1989 election turnout was 91%, and in 1991, some 85% of the public cast their vote for parliament. In 1994 the number was down to 75%, and in 1997 it dropped to 62%.<sup>50</sup>

In summary, the polarization of the public sphere and delayed legislation and reforms drew attention to the lack of a national strategy for the country’s transformation, and further halted the process of democratization, liberalization, and the advancement towards a free market economy.

---

<sup>45</sup> Crampton, *Bulgaria*.

<sup>46</sup> See Peter Gross, *Entangled Evolutions: Media and Democratization in Eastern Europe* (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2002), 145.

<sup>47</sup> Raycheva, “Turn-of-the-century challenges.”

<sup>48</sup> Raycheva, “Fifteen Years of Televised.”

<sup>49</sup> Raycheva, “Fifteen Years of Televised.”

<sup>50</sup> Raycheva, “Fifteen Years of Televised.”

## The socioeconomic framework

Many scholars embrace the theory that a major political shift represents a significant change in an emerging order. In the former communist states, the social recasting and the process of transformation from state socialism to capitalism were the salient features of the democratization project.<sup>51</sup> In Bulgaria's case, Assen Dimitrov concludes, "An ominous symbiosis of the most plutocratic versions of socialism with capitalism lies hidden behind the slogans of democracy and market economy."<sup>52</sup> In a similar vein, sociologist Petya Kabakchieva argues that whereas the reformers' agenda focused on the founding of "political democratic institutions, the 'transformers' were concerned with structural adjustments of the economy and maintaining a clear position in power."<sup>53</sup> Attesting to this assertion is the shift to a "market economy based on capitalist private property"<sup>54</sup> in the first 10 years of the transition, which will be discussed in detail later in this chapter.

In order to explain the economic and social undercurrents in the post-socialist decade, it is essential to describe the economic conditions in Bulgaria on the threshold of the new system. According to Vesselin Dimitrov, at the outset of the changes Bulgaria was bereft of a genuine private sector, its economic infrastructure was heavily dependent on industrial enterprises, and some 60% of the country's foreign trade was reliant on the Soviet market.<sup>55</sup> In 1991 the gross domestic product slumped drastically and there was a dearth of foreign investments or foreign-

---

<sup>51</sup> Petya Kabakchieva, "The New Political Actors and Their Strategies," in *Bulgaria at the Crossroads*, ed. Jacques Coenen-Huther (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 1996), 113-136.

<sup>52</sup> Assen Dimitrov, "Values and Stability During a Period of Social Polarization," in *Civil Society in Southeast Europe*, eds. Dane Gordon and David Durst (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), p.147-152, 148.

<sup>53</sup> Kabakchieva, "The New Political Actors," 118.

<sup>54</sup> Assen Dimitrov, "Values and Stability."

<sup>55</sup> Vesselin Dimitrov, *Bulgaria: The Uneven Transition* (London: Routledge, 2001), 70.

bound trade.<sup>56</sup> In what became known as the “winter of discontent,” an economic recession concurrent with mass impoverishment loomed.

Against this backdrop, in the ensuing years, the country adopted two major undertakings, as outlined by scholars: a stable macroeconomic environment and liberalization established on the principle of private property and open market.<sup>57</sup> The symbolic death of the centrally-planned economy was established by liberalizing the majority of the prices of goods and services in 1991.<sup>58</sup> With this move, the government aimed to deal with the “financial imbalances,” the heavy residue of communist mismanagement, by paving the way for economic stabilization. In effect, spiralling annual inflation reached 339% and the Bulgarian currency, the lev, depreciated ten-fold,<sup>59</sup> illustrating two economic trends that remained relatively consistent until 1997. Moreover, as production output by the still state-owned infrastructure plummeted,<sup>60</sup> unemployment reached alarming proportions.<sup>61</sup> From a 0.7% “temporarily jobless” rate in 1985, unemployment levels climbed to 16.2% in 1993.<sup>62</sup> In that same year, some 60% of all Bulgarian households were counted as poor.<sup>63</sup>

For the Bulgarian population, the “price shock”<sup>64</sup> and the loss of the “secure social minimum”<sup>65</sup> were the first encounters with the reforms, and these in turn stirred people’s disillusionment with “the higher social cost of a transition not yet implemented.”<sup>66</sup> Equally

---

<sup>56</sup> Vesselin Dimitrov, *Bulgaria*.

<sup>57</sup> Giatzidis, *Introduction to Post-communist Bulgaria*, 81; Dimitrov, *Bulgaria*, 72.

<sup>58</sup> Roman Frydman, Andrzej Rapaczynski and Earle John, eds., *The Privatization Process in Central Europe* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 1993); Dimitrov, *Bulgaria*, 73.

<sup>59</sup> Vesselin Dimitrov, *Bulgaria*, 73.

<sup>60</sup> Frydman et al., *Privatization process*.

<sup>61</sup> Atanas Atanassov, Sasha Todorova and Valentina Zlatanova, “Socially Vulnerable Groups During the Transition to a Market Economy” in *Bulgaria at the Crossroads*, ed. Jacques Coenen-Huther (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 1996), 189-207.

<sup>62</sup> See Nikolai Tilkidjiev, “Social Stratification in Post-Communist Bulgaria,” in *Bulgaria at the Crossroads*, ed. Jacques Coenen-Huther (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 1996), 79-96.

<sup>63</sup> Atanassov et al., “Socially Vulnerable Groups,” 197.

<sup>64</sup> Fotev, “Total Crisis,” 23.

<sup>65</sup> Tilkidjiev, “Social Stratification,” 91.

<sup>66</sup> Fotev, “Total Crisis,” 24.

frightening were the social tremors that the transition heralded, such as organized and economic crime, all-encompassing corruption, alcoholism, prostitution, drug addiction, and the formation and visibility of vulnerable groups such as the elderly, orphans and people with disabilities—all risks that had been, at least officially, non-existent yesteryear.<sup>67</sup> An assessment of the population in the form of a 1993 sociological survey carried out by Bulgarian sociologists shows that crime rates, unemployment, and the “poverty-wealth axis”<sup>68</sup> were mentioned by 78%, 64.4% and 42.7%, respectively, of the respondents as “a very grave problem.”<sup>69</sup>

### **Annals of the transition**

Despite the plans to achieve a smooth economic transition and the commitment of all successive governments to the incantation of break off the state monopolies and transfer ownership and vested interests from the old *nomenklatura*,<sup>70</sup> enforced stratification and a quasi-political space<sup>71</sup> held back the country’s transition until the late 1990s. The following is a brief summary of the annals of the transformation.

Gradually, private property and the reconstruction of a free market started replacing the centrally-planned communist economy, albeit at a painfully sluggish pace. Although in April 1992, the National Assembly adopted the *Law on the Transformation and Privatization of*

---

<sup>67</sup> Atanassov et al., “Socially Vulnerable.”

<sup>68</sup> Tilkidjiev, “Social Stratification.”

<sup>69</sup> Atanassov et al., “Socially Vulnerable,” 194.

<sup>70</sup> Nomenklatura are party-appointed elites during communism who held posts in strategic places in the state’s international affairs, business, trade and state security. “In translation nomenklatura means a ‘list’ of items, persons—and as such it has to be arranged by somebody. The political synonym for nomenklatura is ‘partocracy.’” (Stephan Nikolov, “Bulgaria: a Quasi-elite” in *Post-communist Elites and Democracy in Eastern Europe*, eds. John Higley, Jan Pakulski and Włodzimierz Wesolowski (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 213-225.

<sup>71</sup> Kabakchieva, “New Political Actors.”

*State-Owned and Municipal Enterprises*,<sup>72</sup> the first chunk of state assets was not put up for sale until four years later.<sup>73</sup> Six years after the country opened its markets, the private sector accounted for only 40% of the GDP<sup>74</sup> even though the two years after the enactment of the privatization law were crowded with a series of reforms introduced by the BSP-backed government, who loudly claimed to be a “government of privatization.”<sup>75</sup> Contrary to the declared strategy, however, privatization in the country began inconsistently and without a well-defined plan; the so-called “quiet privatization”<sup>76</sup> even preceded the adoption and enactment of the Privatization Law.<sup>77</sup> Some scholars have termed this early activity “spontaneous illegal privatization,” which was conveniently facilitated by non-existent legal framework regulating property rights.<sup>78</sup> Like Svetlana Alexandrova explains:

Since the lines between state-owned property and private property are not clearly defined, there has been considerable chaos in the relationships of microstructures and the state, which has had a negative effect on the coordination and control of economic activities.<sup>79</sup>

Since privatization in Bulgaria has been defined as much by an economic motivation as by political impetus,<sup>80</sup> other scholars see the immediate post-communist state of chaos as the result of a deliberate strategy by the restored communists to turn their lost political monopoly into economic power,<sup>81</sup> ultimately leading to plutocracy. A Bulgarian sociologist confirms such a notion, saying that “[o]nly left-oriented political forces can benefit from the delay in

---

<sup>72</sup> Daniela Bobeva and Alexander Bozhkov, “Privatization and Foreign Investments in Bulgaria” in *Privatization and Foreign Investments in Eastern Europe*, ed. Iliana Zloch-Christy (Westport, Connecticut, Praeger Publishers, 1995), 143-156.

<sup>73</sup> Vesselin Dimitrov, *Bulgaria*.

<sup>74</sup> Svetlana Alexandrova, “The Privatization Process in Bulgaria” in *Privatization in Central and Eastern Europe: Perspectives and Approaches*, eds. Demetrius Iatridis and June Hopps (Westport, Connecticut, Praeger Publishers, 1998), 134-143, 135.

<sup>75</sup> See Georgi Smatrakalev, “Investment Policy and Privatization in Bulgaria” in *Privatization and Foreign Investments in Eastern Europe*, ed. Iliana Zloch-Christy, (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 1995), 131-142.

<sup>76</sup> Smatrakalev “Investment Policy and privatization.”

<sup>77</sup> Bobeva and Bozhkov, “Privatization and Foreign Investments.”

<sup>78</sup> Alexandrova, “The Privatization Process in Bulgaria,” 141.

<sup>79</sup> Alexandrova, “The Privatization Process in Bulgaria,” 141.

<sup>80</sup> Alexandrova, “The Privatization Process in Bulgaria,” 141; Smatrakalev, “Investment Policy.”

<sup>81</sup> Fotev, “Total Crisis.”

economic reforms.”<sup>82</sup> So could the party-state *nomenklatura*.<sup>83</sup> In order to understand the *nomenklatura*'s ascendancy to power post-1989, one must revisit the roots of this 'clan' in the stratification of communist Bulgaria. During communism, the *nomenklatura* were intrinsically connected to the political elite in dealing with the operation of the state and were dominant over the control of the country's major assets, foreign trade networks and financial transactions<sup>84</sup> a position they have maintained since 1989 due to their adaptability.

Returning to the issue of the privatization process and the *nomenklatura*'s lion's share of the spoils, because the Bulgarian political leadership based its rationale on the examples of other countries with a market economy, it perceived privatization (if handled properly) as the panacea for dealing with the uncertainties associated with economic transition;<sup>85</sup> however, unlike in other countries undergoing a transition, the method of privatization in Bulgaria was heavily conditioned by the political system and vested interests.<sup>86</sup> For example, Assen Dimitrov relates the delays in the privatization of the state-owned enterprises to “ideological [and] financial [reasons], and an unwillingness to run the risks of private enterprise.” He then notes that “[r]ather than privatize the state-run enterprises, the communist *nomenklatura* simply privatized their profit.”<sup>87</sup> Furthermore, quoted by Thomas Meininger and Detelina Radoeva, one sociologist writes that, “the majority of the new businessmen amassed their wealth as party leaders and as former employees of the security forces.”<sup>88</sup>

---

<sup>82</sup> Fotev, “Total Crisis,” 23.

<sup>83</sup> In “Social Stratification in Post-communist Bulgaria” Tilkidjiev defines the social stratification as a party and state *nomenklatura*, and the rest of the population. It is important to note that the reference to the beneficiaries of the transition is not borrowed from Tilkidjiev.

<sup>84</sup> Tilkidjiev, “Social Stratification.”

<sup>85</sup> Giatzidis, *Introduction to Post-communist Bulgaria*; Alexandrova, “The Privatization Process.”

<sup>86</sup> Smatrakalev, “Investment Policy and Privatization;” Alexandrova, “The Privatization Process;” Giatzidis, *Introduction to Post-communist Bulgaria*.

<sup>87</sup> Assen Dimitrov, “Values and Stability,” 147.

<sup>88</sup> Thomas Meininger and Detelina Radoeva, “Civil Society: The Current Situation and problems” in *Bulgaria in a Time of Change*, ed. Iliana Zloch-Christy (England: Athenaeum Press, 1996), 45-73.

Apart from the inconsistent economic development procured by the revived *nomenklatura*, the new economic entities added another layer of confusion to the devastated economy. Vesselin Dimitrov best explains the origin of the “macroeconomic disequilibrium,”<sup>89</sup> which would affect the country’s socioeconomic and political milieu for years to come:

Those [newly emerging private entrepreneurs] who wanted to compete with the declining state sector were a minority compared with those who wished to take advantage of the loosening controls and extract resources from the state for their own benefit. For their part, state enterprise managers found it rational to maximize not the profit of the [state-owned] enterprise but their own personal gain.<sup>90</sup>

An additional explanation for the modus operandi of the funneling of assets from the state-owned enterprises, which was orchestrated in favour of enterprise managers and a tight-knit web of political-turned-economic lobbies, can be characterized in terms of *nomenklatura*’s plutocratic status. State plants and enterprises were operated by “shady” business groups who controlled the production and regulated the prices of goods. In this manner, the state plants inherited the liabilities of the economic activities, such as due credits, worn-out equipment, and social commitments to the employees, whereas the profits were redirected to those entities placed at the strategic entry and exit points. As a result, Crampton observes, “the profits were privatized and the losses nationalized.”<sup>91</sup> In this way “the redistribution of wealth”<sup>92</sup> led to the accumulation of capital by certain business entities, which in turn allowed them to take part in the larger privatization movement in the country some years later. These entities managed to privatize their profits by exporting them to foreign bank accounts before re-investing those

---

<sup>89</sup> Vesselin Dimitrov, *Bulgaria*, 78.

<sup>90</sup> Vesselin Dimitrov, *Bulgaria*, 74.

<sup>91</sup> Crampton, *Bulgaria*, 404.

<sup>92</sup> Alexandrova, “The Privatization Process in Bulgaria.”

same profits in Bulgaria under the category of “foreign investments,” thus creating, for lack of a better term, a “black economy.”

The state-owned enterprises continued accumulating losses and draining loans from the banks,<sup>93</sup> which were later covered by state assets.<sup>94</sup> Such a progression of events led to a budget deficit of 12% in 1995.<sup>95</sup> The economic stalemate was further exacerbated by simmering social unrest, provoked by the sluggish pace of reforms and the growing impoverishment of the people.<sup>96</sup> Also, the UN embargo on Yugoslavia cut off Bulgaria from its markets in Western Europe and contributed to the hard economic circumstances.<sup>97</sup> At the same time, the embargo enabled the criminal contingency to accumulate capital by smuggling goods across the borders.<sup>98</sup> By 1997, Bulgaria was facing yet another economic recession, but this time of an enormous scale.

A pool of economists has singled out the collapse of the banking system<sup>99</sup> as one of the major reasons for the downward spiral of the economy, since a non-functional banking system stagnates a country's market. The Bulgarian experience is best captured in a 1996 review quoted in an IMF report, which states: “Out of ten state banks, which still accounted for more than 80% of the banking sector assets, nine had negative capital and more than half of all state banks' portfolios were nonperforming.”<sup>100</sup> Simultaneously, hyperinflation skyrocketed to over 2000% in March of 1997.<sup>101</sup> More alarmingly, half of the private banks were in a state of

---

<sup>93</sup> Giatzidis, *Introduction to Post-communist Bulgaria*, 90; Crampton, *Bulgaria*, 404.

<sup>94</sup> Gallina Andronova-Vincelette, “Bulgarian Banking Sector Development, Post-1989,” *Southeast European Politics* 2, no.1 (May 2001), <<http://www.seep.ceu.hu/issue21/andronova.pdf>>.

<sup>95</sup> Alexandrova, “The Privatization Process in Bulgaria.”

<sup>96</sup> Crampton, *Bulgaria*; Giatzidis, *Introduction to Post-communist Bulgaria*; Anne-Marie Gulde, “The Role of the Currency Board in Bulgaria's Stabilization” Policy Discussion Paper of the International Monetary Fund (April 1999), <<http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/pdp/1999/pdp03.pdf>>.

<sup>97</sup> Giatzidis, *Introduction to Post-communist Bulgaria*; Crampton, *Bulgaria*; Bobeva and Bozhkov, “Privatization and Foreign Investments.”

<sup>98</sup> Crampton, *Bulgaria*; Vesselin Dimitrov, *Bulgaria*.

<sup>99</sup> Andronova-Vincelette, “Bulgarian Banking Sector Development.”

<sup>100</sup> Gulde, “The Role of the Currency,” 3.

<sup>101</sup> Gulde, “The Role of the Currency.”

insolvency and a third of the banking sector pulled down the shutters,<sup>102</sup> enriching a coterie of entrepreneurs. This last point is significant here, since one such bank was the de facto owner of what was to become Bulgaria's largest circulation daily.

What precipitated this cataclysm in the financial sector? Gallina Andronova-Vincelette provides the answer: In an environment of inconsistent reforms and inadequate supervision and regulation, banks would "grant economically non-viable, politically motivated preferential credit[s]."<sup>103</sup> As a result, Bulgaria gave the world a class of "credit millionaires."<sup>104</sup>

Wary of the "acute social polarization" and angered by the growing epidemic of "cashing in on social status,"<sup>105</sup> the people vented their disappointment with the new reality in mass protests, the second largest in Bulgaria's democratic history, six years after the severe "winter of discontent" in 1991.

The way out of the economic cul-de-sac came on July 1, 1997, when Bulgaria entered a currency board arrangement with the International Monetary Fund. The deal required Bulgaria to peg its currency to the Deutschmark (later the euro), fix the exchange rate and reorganize the Bulgarian National Bank.<sup>106</sup> Soon, the country began to show the first signs of economic rebound since the beginning of the transition period. Gradually, the public confidence in a functioning market was regained. This time it was irreversible—the country was on a steady, upward reform path, which made the hope of joining the European Union a decade later less of a distant dream and a step closer to reality.

---

<sup>102</sup> Gulde "The Role of the Currency."

<sup>103</sup> See Andronova-Vincelette, "Bulgarian Banking Sector Development," 26.

<sup>104</sup> "A credit millionaire is an individual or a firm that has made money by failing to service bank loans." (See Andronova-Vincelette, "Bulgarian Banking Sector.")

<sup>105</sup> Assen Dimitrov, "Values and Stability," 147.

## The media upheaval

Because each media system is wedded to its immediate environment, scholars conclude that it is appropriate to review the media in a country undergoing transition within the context of that country's cultural, socioeconomic and political changes.

In relation to the post-communist media landscape in Bulgaria, the unclear vision for the country's political and economic transition to democracy has posed a challenge for the media system. In the words of media scholar Elizer Alfanderi, the failure of the political leadership to articulate a clear vision for the media's transformation suspended the ability to conceptualize a suitable national media system.<sup>107</sup> Hence, it is not surprising that seeds for the "eradication of censorship and the end of state monopoly,"<sup>108</sup> the two corollaries of the media reformist agenda, were planted even before the formalization of press freedom and the abolishment of censorship in the 1991 Constitution.

Further, it would not be an overstatement to claim that the mass media, which was simultaneously performing the role "of transmitters of protest and ... catalysts for political change," launched the quest for democratization in the country.<sup>109</sup> One of the directions such an assertion takes is the argument pertaining to the state's disengagement in the media, which Peter Gross adopts. In his view, the origin of media deregulation in the Eastern European countries was both spontaneous and deliberate.<sup>110</sup> The former, he says, was "a natural rejection of authoritarian regulation by the state [and the latter came about] as an expression of the ideational, practical, and professional evolution of journalists" when civil society was on the

---

<sup>106</sup> Vesselin Dimitrov, *Bulgaria*.

<sup>107</sup> Elizer Alfanderi, *Media and Power: Journalism Between the Freedom of Speech and the Social Responsibility* (Sofia: Tilia Publishing House, 2000).

<sup>108</sup> Alfanderi, *Media and Power*.

<sup>109</sup> Raycheva and Petev, "Mass Media's," 75; Raycheva, "Turn-of-the-Century," 9.

way to maturity.<sup>111</sup> With regards to Bulgaria's media system, Gross was subsequently proven correct on both counts.

After an ad hoc start,<sup>112</sup> the roadmap to democratization in the media remained uncharted well into the 1990s. Raycheva explains the "communication euphoria" that occurred in the public domain with the launch of the changes in 1989. What actually happened, she recalls in a 1999 article, was a "spontaneous pouring of the people in the streets to take part in meetings, marches, wakes and strikes, as to give free vent to or exchange long pent-up discontent."<sup>113</sup>

In 1993, a survey that polled some 100 intellectuals established "'freedom of speech' ... [as] the most frequent response to the question: 'What is the most important thing that we have accomplished in the four years after November 10, 1989?'"<sup>114</sup> However, in its most benign form, the notion of a free press was, first and foremost, realized through the communist-anti-communist dichotomy, which was later molded into an overarching BSP-UDF rhetoric. That binaryism it seems, was broadly launched by the party press and was later adopted, as an instantly winning principle, by the rest of the media—both electronic and print.

The vigorous participation of the social constituency in the historical events, the proliferation of new political entities and the vivid political activism provided the impetus for what was to unfold as an unprecedented boom in print publications,<sup>115</sup> followed later by the emergence of new electronic outlets. On the surface, the start seemed pretty straightforward:

---

<sup>110</sup> Peter Gross, Peter Gross, "Media and Political Society in Eastern Europe," *Media Development* 2, no. 1 (2002), <[http://www.wacc.org.uk/wacc/publications/media\\_development/archive/2002\\_1/media\\_and\\_political\\_society\\_in\\_eastern\\_eur\\_ope](http://www.wacc.org.uk/wacc/publications/media_development/archive/2002_1/media_and_political_society_in_eastern_eur_ope)>, 4.

<sup>111</sup> Gross, "Media and Political," 4.

<sup>112</sup> Raycheva, "Turn-of-the-century."

<sup>113</sup> Raycheva, "Turn-of-the-century," 9.

<sup>114</sup> See Ekaterina Ognianova and Scott Byron, "Milton's Paradox: The Marketplace of Ideas in Post-communist Bulgaria," *European Journal of Communication* 12 no. 3 (1997): 369-390, 373.

<sup>115</sup> Nikoltchev, "The Post-communist Bulgarian Journalist;" Nikoltchev, "Polarization and Diversification."

there was a demand for political pluralism and a diversity of political viewpoints.<sup>116</sup> Since at the bilateral talks, the UDF put forth, among other things, demands for access to the media and the publication of its own party newspaper, soon the public was provided with continuous broadcasting of the roundtable talks.<sup>117</sup> Also, the *Bill on Political Parties* ensured the issuance of own-party newspapers.<sup>118</sup> As a result, the resurrected Bulgarian Social Democratic Party launched its daily *Svoboden Narod* (Free People) and the UDF launched *Demokratsia* (Democracy),<sup>119</sup> later followed by *Narodno Zemedelsko Zname* (People's Agricultural Banner) and *Podkrepa* (Support)—all “party organs of the anti-communist coalition.”<sup>120</sup> Their “ideological opponents” were *Otechestven Vestnik* (Fatherland Newspaper), *Zemedelsko Zname* (Agricultural Banner) and the BSP's *Duma* (Word)—which was in fact the resuscitated *Rabotnicheskoto Delo*.<sup>121</sup>

Meanwhile, entrenched communist praxis continued to shape public discourse in the early transition period. As Ekaterina Ognianova writes, “The tradition of the communist regime—that a party must have a tribune and that a mass medium furthers the cause of party—was very strong.”<sup>122</sup> On the other hand, Ognianova traces the origin of the new press freedom status quo to the media's fervor to completely “dissociate” from authoritarian practices by providing unfettered access to the oppositional voices of the UDF coalition.<sup>123</sup> She also points out that the media “voluntarily” succumbed to “the politicians in the name of the long-awaited democracy.”<sup>124</sup>

---

<sup>116</sup> Nikoltchev, “The Post-communist Bulgarian Journalist;” Nikoltchev, “Polarization and Diversification.”

<sup>117</sup> Melone, “Bulgaria's National Roundtable.”

<sup>118</sup> Maria Bakardjieva, “The New Media Landscape in Bulgaria,” *Canadian Journal of Communication* 20, no.1 (1995), <<http://www.cjc-online.ca/index.php/journal/article/viewArticle/845/751>>.

<sup>119</sup> Bakardjieva, “The New Media Landscape;” Nikoltchev, “The Post-communist Bulgarian Journalist.”

<sup>120</sup> Ognianova and Byron, “Milton's Paradox,” 377; Ognianova, “The Transitional Media System,” 20.

<sup>121</sup> Ognianova and Byron, “Milton's paradox,” 377); Ognianova, “Transitional Media System,” 20.

<sup>122</sup> Ognianova, “Transitional Media System,” 19.

<sup>123</sup> Ognianova, “Transitional Media System.”

<sup>124</sup> Ognianova, “Transitional Media System,” 24.

Political flak and re-packaged propaganda,<sup>125</sup> and between-party quibbles preoccupied the media, keeping it away from the more important issues of a society facing the challenges of a new socioeconomic environment. Describing the media–societal trend in Eastern Europe, which was symptomatic of Bulgaria’s in the mid-90s, Karol Jakubowicz rightly concluded that,

[c]ivil society is in retreat because the population has largely opted out of public life, discouraged by lack of progress in solving the particular countries’ problems and by what it perceives to be the interminable power struggle of politicians concentrating on issues without relevance to the everyday life of the people.<sup>126</sup>

Moreover, the all-encompassing polarization of the public sphere<sup>127</sup> into UDF or BSP sympathizers, and the media politicization,<sup>128</sup> gradually fostered disenchantment. The public started verbalizing their discontent, venting their frustration with the engulfing political polarization of the day. As politicization fatigue settled in,<sup>129</sup> new independent and quasi-independent newspapers increasingly started hitting the news kiosks, thus turning yet another page in the history of Bulgarian democratic journalism. In 1990 there were 108 new newspapers, and by 1993 the print market had exploded to 2,664 news publications<sup>130</sup> featuring some 50 dailies.<sup>131</sup>

In such a plethora of new publications, or resurrected old ones, a few titles stand out: *168 Chassa* (168 Hours), a politically independent weekly issued by private publishers; *Trud* (Work), the national daily of the confederation of independent trade unions; *24 Chassa* (24 Hours), the first tabloid-sized independent daily, which enjoyed the largest circulation; and

---

<sup>125</sup> Ognianova, “Transitional Media System.”

<sup>126</sup> Karol Jakubowicz, “Media as Agents of Change,” in *Glasnost and After: Media and Change in Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. David Paletz, Karol Jakubowicz and Pavao Novosel (New Jersey: Hampton Press, 1995), 19-47, 41.

<sup>127</sup> Orlin Spassov, “The ‘Serious’ Press, the Tabloid Context.”

<sup>128</sup> Valeri Naidenov, “Before the Birth of the Newspaper and Shortly After,” in *24 Chassa: The Newspaper*, compilers Georgi Lozanov, Orlin Spassov and Rossen Yankov (Sofia: Trud Publishing House, 2001).

<sup>129</sup> Raycheva, “Fifteen Years of Televised.”

<sup>130</sup> See Ognianova, “The Transitional Media System.”

<sup>131</sup> Meininger, and Radoeva, “Civil Society,” 60.

*Standart* (Standard), a daily of the independent mainstream press.<sup>132</sup> These newspapers are the subject of more extensive discussion later in this chapter and in the paper overall.

The quality press made an entry with the dailies *Kontinent* (Continent) and *Pari* (Money) in 1992, followed a year later by the launch of two business weeklies, *Kesh* (Cash) and *Kapital* (Capital).<sup>133</sup> In addition, a myriad of specialized publications, ‘yellow press’ with a penchant for sensationalism and infotainment further filled the demand for diversity. All the while, the popularity of the partisan press took a downward turn and those print outlets that were not forced to fold gradually shrank in terms of size and circulation. For example, by 1995 the circulation of BSP’s *Duma* had been reduced to one tenth of its previous high of 680,000, while the circulation of the UDF-published *Demokratsia* dropped from 420,000 in 1990 to 50,000 some five years later.<sup>134</sup>

Most of the print outlets, it could be argued, failed to engage and help people reconstruct the new social reality, as the majority simply adopted biased and tabloid-style newspeak, and aggressively mish-mashed opinions and facts.<sup>135</sup> Some sociologists go so far as to claim that the press:

[w]orsened societal harms ... and confused the public mind. The national and especially the local press have pandered to popular prejudice and have practiced character assassination, doing so in language that has been coarse, obscure and filled both with neologisms, and often (foreign phrases) chosen for their ability to stereotype.<sup>136</sup>

---

<sup>132</sup> Raycheva and Petev, “Mass Media’s.”

<sup>133</sup> Raycheva and Petev, “Mass Media’s.”

<sup>134</sup> In all, this paragraph heavily relies on the media studies of Ivan Nikoltchev. See, Nikoltchev, “The Post-communist Bulgarian Journalist;” Nikoltchev, “Polarization and Diversification.”

<sup>135</sup> Ognianova, “Transitional Media System;” Raycheva and Petev, “Mass Media’s.”

<sup>136</sup> Meininger, and Radoeva, “Civil Society,” 21.

For example, citing a sociological survey held in 1991 that recorded only 21% of the polled saying they trusted the press, Raycheva and Petev were right to conclude that, “[t]he need for social dialogue was painfully felt.”<sup>137</sup>

Unlike the popular press, changes on the broadcasting front took longer to shape and were driven by a different, and oftentimes contradictory, government motivation.<sup>138</sup> Whereas the foreign radio channels—The Voice of America, BBC-World Service, Free Europe, France International, and Deutsche Welle—entered the market in the first years of changes, the television liberalization was considerably delayed.<sup>139</sup>

### **Establishing the marketplace of ideas**

In the midst of the democratization of social life and the chaos that enveloped the country after the 1989 revolution, the press was deregulated first,<sup>140</sup> revolutionizing the mass media landscape and thoroughly transforming the press market. The newly liberated media sought independence, derived from what media scholars called a laissez-faire economy and genuine competition. As in the other sectors of the open market, privatization was perceived as the *raison d’être* for a democratized mass media.<sup>141</sup> Bulgaria’s democratic government seemed to have understood this dictum clearly and instantly adopted a two-pronged strategy of encouraging private ownership. A 1989 *Council of Ministers Decree* allowed for the establishment of private media outlets, while the adoption of the legislation sanctioning the confiscation of the property of the totalitarian organizations allowed for the privatization of the

---

<sup>137</sup> Raycheva and Petev, “Mass Media’s,” 85.

<sup>138</sup> Raycheva, “Turn-of-the-Century.”

<sup>139</sup> Raycheva, “Turn-of-the-Century.”

<sup>140</sup> Raycheva and Petev, “Mass Media’s.”

