MEDIA AND POLITICS

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Media and politics are in a tense relationship in a functioning democracy. Despite their divergent missions, it is a symbiotic correlation. Political forces turn to the public to motivate their actions, to campaign for their ideas and to win people's trust. Media, in turn, have to inform people about politics and to exercise control over politicians when the latter perform their duties. They need each other and, at the same time, they benefit from each other. Without access to current affairs, media would be deprived of topics to cover, and without media, politicians would hardly find a way to the people.

Both players have to be aware of their roles and to live up to them. The politicians have to correctly communicate their public activity to the people. What they mostly need is trust. Making good policy alone is not enough. Of no less importance is the skilful public presentation of goals, decisions and achievements. Only those who are familiar with the rules of media democracy and know how to apply them would survive as politicians and win majorities. With this communication missing, the image of the political institutions would be distorted and prejudices would be reinforced.

It becomes critical when politicians try to erect a media façade, to instrumentalize media and even to manipulate them. At this juncture, media are called upon as watchdog and corrective. For this task to be accomplished, free and independent media are required. The status and plurality of media are vital for the quality of the democratic public because the level of citizens' awareness and the public opinion are largely shaped by the media. So it is even more imperative to ensure press freedom and transparency of the media structures, to guarantee fair working conditions for journalists, to counteract partisanship and corruption in media and to provide for plurality of views and the free formation of opinion.

The relationship between politics and media thus lies at the core of democracy. This relationship needs constant rebalancing. Highest transparency and a permanent critical evaluation are of utmost importance. Despite their interdependence, the demarcation line between them must be maintained. We need a sensible balance between media and politics for the sake of democratic society. This holds true not only for transition countries like Bulgaria but also for all free democratic polities.

The anthology *Media and Politics* elucidates the relationship between media and politics and critically evaluates it. It offers an extensive and insightful look into the Bulgarian media landscape. It shows how media inform Bulgarian people about current political affairs. What is more, it provides a veritable view of the relationship between politics and media in Bulgaria. This book, which is a joint publication of the Media Program South East Europe of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and Foundation Media Democracy, is not without reason. It is the result of a cooperation that has grown over a long period of time. Foundation Media Democracy is highly competent and experienced in the area of media monitoring. It is committed to contributing to the development of a democratic-pluralistic media landscape in Bulgaria. For us, it is the best partner for this project. This collection of essays edited by Georgi Lozanov and Orlin Spassov is directed towards media professionals, political decision-makers, students, the interested public and primarily for journalists and chief editors.

The present publication aims at contributing to a better cooperation between politics and media to the benefit of citizens and democracy. It corresponds to one of the main objectives of the Media Program South East Europe of the Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation, i.e. to shape a shared understanding of the role of the media in a democracy and to involve all relevant players for the development of free and independent media. These are the journalists, the media owners, politicians, nongovernmental organizations and science.

Matthias Barner
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Sofia, December 2010

In the last few years, the relationship between media and politics in Bulgaria has changed significantly. The rise of new political actors has also brought about a change in the attitude towards the media. Politics has become much more mediatized. Starting from television, this process soon spread to the press and the internet. In practice, the distance between politics and media has become much 'shorter'. Ever closer to show business, politics has begun to be represented in the media in ways typical of popular culture. Whereas there were such symptoms in previous periods, too, today we are witnessing their easy victory over alternative repertoires. What is happening with the 'Fourth Estate' in this context? To what extent is it managing to keep its independence? Do the media maintain a critical position towards those in power? What are the metamorphoses of censorship today?

The answers to those questions are as interesting as they are difficult. The Bulgarian media landscape today is well-developed – in quantitative terms, it is even overcrowded. It is increasingly difficult to speak of media 'in general'. The market is strongly stratified. Present on it are influential foreign investors as well as ambitious local players, boulevard titles as well as newspapers claiming to offer serious journalism, fair-weather media as well as media that consistently defend their own views, be it at the price of marginalization. The different tendencies are often in conflict, which makes the picture not only tense but also very erratic. That is why any analysis must take into account numerous nuances before generalizing them in an overall picture. All the more so, considering that the Bulgarian media environment has become increasingly complex, while the disappearing boundaries between the different types of media are calling into question the adequacy of traditional terms and concepts. This trend has made its way from technology into business, leading to the rise of media empires that offer information services in all possible forms.

This book focuses on the processes that took place in Bulgaria in the last year and a half: from the parliamentary elections in mid-2009 to the end of 2010. This period was very eventful. There were changes in the ownership of emblematic media. News Corporation and WAZ moved out of Bulgaria. Their businesses were bought by new investors. After the Council for Electronic Media (the national regulatory authority for broadcast media) conducted competitive procedures for the relevant positions, the public-service Bulgarian National Television and Bulgarian National Radio now have new directors general. The drafting of a new media law was initiated. The government asked

the media whether they felt free. The secret services began to live an unexpectedly active media life, following the script of scandal. There were positive changes towards guaranteeing transparency of media ownership. The recession on the advertising market continued. The analyses of those and many other subjects in this book were produced by experts at the Media Monitoring Lab at Foundation Media Democracy. The authors include some of the most eminent media analysts in Bulgaria as well as young researchers who represent the new generation in media studies.

In preparing this book we had the pleasure of working in partnership with our colleagues from the Media Program South East Europe of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung. The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung is a well-establised institution with rich experience in promoting the democratization of the media landscape in South East Europe. This is also the main objective of the present joint project. This book starts from the