<sup>141</sup> Slavko Splichal, “From State Control to Commodification: Media Democratization in East and Central Europe” in *Democracy and Communication in the New Europe: Change and Continuity in East and West*, (eds.) Farrel Corcoran and

“print organs:” the spine of the totalitarian system that communicated the all-encompassing communist ideology.<sup>142</sup>

Just as political impetus lay behind the change of ownership in all sectors of the economy<sup>143</sup> from the outset, so also was press privatization in Bulgaria steered politically.<sup>144</sup> When looking at the liberalization of the press industry, scholars see a form of perpetuation of a politically motivated legacy of the powers that be to hold a tight grip over the independent dailies.<sup>145</sup> In the words of one media expert, the privatization of *Trud*, the organ of the former confederation of independent trade unions, and the emergence of *24 Chassa*, the first private national daily, epitomized the utmost “state monopolization over the public sphere.”<sup>146</sup> To support his claim, Elizier Alfandari traces the genesis of the mainstream press:

[It] did not emerge out of market mechanisms ... but by state decree—either by the inheritance of the assets of old-regime predecessors (i.e. *Trud*) or by the channeling of state loans to strictly selected and trusted entities which were later written off with a special law (i.e. *24 Chassa*). This concealed type of state activity led to the formation of the-so-called credit millionaires in the ‘social constituency’ of the media.<sup>147</sup>

Regardless of the motivation for the privatization of the media, which instantly introduced a wave of privatization in other fields of the economy related to the production and distribution of newspapers, it is correct to state that the free market in the country was conceived within the proliferation of the democratic print media outlets.<sup>148</sup> Furthermore, the spurring competition among the print outlets developed the media market and accelerated the trend of media capital

---

Paschal Preston (New Jersey: Hampton Press, 1995); Slavko Splichal, *Media Beyond Socialism: Theory and Practice in East-Central Europe* (Boulder: Westview press, 1994).

<sup>142</sup> Bakardjieva, “The New Media Landscape.”

<sup>143</sup> Alexandrova, “The Privatization Process in Bulgaria.”

<sup>144</sup> Alfandari, *Media and Power*.

<sup>145</sup> Alfandari, *Media and Power*, 141.

<sup>146</sup> Alfandari, *Media and Power*.

<sup>147</sup> Alfandari, *Media and Power*, 141.

<sup>148</sup> Filip Panayotov, “Pages from *Trud*’s Biography” in *Daily Trud: The Leader*, compilers Georgi Lozanov and Orlin Spassov (Sofia: Trud Publishing House, 2002), 59. See Ognianova, “The Transitional Media System.”

accumulation. That is how *Media Holding* (publishers of *Trud*), *Tron* (publishers of *Standart*) and *168 Chassa Press Group* (publishers of *24 Chassa* daily and *168 Chassa* weekly) became the largest enterprises in the marketplace of ideas post-1989.<sup>149</sup> The new *Trud* and *Media Holding* instantly became the only rival to the then most influential private press group, *168 Chassa*.<sup>150</sup> The intense media competition between the three press groups led to a new era in Bulgarian mass media. By steering away from political rhetoric and eagerly embracing the market mechanisms of development, the three press giants established the concept of free press.<sup>151</sup> Moreover, as Filip Panayotov further argues,

The press groups had abandoned the official monotonous language, ideologues and totalitarian-style humdrum headlines and by applying the experience of the western press, the press groups' publications conquered the newspaper market, ultimately fostering press freedom—the first and only triumph of Bulgaria's fledgling democracy.<sup>152</sup>

The growth of the commercially-oriented press groups that based their business on the principles of the market officially ended the politicized discourse, which had hampered the country's democratization process. As Raycheva affirms with relation to the media-triggered politicization, "the press has frequently distorted the country's political processes, yet it exerted considerable influence on public opinion."<sup>153</sup> Moreover, *24 Chassa* and *Trud* "dictate the main trends in the development of the press."<sup>154</sup>

---

<sup>149</sup> Nikoltchev, "The Post-communist Bulgarian Journalist." Nikoltchev, "Polarization and Diversification."

<sup>150</sup> Nikoltchev, "The Post-communist Bulgarian Journalist;" Nikoltchev, "Polarization and Diversification."

<sup>151</sup> Panayotov, "Pages From *Trud*'s Biography."

<sup>152</sup> Panayotov, "Pages From *Trud*'s Biography," 59.

<sup>153</sup> See Raycheva, "Fifteen Years of Televised," 362.

## **24 Chassa (hours) of modern journalism**

A self-proclaimed “terminator of the press market,”<sup>155</sup> from its debut on the market, *24 Chassa* restructured the press landscape, revolutionized news output and put an end to the dominance of the political gobbledygook in the ‘public sphere.’ A decade later, Valeri Naidenov, “the father of modern journalism in Bulgaria”<sup>156</sup> and creator and first editor-in-chief of *24 Chassa*, recalled the concept of the new daily at the outset:

Bulgaria was in dire need of an objective newspaper. In 1990, the country it seemed was split in two military camps—a blue [UDF] and a red one [BSP].<sup>157</sup> There was a gaping abyss between them. As if we were two different people and no longer just one. The peaceful co-existence was increasingly becoming more impossible. People in love were breaking up and spouses were divorcing. The two fallen-out ‘Bulgarias’ had two newspapers: *Duma* and *Demokratsia*. They were affecting the people like an opium of hatred. . . . *24 Chassa* eliminated the two conflicting and hostile public discourses. Bulgaria’s common public discourse came to life with *24 Chassa*.<sup>158</sup>

From its beginning *24 Chassa* employed an adversarial approach to partisanship and espoused a pro-entrepreneurial bias, proclaiming support for “liberal democracy”<sup>159</sup> and what media scholar Maria Bakardjieva calls the fostering of “free market ideology.”<sup>160</sup> The competitive environment ushered by the fall of the Iron Curtain and the mushrooming of domestic businesses have opened up a readership’s niche that *24 Chassa* tapped into: the private business entities. For example, Rossen Yankov, today’s deputy editor-in-chief of *24 Chassa*, recalls the unique nature of the daily: “*24 Chassa* is the newspaper that first differentiated

---

<sup>154</sup> Spassov, “The ‘Serious’ Press, the Tabloid Context,” 3.

<sup>155</sup> Venelina Gocheva, “2001: the Newspaper the Way it is,” in *24 Chassa: The Newspaper*, compilers Georgi Lozanov, Orlin Spassov and Rossen Yankov (Sofia: Trud Publishing House, 2001).

<sup>156</sup> Georgi, Lozanov, Orlin, Spassov, and Rossen Yankov, (eds.) *24 Chassa: The Newspaper* (Trud Publishing House, 2001).

<sup>157</sup> Blue is the symbol of the UDF and red is associated with the BSP.

<sup>158</sup> Valeri Naidenov, “Before the Birth of the Newspaper and Shortly After,” in *24 Chassa: The Newspaper*, compilers Georgi Lozanov, Orlin Spassov and Rossen Yankov (Sofia: Trud Publishing House, 2001), 52-53.

<sup>159</sup> Rosen Yankov, “Short History,” in *24 Chassa: the Newspaper*, compilers Georgi Lozanov, Orlin Spassov and Rossen Yankov (Sofia: Trud Publishing House, 2001).

society from state, state from motherland and the society from the ruling group. . . . Life in the country was radically changing and *24 Chassa* reflected on that change.”<sup>161</sup>

*24 Chassa* was innovative in terms of public discourse and the media’s role in a democracy. It thrived on a modern colloquial style,<sup>162</sup> reversed sentence structure and a lively language stripped of uniformity that overnight turned it into the most preferred newspaper on the print market. It also introduced the Fourth Estate role of the media by antagonizing political elite<sup>163</sup> and siding with the business. Its concept brought the newspaper widespread public trust. According to data from a BBSS Gallup International poll cited by Tsvetozar Tomov, about 70% to 80% of the 4 million active newspaper readership in Bulgaria in 1992-93 trusted the newspaper.<sup>164</sup> By mid-1994, with a tabloid format and daily sale of 280,000 copies,<sup>165</sup> *24 Chassa*, the new kid on the block, boasted the largest circulation of all the dailies, outnumbering the combined circulations of *Trud*, *Standart* and *Duma*.<sup>166</sup>

Public trust in the newspaper took a downward turn once the publisher of *24 Chassa* Ventsislav Yosifov, co-owner of First Private Bank (mentioned earlier in the chapter as a ‘credit millionaire’), was nominated by BSP to run in the mayoral race in Sofia in 1995. *24 Chassa* carried the election campaign on its shoulders and vouched for the wannabe mayor. Reflecting on the political bias of the newspaper, Yankov writes, “For the first time *24 Chassa* transformed into something akin to a party organ... This was the first time that the newspaper

---

<sup>160</sup> Bakardjieva, “The New Media Landscape.”

<sup>161</sup> Yankov, “Short History,” 19.

<sup>162</sup> Bakardjieva, “New Media Landscape.”

<sup>163</sup> Venelina Gocheva, “2001: The Newspaper the Way it is,” in *24 Chassa: The Newspaper*, compilers Georgi Lozanov, Orlin Spassov and Rossen Yankov (Sofia: Trud Publishing House, 2001).

<sup>164</sup> Tsvetozar Tomov, “The Successful Newspaper,” in *24 Chassa: The Newspaper*, compilers Georgi Lozanov, Orlin Spassov and Rossen Yankov (Sofia: Trud Publishing House, 2001).

<sup>165</sup> Yankov, “Short History.”

<sup>166</sup> Orlin Spassov, “From Politics to the Citizenship,” in *24 Chassa: The Newspaper*, compilers Georgi Lozanov, Orlin Spassov and Rossen Yankov (Sofia: Trud Publishing House, 2001).

entered into a conflict with its reader, who has a liberal or right-wing orientation, and for whom partisanship is completely foreign.”<sup>167</sup>

### ***Trud*: the family tribune**

One newspaper’s misfortune is another’s good fortune. As *24 Chassa* redrew its ideological stance, *Trud*, the newspaper with the longest lifespan in Bulgaria, began to flex its non-affiliation muscle. Brought by the impoverishment of the greater majority of the population a social polarization increasingly enveloped the country; thus led to the segmentation of the readers. Amidst such a division, while *24 Chassa*’s ideology served only the private entrepreneurs and new capitalists, *Trud*’s formula of success was to offer a different reality to the working class and the average Bulgarian family fighting the new socioeconomic environment<sup>168</sup> of social insecurity, escalating hyperinflation and robust crime. *Trud*’s popularity steadily grew and it soon became the top-ranked daily, a position the newspaper has preserved to this day. *Trud*’s readership stood at 80,000 in 1992<sup>169</sup> and over four years grew to 182,000.<sup>170</sup> Moreover, according to its editor-in-chief Tosho Toshev, the non-affiliation with any party cause and the newspaper’s blatantly “non-servile behaviour towards any party entity” represented the only non-partisan approach in the contest for readers.<sup>171</sup> A journalist from the rival *24 Chassa* describes the ascendancy of the revived and reformed *Trud* to become the newspaper with the largest circulation from 1996:

---

<sup>167</sup> Yankov, “Short History,” 21.

<sup>168</sup> Georgi Gospodinov, “Seducing the Market,” in *24 Chassa: The Newspaper eds.*, Georgi Lozanov, Orlin Spassov and Rossen Yankov, (Sofia: Trud Publishing House, 2001).

<sup>169</sup> Toshev, Tosho “The Newspaper with Character.”

<sup>170</sup> Raycheva and Petev, ‘Mass Media’s.’

<sup>171</sup> Toshev, “The Newspaper with Character;” 23.

The nation-wide dream of wealth collapsed and the secured income, a state-budget salary, the pension and the social benefits gained more importance to the average Bulgarian who felt cheated realizing that only the swindlers and the people with power could become capitalists. The mass conscience that we are poor, working people settled in.<sup>172</sup>

The emergence of the press groups played a significant role in the democratization of the country. By introducing objective coverage, a pluralism of viewpoints and enterprise reporting, the press groups “foster[ed] social dialogue.”<sup>173</sup> More to the point, according to two scholars, “Both newspaper groups feature watchdog reporting on state institutions – an important role of non-political journalism in times of political turmoil.”<sup>174</sup>

While the modern journalism embraced by the independent press groups continued to flourish and increasingly began to serve the public interest by acting as a watchdog for the people and keeping checks and balances on the state authority, scholars claim that the state continued to deliver a set of challenges to the press by holding a firm grasp on the centralized printing and distribution, and by introducing a value-added tax of 18 per cent on newspapers.<sup>175</sup> Another challenge loomed with the restructuring of the newspapers’ ownership and management, which in turn, was complicated by the lack of readiness on the part of the leadership to operate a newspaper as an enterprise and to ensure its survival in a highly competitive market.<sup>176</sup> Moreover, the dearth of advertising revenue and a very poorly functioning economy<sup>177</sup> added to the already considerable barriers the media industry faced as it sought to reform on both micro and macro levels.

---

<sup>172</sup> Yankov, “Short History,” 19.

<sup>173</sup> Raycheva and Petev, “Mass Media’s.”

<sup>174</sup> Raycheva and Petev, “Mass Media’s,” 87.

<sup>175</sup> Ognianova, “Transitional Media System;” Nikoltchev, “Post-communist Bulgarian Journalist;” Nikoltchev, “Polarization and Diversification.”

<sup>176</sup> Ognianova, “Transitional Media System.”

<sup>177</sup> Nikoltchev, “Post-communist Bulgarian Journalist.”

Thus, in the midst of the economic crisis that reached its nadir at the end of 1996, the media was stumbling and in need of a helping hand. For the mainstream print publications, relief came from abroad. In September 1996, the media conglomerate Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung (WAZ), a European empire of more than 130 newspapers,<sup>178</sup> “invaded” Bulgaria’s print media space, acquiring a 70% share of the indebted *168 Chassa Press Group* and, a few months later, 70% of *Media Holding*.<sup>179</sup> Journalists and media analysts likened the takeover of the two leading newspapers<sup>180</sup> to an opportunity for “mass manipulation” since, at the time, the sales of the traditional rivals *Trud* and *24 Chassa* exceeded the combined sales of the remaining dailies.<sup>181</sup> Their circulation was nearly similar, as were their styles. Moreover, the merger of the two groups, whose combined readership at the time represented 80% of Bulgaria’s total readership, pointed to a “blatant breach of Bulgaria’s anti-monopoly laws”<sup>182</sup> since after the merger the market share of WAZ in Bulgaria amounted to 41.7%<sup>183</sup> and in 1999 it was as high as 53.80%. Their large circulation made the two dailies very attractive for advertisers; this, in addition to a joint advertising programme which, in effect, “ensured a monopoly position for WAZ.”<sup>184</sup>

WAZ’s dominant position at the market has brought a host of positive development and a series of challenges for the media, which will be further discussed in the next chapter of this research.

---

<sup>178</sup> *Kapital*, “Who is Who on the Bulgarian Media Market?” August 10, 2007, 12-13.

<sup>179</sup> Christopher Karadjov, “Free Enterprise or Free Press,” *War Report* (June-July 1997), letter to author, August 2008.

<sup>180</sup> Lilia Raycheva, “Bulgaria: The Online Mirror Image of The Printed Newspapers,” in *Print and Online Newspapers in Europe: A Comparative Analysis in 16 Countries*, eds. Richard van der Wurff, and Edmund Lauf (Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, 2005), 67-78.

<sup>181</sup> Karadjov, “Free Enterprise or Free Press.”

<sup>182</sup> See Karadjov, “Free Enterprise or Free Press.”

<sup>183</sup> Velislava Popova, “Concentration of Media Ownership and its Impact on Media Independence and Pluralism” (report presented at the South East European Network for Professionalization of Media Conference, Bled, June 11-12, 2004), 94-117.

<sup>184</sup> Popova, “Concentration of Media Ownership.”

## Chapter 3

### Media revolution and media growth: 20 years later

In this chapter, I narrate the story of Bulgaria's mass media within the context of the press landscape in 2008. First, I provide the economic, political and social framework for an analysis of the press. Second, I highlight the paradoxes that the media are facing and explain them within the framework of media ownership and the impact on the media of political and corporate interests.

Where two decades earlier disenchanted Bulgarians had flocked to protest a life of oppression, on January 1, 2007, fireworks and a celebratory mood gathered the exhilarated masses together to cheer yet another milestone in the country's modern history: Bulgaria's accession to the European Union. This event, as one journalist predicted, would "formally declare the end of the transition."<sup>1</sup> The country's extended period of harmonizing its legislation with the *acqui communautaire* of the wealthy bloc was officially over and the parameters of the changes were officially re-drawn. This was surely a moment worthy of celebration—but the dream of *La Dolce Vita* would soon turn into a harsher reality.

There were telling indications of this last point: in 2007 GDP growth was estimated at 6.2%, the inflation rate was 12.5% compared with 6.5% for 2006,<sup>2</sup> and unemployment had plateaued at 6.9%.<sup>3</sup> Direct foreign investment had continued to pour in within the past few

---

<sup>1</sup> Hristo Hristov, "The Freedom of Speech and its Dependencies," *Dnevnik*, November 1, 2006, <<http://www.dnevnik.bg/show/?storyid=291061>> (26 August 2008).

<sup>2</sup> US Department of State, "Country Profile," <<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ci/bgn/3236.htm>> (15 August 2008).

<sup>3</sup> National Statistic Institute, <<http://www.nsi.bg/>> (10 August 2008).

years, accounting for some 17.7% of the GDP in 2007 alone.<sup>4</sup> More tellingly perhaps, the World Bank unequivocally recognized the country's commitment to encourage foreign investments in its *Doing Business 2008* report, placing Bulgaria among one of the world's top ten reformers.<sup>5</sup> The final days of the restructuring appeared to be in sight.

Overall, the European Union (EU) identified Bulgaria as a functioning democracy and market economy. The relative political stability, maturing civil society and a round of completed reforms plainly signaled positive development in many fields. Analysts were quick to predict a rise in living standards and better job opportunities—all expectations fuelled by forecasts of new business entrants and by the newly gained access to “the world's largest economic bloc” of 500 million people.<sup>6</sup>

But this bed of roses had some hidden thorns. Although in March of 2008, the average monthly salary of \$360US was some 25% higher than in the same period of the previous year,<sup>7</sup> upon their joint accession to the EU, Bulgaria and Romania were labeled the poorest European Union member.<sup>8</sup> More alarmingly, in a report on the country's progress months after Bulgaria joined the club, the EU called for better implementation of the reforms in the areas of the judiciary and the fight against high-level corruption and organized crime, areas presenting an overarching concern for the bloc.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> World Association of Newspapers, “Bulgaria,” in *World Press Trends 2008*, World Association of Newspapers, (Paris: ZenithOptimedia, 2008), 252-258.

<sup>5</sup> World Bank, “Doing Business 2008,” World Bank Report, <<http://www.worldbank.org/am/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/ECAEXT/ARMENIAEXTN/0..contentMDK:21496114~menuPK:50003484~pagePK:2865066~piPK:2865079~theSitePK:301579.00.html>>. (10 October 2008).

<sup>6</sup> Ferrero-Waldner, Benita, European Commissioner for External Relations and European Neighbourhood Policy, “The Future of the European Union - Managing Globalization” speech at the Bucerius Summer School, Hamburg, 31 August 2007, <[http://www.europa-eu-un.org/articles/en/article\\_7282\\_en.htm](http://www.europa-eu-un.org/articles/en/article_7282_en.htm)> (13 August 2008).

<sup>7</sup> National Statistical Institute, <[www.nsi.bg](http://www.nsi.bg)> (13 August 2008).

<sup>8</sup> Dan Bilefsky, “Romania and Bulgaria Celebrate Entry Into European Union,” *The New York Times*, January 2, 2007 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/02/world/europe/02union.html>> (3 September 2008).

<sup>9</sup> Commission of the European Communities, “Key findings of the progress report on the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism with Bulgaria,” (European Commission: press release, Brussels, 27 June, 2007) <<http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=MEMO/07/261&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en>>.

Hence, these issues were quickly tabled on the public agenda, or so it seemed at first. However, “in order to solve a social problem of the scope of all-encompassing corruption, corruption has to be first realized by the people”<sup>10</sup> who are the vehicle through which the mass media carries out its civic function, even more so in a country undergoing societal transformation where the media plays the central role in the restructuring of the public space.<sup>11</sup> As Petko Todorov puts it, the media’s watchdog role “allows for the definition of their own impact on public opinion on issues of corruption, on the initiatives and actions directed against corruption, and ultimately on the activity or passivity of the different institutions in combating corruption.”<sup>12</sup>

The media’s role of serving as a platform for a multifaceted debate on issues of general interest to the public had failed to fully materialize. The peak of its silence came some eighteen months after the EU accession, when the European Commission raised a red flag, criticizing Bulgaria’s “failure to tackle corruption and its bad management of EU funds and froze \$1.2 billion in subsidies amid corruption and fraud concerns.”<sup>13</sup> Such an outcome emphatically reiterated the appeal that Slavi Binev, a Bulgarian member of the European Parliament (MEP) had made from the club’s dais three months earlier, voicing an urgent need for involvement on the part of the European Court of Justice “in order to save statehood in our country.”<sup>14</sup>

However, of greater interest for the present discussion is Binev’s harsh scolding of the media for its debilitating effect on the state’s cohesion. In his sixty-second address to the MEPs “on matters of political importance,” Binev related the lack of solutions to the country’s

---

<sup>10</sup> Petko Todorov, “Bulgarian Media in European Routes,” e-mail message to author, 25 June 2008.

<sup>11</sup> See Velislava Popova, “The Year of Concealed Media Bankruptcies,” *Kapital*, December 27, 2003.

<sup>12</sup> Todorov, “Bulgarian media.”

<sup>13</sup> “EU Tells Bulgaria to Step up Anti-corruption Drive,” *AFP*, August 27, 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Slavi Binev, “One Minute Speech on Matters of Political Importance,” European Parliament, May 19, 2008, <<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+CRE+20080519+ITEM-019+DOC+XML+V0//EN#top>>.

endemic problems in the areas of the judiciary and home affairs, among other things, to the mass media, which, he claimed, sides with the powerful.<sup>15</sup>

Most of the media in Bulgaria, which ought to be the staunchest safeguards ensuring the irreversibility of the democratic path of development of our country, have entered into a bond, through financial interest, with the criminal element, and with the powers that be, and have become their vehement protectors and accomplices. Anyone who disagrees with the official line has their voice muffled and is deprived of access to the public stage.<sup>16</sup>

Precisely in the attempt to un-knit the symptoms of such an acute disorder lies the discussion of the various dependencies entangled in the Bulgarian mass media. Koprinka Chervenkova, editor-in-chief of *Kultura* (Culture) weekly, provides a framework for such a stark assessment of the present-day media. She attributes the complexity of the challenges faced by the media to the corporate and economic interests that have an impact on them, and which are pertinent to politics because “a part of those corporations that own newspapers have certain business interests, which they realize through the political players.”<sup>17</sup> The grounds for such observations—by journalism practitioners, media analysts and sociologists, among others—can be traced to the controversial debate about concentrated media ownership or the lack of transparency of media ownership in the country, and to a series of inconsistencies in the structure and functioning of the media market.

---

<sup>15</sup> Binev, “One Minute Speech.”

<sup>16</sup> Binev, “One Minute Speech.”

<sup>17</sup> Koprinka Chervenkova, editor-in-chief *Kultura*, telephone interview by author, 29 July, 2008.

## **In media we distrust**

Fluid, dynamic and filtered—these are words that at best describe the mass media landscape in Bulgaria. Briefly, the media market is tiny and jam-packed;<sup>18</sup> media ownership is concentrated; foreign corporate ownership dominates the market of print publications and television broadcast; media ownership lacks transparency, often being completely “concealed”; the advertising market is monopolized by a few advertising companies revolving around a conglomerate steered by a single person;<sup>19</sup> circulation numbers (e.g., plunging en masse) represent a “trade secret;”<sup>20</sup> quasi-cartel arrangements dictate editorial and advertising policies; self-censorship and censorship, albeit more refined, are making a comeback.<sup>21</sup> It is then no surprise that, although Bulgaria had been steadily climbing in Freedom House’s press freedom rankings at the start of the 90s, since 2004 the world’s oldest democracy-and-press-freedom watchdog has demoted Bulgaria’s media status from “free to partly free.”<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps Valeri Naidenov, the father of Bulgaria’s first private newspaper and the creator of modern journalism in Bulgaria and an editor-in-chief of various post-1989 publications, was right to conclude that “an independent newspaper is published in a single copy and God is its only reader.”<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Petranka Fileva, media expert, Sofia University, Communication Department, telephone interview by author, July 13, 2008.

<sup>19</sup> Krum Blagov, “Media Concentration Endangers Freedom of Speech,” *Objective*, May 2007, <<http://www.bghelsinki.org/index.php?module=pages&lg=bg&page=obektiv14214>> (16 August 2008).

<sup>20</sup> Ivan Krustev, “Bulgaria,” in *Nations in Transit 2007: Democratization from Central Europe to Eurasia*, Jeannette Goehring, ed., (New York: Freedom House, 2007), 175-196, 189.

<sup>21</sup> Ivo Indjev, former host of political weekly talk-show on Bulgaria’s *bTV* private channel, telephone interview by author, August 6, 2008.

<sup>22</sup> Freedom House, “2004 Freedom House Report,” <<http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=251&year=2004>>.

<sup>23</sup> Isak Gozes, “We were the Hammer, They are the Anvil: The Media Overdid Themselves to Hero-ize Politicians,” *Standart*, February 28, 2008, 15.

## **Hush little baby, don't say a word**

Heavily relying on Peter Gross's assertion that the process of democratization must be civic-driven,<sup>24</sup> a process in which media freedom plays a pivotal part, it is only natural to recognize an informed citizenry as the catalyst in the politics-economy-media trinity.<sup>25</sup> Such a notion is even more valid when the mass media operate under open market regulations and the state authority formally abdicates from interfering with the media.<sup>26</sup> Given civil society's special part in the equation, media analysts remark that although journalists in Bulgaria are doing their jobs to inform the people, they cannot influence the political sphere in the same way the media in liberal democracies can because civil society in the country is not as strong in its response.<sup>27</sup> A Bulgarian journalist, Ivo Indjev, echoes a similar sentiment. In Bulgaria he says, "A series of manipulations and the demonstration of a lack of justice have put civil society to sleep."<sup>28</sup> The lullaby, it could be argued, is partly sung by the press which fails to engage the people in a well-informed dialogue on matters of public interest. It is precisely here that one of the greatest tests for the democratization of the country lies: in the independence of the media from a political caste, from corporate interests and from the past. A guarantee for the safeguarding of democracy is the pluralism of viewpoints that inform a critical debate.

In this sliver of land that is Bulgaria, 215 television channels, 150 radio broadcasters,<sup>29</sup> 500 cable TV providers<sup>30</sup> (making Bulgaria's TV per capita ratio one of the highest<sup>31</sup>), and 448

---

<sup>24</sup> Peter Gross, *Entangled Evolutions Media and Democratization in Eastern Europe* (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2002).

<sup>25</sup> See Blagov, "Media Concentration."

<sup>26</sup> Blagov, "Media Concentration."

<sup>27</sup> "Do we Live Under Carbon Copy? *The Journalists' Club*, Bulgarian National Radio, May 17, 2008.

<sup>28</sup> Indjev, interview.

<sup>29</sup> Krassimir Martinov, "Bulgarian Media Market is Becoming Dynamic," *Bulgarian National Radio*, May 23, 2008 <[http://www.bnr.bg/RadioBulgaria/Emission\\_Bulgarian/Theme\\_Obstestvo/Material/23\\_05\\_medien\\_pazar.htm](http://www.bnr.bg/RadioBulgaria/Emission_Bulgarian/Theme_Obstestvo/Material/23_05_medien_pazar.htm)> .

<sup>30</sup> Vesislava Antonova, "Two are Too Many," *Kapital*, May 30, 2008, <<http://www.capital.bg/show.php?storyid=503612>>.

<sup>31</sup> Boris Hamalski, journalist from Bulgarian news agency *BTA*, telephone interviews by author, November 12, 2008 and July 21, 2008.

newspapers including 24 dailies,<sup>32</sup> broadly constitute the media market. The lowest newspaper circulation per capita in Europe, however, is counterbalanced by the highest number of newspapers per capita,<sup>33</sup> further complicating the functioning of Bulgaria's press industry. Can a bulk of periodicals, national daily and weekly newspapers, and hundreds of cable channels adequately tackle the tough questions tabled by civil society? And do they serve as the province for public opinion formation, one of the greatest values of media in any democratic country? Responding to this multi-layered question requires consideration of the different factors at play.

Media ownership concentration tops the list. A Bulgarian media scholar forcefully concludes that "Bulgaria's small [media] market is doomed to concentration of ownership."<sup>34</sup> Petranka Fileva continues, saying that "no company will enter from abroad to buy the Bulgarian national television station or leading Bulgarian newspapers if the investment does not ensure a relatively large market share that, in turn, will provide a significant return on the investment."<sup>35</sup>

As for media ownership concentration, there are two schools of thought. The first is that of proponents of ownership concentration, who contend that it has a positive impact on the media landscape. They point out the competitive environment and the larger pool of finances and resources, which could be channeled towards better journalistic quality and greater media autonomy, as a few of the reasons in favour of media ownership concentration globally. Quoted in a study on labour relations and media, Zhanet Zaharieva, the chief legal adviser of Bulgaria's first national private channel *bTV*, explains that,

---

<sup>32</sup> National Statistical Institute, <[www.nsi.bg](http://www.nsi.bg)> (August 2008).

<sup>33</sup> See *Kapital*, "Buy me a Newspaper," August 10, 2007, 12-13.

<sup>34</sup> Fileva, interview.

<sup>35</sup> Fileva, interview.

[T]he concentration of media ownership has a positive effect on [the] journalists [working for *bTV*], because they could work at other media outlets (such as radio stations) [owned by the media conglomerate], something that increases their opportunities for better professional realization, enlarges their horizons and gains them more money.<sup>36</sup>

The adversaries in the debate, however, relate ownership concentration to opportunities for the concentration of power heavily reliant on economic and political resources, which then empower the big media groups.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, referring to ownership concentration in the media industry globally, Fileva asserts that this does not present a danger in the everyday milieu, but could pose a danger in a “sublime moment” when someone has a problem with or a strong interest in directing information in a certain way.<sup>38</sup>

In Bulgaria, where the press market is unevenly split among four major players (a foreign-owned publishing giant and a handful of nouveaux riches), the concentration of media ownership is a two-edged sword. In the present discussion, ownership concentration is approached from the point of view of Agnes Gulyas, who, relying on international scholarship, defines market concentration as the combined circulation of the four biggest publishing groups exceeding 50% of the market share.<sup>39</sup>

Moreover, in Bulgaria the argument that ownership concentration in the media field is an obstacle to democracy has been part of an ongoing discussion since the first foreign investors made an entry over ten years ago. Media ownership has been pointed out as a hindrance to the Fourth Estate function of the media—performing a checks-and-balances role

---

<sup>36</sup> See Danail Danov, “Bulgaria,” in *Labour Relations and Media: Analyzing Pattern of Labour Relations in the Media of SEENPM Member Countries* (Moldova: Independent Journalism Center-Moldova, February 2008), <[http://ijc.md/Publicatii/resurse/Labor\\_Relations\\_and\\_Media.pdf](http://ijc.md/Publicatii/resurse/Labor_Relations_and_Media.pdf)>, 146.

<sup>37</sup> Ben Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997).

<sup>38</sup> Fileva, interview.

in overseeing the other powers and in being a spokesperson and watchdog for the public. That said, the ubiquitous commercialization and penchant for infotainment, a global media trend, has further intensified the importance of the media's public service function in providing people with the information they need in the process of democratization. Although Bulgarian journalist Eliana Mitova argues that since commercialization creates an atmosphere of competitiveness, it could have a positive impact on the press industry overall,<sup>40</sup> a host of recent developments indicate otherwise. Perhaps the most potent argument regarding the main challenge faced by Bulgaria's mainstream press in relation to the transition period can be found in Fileva's analysis of what happens when:

[N]ewspaper owners set a "money-making task" for the press, newspapers become market-oriented and start speaking in the way that is expected by the people. Thus, newspapers have to be liked by the ordinary person who hasn't as yet reconciled with surviving in an open market and with being active in a democratic society.<sup>41</sup>

Indjev explores the issue from a slightly different angle. In addition to media commercialization, Indjev further highlights the return of self-censorship and the open political pressure exerted by the powers that be as reasons for the "regression" of Bulgaria's media independence, a striking turnaround from the promising start in the 1990s.<sup>42</sup> And with these reasons, as the heart of the matter, lies the potency of the issue of media ownership and editorial leadership, which, judging by teeming discussions and publications, is consistently pinpointed as a major, if not the greatest, stumbling block for Bulgaria's "populist" press.

---

<sup>39</sup> Agnes Gulyas, "Structural Changes and Organizations in Print Media Markets of Post-communist East Central Europe," *Javnost*, 6 no. 2 (1999), 61-74.

<sup>40</sup> Eliana Mitova, journalist *Klasa*, telephone interview by author, June 15, 2008.

## Too many cooks in the tiny kitchen

Luben Dilov Jr., co-owner of *Novinar* daily and a member of Parliament from the UDF ranks, defines three kinds of Bulgarian newspaper owners: those who take up publishing as a mainstream pursuit; those whose publishing activities are merely addendums to their other businesses; and lastly, the so-called political publishers.<sup>43</sup> To this list a media manager adds a fourth group of newspaper owners: those who tend to use the media to achieve political or economic influence, for money-laundering,<sup>44</sup> or for 'black PR.' This last group of publishers hampers the media market in Bulgaria because, as the managing director of *Vestnikarska Grupa Bulgaria* (WAZ Mediengruppe Bulgaria), Axel Schindler, remarked in an interview with *Kapital*, "often big losses seem to be an acceptable part of the [newspaper] business."<sup>45</sup>

In this context, Gulyas's formulation that "market structure influence how the media perform in their important social roles in a democratic society,"<sup>46</sup> alludes to the idiosyncrasies of Bulgaria's press industry, which media analysts maintain is bereft of order. For evidence of this, a panel of media scholars and journalists point out the decrease of availability of objective and reliable data about newspaper circulations and broadcast ratings.<sup>47</sup> The Audit Bureau of Circulation fails to provide reliable circulation numbers for most publications, a lack that further adds to the perception of "a media environment developing in the dark."<sup>48</sup>

The print landscape in 2007 featured some 448 newspapers of which 64 were daily publications.<sup>49</sup> In the meantime, the market of the mainstream press is divided between four

---

<sup>41</sup> Fileva, interview.

<sup>42</sup> Indjev, interview.

<sup>43</sup> See *Kapital*, "Buy me a Newspaper."

<sup>44</sup> See *Kapital*, "Buy me a Newspaper."

<sup>45</sup> See *Kapital*, "Buy me a Newspaper."

<sup>46</sup> Gulyas, "Structural Changes," 62.

<sup>47</sup> International Research and Exchange Board, "Media Sustainability Index 2008: The Development of Sustainable Media in Europe and Eurasia," International Research and Exchange Board, <[http://www.irex.org/programs/MSI\\_EUR/index.asp](http://www.irex.org/programs/MSI_EUR/index.asp)>.

<sup>48</sup> International Research and Exchange Board, "Media Sustainability."

<sup>49</sup> National Statistical Institute, <[http://www.nsi.bg/SocialActivities\\_e/IzdDejnost2007.htm](http://www.nsi.bg/SocialActivities_e/IzdDejnost2007.htm)>.

big companies. Despite serious competition since its début in Bulgaria, the German conglomerate *Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung (WAZ)* has maintained a dominant position in the newspapers' market.<sup>50</sup> Journalists covering the media beat contend that it is important that *WAZ* has been present in the market<sup>51</sup> because it has focused on media products and its major line of business publishing newspapers. Undoubtedly, in Bulgaria the *WAZ* newspapers imported a more modern journalistic language<sup>52</sup> and introduced well-structured management and administration. They made substantial investments, too.<sup>53</sup> From the beginning, the foreign investor approved an autonomous editorial policy, thus "creat[ing] an opportunity for their [publications] policy to be frequently guided by the personal bias and interests of their editors-in-chief."<sup>54</sup> From a parallel point of view, the entry of a big transnational player meant a serious quest for circulation in a tighter market. One reason for the confinement of the press market is that *WAZ's* publications convincingly claimed front-runner status following an aggressive advertising maneuver that sold combined ads in their dailies.<sup>55</sup> This was coupled with vertical integration—the acquisition of their own distribution network and the construction of printing plants.<sup>56</sup> From controlling 80% to 90% of Bulgaria's national newspaper circulation in the start of 2000,<sup>57</sup> and 64% of the national dailies market in 2005,<sup>58</sup> in 2007 *WAZ's* two dailies *24 Chassa* and *Trud* are the two print outlets with the highest circulation among the national daily press. In addition to the two leading daily newspapers,

---

<sup>50</sup> Vesela Tabakova, "The Bulgarian Media Landscape," in *European Media Governance: National and Regional Dimensions* ed., Georgios Terzis (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2007).

<sup>51</sup> Vesislava Antonova, journalist *Kapital*, Skype interview by author, June 22, 2008.

<sup>52</sup> Antonova, interview.

<sup>53</sup> Vesislava Popova, "Concentration of Media Ownership and its Impact on Media Independence and Pluralism" (report presented at the South East European Network for Professionalization of Media Conference, Bled, June 11-12, 2004), 94-117.

<sup>54</sup> Popova, "Concentration of Media Ownership," 110.

<sup>55</sup> Tabakova, "The Bulgarian Media Landscape;" Popova, "Concentration of Media Ownership."

<sup>56</sup> Popova, "Concentration of Media Ownership."

<sup>57</sup> See Robyn Goodman, "The Post-Cold War Bulgarian Media: Free and Independent at Last?" (paper presented at the International Communication Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication Conference, Phoenix, Arizona, 2000).

<sup>58</sup> Vesislava Antonova, "CPC [Competition Protection Commission] allowed *WAZ* concentration," *Kapital*, July, 30, 2005.

*Vestnikarska Grupa Bulgaria* (WAZ Mediengruppe Bulgaria) publishes *Noshten Trud* (Night Labour), the national weeklies *Sedmichen Trud* (Weekly Labour) and *168 Chassa* (168 Hours) and a few magazines. Gradually the potentate status and the profit-driven behavior of *WAZ*<sup>59</sup> in Bulgaria has not only forced smaller regional publications to fold,<sup>60</sup> but of late has obstructed the entry of new ones.

The most recent case in point was the war surrounding the planned launch in 2006 of Bulgaria's first free newspaper by *Economedia*, publishers of the newspapers *Dnevnik* (Journal) daily and *Kapital* (Capital) weekly.<sup>61</sup> In a *WAZ*-led campaign, *24 Chassa*, *Trud*, *Standart* and *Duma* published articles haranguing about eventual infringement on press freedom by "pseudo-journalistic publications,"<sup>62</sup> a direct reference to free press (no per copy charge). As a result, *Economedia*, leader of the business publication segment, put on hold the plan for a free daily and published a thorough study on the economic formula of free newspapers, noting that they represented the fastest growing niche worldwide.<sup>63</sup> In an editorial on the nature of the free press they also alluded to an unfair game: "*WAZ* is the owner of a printing house, whose client is *Economedia*."<sup>64</sup> Thus, amid speculation about controversial competition practices, seventeen years after the embrace of press freedom the project for the country's first free newspaper was frozen in its infancy and journalistic voices went unheard, at least in print.<sup>65</sup> After *WAZ*'s entry in the Bulgarian market in 1997, the then-fears about the foreign investor becoming a hindrance to new publications proved unfounded, as two national dailies, *Sega* and *Monitor*, were launched soon after.

---

<sup>59</sup> From here onwards *WAZ* stands for *Vestnikarska Grupa Bulgaria* (WAZ Mediengruppe Bulgaria).

<sup>60</sup> Goodman, "The Post-Cold War Bulgarian Media."

<sup>61</sup> Elena Atanasova, "WAZ Blocked the Publishing of the First Free Newspaper in Bulgaria," August 17, 2006, <<http://www.mediapool.bg/show/?storyid=120521&srcpos=7&p=1>>.

<sup>62</sup> Atanasova, "WAZ Blocked the Publishing."

<sup>63</sup> *Kapital*, "WAZ Denied the Category of Free Newspapers." August 18, 2006.

Defined by circulation numbers, currently two other publishing giants share second place in the mainstream press market: *Nova Mediina Grupa Holding* (*New Media Group Holding*), the publisher of the national dailies *Telegraf* (Telegraph), *Monitor* and *Express*, the sports daily *Meridian Mach* (*Meridian Match*) and the weekly *Politika* (Politics); and the *Standart News*, publisher of *Standart* (Standard) daily since 1992 and *7 Dni Sport* (7 Days Sport). The latter group attracted a crop of headlines after the alleged owner of *Standart News*, Russian tycoon Michael Chorni who bought *Standart News* in 2000, was “expelled from Bulgaria under accusation of being a ‘threat to national security.’”<sup>66</sup> It is said that he still holds stakes in the two newspapers through offshore companies and through his lawyer Todor Batkov,<sup>67</sup> who is also a chairman of the board of directors of *Standart*.<sup>68</sup>

The heated debate about media ownership was reinvigorated in the context of *New Media Group Holding*’s taking over the publishing business from its previous owner Petyo Bluskov in the summer of 2007.<sup>69</sup> In the ownership reshuffle, analysts instantly foresaw a political maneuver expected to curry favour with the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) of the tripartite ruling coalition. Here is how journalists, bloggers and online information outlets explained the tacit connection. Delyan Peevski and his mother, Iren Krusteva, are the majority shareholders of *New Media Group Holding*. Peevski was appointed a deputy minister in the Ministry of Disaster Management from the MRF quota and was later dismissed amid corruption allegations;<sup>70</sup> Peevski was later reinstated. Krusteva was former

---

<sup>64</sup> *Kapital*, “Can You Hear Teeth Grinding? Many Publishers are Fearful of Free Newspapers. Are Their Fears Justified?” August 25, 2006.

<sup>65</sup> “*Za Grada*” is an online project expected to later become a free daily newspaper.

<sup>66</sup> Popova, “Ownership and Its Impact,” 111.

<sup>67</sup> Popova, “Ownership and Its Impact.”

<sup>68</sup> *Standart News* ([www.standartnews.com](http://www.standartnews.com)).

<sup>69</sup> *Kapital*, “Buy me a Newspaper.”

<sup>70</sup> *South East European Times*, “Bulgaria Promises Transparency in Investigating High-level Corruption Scandal,” *South East European Times*, May 7, 2007,

<[http://www.setimes.com/cocoon/setimes/xhtml/en\\_GB/features/setimes/features/2007/05/07/feature-01](http://www.setimes.com/cocoon/setimes/xhtml/en_GB/features/setimes/features/2007/05/07/feature-01)>.

head of Bulgaria's state lottery and is often labeled by the press as an MRF protégé.<sup>71</sup> Months after the ownership change, *Monitor's* newly-appointed editor-in-chief Petar Boichev assured the public that no cardinal changes in the concept of the newspaper or in the team would be made.<sup>72</sup> He was subsequently proven right. After the new owners took over the portfolio of newspapers, a Bulgarian journalist recounts, the editorial content did not fulfil the common predictions of a pro-MRF bias and thus did not signal a drastic shift from the previous editorial policy.<sup>73</sup> In addition to the expansion of *New Media Group Holding* in the print media, the conglomerate bought Bulgarian television channel *TV7*.

Although seen as a threat to pluralism around the world, at first blush media concentration in Bulgaria seemed to have created a competitive environment and a glut of information fed by publishers to the market. However, in a crowded press market dominated by a handful of powerful media groups fewer alternative voices in conjunction with commercially-oriented information output impeded and narrowed informed civic debate. No other media instance has captured the national hysteria brought about by a market-oriented mainstream press better than the project "Batak as a Place of Bulgarian Memory," featuring an exhibition and an accompanying conference.

The controversy began when it became known that a Bulgarian scholar and her academic adviser would discuss their analysis of a painting by a Polish artist at a conference commemorating the massacre in Batak, where, in the cusp of the 1876 April revolt against the Ottoman yoke, almost 5,000 people were slaughtered.<sup>74</sup> At the conference, the Bulgarian

---

<sup>71</sup> Ivan Bakalov, "How Bluskov took over the real estates of the UBJ (Union of Bulgarian Journalists) and is to build a hotel on the seaside," *e-vestnik*, December 15, 2007, <<http://e-vestnik.bg/2912>>.

<sup>72</sup> Andreana Mihailova, "A Total Makeover in Monitor," *Klasa*, October 24, 2008.

<sup>73</sup> Romyana Simeonova, journalist *Noshten Trud*, Skype interview by author, June 17, 2008.

<sup>74</sup> Petar Kostadinov, "The Batak Massacre: a Sacred Subject," *The Sofia Echo*, May 7, 2007; Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, "Human Rights in Bulgaria in 2007: Annual Report of the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee," Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, April 2008, <<http://www.bghelsinki.org/index.php?module=resources&lg=en&id=631>>.

historian Martina Baleva and her adviser were to present their research, “Batak as a Place of Memory,” discussing the painting of the massacre and “indicat[ing] its role in the collective memory of the Bulgarians.”<sup>75</sup> A synopsis in a local English-language newspaper reads, “According to initial Bulgarian-language media coverage, [Ulf] Brunnbauer and [Martina] Baleva claimed that the Batak atrocities were a myth, that the number of victims had been exaggerated, and that talk of 500 years of Ottoman rule was actually fake.”<sup>76</sup>

An unprecedented media campaign against the two researchers erupted after the circulation of a résumé of the project. The “out-of-control patriotic campaign”<sup>77</sup> started with a publication in *24 Chassa*, in tune with one in its sibling *Trud*.<sup>78</sup> Soon, articles with headlines such as “Encore massacre for Batak” and “To discredit Batak for 2,000 euro”<sup>79</sup> were instigated by jingoistic historians and politicians and the president himself who condemned the project and whose advisor—head of the National History Museum “de facto launched”<sup>80</sup> the campaign with an interview in *24 Chassa*.<sup>81</sup> As a result, the atmosphere hummed with tension and provoked a public outcry, and the scientific conference was cancelled. Furthermore, Baleva started receiving death threats and even a reward was offered by the extreme rightwing ATAKA party for her home address.<sup>82</sup>

Following the post-media hysteria, an article in the “flagman of the German press”<sup>83</sup> *Der Spiegel* called the two *WAZ* publications “boulevard press” and held them accountable for

---

<sup>75</sup> Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, “Human Rights in Bulgaria.”

<sup>76</sup> Kostadinov, “Batak Massacre.”

<sup>77</sup> Milen Radev, “Batak after Batak,” *Mediapool*, November 22, 2007, <<http://www.mediapool.bg/show/?storyid=133959>>.

<sup>78</sup> Evgenia Ivanova, “Police Guards a Discussion on Batak,” *Sega*, December 20, 2007

<sup>79</sup> Ivanova, “Police Guards a Discussion.”

<sup>80</sup> “Hombach visits [President] Purvanov to discuss the problem with WAZ newspapers in Bulgaria,” *Mediapool*, November 23, 2007, <<http://www.mediapool.bg/show/?storyid=134013>> .

<sup>81</sup> *Mediapool*, “The President Gives the Final Fusillade on Batak,” May 16, 2007, <<http://www.mediapool.bg/show/?storyid=128651>> (12 September 2008).

<sup>82</sup> See *Netinfo.bg*, “Spiegel on the Batak Myth: WAZ Newspapers Organize a Witch-hunt,” November 11, 2007, <<http://news.netinfo.bg/index.phtml?tid=40&oid=1126329>>.

<sup>83</sup> Vanya Eftimova, “Spiegel: Bulgaria in a Strangling Mafia Hug,” *Kapital*, April 23, 2008.

the “witch-hunt with nationalistic overtones for the capture of a researcher.”<sup>84</sup> In the same article, Bodo Hombach, managing director of the *WAZ Media Group*, was quoted as saying that the *24 Chassa* and *Trud*-led campaign was “a mistake” and that *WAZ* “will draw a lesson from it.”<sup>85</sup> In an interview for another German publication, Hombach apologized to the Bulgarian researcher for the insults hurled at her from the pages of *WAZ* newspapers in Bulgaria.<sup>86</sup>

The controversy forced *WAZ* to rethink its policy for non-interference with the editorial decisions of its Bulgarian subsidiaries. Hombach was quoted as telling the German agency *EDP* that in the future, *WAZ* “will exercise closer supervision on its newspapers in Eastern Europe... Because of this negative experience, the current policy of leaving the newspaper content entirely up to the editors-in-chief can no longer be applied.”<sup>87</sup>

In broad strokes, the nationalistic campaign brought forward three significant aspects pertaining to the challenges the print media faces today. The paucity of pluralism, the monopolization of public opinion by groups who are powerful enough to prevent other voices from reaching the public, and the lethal effect of market-oriented behaviour on the social function of media were the conclusions drawn from the campaign. Of these, the commercialization of the public opinion formation will be a point of focus in the case study in Chapter 4. Also, the hysteria surrounding the Batak project pointed at a very distinctive feature of Bulgaria’s media pluralism: namely, when a media-driven debate touches upon social problems, historical pride becomes the common thread of the civil society’s unification.<sup>88</sup> That

---

<sup>84</sup> See *Netinfo.bg*, “Spiegel on the Batak Myth;” See *Mediapool*, “Bodo Hombach in Spiegel: The Campaign of our Bulgarian Newspapers ‘wasn’t right,’” November 19, 2007, <<http://www.mediapool.bg/show/?storyid=133844>>.

<sup>85</sup> See *Mediapool*, “Bodo Hombach in Spiegel.”

<sup>86</sup> *Mediapool*, “WAZ Plans to Control the Content of its Publications in Bulgaria,” November 20, 2007, <<http://www.mediapool.bg/show/?storyid=133905&p=3>> (15 October 2008).

<sup>87</sup> *Mediapool*, “WAZ Plans to Control.”

<sup>88</sup> *Capital*, “Batak or Death,” April 27, 2007, <<http://www.capital.bg/show.php?storyid=335041&show=0>>.

pride, however, was fuelled by the media's commercial orientation and their willingness to conform to the readers' expectations.

On a more ominous note, the words of the sociologist Antoni Gulubov provide an additional context to the debate on the covert link between commercialism, public opinion and the omnipotence of market-oriented media. He writes, "Scandal is the only chance for any topic to make it into the agenda of the [media] status quo. That's why a considerable part of the public communication and advertising is planned in that way."<sup>89</sup>

In a press market dominated by very few major players, the dearth of voices inevitably strikes a blow at the media's public mission: rather than attend to issues of significance to society, the media clusters become slaves to ratings and circulation volumes and are forced to adopt a populist discourse. In the words of *Trud*'s editor-in-chief Tosho Toshev, as quoted in *Der Spiegel* with reference to *Trud*'s reaction to the initial messages about the Batak case, "We show what people think. I don't want to lose my readership."<sup>90</sup>

### **The power of advertising**

Against the backdrop of high internet penetration (29% in 2006, with a user growth rate of more than 400%), thriving online information flows,<sup>91</sup> and dynamically developing new media formats, no single print outlet is able to deny the appeal of mass readership. Media scholar Slavko Splichal, who authored a study on privatization of Eastern European media in 1995, argues that while the free-market can provide guarantee for the media's autonomy from political interests it fails to ensure pluralism and quality of information, which is essential for

---

<sup>89</sup> Antoni Gulubov, "Media Structure, the Daily Routine," *Dnevnik*, March 26, 2008.

<sup>90</sup> See *Mediapool*, "Bodo Hombach in Spiegel."

<sup>91</sup> Vesela Tabakova, "Media Landscape-Bulgaria," European Journalism Centre, <[http://www.ejc.net/media\\_landscape/article/bulgaria](http://www.ejc.net/media_landscape/article/bulgaria)>.

the process of democratization.<sup>92</sup> In Bulgaria, a 'pure' free market strategy is further fettered by the disorganized and highly competitive media industry.

Market logic has it that because newspapers compete in the market of readers and advertisers they generate their income from per copy sales or subscriptions and mostly from advertising revenues.<sup>93</sup> Circulation and viewership ratings become the common denominator by which the influence of a print or broadcast outlet is measured, and the civic-minded mission of a news outlet inevitably is converted to a market-oriented approach for disseminating information on issues of public interest. Focusing on electronic media, Danail Danov, a Bulgarian media analyst, was quoted as saying that "the myth that quality media actually means media with the highest rating was fostered in the last ten years."<sup>94</sup> Danov concludes that this rating-quality media logic "extends beyond the direct functions of public media to provide quality information, to educate and entertain diverse audiences, to talk on behalf of these audiences, thus to protect the public interest."<sup>95</sup>

How important is it for the media to be consistent with its informative function on issues of public interest in a market where foreign ownership dominates the advertising market both in television (*bTV*) and the press (*WAZ*)?<sup>96</sup> In the case of *WAZ*, the company's profitable advertising strategy absorbs the advertising influx from the market, a situation that, in turn, reflects unfavourably on the smaller players and on media pluralism overall.

---

<sup>92</sup> Slavko Splichal, "From State Control to Commodification: Media Democratization in East and Central Europe" in *Democracy and Communication in the New Europe: Change and Continuity in East and West*, (eds.) Farrel Corcoran and Paschal Preston (New Jersey: Hampton Press, 1995).

<sup>93</sup> Robert Picard, *Media Economics: Concepts and Issues* (California: Sage Publications, 1989); Robert Picard, "The Economics of the Newspaper," in *Media Economics: Theory and Practice*, eds. Alison Alexander, James Owers and Rodney Carveth (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1998).

<sup>94</sup> See Blagov, "Media Concentration," 29.

<sup>95</sup> See Blagov, "Media Concentration," 29.

<sup>96</sup> Ognian Zlatev, managing director *Media Development Centre*, Skype interviews by author, June 11, 2008 and March 10, 2008.

“In 2006, some 257 daily and weekly newspapers competed for an advertising budget of 40 million euro,”<sup>97</sup> a meager chunk of the lump sum that is spent on TV advertising. The year before, only one-fifth of the grand total of advertising revenues was directed to the press.<sup>98</sup> Hence, of particular interest to this research is the claim that no single newspaper outlet in Bulgaria today nets a clear profit, as a newspaper is unable to sustain its existence only through sales.<sup>99</sup> Two weekly newspapers, *Treta Vuzrast* (Senior Age) and the yellow tabloid *Weekend*, are an exception to this rule. *Treta Vuzrast* has a circulation of 310,000<sup>100</sup> and the lowest per copy price, and as such is the preferred information outlet for senior citizens.<sup>101</sup> The circulation of the weekly *Weekend*, which is independent of advertising,<sup>102</sup> has swollen to 236,000 in 2007.<sup>103</sup> Together both weekly newspapers enjoy the highest circulation in the country, which raises the following question: Why have gossip-oriented publications, such as *Weekend*, consistently flourished while the mainstream press has languished? This query will be addressed later on in this chapter.

Bulgaria’s mammoth media space relative to its limited advertising market not only creates opportunities for “the entry of capital” from other non-publishing businesses,<sup>104</sup> but also makes the press vulnerable to dependence. Similar problems were remarked on by a media expert quoted in the 2008 Media Sustainability Index (MSI), a study assessing the media environment in Europe and Eurasia, inclusive of Bulgaria, that was based on a panel discussion

---

<sup>97</sup> See *Kapital*, “Buy me a Newspaper;”

<sup>98</sup> Orlin Spassov, “Publicity and Public Relations,” in *Reformulating Publicity: Transparency in the Relationships Between the PR and the Media*, (Sofia: Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, July 2006), 14-34, <<http://www.bghelsinki.org/index.php?module=resources&lg=bg&id=395>>.

<sup>99</sup> Hamalski, interview.

<sup>100</sup> World Association of Newspapers, “Bulgaria,” in *World Press Trends 2008*, World Association of Newspapers, (Paris: ZenithOptimedia, 2008), 252-258.

<sup>101</sup> Zlatev, interview.

<sup>102</sup> See *Kapital*, “Buy me a Newspaper.”

<sup>103</sup> World Association of Newspapers, “Bulgaria.”

<sup>104</sup> See Velislava Popova, “The Year of Hidden Media Bankruptcies,” *Kapital*, December 27, 2003.

of media practitioners, NGO representatives and media development analysts. In the study, Ivo Draganov, is quoted as saying:

[print] outlets are generating profits, but their most cashable asset is influence—on the local and national levels alike. Revenue is generated mostly from advertising, but there's sponsorship, hidden PR, and publicity, which create dependencies. The advertising market is thriving, but the criteria for selection of outlets are still not clear enough.<sup>105</sup>

Furthermore, according to a study by the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee that examined media and public relations transparency, media ownership leads to concealed advertising, black PR, or a kind of “favoured” newsflow.<sup>106</sup> This demarcation between journalistic and advertorial discourse is further complicated by the intertwining of political and corporate interests, in addition to a politicized advertising environment<sup>107</sup> operating in a market dominated by a quasi-monopoly. Indjev, who perhaps is best acquainted with this form of convergence, argues that advertising in Bulgaria is associated with oligarchic circles, which he identifies as influential advertisers “who are usually on the table of the president and the other ruling parties—the MRF and the NMSII [National Movement Simeon II].”<sup>108</sup> This is how, he says, the circle closes, as political and corporate interests join and the media become dependent on the political situation of the moment.<sup>109</sup>

A non-transparent advertising market concentrated in few hands<sup>110</sup> adds insult to the injury that the politics-media consortium inflicts on the media market. Svilen Ovcharov, from the NGO sector, asserts that a single conglomerate monopoly in the broadcast advertising

---

<sup>105</sup> See International Research and Exchange Board, “Media Sustainability.”

<sup>106</sup> Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, *Reformulating Publicity: Transparency in the Relationships Between the PR and the Media* (Sofia: Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, July 2006), <<http://www.bghelsinki.org/index.php?module=resources&lg=bg&id=395>>.

<sup>107</sup> Spassov, “Publicity and Public Relations.”

<sup>108</sup> Indjev, interview.

<sup>109</sup> Indjev, interview.

market “obstructs the connection between the economic entities that want their advertising to reach specific social groups of certain educational and property qualifications, and the consumers of the advertising message.”<sup>111</sup> His analysis contends that the dominant position of one entity in the advertising market is a disadvantage for the public-oriented media.<sup>112</sup> In his words, the dominant conglomerate “directs the large advertising flows solely towards the commercial media.”<sup>113</sup> For confirmation of such a claim, one need only refer to the 2008 MSI, where a market control scheme is succinctly described:

There is an alleged connection, which is hard to prove, between media outlets and advertising agencies controlled behind-the-scenes by the same persons or entities. Hence, it is believed that some outlets are favoured at the expense of others when it comes to receiving advertising budgets.<sup>114</sup>

It is worth noting that although various speculation about the concentration of media power in the hands of one person are gaining momentum with regards to television and radio advertising revenues, no solid evidence exists to support such an assertion in relation to the press.

### **Tabloidization compounds the information deficit**

Indjev asserts that the leading mainstream newspapers behave in a manner characteristic of the tabloid press, which in his argot means dangling “bait for the mass readership.”<sup>115</sup> The most efficient bait for trapping mass readership, it has been argued, is distancing from the serious issues of the day, offering instead a showbiz-cum-leisure digest. Weary of reading about

---

<sup>110</sup> Mitko Novkov, interviewed in *Boulevard Bulgaria*, Re:TV, July 31, 2008; Spassov, “Publicity and Public Relations.”

<sup>111</sup> See Blagov, “Media Concentration.”

<sup>112</sup> See Blagov, “Media Concentration.”

<sup>113</sup> See Blagov, “Media Concentration.”

<sup>114</sup> International Research and Exchange Board, “Media Sustainability.”

politics and the economy, the reader prefers lighter topics and settles on the popular press.<sup>116</sup> An alternative interpretation for the shift toward lighter journalism is the mainstream press's unwillingness to be associated with partisanship politics. Zlatev explains that the high-circulation publications tend to take on a more sensationalized journalism and stray away from "any in-depth analysis" lest they be accused of commitment to one or another political power.<sup>117</sup>

Whereas commercialism transforms TV advertising into the most rapidly developing sector of the economy,<sup>118</sup> it also forces the money-starved press market to succumb to sensationalism and 'puff coverage' of the deluge of television reality shows, song and dance contests and tabloid talk-shows. Anecdotal evidence and a flip through September and October 2008's stack of purportedly quality mainstream dailies leads to the observation that the press has adopted a new identity—that of the print song-and-dance 'reality-show format' used for pure entertainment, be it through its *Big Brother* pervasiveness or through *Music Idol* hubbub, or in swashbuckling soirees with *Dancing Stars* characters. Bereft of the sound and the visual effects of television, however, the 'print clones' of the mainstream press are significantly less appealing. This deficiency, analysts argue, confuses the readership, who, against the backdrop of a host of voices and plurality of opinions, attempt to find information of public interest. Indjev opines that by applying the methods of the tabloid press, hybrid newspapers combine serious analysis and pretentious interviews with a smattering of objective information.<sup>119</sup> Echoing a similar observation, Vesislava Antonova queries,

---

<sup>115</sup> Indjev, interview.

<sup>116</sup> Simeonova, interview.

<sup>117</sup> Zlatev, interview.

<sup>118</sup> Novkov, *Boulevard Bulgaria*.

<sup>119</sup> Indjev, interview.

Where does one draw the line between the serious and the more entertaining information in the age of the reality format, when in order to make a return on its investment one television station broadcasts self-advertising about Big Brother in its own newscasts? Something similar is happening in *24 Chassa*. . . . Why is the headline on page 1 as scandalous as the headline on the pages with lighter topics and entertainment?<sup>120</sup>

Moreover, a Bulgarian journalist defines *Trud* as a hybrid between Germany's quality newspaper *Die Welt* and the tabloid *Bild*, and *Standart* as a combination between the United Kingdom's serious quality newspaper *The Times* and the daily tabloid *The Sun*.<sup>121</sup> This *mélange* seems to make Bulgaria's yellow press "self-proclaim and behave as such... It does not make claims to be a public mentor or an arbiter."<sup>122</sup> Such a hybrid mainstream press "erodes the media market and opens up a niche for the classical tabloid press," which then occupy larger territory and influence public opinion,<sup>123</sup> thus, the yellow press has attained prominence, in particular its top contestant *Weekend* weekly. From a circulation of 236,000, *Weekend*'s outreach continues to grow, attracting readership with its inflammatory prose and scandalous information, mainly about people in Bulgaria's entertainment business who are in the spotlight. These people, in the opinion of a known sociologist, "represent the new power."<sup>124</sup> In a column in *24 Chassa*, sociologist Andrey Raychev calls the yellow press "social porn" and provides an interesting formulation for the phenomenon of its exponential growth, arguing that "readers do not believe the yellow press," which "is an expression of some peculiar social hedonism... To hear vile comments about the powerful is a kind of inner need that a slave consciousness has created."<sup>125</sup> However, the penchant for scandalous news is

---

<sup>120</sup> Antonova, interview.

<sup>121</sup> Mitko Novkov, "Media Understood and Done," *Kultura*, July 1, 2005.

<sup>122</sup> Novkov, "Media Understood."

<sup>123</sup> Indjev, interview.

<sup>124</sup> Andrey Raychev, "Why do They Read the Yellow Press? The Showbiz Stars are the New Power in Bulgaria," *24 Chassa*, May, 2005, <[http://www.gallup-bbss.com/?page=8\\_6&pdf=1](http://www.gallup-bbss.com/?page=8_6&pdf=1)> (25 August 2008).

<sup>125</sup> Raychev, "Why do They Read the Yellow Press?"

not the sole reason for the growth of the yellow press. The uniform content in the mainstream newsflow redirects the readership to alternative sources of information.

More important, the homogenization of editorial content in the mainstream press is striking, and cause for concern. This conclusion could be drawn from the words of, Petya Mironova, from the Ethics Committee for Print, who was quoted in the 2008 MSI panel report<sup>126</sup> as saying that “the practice of joint journalistic investigations is spreading. Such an agreement exists between *Nova TV* and the *Novinar* daily: One story gets aired in the morning and gets printed word-for-word the next day.”<sup>127</sup> In this synergy, some see the debilitating impact of the press on the public discourse. Ivan Bakalov argues that by following at the heels of the broadcast media, the press is forced to use the electronic media as a source, hence its own influence is plummeting.<sup>128</sup> Bakalov’s observation on this link between print and electronic media is important because it suggests that the trends of development in radio and television broadcasting are, in a way, akin to those in the press.

There are two reasons why the development of the press market cannot be viewed in isolation from broadcast. First, the polling results from a representative survey conducted at the end of May 2008 show that some 93% of the respondents say they receive daily information about various local and foreign events from television, compared with 35% who rely on the press.<sup>129</sup> Second, the penetration of reality programmes into the mainstream flow of information and the overtaking of news and commentary formats by “tabloid” talk-shows and infotainment restrict public debate to the confines of entertainment, both on air and in print. In effect, the balance between informative programmes of social importance and entertainment

---

<sup>126</sup> International Research and Exchange Board, “Media Sustainability.”

<sup>127</sup> International Research and Exchange Board, “Media Sustainability.”

<sup>128</sup> Ivan Bakalov, “The Crisis in the Newspapers or Who Will Replace Toshev and Gocheva?” *e-vestnik.bg*, March 25, 2008, <<http://e-vestnik.bg/3572>> (13 August 2008).

<sup>129</sup> *Klasa*, “64% of Polled Have Cable TV, 34% Use Internet,” June 16, 2008, 11.

shows is acutely threatened, and as a result political and economic issues of interest to society get minor attention.

### **Media go silent**

The current research is not attempting to empirically prove that entertainment stories in the press are overtaking the informational public sphere. What the entertainment focus does, however, is extend its influence over the populace and across the different media and shake the equilibrium of the media market. For instance, the pro-entertainment trend has led to the reformatting of public service radio broadcasters into commercial ones, a tendency recognizable in the press, too. Since democratization began in Bulgaria, the *Students' Tribune* newspaper, the only students' platform of the past, has gone into oblivion and the Sofia University's *Alma Mater* radio has given up its frequency to *Alma Mater-Classic FM*, a classical music programme. In a radio talk-show discussing media issues, mass media professor Svetlana Bojilova laments,

Young people of Bulgaria have no public forum except when it comes to taking part in singing and dancing reality formats. Not a single programme or channel caters to the needs of students and provides a forum where they can debate issues that are of an interest to them and where they can share how they live.<sup>130</sup>

Concealed interests and behind-the-scenes arrangements by certain media monopolists contribute to the painful process of media commercialization. Ironically, almost two decades after the launch of democratization, BBC-World Service and Radio Free Europe—the two foreign radio stations that were given the green light to enter the media market during the first

moments of freedom because of their “sensitivity to the democratization processes”<sup>131</sup>—went silent. Their broadcast frequencies were seized by commercial programming. Journalists from the Bulgarian section of BBC, who have been writing on *kafene.net* since BBC Bulgaria stopped broadcasting in 2005, claim that the broadcast licence of BBC English was terminated because certain businesses circles had interest in the radio frequency.<sup>132</sup> In a similar vein in 2006, Radio New Europe, heir to Radio Free Europe, changed its public service format to become the commercial Z-Rock Radio, which started broadcasting mostly music.<sup>133</sup> Similarly, the public service Radio Net, which had focused on information-oriented programming, became N-Joy<sup>134</sup> and today broadcasts in 26 towns across the country, billing itself as ‘the biggest radio station for music.’ In sum, selling a commodity to the listener becomes more important than informing the people on matters of public interest, because to borrow the words of a Bulgarian journalist, the media in Bulgaria are managed by the economic interests of their owners.<sup>135</sup> Dwelling on media praxis in general, Boris Hamalski from Bulgaria’s news agency *BTA* laments that the focus on superficial topics, which are not explored in depth and are covered with “a certain agenda in mind,” sidelines any discussion about the significant processes that civil society is undergoing.<sup>136</sup>

According to the same poll cited above, respondents said that entertainment programmes are the most preferred.<sup>137</sup> The prime-time newscast on first national broadcaster *bTV* tops, with 15.5% of the participants identifying it as a programme they like, followed

---

<sup>130</sup> Svetlana Bojilova, interviewed in *Do we live under carbon copy?* The Journalists’ Club, Bulgarian National Radio, May 17, 2008.

<sup>131</sup> Lilia Raycheva, “Turn-of-the-Century Challenges Facing the Mass Media in Bulgaria,” *Media Development* 46 no.3 (1999): 9-12.

<sup>132</sup> *Netinfo.bg*, “The Council for Electronic Media Preliminary Terminates the English Broadcasts of BBC World Service,” August 21, 2008, <<http://news.netinfo.bg/?tid=40&oid=1226657>>.

<sup>133</sup> Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, “Human Rights in Bulgaria in 2007.”

<sup>134</sup> Blagov, “Media Concentration.”

<sup>135</sup> Hamalski, interview.

<sup>136</sup> Hamalski, interview.

closely by *Music Idol* with 14.9% and the local version of *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* with 8.8%. On the flip side in the same survey, Bulgaria's National Television newscast, once the most reliable and preferred source of information, was the chosen programme of only 6% of respondents.<sup>138</sup> These results confirm that entertainment in the media has wide appeal in civil society, a trend that this research has demonstrated pertains to the press as well.

Also, in order to hold on to its readership, the press has begun to speak with the voice of television, which itself has developed a penchant for the more entertaining tabloid journalism. When the greater part of civil society is exposed to television programming that, in turn, self-advertises its own reality formats in prime time news, public debate on serious issues narrows down and stories that are vital to the democratic debate, get little attention, while issues of corporate interest are embraced with enthusiasm. The essence of media commercialism is summed up by Petyo Staikov, chairperson of the board of *Eurocom Cable* (a leading cable operator in Bulgaria). Speaking on behalf of owners of television networks at a round-table that focused on concentration and pluralism in the electronic media, Staikov asserts, "Bulgarian viewers enjoy attractive things and are less interested in public issues. . . . They all want to watch Veneta Raykova<sup>139</sup> and VIP Brother<sup>140</sup> and it is our duty to cater for the interests of our consumers."<sup>141</sup> Thus, the erstwhile communist dependency has shifted to a market-oriented dependency. In the words of a media analyst, Ognian Zlatev, such a situation "undermines" the media's watchdog role and its function to be a social controller, and opens up a new role: to entertain.<sup>142</sup> Not only is this bad news for the media, but as Zlatev asserts,

---

<sup>137</sup> *Klasa*, "64% of Polled Have Cable."

<sup>138</sup> The statistics in this paragraph are taken from *Klasa*, "64% of Polled Have Cable."

<sup>139</sup> Veneta Raykova is the host of the popular television tabloid talk show *Goreshto* (Hot) on Nova Televizia.

<sup>140</sup> *VIP Brother* is a *Big Brother* show in which people from show business participate that was aired on Nova Televizia.

<sup>141</sup> Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, "Pluralism and Concentration in the Electronic Media Sector," Roundtable, Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, April 17, 2007.

<sup>142</sup> Zlatev, interview.

[It] is much easier to, say, manipulate the audience when you have only entertainment programmes in the broadcast or print media and when you don't have serious stuff. People are not supposed to take any informative decisions. This role is left to the others [while] the people use the media only for entertainment.<sup>143</sup>

The transition of media from information provider to entertainment source may have an irreversible impact on people's ability to enhance their democratic behaviour, especially in a civil society lacking long-standing democratic traditions. The following example of Bulgarians' opportunity for public involvement in self-governance shows that the media failed in its mission to serve as an information purveyor on matters of public interest. A referendum on the construction of an oil transit pipeline held in Bourgas in February 2008 fell through because voter turnout, a disquieting 27%, was far less than the required minimum of 50%.<sup>144</sup> This democratic deficit, some argued, was partly due to a "non-existent civil society and [partly to] a lack of information as many people ha[d]n't heard about the referendum."<sup>145</sup>

### **Advertising: he who pays the piper calls the tune**

According to Naidenov, the existence of every newspaper is a function of three factors: the owner, the reader and the advertiser.<sup>146</sup> The role of the media, however, is distorted once the owner and advertiser start operating in a team-like fashion. "The negotiation of advertising [contracts] between media owners and advertisers is a situation that has hampered true

---

<sup>143</sup> Zlatev, interview.

<sup>144</sup> *Novinite.com*, "Bulgaria's Sozopol Holds Referendum on Burgas-Alexandroupolis Oil Pipeline," *Novinite.com*, 6 April, 2008, <[http://www.novinite.com/view\\_news.php?id=91944](http://www.novinite.com/view_news.php?id=91944)>; Yassen Luckanov, "Democracy Below Zero," *TEMA*, 25 February - 2 March, 2008.

<sup>145</sup> Luckanov, "Democracy Below Zero," 24-25.

<sup>146</sup> Gozes, "We Were the Hammer," 15.

competition on the media market for years.”<sup>147</sup> A study of transparency in the relationship between PR agencies and the media, conducted by a Sofia-based NGO in 2006, found that in Bulgaria “media ownership is a source of concealed advertising.”<sup>148</sup> The project, which aimed to illustrate the PR-media relationship, draws conclusions from some 150 interviews with media practitioners, TV/radio presenters, editors and owners from leading national print and broadcast outlets, as well as PR experts. In the analytical part of the study, Albena Borisova concludes unequivocally: “Journalists admit that the media’s commitment to a certain advertiser inevitably has an impact on the editorial policy.”<sup>149</sup> Mitova, a Bulgarian journalist, explains the basis for such a finding: “It is highly unlikely for a newspaper to be able to afford to slam an advertiser. This does not happen in Bulgaria because it simply means an end to advertising.”<sup>150</sup>

When a monopolist in the advertising market has business interests in conjunction with those of the media owners, the vicious circle closes in; the interests of the reader get minor treatment and public opinion is manipulated by the interests of the owner. Nascent propaganda begins to invade the media sphere, albeit it of a “more refined [variety] than the communist propaganda”<sup>151</sup> because, as Indjev says, today “those who manage the media are better masters at concealing the lie.”<sup>152</sup>

---

<sup>147</sup> Velislava Popova, “Our Friends, Businessmen and Journalists will Publish Novinar: The Leader of Georgyovden and Miroslav Borshosh are the New Owners of the Newspaper,” *Kapital*, May 22, 2004.

<sup>148</sup> Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, *Reformulating Publicity*.

<sup>149</sup> Albena Borisova, “A Conclusion of the Interrelation Between PR and the Media Based on the Questionnaires of Journalists and PR experts,” in *Reformulating Publicity: Transparency in the Relationships Between the PR and the Media*, (Sofia: Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, July 2006), 175-179.

<<http://www.bghelsinki.org/index.php?module=resources&lg=bg&id=395>>.

<sup>150</sup> Mitova, interview.

<sup>151</sup> Indjev, interview.

<sup>152</sup> Indjev, interview.

Such “information masonry,”<sup>153</sup> concealed ownership or lack of transparency of the vested interests in media outlets prevent the media from performing their role to safeguard democracy, which should involve seeking answers to tough questions, exposing prevalent corruption, or campaigning for social justice. Instead, the media picture looks more like a blueprint of oligarchic interests. As Indjev concludes, the corporate interests of a certain economic group or oligarch “creep in through the media... Whole pages in the newspapers are bought by them [oligarchs] to narrate their doings aboard their yachts, and sumptuous celebrations that in a poor Bulgaria look more like acts of foolishness from the third world than the behaviour of affluent European people.”<sup>154</sup> In Indjev’s opinion, these well-off people need be transparent in front of society when it comes to the origin of their wealth and, more importantly, they should not “manipulate public opinion through the media, which are apparently bought by them . . . [i]f not all [the media] then those outlets which are influential.”<sup>155</sup>

One paradox strikes a chord in the debate concerning the link between ownership and the public service role of the media in Bulgaria: the interviewees who took part in this study unanimously agreed that the owners of various newspapers and TV channels represent “a public secret.” In other words, instead of upholding the public interest, the media marginalize the lack of ownership transparency and in turn civil society remains doubtful about who speaks to them and whose interests they protect. By the same token, the scholar Dimitar Kamburov argues, “it is of great importance to know not only who owns the media, but who pulls the strings of a media outlet, and if this person has a political or economic citizenship.”<sup>156</sup> It is

---

<sup>153</sup> Georgi Lozanov, “Information Masonry Dictates the News Repertoire,” *Klasa*, May 9, 2008.

<sup>154</sup> Indjev, interview.

<sup>155</sup> Indjev, interview.

<sup>156</sup> See Blagov, “Media Concentration.”

virtually impossible to arrive at a straightforward answer to the question simply because, like Chervenkova claims, the source of the capital that has created “media moguls” is a “taboo” subject in the media.<sup>157</sup>

Furthermore, the non-transparent origins of the capital invested in the media create a multitude of economic and political dependencies.<sup>158</sup> Sociologist Raychev, however, does not see concealed ownership as the “disease of the [media] market.”<sup>159</sup> At a seminar on media ownership concentration and transparency held in 2004, he was quoted as saying, “So what if it is proven that [Russian oligarch] Michael Chorni publishes *Standart* newspaper. I don’t care who publishes it, but [I care] that without competing for advertising revenues, *Standart*’s circulation is twice larger than the circulation of the other daily newspapers.”<sup>160</sup>

### **Ownership shackles and editorial embargoes<sup>161</sup>**

Freedom of speech and media freedom have a crucial role to play in any democratic state. *De jure*, “Bulgarian media legislation provides various mechanisms to prevent censorship and political and/or economic interference in the editorial content of both print and broadcast media.”<sup>162</sup> In actuality, in Bulgaria there is ample circumstantial evidence of detrimental efforts to overhaul that status quo. An analysis of the feedback from the interviewees in this research, in addition to an extract drawn from the observation of commentaries by journalists and a pool

---

<sup>157</sup> Chervenkova, interview.

<sup>158</sup> Spassov, “Publicity and Public Relations.”

<sup>159</sup> Velislava Popova, “Will There be a Media Ownership Cleansing?” *Kapital*, April 24, 2004.

<sup>160</sup> Popova, “Will There be.”

<sup>161</sup> Dimitar Naidenov coins the term editorial embargo in Dimitar Naidenov, “Press Journalism,” (Sofia: Sofia University, Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communications, 1995).

<sup>162</sup> See Danov, “Bulgaria,” 145.

of media critics in the mainstream media, point to an environment “constructed by the media in concert with politicians, which differs from the world of the readership and viewership.”<sup>163</sup>

An oppressive obstacle to democracy, media censorship in Bulgaria today rests on economic, political, corporate and sometimes even crony-based interconnections. A critical emphasis on media freedom, a television journalist explains, needs to look into the leadership at the helm of a certain media outlet and the origin of the capital invested in it.<sup>164</sup> In a radio talk-show discussing media-related matters, Boiko Stankushev maintains that journalists need to exercise more civic effort to “whistle out any appointed capitalist who is at the top of the pyramid in a certain media.”<sup>165</sup> This viewpoint, it could be argued, shows the chasm between the media’s role as a watchdog for the people and its being haunted by the past, when “capital of unclear origin”<sup>166</sup> was invested in the launch of various media outlets. Stankushev firmly cautions that media freedom in Bulgaria will be nonexistent “for as long as journalists remain dependent on the people who were delegated the right to be called media magnates ... and this whole thing garnished with bank accounts or briefcases.”<sup>167</sup>

In the same talk-show, journalist Svetlana Batalova of *168 Chassa*, who received an award for a journalism investigation from Reporters Without Borders, explains that “the threat to call a publisher or an editor-in-chief is the present-day censorship tool in addition to [signing] an advertising contract.”<sup>168</sup> Indjev offers a slightly different insight, defining the two-tier mechanism for media manipulation as both the corporate interest of media owners and the

---

<sup>163</sup> See Hristian Nemski, “European Operators Want the Rights of TV Bulgaria,” *Klasa*, April 2, 2008.

<sup>164</sup> Boiko Stankushev, interviewed in *Do We Live Under Carbon Copy?* The Journalists’ Club, Bulgarian National Radio, May 17, 2008.

<sup>165</sup> Stankushev, *Do We Live Under Carbon Copy*.

<sup>166</sup> Spasov, “Publicity and Public Relations.”

<sup>167</sup> Stankushev, *Do We Live Under Carbon Copy*.

<sup>168</sup> Svetlana Batalova, interviewed in *Do We Live Under Carbon Copy?* The Journalists’ Club, Bulgarian National Radio, May 17, 2008.

politicians who manage to “manipulate the media through dummy entities.”<sup>169</sup> Be it for its reliance on the past or the money-making onus of the present, as of late the media has been derailed from its purpose of serving the public interest. Instead, the media are beholden to their own self-interest, which is fostered by the interests of the editors-in-chief, and the media owners.

In a study dwelling on labour relations and the media that also discusses censorship and self-censorship as an effect of labour relations, the deputy editor-in-chief of *Trud*, Nikola Kitsevski, denies the charge of censorship and explains that only the public interest shapes *Trud*'s editorial policy: “Only shame-faced or guilty politicians would try to interfere, but in vain. We do not depend on them, and they know it. It is the public interest, not the political that motivates us and hence, no censorship is possible with our newspaper.”<sup>170</sup> Another media practitioner agrees that “a strong media company allows its journalists complete freedom.”<sup>171</sup>

Regardless of this, others maintain that self-censorship has become the biggest challenge for journalism in Bulgaria's young democracy. When the position and vision of the executives of a newspaper compel journalists to self-censor and when a journalist succumbs to a myriad of entrenched influences, the media is derelict in performing its duty. Suffice it to say, when that happens, the media sidesteps significant matters of importance to the public discourse, creates an environment that is of interest to one entity or another, or even ignores thorny matters for fear of repercussion. For a country in transition, such conflicts of interest present an abysmal problem. Tabakova provides a context for an analysis of this problem,

---

<sup>169</sup> Indjev, interview.

<sup>170</sup> See Danov, “Bulgaria,” 146.

<sup>171</sup> Simeonova, interview.

noting, “The public [in a country in transition] lacks the necessary orientation to filter the information and to be able to perceive this information critically.”<sup>172</sup>

What are the reasons for the comeback of self-censorship after years of championing freedom of speech? Journalists interviewed overwhelmingly defined self-censorship as a “personal decision,” yet there are other reasons for self-censorship.

Adherence to the interests of the publisher and the editor-in-chief, in addition to the chilling effect of fear of prosecution for libel or defamation, not only unifies the information in the press and distorts pluralism, but also stymies investigative journalism. As Batalova says in the radio talk-show, reading unified information in the press outlets is a familiar phenomenon:

It is common to read the same articles, the same profiles and the same laudatory interviews in different media, and the reason for this is simple. Apart from the interests of the publisher and the editor-in-chief, journalists fear being fined or penalized. That fear makes journalists from different publications synchronize their information.”<sup>173</sup>

Stankushev paints a similar picture of journalists embracing self-censorship as a result of the fear of unemployment and low compensation. The media current dilemma he describes succinctly as “hunger or silence.”<sup>174</sup> Personal morals and responsibility play a large part in a journalist’s ability to differentiate between a publisher’s interests and the interests of civil society.<sup>175</sup> However, even if personal morals prevail and the interest of civil society is prioritized, Hamalski asserts, it remains questionable whether the editor-in-chief or the owner

---

<sup>172</sup> Vesela Tabakova, media expert, Sofia University, Communication Department, telephone interview by author, August 6, 2008.

<sup>173</sup> Batalova, interviewed in *Do We Live Under Carbon Copy*.

<sup>174</sup> Stankushev, *Do We Live Under Carbon Copy*.

<sup>175</sup> Mitova, interview.

of a media outlet “will allow an article to go into print” unless it is related to a concept beneficial to the newspaper, or unless it is commissioned by certain interests.<sup>176</sup>

In response, chequebook, charter, or lapdog journalism synchronizes political-cum-economic power. Over time, journalism investigations and serious commentaries and analyses have become “rare guests” in the press.<sup>177</sup> With a whole new set of values characterized by a demeanour deprived of professionalism, part of Bulgaria’s media has been transformed into “mailboxes”<sup>178</sup> - to borrow the term from Tabakova. A “mailbox” media presents a striking contradiction to a media fulfilling its public service role, which is to hold accountable those in power and to objectively inform civil society on matters of significance in a democracy. Almost 20 years after the demise of communism, although Bulgaria’s new “EU postal code” has added a new dimension to its media development, it has also opened a Pandora’s box and set journalists on a reformist course. Whether they will embrace such a task, once they turn their back on the ghosts of the past, remains to be seen.

---

<sup>176</sup> Hamalski, interview.

<sup>177</sup> The Journalists’ Club, “Do We Live Under Carbon Copy?” *The Journalists’ Club*, Bulgarian National Radio, May 17, 2008.

<sup>178</sup> Tabakova, interview.

## Chapter 4

### The media's "ostrich"<sup>1</sup> approach

This chapter looks at media coverage of political players and parties in Bulgaria's embryonic democracy, and pursues the argument that the mainstream press tends to favour those currently in power, while giving little or no attention to alternative and oppositional movements.

The first hypothesis in this study of media coverage is that topics of public interest that generate less revenue remain under-represented in the mainstream press. What I expect to find is that politically and economically "dissident views" tend to be dismissed by the press<sup>2</sup> as being peripheral or simply non-existent—in other words, of no commercial interest to media owners.

The second hypothesis this study explores relates to pluralism in the mass-circulated national press. The most influential newspapers with the highest circulation numbers offer a dominant rhetoric and in so doing, rather than serving as a platform for critical debate about various political ideologies, function instead as lobbyists for a particular politician, who then is over-represented in the coverage. The two hypotheses represent what I refer to as the contradiction between absence and favouritization in media coverage.

---

<sup>1</sup> Vesela Tabakova, media expert, Sofia University, Communication Department, telephone interview by author, August 6, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> The concept of non-conformist topics in commercially-oriented information output in Bulgaria is rooted in Robert McChesney's analysis of the relation between commercial broadcasters who have to perform a public service role and the "absolutist interpretation" of the First Amendment in the US. McChesney argues, "The marketplace [of ideas] is assumed to be a neutral, value-free regulatory mechanism. In fact, a commercial "marketplace" of ideas has a strong bias toward rewarding ideas that support the status quo and marginalizing socially dissident views. In practice, the marketplace tends to reproduce social inequality economically, politically, and ideologically." (Robert McChesney, "The Mythology of Commercial Broadcasting and the Contemporary Crisis of Public Broadcasting," The 2001 Spry Memorial Lecture, University of Montreal, <<http://www.com.umontreal.ca/spry/spry-e.html>>).

Findings from the research described in this chapter will allow me to assess and make conclusions about how the Bulgarian media are fulfilling their democratic role.

### **The populist context**

In the wake of the overthrow of communism, single-party rule was replaced by a plethora of political ideologies, which gradually brought about polarization of the public sphere around a communist-anti-communist axis. Today, almost two decades after the regime change, the extreme politicization that saturated the first years of freedom, the delayed economic reforms throughout the transition from state socialism to democracy, and continuous inter-party chicanery have made people weary of participating in statehood. Looking at recent elections, one could certainly draw this conclusion based on unprecedented vote-buying practices<sup>3</sup> and the de-mobilization of voters. For example, some 41% of the eligible electorate went to the polls in 2006 to cast their vote for the president, but a mere 28% of the electorate voted for the European Parliament<sup>4</sup> in 2007.

In the Habermasian sense, the media is the vehicle through which private people who are engaged in political roles<sup>5</sup> contribute to public opinion formation<sup>6</sup> and set forth issues of public interest to the citizenry. Svetlozar Andreev offers a helpful perspective on the relationship between the role of political parties and the media in the social milieu:

Although it is difficult to be specific about how large the direct impact of media on political behaviour and decision-making is, it is nevertheless certain that media fills some important gaps in the field of social communication. These opportunities for the media have appeared predominantly as a result of the declining role of political

---

<sup>3</sup> See *Standart*, "USA Reproaches Bulgaria for Vote-buying Practices," March 13, 2008;

<sup>4</sup> Central Electoral Committee, <[www.izbori2007.org](http://www.izbori2007.org)>; Central Electoral Committee, <[www.izbori2006.org](http://www.izbori2006.org)>.

<sup>5</sup> Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeoisie Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (The MIT Press, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> Jurgen Habermas, "The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article (1964)," in *New German Critique* 3 (autumn 1974), trans. Sara Lennox and Frank Lennox, 49-55.

parties as intermediaries between state elites and the citizens, as well as following the increasing influence of international factors on the domestic political arena.<sup>7</sup>

As the roles of political parties and the media in the “public sphere” shift, the “media-centred and personalized” polity is further reshaped by the establishment of new political players—the “identity-based” populist parties with a “focus on communication” whose political discourse is further determined by an irreconcilable antagonism to the elites of the transition.<sup>8</sup> A self-described nationalist party, ATAKA<sup>9</sup> presents an excellent case study of such a group. The political scientist Venelin Ganev describes ATAKA as “an antisystem party that exploits the fears of those caught in the undertows of post-1989 dislocations. Its political rhetoric blends rightist xenophobia and leftist radicalism.”<sup>10</sup> In 2005 the blatant anti-Turk rhetoric, in addition to ATAKA’s slogan “Bulgaria for the Bulgarians,” resonated with constituents who were embittered by what sociologist Mira Yanova terms “the long and painful transition” that resulted in “a great social discontent.”<sup>11</sup> These constituents not only needed an “enemy” to blame for their pauperism<sup>12</sup> but had also grown disillusioned with traditional left-right cleavages.

Within a larger context, ATAKA saw the villain of the turbulent transition<sup>13</sup> in the ethnic party MRF<sup>14</sup> which, in the words of a Bulgarian sociologist, was no longer perceived as a “party representative of the Bulgarian Turks but of the elites from the transition who never

---

<sup>7</sup> Svetlozar Andreev, *The Media and Democratic Consolidation in Post-Communist Eastern Europe*, in the European Consortium for Political Research, University of Essex, 2002, <<http://www.essex.ac.uk/ecpr/events/jointsessions/paperarchive/uppsala/ws18/Andreev.pdf>>, 1.

<sup>8</sup> Daniel Smilov and Ivan Krastev, “The Rise of Populism in Eastern Europe: Policy Paper,” in *Populist Politics and Liberal Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe*, eds. Grigorij Mesežnikov, Olga Gyárfášová and Daniel Smilov, (Working Paper, Institute for Public Affairs, Bratislava, March, 2008), <[http://www.cls-sofia.org/uploaded/1214822685\\_populist\\_politics.pdf](http://www.cls-sofia.org/uploaded/1214822685_populist_politics.pdf)>.

<sup>9</sup> ‘ATAKA’ is Bulgarian for ‘attack’.

<sup>10</sup> Venelin Ganev, “Ballots, Bribes, and State Building in Bulgaria,” *Journal of Democracy* 17 no. 1 (January 2006): 75-89, 87.

<sup>11</sup> See Petar Kostadinov, “Nationalism and Populism in Bulgaria,” *The Sofia Echo*, March 1, 2006.

<sup>12</sup> See Kostadinov, “Nationalism and Populism.”

<sup>13</sup> See Kostadinov, “Nationalism and Populism.”

<sup>14</sup> Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) is a party of Ethnic Turkish background.

lose.”<sup>15</sup> During the transition, which was seen as an “elite-controlled” process,<sup>16</sup> the media tabled a class agenda that drastically differed from the people’s agenda. Precisely here is where ATAKA’s vociferous nationalist and populist messages appealed to the populace. To a small coterie of personal-interest-driven elites, the nationalist cause became a growing threat. In the words of the historian Nikola Altunkov, “nationalism arouses enemies,” whom he describes in an interview with ATAKA’s party organ, “as the destroyers of the system of state, family and a people...The ones who pursue personal interest at all costs, leading to the destruction and annihilation of a nation’s main civic virtues such as patriotism, nationalism, solidarity and conservatism.”<sup>17</sup> Altunkov further asserts that the nationalist “is antagonized by those who . . . [want] society to be atomized and the individual to be put in a blind alley as well as statehood, the nation and society’s pillars to be destroyed.”<sup>18</sup>

ATAKA’s 20-point ideological platform features withdrawal of Bulgarian troops from Iraq,<sup>19</sup> skepticism about its membership in the European Union,<sup>20</sup> and insistence on the sovereignty of the nation bordering on isolationism. In addition, ATAKA insists on a reassessment of the terms for closure of Bulgaria’s two nuclear reactors in Kozlodui power plant that was part and parcel of the country’s EU accession treaty.<sup>21</sup> On the national front, ATAKA trumpets accountability—delayed but not denied—and a review of the alleged kleptocratic state of affairs up to the highest government levels. In its political platform, the party also calls for a revision of the economic side of the transition, with an emphasis on auditing privatization deals, which were not in Bulgaria’s national interest; investigation of

---

<sup>15</sup> See Yuri Velevev, “The Transition Started and Ends Like a Crisis,” *24 Chassa*, October 3, 2007; Here it is important to note that MRF has been in the ruling coalition with different governments for over a decade.

<sup>16</sup> See Velevev, “The Transition Started.”

<sup>17</sup> See Stanka Dineva, “The Historian Nikola Altunkov: I Believe in the Political Future of Patriotism,” *ATAKA*, October 30, 2006.

<sup>18</sup> See Dineva, “The Historian Nikola.”

<sup>19</sup> *Trud*, “ATAKA Wants Bulgaria’s Withdrawal from its Missions,” *Trud*, April 3, 2008.

wealth acquired as a result of criminal activities; and examination of all financial transactions that involved politicians in any way.<sup>22</sup> This analysis is found in the seminal study on the rise of populist parties in Eastern Europe by Smilov and Krastev, who observe that populist parties of the likes of ATAKA ground their political rhetoric in the “‘redistribution’ of the benefits of the transition... mean[ing] that certain corrupt elites should be punished. . . . Redistribution thus is translated not in economic policies but in ‘anticorruption’ measures.”<sup>23</sup>

Whether it is related to ATAKA’s xenophobic overtones veiled in extreme nationalistic discourse or the taboo topics related to the oligarchs’ accumulation of affluence during the transition, the absence of any debate in the public sphere creates a vacuum, negatively impacts democracy and encourages profligacy. Situated in a region that has often been shaken by ethnic tensions and civil wars since communist times and beyond, Bulgaria also experienced deep ethnic hostility when, in the mid-1980s, thousands of Bulgarians of Turkish background were forced to change their names or even leave the country. Today, any incitement of ethnic violence or intolerance provokes an immediate negative response by Bulgarian society decrying such attempts to fracture public discourse.

The unwillingness to challenge the present politico-economic status quo is one possible explanation for the mainstream media’s mindset in muzzling voices opposed to the ruling elites, whose role in guiding the transition cannot be easily discarded. As shown in the previous chapters, the media leadership has established dependencies on the current political and economic elites, and therefore delving into the dark chapters of the transition, some argue,

---

<sup>20</sup> Smilov and Krastev, “The Rise of Populism.”

<sup>21</sup> ATAKA, <[http://www.ataka.bg/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=13&Itemid=51](http://www.ataka.bg/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=13&Itemid=51)>.

<sup>22</sup> ATAKA, <[http://www.ataka.bg/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=13&Itemid=51](http://www.ataka.bg/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=13&Itemid=51)>.

<sup>23</sup> Smilov and Krastev, “The Rise of Populism,” 10.

would fare weakly in the mainstream press. It is this undercurrent of dependency and fear that is explored in this chapter.

## **Methodology**

This research is designed to determine whether the extreme right-wing nationalist ATAKA party—which came out as the largest opposition political party in Bulgaria’s National Assembly<sup>24</sup> in the 2005 elections, after the first three election winners entered a coalition partnership—receives marginalized coverage in the country’s mainstream press. This chapter is also an empirical study that investigates whether news reports follow a uniform thread in providing the public sphere with objective information, or favour commercially-supported news over topics essential for forming public opinion in a democratic state.

A content analysis was conducted using articles published in four mass circulation daily newspapers for a period of nine weeks, or a total of 63 days. The analysis included news reports, editorials, commentaries, interviews and visual representations that had a direct reference to either the ATAKA party or its leader, Volen Siderov, or Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria (abbreviated as GERB in Bulgarian) and its informal leader Boiko Borissov. Overall, this research adopts a descriptive approach to analyzing the content and patterns of coverage. More importantly, the content analysis does not aim to highlight the differences between the four newspapers’ coverage, but rather to draw a bigger picture based on the implicit themes represented by this coverage. A qualitative review of the articles has

---

<sup>24</sup> The 2005 elections for 40th National Assembly were held on June 25, 2005 and witnessed a total of 22 parties, coalitions and independent candidates participating in a proportional election system. Seven political organizations crossed the electoral threshold of 4% for seats in parliament. Some 1,129,196 people voted for the BSP-led Coalition for Bulgaria, which won 33.98% of the votes or 82 seats in Bulgaria’s 240-seat parliament. Of the voters, some 725,314 cast their ballot for the National Movement for Simeon II, which gained 21.83% or 53 seats. Third came the Movement for Rights and Freedoms with 14.07% (467,400) of the votes or 34 seats. The Coalition ATAKA came in fourth with 8.93% of the votes (296,848), winning 21 seats. Some 280,323 people cast their ballot for Coalition United Democratic Forces, which gained 8.44% or 20 seats, followed by

been added to explain certain points of reference that are discussed in other parts of the study. Material from two randomly selected days was analyzed for the qualitative part of the research. In addition to the quantitative analysis, a qualitative review was done on the items from these two particular days.

A study of such scope carries a number of limitations that need to be highlighted. The findings from this study could differ given a varied timeframe, when the dynamism of both the media and the political environment could shift the public sphere to an unexpected province. For instance, in the words of some interviewees, come election time ATAKA presents an attractive news peg.<sup>25</sup> Although GERB is the only “soft populist”<sup>26</sup> union that could be viewed in contrast and comparison with ATAKA, the leadership of the two entities also matters.



This is a front page picture published in *Standart* on 18 May, 2008. The headline reads: “Champions.” Boiko Borissov is seen playing tennis at a tennis tournament organized by *Standart*.

---

Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria with 7.07% (234,788 votes) or 17 seats and Coalition Bulgarian Popular Union with 5.70 % or 189,268 votes, winning 13 seats. (Central Electoral Committee, <[www.2005izbori.org](http://www.2005izbori.org)>.

<sup>25</sup> Eliana Mitova, journalist *Klasa*, telephone interview by author, June 15, 2008.

<sup>26</sup> Daniel Smilov “Bulgaria,” in *Populist Politics and Liberal Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe*, eds., Grigorij Mesežnikov, Olga Gyárfášová and Daniel Smilov, (Working Paper, Institute for Public Affairs, Bratislava, March, 2008), <[http://www.cls-sofia.org/uploaded/1214822685\\_populist\\_politics.pdf](http://www.cls-sofia.org/uploaded/1214822685_populist_politics.pdf)>.



This is the picture published in *Standart* on 27 May, 2008, page 1. The headline of the article is “Circus.” Volen Siderov is seen in the centre of the picture at a demonstration giving a Nazi-like salute.

Furthermore, to explore my hypothesis that the mass circulation press addresses certain topics through “absence,”<sup>27</sup> this research relies on a quantitative comparative approach in combination with interviews with Bulgarian media scholars, journalists and sociologists, who are vital to the canvassing of public opinion in the country. In addition to the content analysis and the interviews with media experts, news reports and commentaries in print and online publications were also consulted for this analysis.

The choice of the time frame for this research is also crucial for the findings. The dates selected for the content analysis fall between April 18, 2008 and June 20, 2008. These particular dates were chosen for two main reasons. Firstly, this period marks a year after the

first elections for the European Parliament were held in Bulgaria. The elections on May 20, 2007 saw the ATAKA party win 14 per cent of the votes, coming in ahead of the traditional right-wing parties associated with the transition. Precise results in percentage and number of votes were as follows:

From a total electorate of 1,937,696:

- Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) won 21.68% (420,001);
- Platform European Socialists (BSP-led) won 21.41% (414,786);
- Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) won 20.26% (392,650);
- National Union ATAKA (ATAKA) won 14.20% (275,237);
- The National Movement Simeon II (NMSII) won 6.27% (121,398);
- Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) won 4.74% (91,871).<sup>28</sup>

Secondly, this period illustrates the normal behaviour of the press in a span of time that is not leading up to local elections or the elections for president, National Assembly or the European Parliament, and is therefore characterized by coverage that is not overtly politicized. Considering the polarization that is known to surround election campaigns, this time frame was specifically chosen because it did not include any political campaigning, voting, or political events that could restructure public opinion through media agenda-setting. As Lilia Raycheva argues, “The mass media have had a great deal of influence on strong politicization of the Bulgarian people. The press has frequently distorted the country’s political processes, yet it has exerted considerable influence on public opinion.”<sup>29</sup>

This case study on media content focused on the coverage in Bulgaria’s most prominent daily newspapers: *Standart*, *24 Chassa*, *Trud* and *Klasa*.<sup>30</sup> The selection of these four print outlets for this research was informed by a number of considerations. With the exception of

---

<sup>27</sup> “Absence” is a term used by Stuart Hall to describe the media silence on issues that lie outside the mainstream views of society. (Hall, Stuart 1988)

<sup>28</sup> Central Electoral Committee, <[www.izbori2007.org](http://www.izbori2007.org)>.

*Klasa*, the three remaining national newspapers are not only the leaders in the country in terms of circulation, but also have a dominant position in the advertising market. Moreover, these three print outlets are owned by foreign economic entities. Statistics show that the combined circulation of *Standart*, *24 Chassa*, and *Trud* in 2007 was approximately 253,000 copies,<sup>31</sup> a number that greatly exceeds the circulation of the remaining national daily publications in the country. Also, as discussed in Chapter 3, *24 Chassa* and *Trud* are the two most influential national mainstream print outlets and are owned by the German conglomerate Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung (WAZ). Moreover, the publisher of *Standart* is also connected to the Russian oligarch Michael Chorni, who bought *Standart* in 2000 and was later expelled from Bulgaria.<sup>32</sup> Thus, this research focuses on and is informed by news coverage in the country's leading mass-circulated national dailies, which also have a dominant position in the market and are owned, or allegedly owned as in the case of *Standart*, by foreign entities.

On the other hand, of the selected four newspapers, *Klasa* is the only daily that is dubbed a quality publication, with serious editorial content and a focus on business news. What is of greater importance in the choice of *Klasa* for this research, however, is the comparative newness of the print outlet. *Klasa* emerged into the press market in the latter part of 2007 and, according to unconfirmed reports posted online and claims by media scholars and journalists, the newspaper is owned by advertising tycoon Krassimir Gergov, who purportedly also owns a portfolio of broadcast media and a number of advertising agencies.<sup>33</sup> In sum, these four print outlets were chosen for this research because they represent the pattern of the Bulgarian press

---

<sup>29</sup> Lilia Raycheva, "Fifteen Years of Televised Political Advertising Developments in Bulgaria," in *The SAGE Handbook of Political Advertising*, ed. Lynda Lee Kaid and Christina Holtz-Bacha (London: Sage Publications, 2006), 359-375, 362.

<sup>30</sup> See Appendix 1 for description of these and other main newspapers in Bulgaria.

<sup>31</sup> See *Kapital*, "Buy me a Newspaper," August 10, 2007, 12-13.

<sup>32</sup> See Chapter 3.

<sup>33</sup> Ognian Zlatev, managing director *Media Development Centre*, Skype interviews by author, June 11, 2008 and March 10, 2008.

landscape as a whole, and the editorial coverage on their pages could be used to measure the extent to which the public is informed.

In this content analysis, the coverage of ATAKA will be examined against the coverage of a nascent political entity, the centre-right opposition group GERB and its leader, Borissov. The decision to focus on coverage of these particular political entities was made for several reasons related to their historical genesis. Firstly, ATAKA and GERB were chosen for this research because public support for them is growing.<sup>34</sup> Further, conceived in the final stages of Bulgaria's transition to democracy, the two political entrants put a decisive end to the bipolar political model<sup>35</sup> and established a broad scope of fresh political discourse.

Founded respectively at the end of 2006 and in April 2005, GERB and ATAKA aimed to meet the expectations of a transition-fatigued society. Unencumbered by the guilt of the transition-wrought devastation that the public attributed to the incumbent political groups, ATAKA and GERB were established as a response to the deficiency of values in traditional left and right-wing parties. More important, GERB and ATAKA focused on leadership and not only embodied the spirit of the transition period—the people's wish for drastic change—but filled a void in the centre-right of Bulgarian politics.

Still in their infancy when they entered the ring of real politics, both parties were awarded immediate political legitimacy. As mentioned earlier, ATAKA won nine per cent of the votes at the legislative elections in June 2005. As a result, the newly-formed political power sent 21 MPs to the 240-seat unicameral National Assembly, outpacing the country's long-term oppositional stronghold, the Union of Democratic Forces. A year later, ATAKA's leader was

---

<sup>34</sup> See *Trud*, "Decline in UDF, Growth [in Popularity] for ATAKA," *Trud*, September 15, 2008.

<sup>35</sup> See *The Sofia Echo*, "Municipal Elections First Round: Comments," November 2, 2007, <[http://www.sofiaecho.com/article/insight-municipal-elections-first-round-comments/id\\_25907/catid\\_67](http://www.sofiaecho.com/article/insight-municipal-elections-first-round-comments/id_25907/catid_67)>.

the runoff candidate in the presidential elections against the incumbent president Georgi Purvanov after winning some 597,175 votes (21.5%).<sup>36</sup>

Similarly, participating for the first time in elections, at the vote for the European Parliament in 2007, GERB won the majority of the votes (21.68%), coming ahead of the three ruling coalition parties, and sent five representatives to the capital of the European Union.<sup>37</sup> Following the first elections for the European Parliament, ATAKA sent three MEPs<sup>38</sup> to Brussels after winning 14.20% of the votes,<sup>39</sup> which was more than one of the parties in the ruling coalition, confirming its position as the fourth most popular political party.

The two young political players have also received international legitimization from their European counterparts. The leader of the French National Front, Jean-Marie Le Pen, showed his party's support for ATAKA at the opening of the latter's pre-election municipal campaign in 2007.<sup>40</sup> Siderov further intensified contacts with leading nationalist leaders in Malta, Italy and Austria, attracting international attention to the party in addition to legitimizing it as a domestic political force.<sup>41</sup> On the other hand, GERB has been a member of the European People's Party since February 2008.

However, the similarities between the two end here. Whereas ATAKA's leader Siderov offers a novel nationalist-populist rhetoric, GERB's Borissov, who is currently serving his second stint as mayor of the capital city, Sofia, has clearly defined a "strongly pro-European...

---

<sup>36</sup> Central Electoral Committee, <[www.izbori2006.org](http://www.izbori2006.org)>.

<sup>37</sup> Claudia Ciobanu, "Far Right Goes Out of Fashion," *Inter Press Service*, March 6, 2008, <<http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=41478>>.

<sup>38</sup> MEP stands for Member of the European Union.

<sup>39</sup> Central Electoral Committee, <[www.izbori2007.org](http://www.izbori2007.org)>; Bulgaria's elections for Members of the European Union were held on May 20, 2007. From a total electorate of 1 937 696 some 420,001 (21.68%) cast their vote for GERB, followed by 414,786 (21.41%) of BSP-led Coalition PES. Third at the elections came the Movement for Rights and Freedoms with some 20.26% (392,650) of the votes. The ballots for National Union ATAKA numbered 275,237 or 14.20%. The National Movement Simeon II received 6.27% (121,398) of the votes.

<sup>40</sup> *Mediapool*, "Jean-Marie Le Pen Supports ATAKA and Slavi Binev," September 30, 2007, <<http://www.mediapool.bg/show/?storyid=132378>>.

<sup>41</sup> Krastyo Petkov, "Bulgaria is on the Threshold of an International Isolation," *Klasa*, October 12, 2008.

and anti-elite”<sup>42</sup> social-populist outlook.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, political scientists argue that within the context of being opposition parties, GERB’s and ATAKA’s values, origins and even members’ personal ideologies share similarities in that they reflect the public’s expectations for top-to-bottom political and economic reform.

Of particular significance to this thesis is the fact that the media played a decisive role in the birth and the increasing support for the two parties. The anti-elitist SKAT television, where Siderov hosted his own programme, simply called ‘Ataka,’ “was the main tool of mobilization of electoral support for ATAKA.”<sup>44</sup> On the other hand, Borissov has been dubbed a “product of media presentation” because of the media’s apparent affection for him. As Daniel Smilov puts it, Borissov has “an extremely fine sense for PR matters and manages always to be in the focus of media attention. His use of street jargon in a relatively delicate manner and with a fine sense of humour makes him one of the media favourites.”<sup>45</sup>

### **Results of content analysis**

This research examines the print coverage of the two political entities GERB and ATAKA within the context of a redefined news culture and dynamically changing social and political landscape in Bulgaria. To determine the amount of coverage each of the political entities received, the numbers per political establishment were calculated first on the basis of the number of headlines where either the party or the leader appeared; second, on the number of articles dedicated to the party or the leader; and lastly on the number of pictures attached to the coverage.

---

<sup>42</sup> See Ciobanu, “Far Right.”

<sup>43</sup> See Stanka Dineva, “The Sooner we Forget Tato, Deto, Bate Boiko [in translation ‘Older Brother’ - a reference to Boiko Borissov], the Better,” *Klasa*, May 22, 2008.

<sup>44</sup> Smilov, “Bulgaria,” 18.

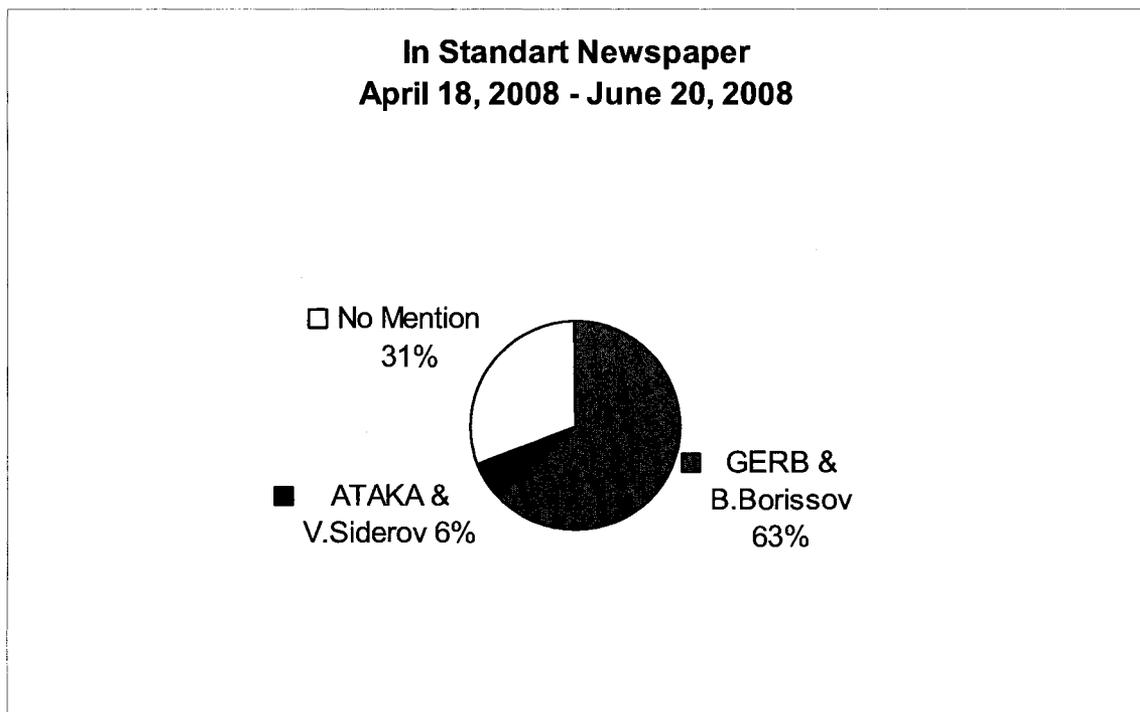
<sup>45</sup> Smilov, “Bulgaria,” 19.

For this study I examined news coverage that consisted of a total of 235 items during 63 days of observation. Each one had either a headline or text with an accompanying image directly related to ATAKA or its leader Volen Siderov; or featured a news report, image or headline focused on GERB or its informal leader Boiko Borissov, be it in his capacity of mayor of Sofia or as an informal leader of GERB. A sizable majority of the data, 206 items, featured a news item with reference to GERB or Borissov. The remaining 29 items had a reference either to ATAKA or to its leader Siderov. This is an almost sevenfold difference in the number of news items dedicated to each variable in this research. Such a large disparity points to a heightened interest on the part of the leading national press towards one of the political powers.

The most outstanding result of the analysis, however, is that the political programme, parliamentary duties, and initiatives of ATAKA are virtually absent from the coverage. In contrast, other opposition parties that won far fewer votes in the 2005 parliamentary elections and are represented by fewer MPs received more coverage than ATAKA, which had 9% of the popular vote. A two-week analysis of the newspapers (June 7 to June 20, 2008) reveals that Democrats for Strong Bulgaria (DSB), which had 7.07% of the popular vote and is headed by a former Prime Minister, was the subject of 19 news items compared to just two on ATAKA, which is an almost tenfold difference. Moreover, the Union of Democratic Forces, with less than 5% of the popular vote for MEPs, was featured in six articles for the same period. In comparison, for GERB, which has no parliamentary representation, there were 52 news items with a mention of the party or its leader. One point must be made here in relation to the nature of the coverage investigated: research based on the comparison between the two political entities aims to strictly emphasize patterns of coverage embraced by the media.

The main finding from the content analysis is that in the mass-circulation daily *Standart*, coverage of ATAKA's political platform and parliamentary initiatives is non-existent. For example, within the research timeframe, *Standart* covered ATAKA and its leader Siderov on only four days compared to forty days on which news items related to GERB and Borissov appeared. Here are the related statistics. The readers of *Standart* were informed about ATAKA and Siderov on only six per cent of the total number of days of publication, in comparison to some 63 per cent for GERB or Borissov-related coverage during the same time (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 – Content Analysis of mentions of ATAKA & GERB

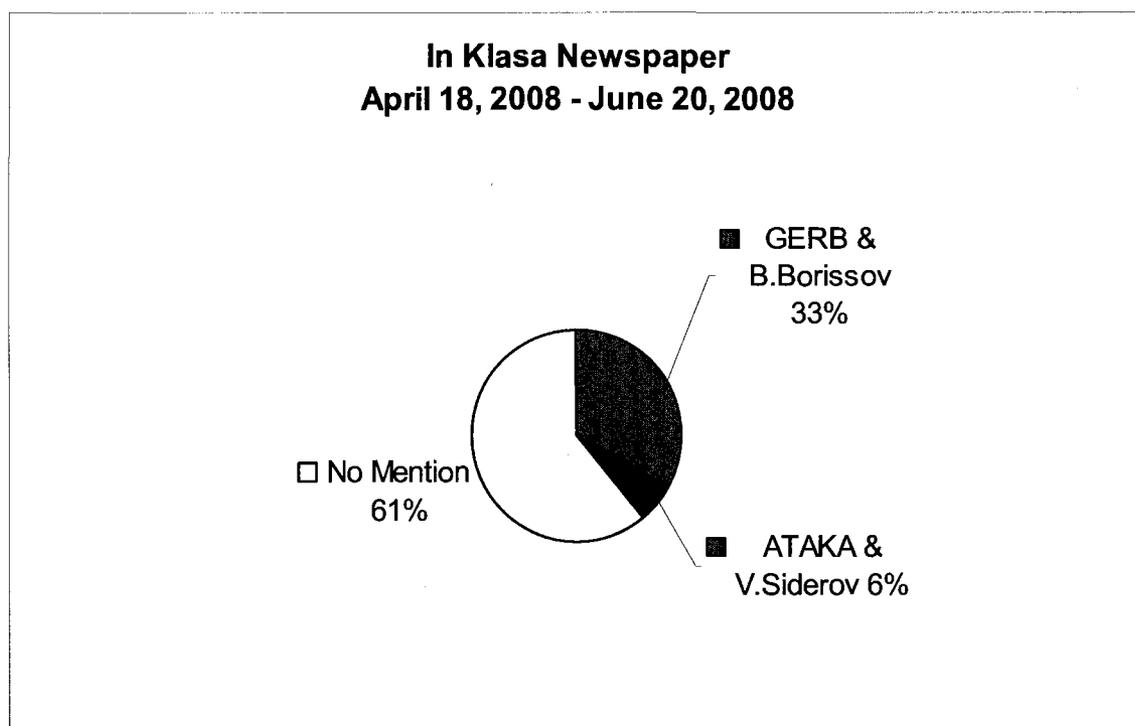


During the Easter holiday (April 27) and the National Holiday St George (May 6), *Standart* did not publish for some five days.

Other data shows that on 11 days of the research period, all four of the newspapers ran news items, pictures or commentaries on GERB and Borissov. In contrast, there was not a single day when all four national newspapers ran articles on ATAKA and Siderov.

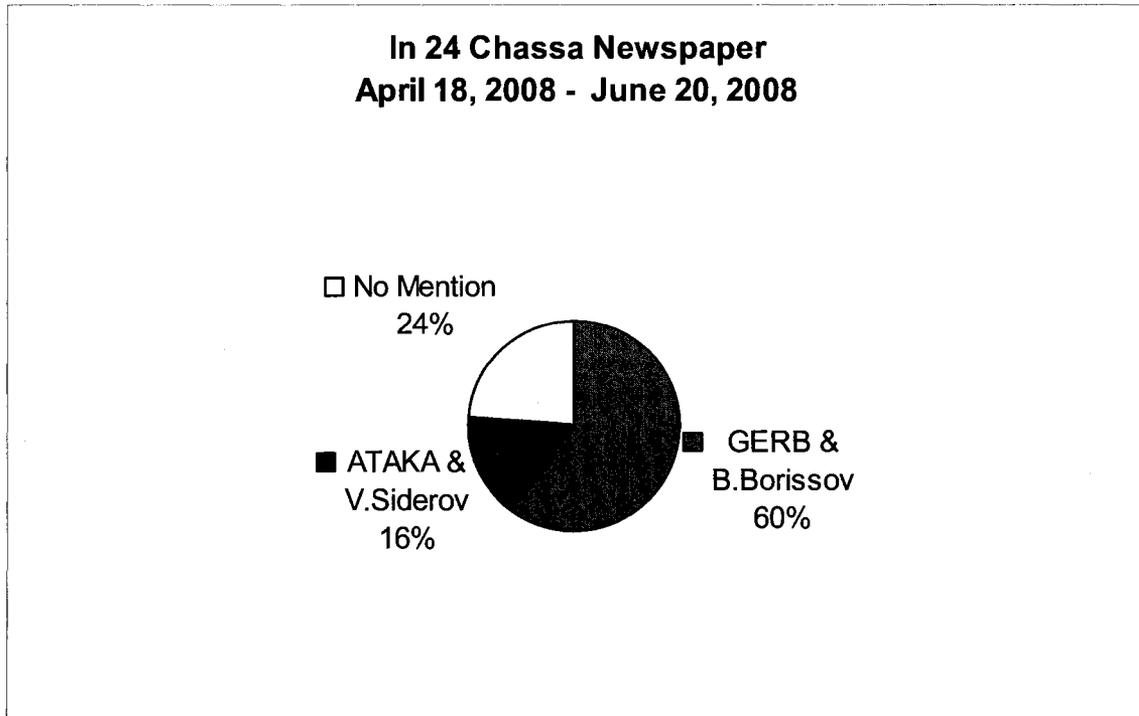
This research found that the percentage of days on which an item appeared on GERB and/or Borissov were 33, 60 and 69 respectively in *Klasa*, *24 Chassa* and *Trud* (see figures 2, 3 and 4).

Figure 2 – Content Analysis of mentions of ATAKA & GERB



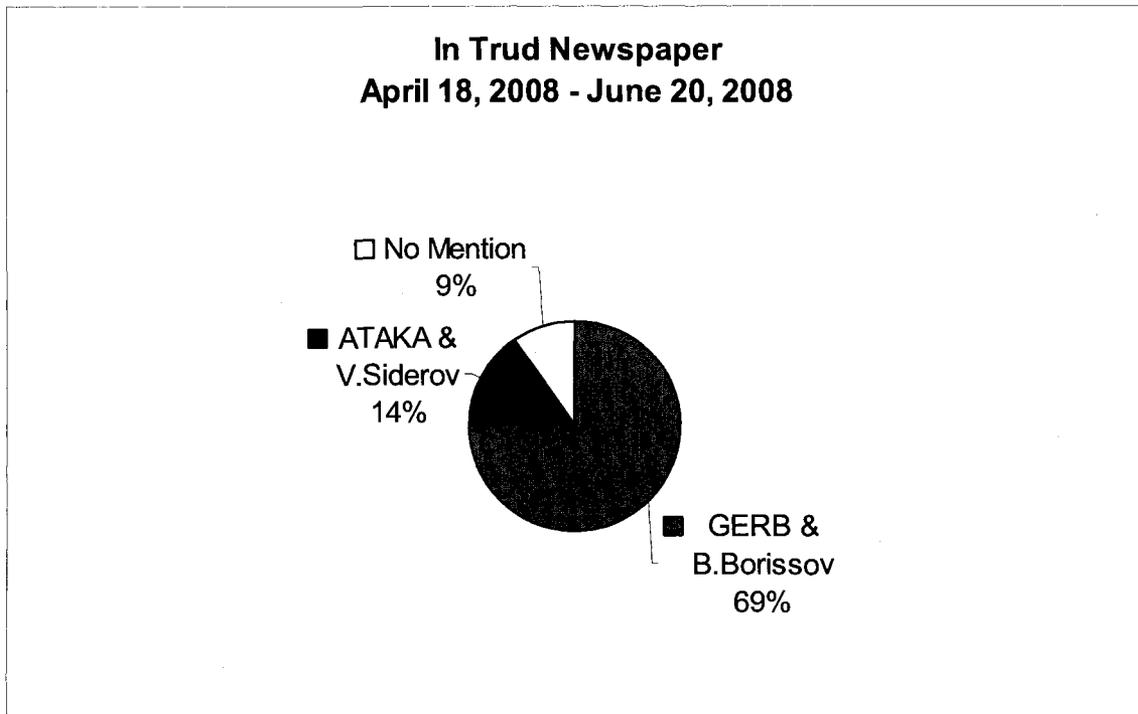
During the research *Klasa* did not publish on Sundays.

Figure 3 – Content Analysis of mentions of ATAKA & GERB



During the Easter holiday (April 27) and the National Holiday St George (May 6), *24 Chassa* did not publish for three days.

Figure 4 – Content Analysis of mentions of ATAKA & GERB



During the Easter holiday (April 27) and the National Holiday St George (May 6), *Trud* did not publish for three days.

On the other hand, during the investigated period, ATAKA and Siderov received coverage on only 6, 16 and 14 per cent of days, respectively, in *Klasa*, *24 Chassa* and *Trud*. There are a few possible explanations for this dearth of coverage, including the lack of political buzz during the period of research. In addition, the fact that Borissov, the informal leader of GERB, is also covered in his capacity as mayor of Sofia would lead to additional media interest in the leader of the party and in the party itself. References to Borissov as mayor are interwoven with references to him as an informal party leader, so therefore they cannot be isolated from the analysis.

*Trud* daily featured 64 news items with GERB or Borissov as the focal point, compared to the meager nine articles discussing ATAKA or Siderov. WAZ's other leading daily, *24 Chassa*, follows a similar pattern of coverage. In it some 50 articles and pictures focus on Borissov and GERB, compared to only 10 items for ATAKA. The ratio between the coverage in *Klasa* is also 7:1 in favour of GERB and Borissov. Again for *Standart*, the total number of articles with coverage of GERB comes to 64, against six for ATAKA and Siderov. On examining these dailies, I concluded that there is an ongoing absence of information with relation to ATAKA or its leader unless mention is unavoidable through the journalistic norm of an item being newsworthy.

An analysis such as this cannot present an exhaustive case study without including a qualitative examination of the materials. This was accomplished by examining a sample of articles published on two particular days—the first and the last days of the research. On April 18, four articles published in three newspapers (*24 Chassa*, *Standart* and *Trud*), in addition to three pictures accompanying the stories, focused on information about GERB and Borissov. On June 20, six news items and eight pictures focused on GERB or Borissov in the four newspapers. On those days, there was zero coverage on ATAKA.

### **Results of the qualitative analysis**

The qualitative analysis of the research is based on a sample of coverage on two separate days. The days are chosen for representing the greatest amount of coverage for each of the two subjects, hence these are the days indicating the most media interest towards each subject. ATAKA and Siderov received the most coverage on May 8 when *Trud*, *24 Chassa* and *Klasa* published items accompanied by pictures. May 19 is the day with the greatest number of news

items focused on GERB or mayor Borissov. On that day, *Standart* alone ran four items, ranging from politics and sports to editorial commentary. The qualitative analysis in this research is mainly discussed within the context of the examination of the coverage of two continuing stories on ATAKA that portray the party in a negative light.

In accordance with the first hypothesis that the mainstream press excludes issues of public interest in favour of other topics that the market demands, this study examined two media phenomena that are largely under-researched in Bulgarian academia. Specifically, the research looks at the “absence” and the “favouritization” variables that are overtly demonstrated in the mass-circulated mainstream press. These findings could be best explained in terms of Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw’s conclusion regarding the media’s agenda-setting function: “The political world is reproduced imperfectly by individual news media ... [and] voters tend to share the media’s composite definition of what is important.”<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, a political scientist argues that if a newspaper is non-partisan, then the mass media coverage of all parties between and throughout election campaigns should be fair<sup>47</sup> because the media serves as the major carrier and means for public opinion formation on varied political stances. Jean Blondel further concedes that “authoritarian leaders have been adamant [that it was essential] to dominate and indeed control completely what was being said and what was being printed” in the press by various means, including, for example, giving an advantage to the newspapers of the ruling party or parties over advertising.<sup>48</sup> In Blondel’s words, although “the impact of such arrangements” is hard to evaluate, in the long run they “affect markedly the views of citizens about the actions of the government and the reactions of the opposition:

---

<sup>46</sup> Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, “The Agenda-setting Function of Mass Media,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36 no. 2 (1972), 176-187, 328.

<sup>47</sup> Jean Blondel, “The Role of Parties and Party Systems in the Democratization Process,” in *Democracy, governance and economic performance: East and Southeast Asia*, eds., Ian Marsh, Jean Blondel and Takashi Inoguchi (Tokyo; The United Nations University Press, 1999), 29-30.

indeed, the citizens may not even come to know what are the standpoints of the opposition parties.”<sup>49</sup> This conclusion is especially applicable to the present discussion on the “absence” of coverage. The quantitative analysis of the articles suggests that the opposition party that entered parliament in 2005 with the greatest support, along with its leader, represent but marginal significance to the mainstream press. One possible reason for such press behaviour is put forth by a Bulgarian media scholar, who suggests that the mainstream newspapers would like to be seen as positively inclined towards the government or the president.<sup>50</sup>

On testing the second hypothesis of “favouritization” that the mainstream press applies a market-oriented approach, and instead of performing the function of a platform to inform pluralistic debate on issues of public interest, it plays favourites as demonstrated by the quantitative analysis, examinations of the news items published in the four dailies revealed that hyper-interest in GERB and Borissov saturates the mass circulation dailies. Within the current media context, however, when interpreting an overrepresentation of a party or its leader, a new dimension should be added: commercialization. According to a Bulgarian media scholar, by being commercially-oriented, the so-called independent media outlets like *Trud* and *24 Chassa* offer their readership what it expects to find in the information output: Even if a journalist does not want to cover Boiko Borissov, Petranka Fileva says, if that is what the readership wants, the media will photograph Borissov and will then provide that coverage to their readers.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, a journalist from the Bulgarian news agency *BTA* takes the argument further, saying that in the mass-circulated *24 Chassa* and *Trud*, GERB will only be covered positively.<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>48</sup> Blondel, “The Role of Parties,” 30.

<sup>49</sup> Blondel, “The Role of Parties,” 30.

<sup>50</sup> Zlatev, interview.

<sup>51</sup> Petranka Fileva, media expert, Sofia University, Communication Department, telephone interview by author, July 13, 2008.

### **The absence of the “black sheep”**

An opposite approach is applied when either ignoring ATAKA altogether or stereotyping the party in a negative light. Here I further rely on the findings of the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee study cited in Chapter 3. The survey conclusions were drawn from some 150 interviews with media practitioners, TV/radio presenters, editors and owners from leading national print and broadcast outlets, as well as PR experts, and aimed to define the media-PR relationship.<sup>53</sup> What is of interest to the current thesis is that in response to the question about cases when ‘black political PR’ has occurred, some of the respondents identified ‘black PR’ in the coverage of ATAKA—both for and against ATAKA.<sup>54</sup>

According to some media practitioners, the media perpetuates the myth that ATAKA has taken up the role of the “black sheep”<sup>55</sup> in the public sphere. Television journalist Assen Grigorov explains: “When [incumbent President] Purvanov runs for office everybody would say: ‘Here are the bad nationalist [Siderov] and the good president.’”<sup>56</sup> Whereas ATAKA always receives an extremely negatively-nuanced coverage, the articles about GERB are quite positive.<sup>57</sup> For example, a scan through the headlines in the researched articles defines a common theme that describes ATAKA in terms of sports hooliganism, relates the party to the inciting of violence and crime, and portrays it as creators of a circus-like environment.

The legislative initiatives and party life of ATAKA are entirely absent from the examined coverage. As mentioned earlier, the qualitative analysis in this research is mainly discussed within the parameters of an examination of the coverage of two news cases

---

<sup>52</sup> Boris Hamalski, journalist from Bulgarian news agency *BTA*, telephone interviews by author, November 12, 2008 and July 21, 2008.

<sup>53</sup> Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, *Reformulating Publicity: Transparency in the Relationships Between the PR and the Media* (Sofia: Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, July 2006), <  
<http://www.bghelsinki.org/index.php?module=resources&lg=bg&id=395>> (25 August 2008).

<sup>54</sup> Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, *Reformulating Publicity*.

<sup>55</sup> Assen Grigorov, director *Re:TV*, telephone interview by author, November 13, 2008 and August 7, 2008.

predominant in the analysis. First, a court case against Siderov and his spouse Kapka Siderova, who is also the editor-in-chief of the party's organ, *Ataka* newspaper; and second, an incident in parliament when the session was adjourned. The background on the lawsuit is as follows: Siderov and Siderova were accused of abetting perjury in the case of an ATAKA MP (Pavel Chernev, who later left the party) in relation to a 2006 car accident.<sup>58</sup> The couple was in a vehicle that crashed into another car and the driver of the other car was allegedly assaulted by Siderov. Chernev, who was with the Siderovs at the time of the collision, changed his initial statements about the incident to say that he was driving when the cars collided and later admitted that Siderov had forced him to testify falsely.<sup>59</sup> The couple was acquitted and the lawsuit ended in October 2008 following a series of adjournments because of disruptions by ATAKA fans who accompanied the defendants and chanted revolutionary slogans. The second case in the coverage is related to a parliamentary session that was disrupted by ATAKA MPs and Siderov.

### **Circus stunts in the public discourse**

The coverage discussed here follows an adjournment of the lawsuit on May 7, 2008, and a court hearing held on May 26, 2008. In *24 Chassa* and *Trud*, the headlines of the articles covering the former read, "ATAKA and a judge measure their strengths" and "The courtroom under stress and paralysis from Volen Siderov's fan group." The story is given great prominence, which a statement in *Trud's* page one editorial in addition to a whole page placement on page 7 illustrates. In *Klasa*, the headline "ATAKA supporters failed the case

---

<sup>56</sup> Grigorov, interview.

<sup>57</sup> Hamalski, interview.

<sup>58</sup> Spasena Baramova, "Sofia City Court to Try Case Against Volen Siderov," *The Sofia Echo*, December 5 2007, <[http://www.sofiaecho.com/article/sofia-city-court-to-try-case-against-volen-siderov/id\\_26499/catid\\_66](http://www.sofiaecho.com/article/sofia-city-court-to-try-case-against-volen-siderov/id_26499/catid_66)>.

against Siderov” introduces the story, which has a brief two-sentence lead describing the courtroom atmosphere followed by a detailed background of the case. *Standart*, the newspaper that is dubbed a pro-any-government publication, provides an effervescent snippet of the court hearing in an article that starts with a picture on page one and the succinct and telling headline: “Circus.”<sup>60</sup> In the story that follows on page four, ATAKA followers are “zombied” by Siderov and they “storm” the court house like an uncontrollable bunch of outlaws trying to strike terror into society. According to the article, Siderov’s buffoonish stunts are hooliganistic attacks that have a vulgar political impact.

The first conclusion of the qualitative analysis shows a tendency of the media to portray Siderov, when they mention him at all, in a negative, marginalized manner. The coverage of the court hearing confirms such a conclusion. Jingoistic overtones, the pervasive mention of weaponry, and threats attributed to the ATAKA supporters reminiscent of a state of lawlessness—all serve to create a sense of aggression and a revolution-like theme that is prevalent throughout the coverage. For example, in *24 Chassa*, the fans carried “knives and cool weapons” that had been detected earlier by scanners and confiscated by the security guards. Whereas *Klasa* describes the dozens of ATAKA faithful as “enraged,” the ATAKA supporters in *24 Chassa* showered the court with threats of “When I catch you, I’ll beat you up.” *Klasa* quotes ATAKA fans calling journalists “Turkish stooges.” In *Trud*, the ATAKA supporters blocked the work of magistrates and made the security of the judiciary “look helpless” by staging a scandalous spectacle. In a prominent side-bar, a former ATAKA MP likens Siderov to a convict and a gypsy-clan representative. Although extreme terms are

---

<sup>59</sup> *Novinite.com*, “Former Allies Clash in Bulgaria’s Nationalist Leader Perjury Trial,” December 5, 2007, <[http://www.novinite.com/view\\_news.php?id=88201](http://www.novinite.com/view_news.php?id=88201)>; Baramova, “Sofia City Court.”

<sup>60</sup> *Standart*, “Circus,” May 27, 2008. See image above.

missing in the *24 Chassa* coverage, the havoc in the courtroom is juxtaposed with the article's subhead, in which Siderov is quoted as saying that he is the one who "set(s) an example of civic behaviour."

Such a subhead establishes a complementary frame, in that the references to chaos and violence vis-à-vis the image of law and order that the court stands for molds public opinion in a predetermined way. The pivotal part of the coverage, however, is compressed in the lead of the story in *Standart* that reads: "Siderov took Themis<sup>61</sup> for a hostage." In a similar fashion, Siderov and ATAKA MPs obstruct a parliamentary session. With regards to the incident the headlines in *Klasa* and *24 Chassa* read: "Volen attacked Petkov<sup>62</sup> in parliament" and "Dangerous closeness." Throughout the coverage of both the court hearing and the parliamentary disruption, the usage of verbs like quell, yell, boo, block, attack, enrage and sabotage build an image of Siderov and his party as undisciplined, arrogant and violent hoodlums.

On the basis of the aforementioned examples, it could be argued that the Fourth Estate has embraced two mutually incompatible roles: the desire to protect the public and the urge to sell newspapers by reporting scandal. In other words, the media have acquired the non-traditional watchdog function of preventing further social upheaval by guarding against the breeding of "extreme" views in the public sphere, all the while succumbing to the demands of a commercially-oriented mainstream press with a penchant for scandal as a sought-after news-peg.

Furthermore, for the yet-to-mature democratic institutions and in the obstruction of the judiciary by a member of the legislature, the media charts the direction of public opinion away

---

<sup>61</sup> The Greek Goddess of Justice Themis in Bulgaria is often used as a synonym for the judiciary.

from the extreme xenophobic tendency of a party like ATAKA and closer to the rule of order. Here, it could be argued, lies the rationale for the dearth of coverage of ATAKA's legislative and political initiatives. However, when the media do cover ATAKA, by dwelling on unmentionable epithets, racist sound-bites and scandalous behaviour, the media adopts scandal as its prime agenda-setter because it sells newspapers. It is difficult to prove this finding conclusively using the content analysis provided here; however, the analysis and evidence from the interviews make it clear that when ATAKA does receive coverage, it is only that prompted by scandal.

#### **Does the public have the right to know?**

There is another conclusion that can be reached. Silencing voices impacts pluralism and the public's right to know. In the case of ATAKA, a leading opposition party, when not creating havoc it is tucked away from the view of the public to which it is accountable and is allowed to lead a quasi-illicit political life, its policies and legislative initiatives absent from public discussion, its lawmaking initiatives selectively eclipsed. A large number of voters (9% of those who voted) vouched for a certain political course for the country but have not seen their political perspective enacted because the principles that ATAKA committed to remain undebated and veiled in vagueness by the media, to the point that the media are not serving the public interest. One question persists here: Does such media behaviour represent unprofessionalism in that the economic interests of a newspaper are prioritized, or are the media inadequately loyal to the journalistic ethos of the public's right to know? It is commonly understood that for any political cause to be evaluated, first and foremost it needs to be

---

<sup>62</sup> Rumén Petkov is a former Interior Minister who resigned following a scandal in the ministry for alleged connections between statesmen and shady business circles.

witnessed, reported and reflected through the lens of the media. Here, the cause of nationalism, which ATAKA is mostly recognized for, remains absent from the public sphere and so do the party's 20 principles. Such silence deprives the public of the ability to make rational decisions and judgments on that party's integrity and overall policy agenda.

Discussed within the context of a market-oriented discourse, the absence of critical public disclosure in the realm of public opinion formation in Bulgaria is compensated for by over-representation of issues of commercial interest to the media. The results of the content analysis rather convincingly demonstrate the trend of favouritization in the coverage of GERB and its leader Borissov. Furthermore, the study provided an additional insight into a comparatively new phenomenon in Bulgarian journalism that is characteristic of the democratic era. As the analysis concludes, the coverage of GERB and Borissov illustrates a concept of favouritization and over-representation of a party, based on the immense popularity of its leader that is fashioned into news. Also, by favouring one political leader, the market-oriented press conforms to the public's expectations. A Bulgarian sociologist is of similar opinion. Relating the heightened interest in GERB and its leader to the media's befriending its readership, Luba Devetakova explains that instead of partaking in public opinion formation, the media is conforming to the public will.<sup>63</sup>

One issue that has to be acknowledged here is Borissov's rapid rise in popularity, which began with his very political start as general secretary to the Interior Ministry in 2001, and was further accelerated upon his entry into the Mayor's office in 2005, where he was re-elected for a second term. Some would argue that Borissov's burgeoning popularity, often related to his charisma or speaking-style, could also be related to his growing public approval rating. The abundance of coverage seen in the content analysis needs to be considered within this context

as well as within the context of the favouritization-absence findings in the content analysis. In contrast, Siderov, a former journalist, was known more as a controversial television host who attracted significant media attention on the eve of the 2005 elections, and as such, might be currently considered less newsworthy.

### **The favouritization-absence dichotomy**

This dichotomy can be illustrated by examples from the media coverage examined for this research. Monitoring of Siderov and Borissov in the four national dailies serves as evidence for the media favouritization of GERB. For example, on May 19, 2008, the glut of information includes a total of 10 news items with a mention of either GERB or Borissov, in addition to nine images that cross-refer to the news coverage. At the launch of a council of elders within the structure of GERB, the newspapers quote Borissov in their headlines as saying, “I will not become a premier with a MRF<sup>64</sup> mandate” (*Trud*), “I will refuse to be a premier with Dogan” (*24 Chassa*), and “GERB wants to remove MRF from power” (*Klasa*). A separate commentary in *Trud* reiterates polling results that show a “consistent” leading position for GERB with a majority stake of 27 per cent. Although included later in the newspaper, the commentary piece on the polling results entwines with the dominant theme, “Borissov seen as prime minister.”

These results further legitimize the newspaper’s choice to back Borissov and GERB as based on the popular vote or, in other words, the readers’ vote or, obtusely put, the market’s vote. An ideological filter of that scope is brought about by the media’s market orientation that commodifies public opinion formation by “electing” the political agenda that makes the best commercial sense. By disseminating complete and objective information for the deliberation of

---

<sup>63</sup> Luba Devetakova, sociologist, Skype interviews by author, November 23, 2008 and August 3, 2008.

the public, the dominant mass media promote a certain politician by constructing what in Bulgaria is coined as “media comfort”—positive or neutral coverage of political figures or the party line. Instead of being a tool for public opinion formation, the media turns into an instrument of opinion manipulation. It was not long ago that the then head of Bulgaria’s National Television, Assen Agov, exclaimed that the media in Bulgaria follow the political winners. According to journalist Ivan Bakalov, today the same adage could be modified to read, “the media walks ahead of the winners.”<sup>65</sup> He infers that the media “write about GERB every day” because they “nominate” the party as a political winner.<sup>66</sup>

This concept that the newspapers nominate the political winner is consistent with their lionizing of GERB’s leader. Contrary to the perception that politics is about the left/right dichotomy entrenched in a tug-of-war, in post-1989 Bulgaria the personalization of the political participants takes precedence over any other political evaluative criteria. Debate about politics and political agendas is absent and replaced by a focus on the social personalities of the politicians who play soccer and tennis, attend a myriad of events of considerable social significance, and in a way “flirt with the reader,” a situation that a media scholar in 1995 referred to as “infiltrating power into politics . . . and voluntarily or involuntarily transforming the media into a lobby.”<sup>67</sup> As Bakalov puts it, “One newspaper will not narrate the political agenda of GERB”; instead “it will give the word to Boiko [Borissov].” For example, on *Standart*’s page 33 on May 19, under the headline “Borissov and Penev with a double in ‘Leaders,’” tells the story of a charity, the Leaders tennis tournament, organized by *Standart*. In the tournament, the mayor Borissov played doubles with Luybomir Penev, a soccer player

---

<sup>64</sup> The Movement for Rights and Freedoms is a party of Ethnic and Turkish background. From the start of the transition it has been part of ruling coalitions with different governments playing the role of a “balance of power.”

<sup>65</sup> Ivan Bakalov, editor-in-chief *e-Vestnik*, Skype interviews by author, October 10, 2008 and August 2, 2008.

<sup>66</sup> Bakalov, interview.

<sup>67</sup> Dimitar Naidenov, *Press Journalism*, (Sofia: Sofia University, Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communications, 1995).

who was on Bulgaria's national football team when the country climbed to fourth place in the 1994 World Cup. The subhead of that news item reads, "VIP personalities bestowed 1,000 leva [\$717US] for tennis on the young adults group." In sum, both the headline and the subhead clearly validate the points made by media analysts and media practitioners that the media direct their gaze towards the personality of a politician rather than at his or her political project or ideology.

By joining together the names of Borissov and one of the country's best-known soccer players, whose team were dubbed national heroes on their return from the World Cup, the headline conceptualizes the idea of a modern-day saviour of national pride. Meanwhile, the media promotes an image of Borissov as holding the magic wand that might solve the problems of a disheartened public trapped in the Catch-22 of the social ills brought about by the long transition, and depicts the "nominated" political player as a sports-loving winner. Those same expectations are transposed by the media into the political scene where Borissov is also slated to win the race. That same notion is persistent throughout the coverage that demonstrates the pro-winner idiosyncrasies of the press, providing the anointed one with what a media study calls free and "spontaneous PR."<sup>68</sup> Such a market-oriented approach is healthy for a newspaper's circulation, too. For example, in *24 Chassa* the same story is headlined: "The mayor Borissov again a champion."

Favouritization is not a new technique for a media that sees politicians and their politics as matadors at a political corrida. Seeing a saviour in a new political player gained currency after King Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha returned to Bulgaria after living in exile in Spain for half a century. He made a comeback, briskly formed a political party (The National Movement

---

<sup>68</sup> BTA, "All Media Work with PR Tools," July 30, 2006.

Simeon II) and overwhelmingly won the 2001 parliamentary elections, after which the former monarch stood at the helm of the country as Prime Minister. According to Daniel Smilov, the only reason for the mobilization of the people in support of Simeon was a personal one—“his personal charisma and historical legacy.”<sup>69</sup> In a similar vein, “GERB’s main resource was the personal charisma and appeal” of Borissov,<sup>70</sup> which inspired the media to vouch for an apparent winner.

A possible explanation for the similarity between these two political success stories is suggested by a Bulgarian sociologist, who claims that when a new political phenomenon emerges, the people are interested since the topic “offers intrigue and speculation,” and thus it moves to the centre of interest in the public sphere—as happened with the appearance of Simeon, followed by ATAKA<sup>71</sup> in 2005. However, the disparity detailed above in the press coverage of ATAKA and GERB lies more in the role of the mass-circulated media in building up a personalized image of the Sofia mayor. By feeding the public stories about the various events the mayor attends and by debating his policy in the Sofia municipality, the largest national press “exports” the mayor’s image on a national level.

## **Conclusion**

In this study, it was first hypothesized that the mainstream press in Bulgaria fails to adequately cover topics of significant public interest. Although this research demonstrates that the concept of nationalism in the mainstream press is marginalized, the reasons for this marginalization appear not to stem from any form of media conspiracy to delegitimize any particular political agenda; instead, the conclusions of this research support the argument that the mainstream

---

<sup>69</sup> Smilov, “Bulgaria,” 16.

<sup>70</sup> Smilov, “Bulgaria,” 18.

press favours commercially-bound interests, and in so doing has failed to provide the public with robust coverage of pertinent political and social issues.

The evidence for these conclusions, derived from a combination of a quantitative and qualitative analysis of mass-circulated national coverage and based on interviews with journalists and media analysts, is most strongly argued by Bakalov, who observed that “a tacit media agreement provides a tribune for expression of certain groups whilst depriving other groups from such a forum. . . . The media are closed to many viewpoints.”<sup>72</sup>

For example, the dearth of coverage about ATAKA can be tied to the party’s ideological programme that, if publicized in the mainstream press, would signify a failure of the press to act in the interests of its leadership, corporate ownership, or other political dependencies. For instance, ATAKA vowed to debate within the public sphere the closure of Bulgaria’s nuclear reactors, which was one of the conditions for the country’s EU integration. More to the point, ATAKA was the only party to take an extreme position on termination of the pact with the EU for the decommissioning of four of the plant’s six nuclear units, which had placed Bulgaria amidst the top five energy exporters in Europe.<sup>73</sup> Here it is worth noting that despite significant public concern about the impact of the closure of the reactors (60% of polled respondents disapproved of the closure<sup>74</sup>), a well-informed critical debate or the effective expression of public opinion concerning a referendum on the destiny of the reactors was notably underrepresented in the mainstream press.

---

<sup>71</sup> Devetakova, interview.

<sup>72</sup> Bakalov, interview.

<sup>73</sup> Maria Dimitrova, “Kozlodui NPP – Bulgaria’s Major Compromise of its EU Membership,” *Bulgarian National Radio*, April 15, 2005, <[http://www.bnr.bg/RadioBulgaria/Emission\\_English/Theme\\_Politics/Material/KozloEU.htm](http://www.bnr.bg/RadioBulgaria/Emission_English/Theme_Politics/Material/KozloEU.htm)>.

<sup>74</sup> *International Herald Tribune*, “Bulgaria reluctantly closes nuclear reactors before EU entry,” December 27, 2006, <[http://www.ihf.com/articles/ap/2006/12/27/europe/EU\\_GEN\\_Bulgaria\\_Nuclear\\_Plant.php](http://www.ihf.com/articles/ap/2006/12/27/europe/EU_GEN_Bulgaria_Nuclear_Plant.php)>.

Lack of debate on the conditions for closure of the nuclear reactors was only one of a pattern of “absences.” Most of the subjects who were interviewed, and who work for various publications, broadcasts or online news outlets, tended to agree that a prevalent media practice exists to “blacklist” topics and effectively remove them from the public agenda, but they refrained from offering any concrete examples and unequivocally denied that similar practices existed within their own editorial offices. That said, in an interview with *TEMA* magazine a Bulgarian journalist described a situation in which ownership interests and corporate practice took precedence over a topic of public interest. According to Velislava Dureva, the issue of “protecting Kozlodui power plant’s nuclear reactors 3 and 4, was banned from publication in *Duma*,” where she was working in 2003, because it conflicted with the interests of the publication’s owner.<sup>75</sup> Although *Duma* was not one of the four publications included in this research, her assertion shows a direct link between the commercial interests of an owner of a newspaper and its editorial content, which may well be symptomatic of a larger media problem.

The second hypothesis that the central mainstream press imposes A) a unified approach and B) a dominant rhetoric that is in line with the commercial credo of the media outlets, also proved valid. By conforming to the public desire to be fed coverage on the charismatic mayor, the media creates a forum based on their own commercial interests rather than on the public’s right to know about different political agendas that would inform critical debate on significant issues for civil society. Moreover, the research further shows that the media go beyond favouritizing to determine a political winner on behalf of the people. In other words, what the findings of this research indicate is that the commercial orientation of the mass-circulated press

---

<sup>75</sup> See *TEMA*, “The Dangerous Journalists,” October 6, 2008, <<http://www.temanews.com/index.php?p=tema&iid=488&cover=1>>.

forces the media to kowtow to the market rather than inform the citizenry on policies of great significance to civil society.

This chapter demonstrates that the amplified market-oriented press that is motivated by the quest for increased circulation does not succeed in stimulating public opinion formation, and chooses instead to prematurely cast its ballot for a new political player who is charismatic, enjoys great popularity, and whose coverage most probably helps swell revenues. Although such a finding is not symptomatic for Bulgaria alone, it posits a unique case study for a fledgling democracy.

Taken as a whole, this research shows that the suppression or marginalization of coverage of topics of public interest stems directly from the connection that exists among media practitioners and ownership and corporate interests—a relationship that undermines and restricts discourse in the public sphere and thus fails to serve the greater public interest. In the concluding chapter, this disconnection will first be posited within the public sphere as conceptualized by Habermas, and then will be situated within the discussion on media commercialization and its impact on a nascent democracy.

## Chapter 5

### The media and democracy locked in a euro-transition<sup>1</sup>

One of the most prolific contemporary scholars has defined the “public sphere” as the avenue that allows unfettered right of entry to the citizenry, juxtaposed it to the state authority and formulated it to include the “the public body” as being a construct of “private individuals.”<sup>2</sup> For Jurgen Habermas, the media’s role of an interlocutor between the variables of the public sphere remains fundamental;<sup>3</sup> moreover, applying the Habermasian media-centric conceptualization of the public sphere, the citizens’ “free expression” has been identified as complementary to the freedom of the mass media.<sup>4</sup> More importantly, according to Habermas while playing the role of a vital link between the “political public sphere” and civil society, the mass media also function as an “intensifier” of the public perception. It is precisely, this function, among many others that, has endowed the media with a core role in the establishment of the relationship between “state authority” and civil society, because it is precisely within the public sphere that “public opinion is formed by a reasoning public.”<sup>5</sup> For society to be critically-informed, Habermas argues that the mass media adopts the stance of reflecting on the free expression of the public body and on ensuring mediation between the state authority and

---

<sup>1</sup> I borrow the term euro-transition from Elena Koleva who uses it with reference to Bulgaria’s current state of transition. (Elena Koleva, e-mail message to author, September 10, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Jurgen Habermas, “The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article (1964),” in *New German Critique* 3 (autumn 1974), trans. Sara Lennox and Frank Lennox, 49-55.

<sup>3</sup> Habermas, “The Public Sphere.”

<sup>4</sup> Habermas, “The Public Sphere.”

<sup>5</sup> Habermas, “The Public Sphere.”

civil society in the critical reasoning debate. The ensuing decision-making process remains two-directional and is of the “general interest”<sup>6</sup> to the public.

In Bulgaria, the mass media are the Fourth Estate and they are charged to oversee the judiciary, the executive, and legislative powers. By theoretically being the corrective agent of power, the Bulgarian media embrace the role of a watchdog for the public. Also, the media are tasked with serving the public by providing the platform where issues of general interest are formulated, deliberated and analyzed. Currently, the prevalent consensus is that the media narrate the world by reporting on topics of general interest, entertain and inform, and devise the processes of democratization by championing the different civic liberties.

In practice, in a fledgling democracy like Bulgaria, the mass media’s realm has evolved and, in the process has trafficked a news-flow that has diverged from the true mission of the media in the democratic process. The bedrock of such a notion can be traced to the genesis of the modern mass media in the country and the fast-tracked makeover of the country itself. Used as “a tribune for the Communist party”<sup>7</sup> for almost half a century, after the 1989 bloodless social revolution, the nascent civil society, and the transition from one state order to another not only altered the role of the media, but also completely redesigned its fabric.<sup>8</sup> The mass media that had the function of a spokesperson of the totalitarian ideology, which was also known to suppress critical thinking and sound reasoning, voluntarily took up a new identity: to introduce, explain and debate a propaganda-stripped reality. Ordinarily, such a transformation requires decades, and the media in Bulgaria not only had to experience an amped-up evolution, which in turn forebodes social cataclysms, but also had to enlighten the populace about the

---

<sup>6</sup> Habermas, “The Public Sphere.”

<sup>7</sup> Ekaterina Ognianova, “The Transitional Media System of Post-Communist Bulgaria,” (Columbia: Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Journalism and Mass Communication Monographs, June 1997).

<sup>8</sup> Lilia Raycheva and Todor Petev, “Mass Media’s Changing Landscape in Bulgaria (1989-1999),” in *Business as usual: Continuity and Change in Central and Eastern European Media*, ed. David Paletz and Karol Jakubowicz (New Jersey: Hampton Press, 2003), 73-109.

new environment. Furthermore, social changes achieved quickly are usually hazardous natural phenomena that may develop into social rupture. Voluntarily or involuntarily, the media held sway over the social transformation, becoming the significant other element of influence in any deliberation of importance in the process of restructuring the public sphere.

In the opening moments of this newfound freedom, media ownership was liberalized from being state-owned to private ownership despite not having the lawful grounds. As a result of “trial-and-error,”<sup>9</sup> the media began to take up the opportunity to re-imagine themselves as a province of pluralistic paradigms, but unfortunately the over-political rhetoric was perceived as the utmost expression of the newly-acquired freedoms. In the wake of the transition, press freedom maintained the fundamentals of the traditional role of the media to inform the public on matters of civic importance; however, the communism anti-communism public discourse also brought about attack-dog news-flow, antagonistic viewpoints to political ploys, and a plethora of political voices, that contributed to the construction of a social reality that differed from the imagined civil society. Subsequently, the tainted public sphere encouraged a bigoted schism and perpetuation of the distorted view that being politicized and polarized is characteristic of civic freedom. Over time, the press became a vocal proponent for a state-civil society antagonism. In adopting their new role, instead of fostering “consensual experience,” they began acting on behalf of civil society.<sup>10</sup> In the preface to *The ‘serious’ press, the tabloid context, and qualities of the public sphere* published in 2004, Orlin Spassov writes,

“[t]he underestimation of the media’s traditional, slower and mediated way of influencing power by forming public opinion, and the respective reorientation of

---

<sup>9</sup> Raycheva and Petev, “Mass Media’s.”

<sup>10</sup> Orlin Spassov, “The ‘Serious’ Press, the Tabloid Context, and Qualities of the Public Sphere,” in *Quality Press in Southeast Europe*, ed. Orlin Spassov (Sofia: The Southeast European Media Centre, 2004), <<http://soemz.eu-frankfurt-o.de/media-see/qpress/articles/pdf/ospassov.pdf>>.

the press towards constant direct pressure on the political system [are problematic]... Media pressure is not equivalent to civil society pressure and cannot serve as substitute.”<sup>11</sup>

The next stage of the media development led towards less critical decision-making<sup>12</sup> and greater entertainment that made Bulgarian press a profitable business and commodified the news-flow. With the unprecedented flourishing of newspapers came the conviction that independent media could only be derived from a free market. The press market was distributed among four big players and dominated by one foreign entrant – a status quo that, as this research has concluded (see Chapter 3), influenced the post-1997 press landscape for another decade. At the onset, the entry of *WAZ*<sup>13</sup> – the first professional publication giant signified a decisive stage for the media development in the country: import of western management standards and autonomy from the political class. By launching real competition, *WAZ* also modernized the newspapers’ infrastructure and allowed for greater independence in the media’s Fourth Estate function by investing in enterprise reports and journalism investigations.<sup>14</sup> However, employing a market-oriented strategy, the foreign investor also led to the restructuring of the press industry and absorbed chunks of the advertising that had been sustaining the crowded market heretofore. Gradually, the free market was to ensure the autonomy of the media from various interests where the warranty was a plurality of voices. However, commodifying editorial content was the selling statement of the press which was increasingly being seen as an enterprise that provides information but underplays its role to form public opinion.

---

<sup>11</sup> Spassov, “The ‘Serious’ Press,” 16.

<sup>12</sup> Spassov, “The ‘Serious’ Press.”

<sup>13</sup> *Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, a conglomerate of over 130 media outlets across Europe. In Bulgaria, WAZ is the owner of the two dailies (*24 Chassa* and *Trud*) with the largest circulation.

<sup>14</sup> See Chapter 3.

As this research has shown, in an over-saturated market, when the newly liberated society requires un-manipulated and objectively-presented information that will help society construct the new reality, pluralism is crucial. Should any of the free media foundations be torn, the traditional role of the media in a democracy is harmed and civil society is victimized. In 2008, Velislava Dureva, who witnessed the changes first-hand and who also worked as a journalist during the communist years, sums up the current state of journalism in Bulgaria in the following manner,

Today's journalism replaced standpoints with pose, information with intrigue, the mission with interests, the cause with libel, the culture with gossip, and knowledge and enlightenment with a conscious dumbing-down of the public. Currently, the major task of journalism is to cater for private political and corporate interests of cliques, clans, coteries and all kinds of mutri<sup>15</sup>, mafia-men, and... oligarchs [...] Today's journalism performs commissions for dirty jobs [...] Should it not be in the interest of the one who pays the money, the media could ruin a person of civic position and an idea of public interest.<sup>16</sup>

This harms the reformed public sphere and affects the maturing of civil society, taking shape in the ubiquitous media focus on corruption.

### **Corruption, corruption, corruption**

According to the Transparency International 2008 Corruption Perceptions Index, which is the world's leading anti-graft watchdog, Bulgaria's ranking has significantly dropped from the 64th in 2007 to 72nd in 2008.<sup>17</sup> As well, Transparency International crowned the new Eurostate as the most corrupt club member and has placed it in proximity to China, Macedonia,

---

<sup>15</sup> Mutra is the known colloquial term for mobster which in translation from Bulgarian means "bad face".

<sup>16</sup> See *Tema*, "The Dangerous Journalists," October 6, 2008, <<http://www.temanews.com/index.php?p=tema&iid=488&cover=1>>.

<sup>17</sup> Transparency International, "Persistently High Corruption in Low-income Countries Amounts to an 'Ongoing Humanitarian Disaster,'" Transparency International, September 23, 2008, Berlin, <[http://www.transparency.org/news\\_room/in\\_focus/2008/cpi2008#pr](http://www.transparency.org/news_room/in_focus/2008/cpi2008#pr)>; Petar Kostadinov, "TI Bulgaria goes down in Transparency International's corruption index" *The Sofia Echo*, September 23, 2008.

Mexico and Peru in what appears to be the first such significant decline for the country in the past ten years.<sup>18</sup> The EU subsidies – which in the words of an EU official from Bulgaria should be perceived “as the means for the achieving of better life in Bulgaria, not as the ends,”<sup>19</sup> and which are aimed to be utilized for infrastructural projects in various fields, as well as to foster competitiveness and greater market practices<sup>20</sup> – became a catalyst for the spread of corruption.<sup>21</sup> As a *New York Times* article bluntly stated, “[o]nce Bulgaria’s shady businessmen realized how much European Union money was at stake ... they moved from buying off politicians to being directly involved in politics themselves.”<sup>22</sup>

As a sentry for exposing, graft, cronyism and nepotism that threaten democratization and civil society’s awakening, the media partly shares the responsibility for combating corruption, precisely by providing effective and consistent media checks-and-balances. More to the point, in the words of Huguette Labelle, chair of Transparency International,

Stemming corruption requires strong oversight through parliaments, law enforcement, independent media and a vibrant civil society... When these institutions are weak, corruption spirals out of control with horrendous consequences for ordinary people, and for justice and equality in societies more broadly.<sup>23</sup>

In the Bulgarian case, however, law enforcement is increasingly becoming linked to criminality<sup>24</sup> and civil society has been said “to be put to sleep,”<sup>25</sup> while the media – though

---

<sup>18</sup> Kostadinov, “TI Bulgaria goes down;” Petar Kostadinov, “Snapshot: Corruption in Bulgaria,” *The Sofia Echo*, October 17, 2008.

<sup>19</sup> See *Novinite.com*, “Commissioner Kuneva: EU Money Is Means, Not Ends,” *Novinite.com*, May 26, 2008, <[http://www.novinite.com/view\\_news.php?id=93484](http://www.novinite.com/view_news.php?id=93484)> (3 November 2008).

<sup>20</sup> Elitsa Vucheva, “Bulgaria Under Fire for Corruption Levels,” *EUObserver*, July 17, 2008, <<http://euobserver.com/9/26504>>.

<sup>21</sup> Doreen Carvajal and Stephen Castle, “Mob Muscles Its Way Into Politics in Bulgaria,” *The New York Times*, October 15, 2008, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/16/world/europe/16bulgaria.html?partner=rssnyt>> (3 November 2008).

<sup>22</sup> Carvajal and Castle, “Mob Muscles.”

<sup>23</sup> Transparency International, “Persistently High Corruption.”

<sup>24</sup> See *Vsekiden.com*, “Ilia built a cell,” March 26, 2008, <<http://www.vsekiden.com/?p=25870>>.

<sup>25</sup> Ivo Indjev, former host of political weekly talk-show on Bulgaria’s *bTV* private channel, telephone interview by author, August 6, 2008.

being cheered by some, belittled by others – is equipped with weak immunity for resisting any political or corporate interference. Additionally, to a smorgasbord of dependencies, there remains a handful of old-time journalists who collaborated with the communist state security, and who continue to shape the information flow; also, the invested capital in some media is unclear<sup>26</sup> and such outlets will eventually have to pay the interest to even more ambiguous entities that had accumulated capital during the mass distribution of the national wealth.

It would be an overstatement to assert that the media in Bulgaria has thoroughly abandoned its role as a corrective agent and a watchdog for the people. The first charges that were brought by the prosecutor's office for conflict of interest and corruption in the highest echelons of power came as a result of a journalistic investigation in *Kapital* weekly, which exposed the abuse with a public office in the acquisition of EU funds. After the publication, the EU froze large amounts of structural funds for Bulgaria.

Furthermore, in the words of a media scholar, in the past three years there have been more than 1,800 news reports revealing corruption that have been accounted for in the monitoring of press and broadcast by the Bulgarian anti-corruption NGO, Coalition 2000.<sup>27</sup> Although, as many wrongdoings were exposed in the media, the follow-up articles about abuse of authority, white-collar crime or graft in the highest echelons of power feature a short attention span that could be linked to the unwillingness on behalf of some media outlets to further investigate “the big corruption... as political and economic interests halt additional journalism investigations.”<sup>28</sup> Nowadays, an advertising agency or a marketing department of a big advertiser becomes like the grand censor: the Department of Mass Communication in the

---

<sup>26</sup> Orlin Spassov, “Publicity and Public Relations,” in *Reformulating Publicity: Transparency in the Relationships Between the PR and the Media*, (Sofia: Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, July 2006), 14-34, <<http://www.bghelsinki.org/index.php?module=resources&lg=bg&id=395>>.

<sup>27</sup> Petko Todorov, “Bulgarian Media in European Routes,” e-mail message to author, 25 June 2008.

<sup>28</sup> Todorov, “Bulgarian Media.”

Bulgarian Communist Party,<sup>29</sup> an organization that censored the media during the communist reign. As a result, the media from being party-controlled is put under the control of the market.<sup>30</sup>

According to Elena Koleva, the media “enters into a marriage with those who feed them.”<sup>31</sup> This, in turn, implies that the media becomes intertwined with the economic and political powers. Furthermore, in an interview with *Novinar* daily, political analyst Ognian Minchev states that, in Bulgaria, there is a “symbiosis between power and organized crime, and the police oligarchy is an infrastructure of organized crime.”<sup>32</sup> Within this tangle of dependencies, the media’s function of a moderator between civil society and the state authority actually impeded public opinion formation and ultimately the democratization process.

The strongest confirmation for this analysis is put forth by the deputy editor-in-chief of *Frognews*, Alexander Ivanov, who contends that media development has stagnated in the past thirteen years.<sup>33</sup> Although Ivanov notes that there should be some positive development in that time, but he indicates that the opposite has occurred.<sup>34</sup> In 2003, Pavel Nikolov, a journalist and owner of a radio station echoed a similar sentiment, stating that, “After fourteen years of press freedom, we have to combat a dictatorship against free speech.”<sup>35</sup>

In all, and as this research has pointed out, civil society succumbs to apathy accelerated both by the atrophy of political will for holding rational debate on matters of public interest

---

<sup>29</sup> Sasho Dikov, interviewed in “The Counting of the Tamed Rabbits,” *The Journalists’ Club*, Bulgarian National Radio, September 27, 2008.

<sup>30</sup> Ognian Zlatev, managing director *Media Development Centre*, Skype interviews by author, June 11, 2008 and March 10, 2008.

<sup>31</sup> Elena Koleva, e-mail message to author, September 10, 2008.

<sup>32</sup> See Adelina Deliiska, “Ognian Minchev: Police-elite from State Security Looted the State,” *Novinar*, November 4, 2008, <<http://www.novinar.net/?act=news&actl=det&stat=center&sql=Mjc5MTszMg==&mater=Mjc5MTsxMA==&qstr=%CC%E8%E9%F7%E5%E2>>.

<sup>33</sup> Alexander Ivanov, interviewed in “The Counting of the Tamed Rabbits,” *The Journalists’ Club*, Bulgarian National Radio, September 27, 2008.

<sup>34</sup> Ivanov, interviewed in “The Counting of the Tamed Rabbits.”

<sup>35</sup> Pavel Nikolov, “The Peculiarities of the Local Media Market Seen as a Hindrance to Press Freedom,” in *To Freedom of Speech Candidly*, ed., Ognian Zlatev and compiler Danail Danov, (Sofia: Media Development Centre, 2004).

and by mainstreaming the public opinion formation. That said, perhaps Spassov was right to conclude in a 2006 essay that dwells on the relationship between PR and journalism that public opinion formation weakens and becomes more susceptible to being manipulated by different interests in society<sup>36</sup> that endanger the public space. Evidence for Spassov's conclusion can be found in the study quoted in Chapter 3, which has also identified that the pervasive corruption, as well as the corruption between Bulgarian media and public relations, is to a great extent an effect from "the frail public opinion that fails to perform the role of a corrective of illegitimate methods."<sup>37</sup> As discussed earlier, the media oftentimes become the PR and lobbyists for their own leadership, owners or their owners' interests.<sup>38</sup> In effect, the media tend to "pronounce the problems but they fail in their mission to form strong public opinion that in turn would lead to a social result,"<sup>39</sup> and as a result they are not powerful enough to expose to the public the staggering consequences of entrenched corruption.

### **Lost in restrictions**

The obstruction of critical reasoning is consequence of the media being steered by different interests and accepting editorial restrictions. One instance is the moderately-measured and carefully-fed media coverage on the decommissioning of Bulgaria's nuclear power reactors as part of the conditions for EU accession, which was vital information that the media was responsible for transmitting and translating to civil society. The closure of Kozlodui's nuclear reactors, as part of Bulgaria's accession treaty, "was estimated at a grand total loss of 3 billion

---

<sup>36</sup> Spassov, "Publicity."

<sup>37</sup> Spassov, "Publicity."

<sup>38</sup> Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, *Reformulating Publicity: Transparency in the Relationships Between the PR and the Media* (Sofia: Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, July 2006), <

<http://www.bghelsinki.org/index.php?module=resources&lg=bg&id=395>> (25 August 2008).

<sup>39</sup> See *Tema*, "The Dangerous Journalists," October 6, 2008,

<<http://www.temanews.com/index.php?p=tema&iid=488&cover=1>> (15 November 2008).

euro.”<sup>40</sup> Bulgaria was once known as “the fourth biggest energy exporter in Europe”<sup>41</sup> but no debate was sufficiently tabled regarding the reasons for the closure. Journalist Ivan Bakalov admits that the public issue of the closure of Kozlodui’s units being deeply manipulated by the media in Bulgaria for 10 years.<sup>42</sup> He concedes,

No one in Bulgaria was provided the viewpoint as to why are the two nuclear units decommissioned? For years the media have been reporting that the nuclear power plant is safe and that these bad Europeans want to close our plant for economic reasons...The simple explanation, however, is that all across Europe, the European Commission has a resolution for the closure of nuclear reactors from first generation. This fact was spared to the Bulgarian society by the media.<sup>43</sup>

By keeping such topics of substantial public interest a well-guarded secret, the media do not serve the public adequately. The malfunction comes from surrendering to a new, more polished propaganda, in which media ownership, within its web of nebulous corporate interests, discards the public’s right to know. Similarly, by concealing problems or issues of public interest, the media deprive civil society and the electorate of making well-informed decisions. Managed information, manipulates public opinion in this case, considering that a sizable share of (60%) polled expressed disapproval for the conditions to decommission the nuclear reactors.<sup>44</sup> The information about the closure itself, as this research has demonstrated (See Chapters 3 and 4), was absent from the public agenda and denied the public the right to know.

It could be argued that the disconnect between public opinion and the social cost of the EU accession stems from the lack of adequate delivery of information suppressed by either media’s ownership or leadership bans, which are prevalent in the media landscape. For

---

<sup>40</sup> Dimitrova, “Kozlodui NPP.”

<sup>41</sup> Dimitrova, “Kozlodui NPP.”

<sup>42</sup> Ivan Bakalov, editor-in-chief *e-Vestnik*, Skype interviews by author, October 10, 2008 and August 2, 2008.

<sup>43</sup> Bakalov, interview.

<sup>44</sup> See *International Herald Tribune*, “Bulgaria Reluctantly Closes Nuclear Reactors Before EU Entry,” 27 December, 2006.

example, in the words of Dureva,<sup>45</sup> “news articles defending two of the reactors were banned in *Duma* [in 2003].”<sup>46</sup> This suppression of information clearly suggests this media status quo, which has been further confirmed by a survey on media-PR relations<sup>47</sup> and anecdotal evidence.

As previously discussed in Chapter 3 the press obstructs the critical debate on issues of civic importance. In its most malignant form, the media shatter pluralism, tilting the equilibrium of the public sphere and choose to view journalism pragmatically – as a business and not as a conviction. A proof that establishes the link between media ownership and manipulation of editorial content is further articulated by Dureva when she states that “lists of written and banned topics exist in each editorial office – in addition to lists of never-to-be-interviewed, never-to-be-critiqued and methodically-to-be-demonized subjects and a list of media practitioners who cannot be published.”<sup>48</sup>

The stark media reality that Dureva describes in an interview with *Tema* magazine exemplifies the prevalent, albeit refined censorship, which is ownership-bound. In 2003, while writing for *Duma*, Dureva provides the framework for the analysis illustrating the illicit relationship between media ownership and editorial output:

The war in Iraq started. We were all writing against the war because this was our position. The then-publisher of the newspaper [Petar] Mandjukov<sup>49</sup> came one day and announced: ‘The anti-military position of the newspaper harms my personal economic interests.’ This is how writing against the war and against Bulgaria’s participation in the war was banned in *Duma*.<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>45</sup> See also Chapter 4.

<sup>46</sup> See *Tema*, “The Dangerous Journalists.”

<sup>47</sup> Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, *Reformulating Publicity*.

<sup>48</sup> See *Tema*, “The Dangerous Journalists.”

<sup>49</sup> Petar Mandjukov is a trader in arms. (“Arms Boss Joined Vuzrajane Club,” *Standart*, June 5, 2002). Mandjukov is the former publisher of *Duma* and also owns BBT television.

<sup>50</sup> See *Tema*, “The Dangerous Journalists.”

Dureva's words are further supported by journalist Ivo Indjev, who says that a great number of commissioned and paid articles are published [in the official Bulgarian media]...[however] criticism about the state of Bulgarian journalism is a taboo topic for the official Bulgarian newspapers."<sup>51</sup>

The silence on issues of public interest is facilitated by a renewed self-censorship, political pressure, and the dictatorship of the market, all of which have reshaped the democratic bulwark in the past years. This conclusion was demonstrated in the analyses of Chapter 3 and 4. These analyses are echoed again here by Indjev who says that the media in Bulgaria are "selectively critical" and whether an article can be written or not is decided on a high level in the media's hierarchy.<sup>52</sup> A similar context could be found in the results of a survey conducted by the "Justice" Civil Association that featured a nine-month monitoring of the coverage of five ministers.<sup>53</sup> The survey found that as much as 80% of the coverage of ministers in three central mainstream print outlets was only positive, and in the remaining 20% of the articles the tone was neutral.<sup>54</sup> The monitoring of five particular ministers was triggered by serious discrepancy between the positive coverage in the press and their public assessment.<sup>55</sup> As Justice Civil Association claims the distortion of information by presenting it in a certain way "cannot be overlooked in a democratic state."<sup>56</sup>

Hence, by voluntarily or involuntarily creating a friendly media environment for the government, the media possess the power to mislead public opinion away from democracy and closer to demagoguery. In contrast, when the media provide a greater number of viewpoints to

---

<sup>51</sup> Indjev, interview.

<sup>52</sup> Indjev, interview.

<sup>53</sup> *Mediapool*, "80% of Publications About Ministers in Central Media are Only positive," December 9, 2007, <<http://www.mediapool.bg/show/?storyid=134429>> (6 November 2008).

<sup>54</sup> *Mediapool*, "80% of Publications."

<sup>55</sup> See *Mediapool*, "80% of Publications."

<sup>56</sup> See *Mediapool*, "80% of Publications."

the public sphere, they inevitably play a better role in the decision-making process of the people. The more the media performs its public service role by being a neutral mediator between the state authority and civil society, the more civil society perceives it as its own dais, which they in turn trust to deliver their opinions to the ruling powers.<sup>57</sup>

### **In the interest of owners**

To account for the role of media ownership within this complacent but dynamic media system, this research heavily relies on Denis McQuail's formulation that media should be discussed as an enterprise, whose structure and operation dependent on the conditions of the market and as such, should be analyzed within the framework of the processes undergoing in the economy itself, which in turn is discussed in proximity of the political environment.<sup>58</sup> Within McQuail's politico-economic framework of analysis on the media system, his notion of seeing ownership as a possible impediment to the news-flow "when used selectively to deny access" has been validated by this research.<sup>59</sup>

In the case of Bulgaria, private media ownership can be and often is a prerequisite for the commercialization of the media. "Circulation and profit become a fetish that oftentimes leads to manipulation,"<sup>60</sup> and serving the public interest is compromised by the task of selling information packaged as a product. The manner in which media ownership eclipses the flow of information and deprives the public of a critical debate on topics of vital importance is best illustrated by Maria Shahumova, a journalist from the privatization beat. In an interview with *Tema* magazine, Shahumova says that her bosses would not publish her articles on numerous

---

<sup>57</sup> Radomir Cholakov, "To the Freedom of Speech Like an Expression of the 'I' and the Joint Efforts" in *To Freedom of Speech Candidly*, ed., Ognian Zlatev and compiler Danail Danov, (Sofia: Media Development Centre, 2004), 28.

<sup>58</sup> Denis McQuail, *Mass Communication Theory: An Introduction* (London: Sage Publications, 1994).

<sup>59</sup> McQuail, *Mass Communication Theory*.

<sup>60</sup> Nikolov, "The Peculiarities of the Local Media."

occasions, one of which concern an investigation about a construction of a mall in Sofia that defrauded the municipality.<sup>61</sup> Her words are pertinent to the major argument of this research, which emphasizes that media ownership impacts pluralism and the information output, and thus affects the democratization of the state by depriving the public from a debate on issues of public interest:

It is a public secret that some publishers go with [a printout of] the ready page directly to the person whom the article is about and say: 'Look what my reporter has created. How can I quiet this journalist when there is freedom of speech in our editorial office? Well, I guess I can make an exception for you, but then the question is what are you going to do for me?'<sup>62</sup>

Media ownership in Bulgaria, and more so the lack of ownership transparency (which is tied to political or corporate interests), exacerbates civic bewilderment. The public's right to know about a plurality of voices has been compromised in addition to the less responsibility taken by publishers who own media outlets incognito. The lack of ownership transparency makes it possible for the public to be "misled, manipulated and frankly lied to."<sup>63</sup>

Currently, serious information output and pure entertainment cohabit on the pages of the mainstream press. As Spassov writes in *The 'serious' press, the tabloid context, and qualities of the public sphere*, "quality debates [are absent] in the daily press. This, in turn, impacts on the character of the public sphere."<sup>64</sup> These absences further confuse the information-seeking readership. Moreover, not conforming to the common perception of mediating the official communication messages, the media dismiss their main duty to shape public opinion and the audience remains vulnerable to be shepherded in a guided direction that

---

<sup>61</sup> See *Tema*, "The Dangerous Journalists."

<sup>62</sup> *Tema*, "The Dangerous Journalists."

<sup>63</sup> Yassen Boyadjiev, "Straight Ahead on the Free Speech Road or a Step Back," in *To Freedom of Speech Candidly*, ed., Ognian Zlatev and compiler Danail Danov, (Sofia: Media Development Centre, 2004), 77.

<sup>64</sup> Spassov, "The 'Serious' Press," 12.

is not based on critical reasoning but on the will of a public, which is only based on its commodification needs. This is a consequence of the readership being deprived of a political plurality of voices, and instead a “political choice is set as a prerequisite.”<sup>65</sup> As Chapter 4 illustrates, the current political winners are championed by the mainstream press; they are over-represented while the alternative voices tend to be muzzled, marginalized or covered negatively. By uniformly advocating the public’s uninformed political choices, the press conforms to the perceived will of the people and sets the agenda for the owner – a de facto result of the commercial credo of a newspaper and the corporate interests of the media’s leadership. In effect, the media’s role as a neutral mediator shifts to the role of an agenda-setting tool for corporate and ownership interests. The media sets the agenda for the owners in conjunction with politicians to the detriment of the public sphere, and this places genuine democracy in peril.

### **Freedom of speech vs freedom to speak**

Freedom of speech is the pillar of the media’s Fourth Estate mission. As such, it is zealously guarded by law in any democratic state. In Bulgaria, free speech and free press are guaranteed by the supremacy of law and these freedoms are ‘formally’ embraced by all powers; however, “the standard of its evaluation” in the public sphere in Bulgaria has become a “taboo topic.”<sup>66</sup> Paradoxically, the delay in the implementation of laws, the inefficient public consensus and weak public opinion, as well as the media’s lackadaisical attitude towards quality analyses,

---

<sup>65</sup> British Council, “Media and Diversity Project,” British Council, November 29, 2006, Sofia, <<http://www.britishcouncil.org/bulgaria-projects-media-diversity.htm>> (10 October 2008).

<sup>66</sup> Hristo Hristov, “The Freedom of Speech and its Dependencies,” *Dnevnik*, November 1, 2006, <<http://www.dnevnik.bg/show/?storyid=291061>> (26 August 2008).

signify less commitment to the safeguarding of the media's independence; and, in effect, to the country's democratization.

On a positive note, there have been unquestionable indicators for the reclamation and construction of a democratic public sphere. Four developments in the media field attest to such a notion. First, a recent revision of the access to information legislation has eased the work of journalists; second, a part of the dossiers of the communist journalist-collaborators were made public; third, defamation and libel were decriminalized and replaced with a monetary fine; last, the media adopted a Code of Ethics. The last of these developments will be discussed in the next section.

Two very significant pieces of legislation and the launch of a self-regulation mechanism were viewed as decisive steps for the professionalization of the media in its role as a Fourth Estate. Discussed within the premise that those legal changes were part of the negotiations for belonging to the European Union, the level of their utilization would serve as an indication of the journalists' professionalization and the country's democratization.

Firstly, in 2000, Bulgaria's National Assembly adopted the *Access to Public Information Act*, which enabled journalists to efficiently seek information from government structures,<sup>67</sup> and was instantly welcomed as a step towards greater transparency; however, at odds with the expectation, eight years later the political will did not correspond with the political reality. For example, some 81% of journalists polled in a representative survey responded that "the right of citizens to access public information had not been adhered to."<sup>68</sup> According to the Access to Information Programme,<sup>69</sup> "press offices of [public] institutions

---

<sup>67</sup> Ognian Zlatev and Alexander Kashumov, "Bulgaria," in *Freedom of Speech in Southeast Europe: Media Independence and Self-Regulation* (Sofia: Media Development Centre, 2007).

<sup>68</sup> Access to Information Programme Foundation, "Access to Information Survey," Access to Information Programme, September, 2008, <[http://www.aip-bg.org/projects/ceetrust/summary\\_results.pdf](http://www.aip-bg.org/projects/ceetrust/summary_results.pdf)> (24 October 2008).

<sup>69</sup> Access to Information Programme Foundation. <http://www.aip-bg.org/aip.htm>

often act as filters to hold back information from the public. They refuse access particularly to documents, often covering corruption and wrongdoing ... state institutions are geared to deflect tough journalistic questions.”<sup>70</sup> As remarked by journalist Iglia Goranova from *Klasa*, there exists a trend to “restrain journalists’ access to information with regards to “what is termed classified information and what is not.”<sup>71</sup> On the positive side, a greater number of journalists apply the law in their quest for truth and information. For example, some fifteen journalists filed lawsuits between 2004 and 2005 against different public institutions that denied to provide them with information.<sup>72</sup>

Secondly, at the end of 2006, the *Law for Access and Disclosure of the Documents and Announcing the Affiliation of Bulgarian Citizens to the State Security and the Intelligence Services of the Bulgarian National Army*<sup>73</sup> (known in short as the *Dossiers Law*) was adopted by Bulgaria’s parliament. The long-awaited legislation was to formally put an end to any leftover communist dependencies and dispelled many of the myths of the democratic transition by releasing the dossiers of agents who spied for Bulgaria’s communist secret services. Since the verification of belonging to the communist security services required various time-consuming stages, only the first batch of journalist-collaborators was released on October 8, 2008, following the earlier disclosure of dossiers of public figures, such as diplomats, ministers, MPs, mayors, managers of debt-incurred state enterprise, etc., who spied for the secret services during communism. The greatest paradox that lies with the media’s dominant ethos is well-explained by the Bulgarian adage, “Every miracle lasts for three days.”

---

<sup>70</sup> Access to Information Programme Foundation, “Media and Access to Information - Five Investigative Reporter Stories,” Documentary, Access to Information Programme, July, 2008, <<http://www.aip-bg.org/aip.htm>> (10 October 2008).

<sup>71</sup> Iglia Goranova, interviewed in “When the Reportage Narrows,” *The Journalists’ Club*, Bulgarian National Radio, October 11, 2008.

<sup>72</sup> See Zlatev and Kashumov, “Bulgaria,” 125.

<sup>73</sup> The Committee for Disclosing and Announcing Affiliation of Bulgarian Citizens to the State Security and the Intelligence Services of the Bulgarian National Army, <[www.comdos.bg](http://www.comdos.bg)>.

What is of particular interest to this research is the underwhelming lack of attention given to a story of vital importance to any democratic society; namely, the release of the communist files of journalist-collaborators. These journalists actively molded public opinion during the transition, but in covering this important information the mainstream media did little more than simply provide a list of the agents, their occupations and the length of their collaboration. Within just two days, the story seemed to be off the radar of the mainstream flow of information. In so acting, the mass circulation press deprived the public of a critical and informed debate about those who shaped the information output and influenced the public opinion during the years of democratic transition. As well, these journalists-collaborators added another level of confusion leaving society to question the legitimacy of a series of 'neglected' debates that posited public interest, privatization and the quasi-illegal distribution of the national wealth, among others.

The silencing of the dossier's debate is pertinent to the marginalization of the right-wing nationalist party, ATAKA, too. During their ascension to power, ATAKA fostered the perception that there would be a re-opening of the privatization deals and the clause for the decommissioning of Kozlodui's reactors. As this research has demonstrated, ATAKA's ideological platform and its legislative agenda have not been covered in the mainstream press. Moreover, the careful mention of controversial topics like corruption in the higher echelons of power, privatization and white-collar crime in the mainstream press, buttress the notion that the media's economic interests hold priority over the public's interest. Those interests are further protected by the self-censorship that in the words of Danail Danov, are the result of being ruled by "political or business affiliations" of their owners.<sup>74</sup> According to Danov, "editorial policies

---

<sup>74</sup> Danail Danov, "Blurring of Boundaries Between Public and Commercial Television," *South East European Media Journal*, August 22, 2007, <<http://www.mediaonline.ba/en/?ID=388>> (14 October 2008), 5.

and sales plans take into consideration the need to protect those [economic/political] interests. As a result, critical coverage or investigations into business partners are restrained, while the improprieties of the competition are widely publicized.”<sup>75</sup>

We can make reference to the third development on the *Penal Code* changes that were mentioned in the beginning of this section, as it is relevant to the current debate on self-censorship: self-censorship becomes the life-raft against the possibility of litigation that might pauperize a journalist, because the *Penal Code* for criminal defamation, which was amended in 2000, replaced the prison term for “defamation against public officials” with heavy monetary fines,<sup>76</sup> greatly surpassing the fines for money-laundering.<sup>77</sup> For example, a libeling verdict against a public official will cost the journalist between 2,500 euro and 7,500 euro, which compared to the average monthly remuneration package of 248 euro,<sup>78</sup> presents a gross amount.<sup>79</sup> Once faced with financial chill or the fear of losing one’s job, self-censorship by most journalists becomes inevitable and narrows the scope of investigative journalism. As this research has demonstrated, the all-pervasive practice of silencing one’s own voice has been experiencing a comeback, and this unfortunate practice continues to grow.

For those who speak out and challenge certain interests, they are likely to face the same fate as the battered journalist, Stefanov, who was briefly introduced in Chapter 1. One question remains subject to argument for the media’s democratic collapse: Will Bulgarian journalism get knocked out of its comatose mode unless a forthcoming EU report includes a safeguarding

---

<sup>75</sup> Danov, “Blurring of Boundaries,” 5.

<sup>76</sup> Zlatev and Kashumov, “Bulgaria,” 109-110.

<sup>77</sup> Igljka Goranova, “With the Phone-tapping we Forgot About Fines for Journalists,” *Klasa*, October 12, 2008, <<http://www.class.bg/category.php?id=5&page=12>> (26 October 2008).

<sup>78</sup> *Novinite.com*, “Bulgaria Average Monthly Salary BGN 484 for 2008,” May 17, 2008, <[http://www.novinite.com/view\\_news.php?id=93213](http://www.novinite.com/view_news.php?id=93213)> (16 August 2008).

<sup>79</sup> Zlatev and Kashumov, “Bulgaria.”

clause on the mass media?<sup>80</sup> When servicing their public function in a democratic society, are Bulgarian media today subdued by economic and political factors? Whether or not this question will be answered favourably in the context of fostering democracy with the role of the media, remains to be seen. The fate of the media in Bulgaria rests in the hands of journalists and civil society.

### **Code of ethics and professionalization**

This section discusses the last media development that has most recently exerted influence on the media landscape. Apart from the 20% newspaper taxation, the print “marketplace of ideas” presents one of the most laissez-faire industries in Bulgaria; no press law<sup>81</sup> or licensing requirements for journalists hamper anyone from entering the journalism turf; no registry of owners exists to regulate the entry into the print publications field; there is no requirement for transparency of the funds invested in a print outlet. The regulations that refer to the ownership, operation and content of the press fall under the *Penal Code*<sup>82</sup> (in its part on libel and defamation) and the *Protection of Competition Act* (in the part on monopolies).<sup>83</sup> Against the backdrop of the newfound freedoms and the all-encompassing penchant for market-oriented information, the media’s responsibility to serve in the interest of the public for the enhancement of democracy was in need of guidelines.

Professionalization has been the most common term that media practitioners name with regards to the media dealing with ownership interference and performing its traditional role in

---

<sup>80</sup> In the European Union parlance a “safeguarding clause” is adopted when a country has negotiated certain conditions and has made legally-binding commitments to make reforms in critical areas such as justice, home affairs and corruption, to mention a few, but has later failed to meet the criteria in a certain field. Such a clause means stringent monitoring on part of the EU institutions that the negotiated parameters are not only pronounced but are applied accordingly.

<sup>81</sup> Zlatev and Kashumov, “Bulgaria.”

<sup>82</sup> Vesela Tabakova, “The Bulgarian Media Landscape,” in *European Media Governance: National and Regional Dimensions* ed., Georgios Terzis (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2007).

<sup>83</sup> World Association of Newspapers, “Bulgaria,” in *World Press Trends 2008*, World Association of Newspapers, (Paris: ZenithOptimedia, 2008), 252-258.

a democratic society.<sup>84</sup> The calls for reviewing journalism standards, ethics and professionalism, some argue, have been tied to the country's evolution towards membership of the European Union. Whereas no formal requirement for harmonization of the legislation in the print media landscape has been put forth as part of the EU accession requirements, NGOs, foreign-funded media projects, seminars and awards for media professionalization have intensified the media's links within the bloc and have posited many issues for debate on the journalism status quo and its role in Bulgaria's democratization. For instance, in November 2008, Germany's Konrad Adenauer Foundation, WAZ Media Group and an affiliate of the Austria-based International Press Institute participated in the organization of a media forum in Bulgaria that discussed the role of the media in a democracy laying a special emphasis on investigative journalism.<sup>85</sup> Also, in 2006 the British Council in Bulgaria launched a "Media and Pluralism" project that featured a forum on media diversity and pluralism, and the publication of a manual for journalists highlighting tolerance and ethical practices of covering diversity issues.<sup>86</sup> A demand for a media debate could be further witnessed judging by the avalanche of readers' comments that are posted online as a reaction to media-related articles. The 2007 launch of a weekly radio programme deliberating on media affairs is also seen as a response to the need to reflect on the challenges that the present-day media faces.

Indisputably, the adoption of the Code of Ethics in November 2004 – a tool that epitomizes the journalists' professionalization and an effort to stealth any interference – had been long considered the missing link in the democratic evolution of Bulgaria's media. The mechanism for the media to self-police and adhere to journalism ethics and standards akin to

---

<sup>84</sup> Bakalov, interview; Hamalski, interview.

<sup>85</sup> Maya Pelovska, "Southeast Europe Media Forum Calls for 'new kind' of Journalism Training," *Bulgarian National Radio*, November 11, 2008;

<[http://www.bnr.bg/RadioBulgaria/Emission\\_English/Theme\\_Bulgaria\\_And\\_The\\_World/Material/media+forum.htm](http://www.bnr.bg/RadioBulgaria/Emission_English/Theme_Bulgaria_And_The_World/Material/media+forum.htm)>.

<sup>86</sup> British Council, "Media and Diversity Project."

every democratic country heralded the commitment of the media community to professionalize. Devised with the assistance of foreign organizations and funded by an EU programme, the media constitution,<sup>87</sup> borrowed the basic tenets of good journalism practice from some 60 Press Councils. It was essentially seen as a giant leap in the development of the journalism ethics and releasing from outside interferences.

The code addresses the standards of editorial independence from political or economic interference, ensures the public's right to know and receive objective and fair information (ensuring pluralism of opinions), and establishes the relations between and within media outlets.<sup>88</sup> The code includes a separate section on "public interest" which differentiates between an article of "public interest" and "in the interest of the public."<sup>89</sup>

Drafted by a tripartite body of media owners, journalists and representatives of the Fifth Estate, the code was adopted by many mainstream media (print and broadcast) outlets. The adjacent self-regulation mechanism establishes respectively one print and one broadcast commission, which after their launch in 2006, have had the onus to oversee the media's code of conduct and to provide resolutions on claims of infringement of the ethical norms in the code.<sup>90</sup>

A year after the start of operation of the two commissions, media experts explain that a greater public discussion dwelling on the media ethics as well as on the quality of information and media content is taking shape.<sup>91</sup>

---

<sup>87</sup> Article 19, "Freedom and Accountability: Safeguarding Free Expression Through Media Self-regulation," Article 19/International Federation of Journalists, (March 2005), <<http://www.article19.org/pdfs/publications/self-regulation-south-east-europe.pdf>> (15 October 2008).

<sup>88</sup> Ognian Zlatev, "The Shared Benefits of Media Self-regulation." Media Development Centre (Report presented at OSCE 9<sup>th</sup> Central Asia Media Conference, Tajikistan, November 1-2, 2007).

<sup>89</sup> Zlatev, "The Shared benefits," National Council for Journalism Ethics, <[www.mediaethics-bg.org](http://www.mediaethics-bg.org)>.

<sup>90</sup> Danail Danov, "Bulgaria," in *Freedom of Speech in Southeast Europe: Media Independence and Self-Regulation* (Sofia: Media Development Centre, 2007).

<sup>91</sup> Zlatev and Kashumov, "Bulgaria."

## **Conclusion**

In this study, I have examined the evolution of the Bulgarian print landscape and the praxis of journalism in the transitional period following the communist collapse in 1989. By applying Habermas's notion of the public sphere, wherein the media is perceived as the location for the free formation of public opinion, and within the context of the change of Bulgaria's social system, I have demonstrated that the shift of the market system from state socialism to the free market remains pivotal in forging the media-societal relationship and more importantly, the function of the media within the process of transition to a mature democracy.

Furthermore, using Habermas's conception of the public sphere, I have tested the theory that, in Bulgaria, the populist media behaviour deviates from the equilibrium of Habermas's realm where public opinion is formed by critical debate, which is in the general interest, and instead approaches the role of operating merely as a business – a business that favours its ownership and a host of tightly-knit corporate and political interests.

Through media analysis, interviews with journalists and media scholars and monitoring of the information output, I have shown that the present-day Bulgarian journalism has diverted from its major role to serve civil society in critical decision-making on issues of public interest. I have also demonstrated that although pluralism in the media emerged during the transition, the market conditions imposed by intense competition, not only reshaped the structure of the media system, but also ineptly impacted editorial content. In all, this research has demonstrated that market structure and operations, in addition to the myriad of interests from the political and economic spectrum, have confined the pluralistic debate within the frame of a new propaganda that is promulgated by the interests of multiple media leaderships and ownerships.

Furthermore, the restraint of the vibrant and multi-voice debate has been constrained by a quasi-populist, mass-oriented and profit-driven media that, by commodifying information, strives for clout over issues that help bring a return on the ownership investment. Accordingly, liberation from the party-ideology media has forced the media to subscribe to the market ideology and economic impetus. Consequently, by removing issues of public interest from the public discourse, and by focusing on entertainment and market-oriented information output, the current state of mainstream media in Bulgaria poses a democratic dilemma for civil society and for genuine democracy. In effect, the quality of the debate is held back and so is the maturation of democracy.

Issues surrounding contemporary journalism in Bulgaria have been exacerbated by the prevalent practice of self-censorship that has further hampered the traditional role of the media as a Fourth Estate in any democratic society. Just as civil society, too, has been undergoing transformation, media consistency in investigating misconduct and the strength to resist outside political and economic interference are the headway for the media in the country. Along with the strengthening of civil society, the role of journalism to inform civic-minded debate and foster critical reasoning on issues of public interest could help cure social tremors such as corruption and a loss of faith in justice. For these reasons, the Bulgarian media needs to adopt an independent mindset or otherwise the maturity of Bulgaria's democracy will continue to be at stake.

One aspect of this situation deserves special attention. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the trial for corruption and conflict-of-interests in the highest ranks of power is in the

courts at the conclusion of the writing of this thesis.<sup>92</sup> Having come as a result of the classic mission of journalism to expose misconduct, this litigation bears certain significance for civil society and for the democratization of Bulgaria. More importantly, the case will be a test whether the media have succeeded in out-powering the omnipotence of white-collar wrongdoing by choosing to serve civil society, or whether it will choose to remain toothless, apathetic and servile to various interests. My deep conviction is that the re-addressing of the role of the media in the democracy venture is underway. Currently, all hopes and expectations are for the media to deliver on it.

---

<sup>92</sup> In January 2007, *Kapital* weekly published a journalistic investigation about conflict-of-interest and corruption in the utilization of EU structural funds provided to Bulgaria for road infrastructure projects. In October 2008, the prosecutor's office pressed charges against the head of the agency under whose management occurred irregularities in granting public tenders.

## Bibliography

### Interviews:

Assen Grigorov, director *Re:TV*, telephone interview by author, November 13, 2008 and August 7, 2008.

Boris Hamalski, journalist from Bulgarian news agency *BTA*, telephone interviews by author, November 12, 2008 and July 21, 2008.

Elena Koinova, business reporter *The Sofia Echo*, Skype interviews by author, October 6, 2008 and June 28, 2008.

Eliana Mitova, journalist *Klasa*, telephone interview by author, June 15, 2008.

Ivan Bakalov, editor-in-chief *e-Vestnik*, Skype interviews by author, October 10, 2008 and August 2, 2008.

Ivo Indjev, former host of political weekly talk-show on Bulgaria's *bTV* private channel, telephone interview by author, August 6, 2008.

Koprinka Chervenкова, editor-in-chief *Kultura*, telephone interview by author, 29 July, 2008.

Luba Devetakova, PhD student of sociology, Skype interviews by author, November 23, 2008 and August 3, 2008.

Maria Neikova, media expert, Sofia University, Communication Department, telephone interview by author, June 30, 2008.

Ognian Zlatev, managing director *Media Development Centre*, Skype interviews by author, June 11, 2008 and March 10, 2008.

Petranka Fileva, media expert, Sofia University, Communication Department, telephone interview by author, July 13, 2008.

Rumyana Simeonova, journalist *Noshten Trud*, Skype interview by author, June 17, 2008.

Vesela Tabakova, media expert, Sofia University, Communication Department, telephone interview by author, August 6, 2008.

Vesislava Antonova, journalist *Kapital*, Skype interview by author, June 22, 2008.

## References

### Print/online newspaper articles:

- Antonova, Vesislava. "Two are Too Many." *Kapital*, May 30, 2008.
- Antonova, Vesislava. "CPC [Competition Protection Commission] allowed WAZ concentration." *Kapital*, July, 30, 2005.
- Antonova, Vesislava. "The Right in the Niche: Free Publications Develop the Quality of its Content." *Kapital*, October 6, 2006.
- Atanasova, Elena. "WAZ Blocked the Publishing of the First Free Newspaper in Bulgaria." August 17, 2006.
- Bakalov, Ivan. "The Crisis in the Newspapers or Who Will Replace Toshev and Gocheva?" *e-vestnik.bg*, March 25, 2008.
- Baychev, Raiko. "The Closure of Opasnite.net Suggests Censorship." *Klasa*, September 8, 2008.
- Bilefsky, Dan. "Romania and Bulgaria Celebrate Entry Into European Union." *The New York Times*, January 2, 2007.
- Blagov, Krum. "Media Concentration Endangers Freedom of Speech." *Objective*, May 2007.
- Buchvarova, Albena. "Misleading Bustle Between Ruling and Opposition." *Trud*, October 23, 2008.
- Carvajal, Doreen and Castle, Stephen. "Mob Muscles Its Way Into Politics in Bulgaria." *The New York Times*, October 15, 2008.
- Ciobanu, Claudia. "Far Right Goes Out of Fashion." *Inter Press Service*, March 6, 2008.
- Delcheva, Iren. "Mutafchiski Involved with a Dangerous Site." *Standart*, September 5, 2008.
- Deliiska, Adelina. "Ognian Minchev: Police-elite from State Security Looted the State." *Novinar*, November 4, 2008,
- Dimitrova, Maria. "Kozlodui NPP – Bulgaria's Major Compromise of its EU Membership." *Bulgarian National Radio*, April 15, 2005.

- Dineva, Stanka. "The Historian Nikola Altunkov: I Believe in the Political Future of Patriotism." *ATAKA*, October 30, 2006.
- Eftimova, Vanya. "Spiegel: Bulgaria in a Strangling Mafia Hug." *Kapital*, April 23, 2008.
- Georgiev, Lyudmil. "The Sooner we Forget Tato, Deto, Bate Boiko, the Better." *Klasa*, May 22, 2008.
- Geshakova, Mila. "I am Hurt to be Attached to Stanishev." *24 Chassa*, June 9, 2008, 13.
- Goranova, Iglia. "With the Phone-tapping we Forgot About Fines for Journalists." *Klasa*, October 12, 2008.
- Gozes, Isek. "We were the Hammer, They are the Anvil: The Media Overdid Themselves to Hero-ize Politicians." *Standart*, February 28, 2008, 15.
- Gulubov, Antoni. "Media Structure, the Daily Routine." *Dnevnik*, March 26, 2008.
- Hristov, Hristo. "The Freedom of Speech and its Dependencies." *Dnevnik*, November 1, 2006.
- Ivanova, Evgenia. "Police Guards Discussion on Batak." *Sega*, December 20, 2007.
- Katsarska, Denka. "DANS Found out Who are the Publishers of Opasnite." *Focus*, September 5, 2008.
- Kostadinov, Petar. "Nationalism and Populism in Bulgaria." *The Sofia Echo*, March 1, 2006.
- Kostadinov, Petar. "TI Bulgaria goes down in Transparency International's corruption index." *The Sofia Echo*, September 23, 2008.
- Kostadinov, Petar. "Snapshot: Corruption in Bulgaria." *The Sofia Echo*, October 17, 2008.
- Lozanov, Georgi. "Information Masonry Dictates the News Repertoire." *Klasa*, May 9, 2008.
- Luckanov, Yassen. "Democracy Below Zero." *TEMA*, 25 February - 2 March, 2008, 24-25.
- Martinov, Krassimir. "Bulgarian Media Market is Becoming Dynamic." *Bulgarian National Radio*, May 23, 2008.
- Mihailova, Andreana. "A Total Makeover in Monitor." *Klasa*, October 24, 2008.

- Mihailova, Andreana. "State Media are Like the Museum of Madame Tussaud." *Klasa*, May 9, 2008.
- Mladenova, Marta. "Georgi Lozanov: There is Pressure on the Media, Which will Heighten Before Elections." *Focus*, September 23, 2008.
- Nemski, Hristian. "European Operators Want the Rights of TV Bulgaria." *Klasa*, April 2, 2008.
- Novkov, Mitko. "Media Understood and Done." *Kultura*, July 1, 2005.
- Pelovska, Maya. "Southeast Europe Media Forum Calls for 'new kind' of Journalism Training." *Bulgarian National Radio*, November 11, 2008.
- Petkov, Krastyo. "Bulgaria is on the Threshold of an International Isolation." *Klasa* October 12, 2008.
- Popova, Velislava. "Will There be a Media Ownership Cleansing?" *Kapital*, April 24, 2004.
- Popova, Velislava. "Our Friends, Businessmen and Journalists will Publish Novinar: The Leader of Georgyovden and Miroslav Borshosh are the New Owners of the Newspaper." *Kapital*, May 22, 2004.
- Radev, Milen. "Batak After Batak." *Mediapool*, November 22, 2007.
- Raychev, Andrey. "Why do They Read the Yellow Press? The Showbiz Stars are the New Power in Bulgaria." *24 Chassa*, May, 2005.
- Savova, Elitsa. "Bulgarian Morning TV soundbites." *The Sofia Echo*, May 30, 2008.
- Slavova, Miglena. "DANS Makes a Gallery of Journalists." *Monitor*, October 2, 2008.
- Sugarev, Edvin. "'The event' with Ognian Stefanov and the DANS Indulgences." *Mediapool*, September 25, 2008.
- Velev, Yuri. "The Transition Started and Ends Like a Crisis." *24 Chassa*, October 3, 2007.
- Vucheva, Elitsa. "Bulgaria Under Fire for Corruption Levels." *EUObserver*, July 17, 2008.

**Newspaper/online articles without author**

AFP. "EU Tells Bulgaria to Step up Anti-corruption Drive." August 27, 2008.

BTA. "All Media Work with PR Tools." July 30, 2006.

*Dnes.dir.bg*. "Mutafchiiski was the Target," September 24, 2008.

*Focus*. "A Journalist was Beaten up." September 23, 2008.

*Focus*. "The Union of Bulgarian Journalists 'Podkrepa' Condemned the Assault on Ognian Stefanov." September 23, 2008.

*International Herald Tribune*. "Bulgaria Reluctantly Closes Nuclear Reactors Before EU Entry." December 27, 2006.

*Kapital*. "Can you hear teeth grinding? Many Publishers are Fearful of Free Newspapers. Are Their Fears Justified?" August 25, 2006.

*Kapital*, "Who is Who on the Bulgarian Media Market?" August 10, 2007, 12-13.

*Kapital*, "Buy me a Newspaper," August 10, 2007, 12-13.

*Klasa*. "64% of Polled Have Cable TV, 34% Use Internet." June 16, 2008, 11.

*Mediapool*. "80% of Publications About Ministers in Central Media are Only positive." December 9, 2007.

*Mediapool*. "Jean-Marie Le Pen Supports ATAKA and Slavi Binev." September 30, 2007.

*Mediapool*. "The President Gives the Final Fusillade on Batak," May 16, 2007.

*Mediapool*. "Hombach visits [President] Purvanov to discuss the problem with WAZ newspapers in Bulgaria." November 23, 2007.

*Mediapool*. "Bodo Hombach in Spiegel: The Campaign of our Bulgarian Newspapers 'wasn't right.'" November 19, 2007.

*Mediapool*. "WAZ Plans to Control the Content of its Publications in Bulgaria." November 20, 2007.

*Monitor*. "The Publications." 24 September, 2008, 4-5.

*Netinfo.bg*. "Spiegel on the Myth Batak: WAZ Newspapers Organize a Witch-hunt." November 11, 2007.

*Netinfo.bg*. "The Council for Electronic Media Preliminary Terminates the English Broadcasts of BBC World Service." August 21, 2008.

*Netinfo.bg*. "The Journalist Ognian Stefanov Beaten up in Front of a Restaurant in Sofia." September 23, 2008.

*Novinite.com*. "Commissioner Kuneva: EU Money Is Means, Not Ends." May 26, 2008.

*Sega*. "DANS Taps Journalists Within the Gallery File." October 2, 2008.

*South East European Times*. "Bulgaria Promises Transparency in Investigating High-level Corruption Scandal," *South East European Times*, May 7, 2007.

*Standart*. "Arms Boss Joined Vuzrajane Club." June 5, 2002.

*Standart*. "Circus." May 27, 2008.

*Standart*. "USA Reproaches Bulgaria for Vote-buying Practices." March 13, 2008.

*TEMA*. "The Dangerous Journalists." October 6, 2008.

*Trud*. "ATAKA Wants Bulgaria's Withdrawal from its Missions." *Trud*, April 3, 2008.

*Vsekiden.com*. "Ilia built a cell." March 26, 2008.

### **Radio/TV interviews**

Batalova, Svetlana interviewed in *Do We Live Under Carbon Copy?* The Journalists' Club, Bulgarian National Radio, May 17, 2008.

Bojilova, Svetlana interviewed in *Do we live under carbon copy?* The Journalists' Club, Bulgarian National Radio, May 17, 2008.

Dikov, Sasho interviewed in "The Counting of the Tamed Rabbits." *The Journalists' Club*, Bulgarian National Radio, September 27, 2008.

Goranova, Iglia interviewed in "When the Reportage Narrows." *The Journalists' Club*, Bulgarian National Radio, October 11, 2008.

Ivanov, Alexander interviewed in "The Counting of the Tamed Rabbits." *The Journalists' Club*, Bulgarian National Radio, September 27, 2008.

Novkov, Mitko interviewed in *Boulevard Bulgaria*. Re:TV, July 31, 2008.

Stankushev, Boiko interviewed in *Do We Live Under Carbon Copy?* The Journalists' Club, Bulgarian National Radio, May 17, 2008.

**Books/Journal articles:**

Alexandrova, Svetlana. "The Privatization Process in Bulgaria." In *Privatization in Central and Eastern Europe: Perspectives and Approaches*, edited by Demetrius Iatridis and June Hopps. Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1998.

Alfanderi, Elizer. *Media and Power: Journalism Between the Freedom of Speech and the Social Responsibility*. Sofia: Tilia Publishing House, 2000.

Andreev, Svetlozar. *The Media and Democratic Consolidation in Post-Communist Eastern Europe.*" In the European Consortium for Political Research, University of Essex, 2002,  
<<http://www.essex.ac.uk/ecpr/events/jointsessions/paperarchive/uppsala/ws18/Andreev.pdf>>.

Andronova-Vincelette, Gallina. "Bulgarian Banking Sector Development, Post-1989." *Southeast European Politics* 2, no.1 (May 2001).

Atanassov, Atanas et al., "Socially Vulnerable Groups During the Transition to a Market Economy." In *Bulgaria at the Crossroads*, edited by Jacques Coenen-Huther. New York: Nova Science Publishers, 1996.

Aumente, Jerome, Gross, Peter, Hiebert, Ray, Johnson, Owen and Mills, Dean. *Eastern Journalism: Before, During and After Communism*. New Jersey: Hampton Press, 1999.

Bagdikian, Ben. *The Media Monopoly*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1997.

Bakardjieva, Maria. "The New Media Landscape in Bulgaria," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 20, no.1 (1995), <<http://www.cjc-online.ca/index.php/journal/article/viewArticle/845/751>>.

Blondel, Jean. "The Role of Parties and Party Systems in the Democratization Process." In *Democracy, governance and economic performance: East and Southeast Asia*, eds., Ian Marsh, Jean Blondel and Takashi Inoguchi (Tokyo; The United Nations University Press, 1999), 29-30.

Bobeva, Daniela and Bozhkov, Alexander. "Privatization and Foreign Investments in Bulgaria." In *Privatization and Foreign Investments in Eastern Europe*, edited by Iliana Zloch-Christy. Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1995.

Borisova, Albena. "A Conclusion of the Interrelation Between PR and the Media Based on the Questionnaires of Journalists and PR experts." In *Reformulating Publicity: Transparency in the Relationships Between the PR and the Media*. Sofia: Bulgarian

Helsinki Committee, July 2006.

<<http://www.bghelsinki.org/index.php?module=resources&lg=bg&id=395>>.

Calhoun, Craig. "Introduction: Habermas and the Public Sphere." In *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, edited by Craig Calhoun. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992.

Cholakov, Radomir. "To the Freedom of Speech Like an Expression of the 'I' and the Joint Efforts." In *To Freedom of Speech Candidly*, edited by Ognian Zlatev and compiled by Danail Danov. Sofia: Media Development Centre, 2004.

Coenen-Huther, Jacques. "Introduction." In *Bulgaria at the Crossroads*, ed. Jacques Coenen-Huther. New York: Nova Science Publishers, 1996.

Crampton, R. J. *Bulgaria*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Danov, Danail. "Blurring of Boundaries Between Public and Commercial Television." *South East European Media Journal*, August 22, 2007.

Danov, Danail. "Bulgaria." In *Labour Relations and Media: Analyzing Pattern of Labour Relations in the Media of SEENPM Member Countries*. Moldova: Independent Journalism Center-Moldova, February 2008.

Deltcheva, Roumiana. "New Tendencies in Post-Totalitarian Bulgaria: Mass Culture and the Media." *Europe-Asia Studies* 48 no. 2 (1996): 305-315.

Dimitrov, Assen. "Values and Stability During a Period of Social Polarization." In *Civil Society in Southeast Europe*, edited by Dane Gordon and David Durst. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004.

Dimitrov, Vesselin. *Bulgaria: The Uneven Transition*. London: Routledge, 2001.

Doyle, Gillian *Media Ownership: the Economics and Politics of Convergence and Concentration in the UK and European Media*. London: Sage Publications, 2002.

Fotev, Georgi. "Total Crisis and the Reorganization of Society." In *Bulgaria at the Crossroads*, edited by Jacques Coenen-Huther. New York: Nova Science Publishers, 1996.

Frydman, Roman, Rapaczynski, Andrzej and John, Earle editors. *The Privatization Process in Central Europe*. Budapest: Central European University Press, 1993.

Ganov, Venelin. "Ballots, Bribes, and State Building in Bulgaria," *Journal of Democracy* 17 no. 1 (January 2006): 75-89.

Genov Nikolai and Krasteva, Anna, *Recent Social Trends in Bulgaria 1960-1995*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001.

- Giatzidis, Emil. *An Introduction to Post-Communist Bulgaria: Political, Economic and Social Transformations*. Manchester University Press, 2002.
- Gocheva, Venelina. "2001: the Newspaper the Way it is." In *24 Chassa: The Newspaper*, compilers Georgi Lozanov, Orlin Spassov and Rossen Yankov. Sofia: Trud Publishing House, 2001.
- Goehring, Jeannette ed. *Nations in Transit 2007: Democratization from Central Europe to Eurasia*. New York: Freedom House, 2007.
- Gross, Peter. *Entangled Evolutions: Media and Democratization in Eastern Europe*. Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2002.
- Gross, Peter. "Media and Political Society in Eastern Europe." *Media Development* 2, no. 1 (2002).
- Gulyas, Agnes. "Structural Changes and Organizations in Print Media Markets of Post-communist East Central Europe," *Javnost*, 6 no. 2 (1999), 61-74.
- Gungov, Alexander. "Wonderland in Southeast Europe: Civil Society in Bulgaria Emerging from a Crisis." In *Civil Society in Southeast Europe*, eds. Dane Gordon and David Durst. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004.
- Habermas, Jurgen. "The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article (1964)." In *New German Critique* 3 (autumn 1974), translated by Sara Lennox and Frank Lennox.
- Habermas, Jurgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeoisie Society*, translated by Thomas Burger. The MIT Press, 1992.
- Ray Hiebert, "Transition: From the End of the Old Regime to 1996," in *Eastern Journalism: Before, During and After Communism*, ed., Jerome Aumente et al., (New Jersey: Hampton Press, 1999), 79-122.
- Jakubowicz, Karol. "Media Within and Without the State: Press Freedom in Eastern Europe." *Journal of Communication* 45 no. 4 (1995): 125-139.
- Jakubowicz, Karol. "Media as Agents of Change." In *Glasnost and After: Media and Change in Central and Eastern Europe*, edited by David Paletz, Karol Jakubowicz and Pavao Novosel. New Jersey: Hampton Press, 1995.
- Jakubowicz, Karol. "Post Communist Media Development in Perspective." *Europäische Politik | Politikinformation Osteuropa* 3 (March 2005): 1-16.

Kabakchieva, Petya. "The New Political Actors and Their Strategies." In *Bulgaria at the Crossroads*, edited by Jacques Coenen-Huther. New York: Nova Science Publishers, 1996.

Kanev, Krassimir. "From Totalitarianism to a Constitutional State." In *Bulgaria at the Crossroads*, edited by Jacques Coenen-Huther. New York: Nova Science Publishers, 1996).

Karadjov, Christopher. "Free Enterprise or Free Press," *War Report* (June-July 1997), letter to author, August 2008.

Linz, Juan and Stepan, Alfred. *Problems of Democratic Transition, Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America and Post-Communist Europe*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996.

McChesney, Robert. "The Mythology of Commercial Broadcasting and the Contemporary Crisis of Public Broadcasting", The 2001 Spry Memorial Lecture, University of Montreal, <<http://www.com.umontreal.ca/spry/spry-e.html>>.

McCombs, Maxwell and Shaw, Donald. "The Agenda-setting Function of Mass Media." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36 no. 2 (1972).

McQuail, Denis. *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory*. (London: Sage Publications, 2005).

McQuail, Denis. *Mass Communication Theory: An Introduction*. London: Sage Publications, 1994.

Meininger, Thomas and Radoeva, Detelina. "Civil Society: The Current Situation and problems." In *Bulgaria in a Time of Change*, edited by Iliana Zloch-Christy. England: Atheneum Press, 1996.

Melone, Albert. "Bulgaria's National Roundtable Talks and the Politics of Accommodation." *International Political Science Review* 15 no. 3 (1994): 257-273.

Mills, Dean. "Post-1989 Journalism in the Absence of Democratic Traditions." In *Eastern European journalism: Before, During and After Communism*, Aumente et al., New Jersey: Hampton Press, 1999.

Naidenov, Dimitar. *Press Journalism*. Sofia: Sofia University, Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communications, 1995.

Naidenov, Valeri. "Before the Birth of the Newspaper and Shortly After," in *24 Chassa: The Newspaper*, compiled by Georgi Lozanov, Orlin Spasov and Rossen Yankov (Sofia: Trud Publishing House, 2001).

Nikoltchev, Ivan. "Polarization and Diversification in the Bulgarian Press." In *Post Communism and the Media in Eastern Europe*, edited by Patrick O'Neil. London: Frank Cass, 1997.

Nikoltchev, I. "The Post-communist Bulgarian Journalist." PhD diss., University of Maryland at College Park, 1998.

Nikolov, Stephan. "Bulgaria: a Quasi-elite." In *Post-communist Elites and Democracy in Eastern Europe*, edited by John Higley, Jan Pakulski and Wlodzimierz Wesolowski. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998.

Ognianova, Ekaterina. "The Transitional Media System of Post-Communist Bulgaria." Columbia: Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Journalism and Mass Communication Monographs, June 1997.

Ognianova, Ekaterina. "On Forgiving Bulgarian Journalists/Spies." *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 8 no. 3 (1993): 156-167.

Panayotov, Filip. "Pages from Trud's Biography." In *Daily Trud: The Leader*, compilers Georgi Lozanov and Orlin Spassov. Sofia: Trud Publishing House, 2002.

Picard, Robert. *Media Economics: Concepts and Issues*. California: Sage Publications, 1989.

Picard, Robert. "The Economics of the Newspaper." In *Media Economics: Theory and Practice*, edited by Alison Alexander, James Owers and Rodney Carveth. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1998.

Popova, Velislava. "Concentration of Media Ownership and its Impact on Media Independence and Pluralism." Report presented at the South East European Network for Professionalization of Media Conference, Bled, June 11-12, 2004.

Rathbun, N. "Ruling the Media: The Creation of Independent Press and Broadcasting in Central and Southeastern Europe." PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2003.

Raycheva, Lilia. "Turn-of-the-Century Challenges Facing the Mass Media in Bulgaria." *Media Development* 46 no.3 (1999): 9-12.

Raycheva, Lilia. "Fifteen Years of Televised Political Advertising Developments in Bulgaria." In *The SAGE Handbook of Political Advertising*, edited by Lynda Lee kaid and Christina Holtz-Bacha. London: Sage Publications, 2006.

Raycheva, Lilia and Petev, Todor. "Mass Media's Changing Landscape in Bulgaria (1989-1999)." In *Business as Usual: Continuity and Change in Central and Eastern European Media*, edited by David Paletz and Karol Jakubowicz. New Jersey: Hampton Press, 2003.

Raycheva, Lilia. "Bulgaria: The Online Mirror Image of The Printed Newspapers." In *Print and Online Newspapers in Europe: A Comparative Analysis in 16 Countries*, edited by Richard van der Wurff, and Edmund Lauf. Amsterdam: Het Spinhnis, 2005.

Smatrakalev, Georgi. "Investment Policy and Privatization in Bulgaria." In *Privatization and Foreign Investments in Eastern Europe*, edited by Iliana Zloch-Christy. Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1995.

Smilov, Daniel and Krastev, Ivan. "The Rise of Populism in Eastern Europe: Policy Paper." In *Populist Politics and Liberal Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe*, edited by Grigorij Mesežnikov, Olga Gyárfášová and Daniel Smilov, (Working Paper, Institute for Public Affairs, Bratislava, March, 2008), <[http://www.cis-sofia.org/uploaded/1214822685\\_populist\\_politics.pdf](http://www.cis-sofia.org/uploaded/1214822685_populist_politics.pdf)>.

Spassov, Orlin. "The 'Serious' Press, the Tabloid Context, and Qualities of the Public Sphere." In *Quality Press in Southeast Europe*, edited by Orlin Spassov. Sofia: The Southeast European Media Centre, 2004.

Spassov, Orlin. "From Politics to the Citizenship." In *24 Chassa: The Newspaper*, compiled by Georgi Lozanov, Orlin Spassov and Rossen Yankov. Sofia: Trud Publishing House, 2001.

Spassov, Orlin. "Publicity and Public Relations." In *Reformulating Publicity: Transparency in the Relationships Between the PR and the Media*. Sofia: Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, July 2006.

Splichal, Slavko. "Media Privatization and Democratization in Central-Eastern Europe." *International Communication Gazette* 49 no. 3 (1992): 3-22.

Splichal, Slavko. "From State Control to Commodification: Media Democratization in East and Central Europe." In *Democracy and Communication in the New Europe: Change and Continuity in East and West* edited by Farrel Corcoran and Paschal Preston. New Jersey: Hampton Press, 1995.

Splichal, Slavko. *Media Beyond Socialism: Theory and Practice in East-Central Europe*. Boulder: Westview press, 1994.

Tabakova, Vesela. "The Bulgarian Media Landscape." in *European Media Governance: National and Regional Dimensions*, edited by Georgios Terzis, 315-325. Bristol: Intellect Books, 2007.

Tilkidjiev, Nikolai. "Social Stratification in Post-Communist Bulgaria." In *Bulgaria at the Crossroads*, edited by Jacques Coenen-Huther. New York: Nova Science Publishers, 1996).

Toshev, Tosho. "The Newspaper with Character," in *Daily Trud: The Leader*, compiled by Georgi Lozanov and Orlin Spassov. Sofia: Trud Publishing House, 2002.

Yankov, Rosen. "Short History," in *24 Chassa: the Newspaper*, compilers Georgi Lozanov, Orlin Spassov and Rossen Yankov. Sofia: Trud Publishing House, 2001.

Zlatev, Ognian and Kashumov, Alexander. "Bulgaria." In *Freedom of Speech in Southeast Europe: Media Independence and Self-Regulation*. Sofia: Media Development Centre, 2007.

### **Reports:**

Article 19. "Freedom and Accountability: Safeguarding Free Expression Through Media Self-regulation," Article 19/International Federation of Journalists, (March 2005), <<http://www.article19.org/pdfs/publications/self-regulation-south-east-europe.pdf>>.

British Council, "Media and Diversity Project," British Council, November 29, 2006, Sofia, <<http://www.britishcouncil.org/bulgaria-projects-media-diversity.htm>>.

Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, *Reformulating Publicity: Transparency in the Relationships Between the PR and the Media* (Sofia: Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, July 2006), < <http://www.bghelsinki.org/index.php?module=resources&lg=bg&id=395>>.

Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, "Pluralism and Concentration in the Electronic Media Sector," Roundtable, Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, April 17, 2007.

Commission of the European Communities, "Media Pluralism in the Member States of the European Union," (Commission of the European Communities: staff working paper, Brussels, January 16, 2007).

Freedom House, "2007 Freedom House Report," <<http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=251&year=2007>>.

International Federation of Journalists, "Media Power in Europe: The Big Picture of Ownership," (International Federation of Journalists, 2005), <<http://www.ifj.org/assets/docs/245/202/08737f5-ec283ca.pdf>> (17 August 2008).

Transparency International, "Persistently High Corruption in Low-income Countries Amounts to an 'Ongoing Humanitarian Disaster,'" Transparency International, September 23, 2008, Berlin, <[http://www.transparency.org/news\\_room/in\\_focus/2008/cpi2008#pr](http://www.transparency.org/news_room/in_focus/2008/cpi2008#pr)> (9 November 2008).

World Association of Newspapers, "Bulgaria: Media Market Description," in *World Press Trends 2008*, World Association of Newspapers, (Paris: ZenithOptimedia, 2008), 252-258.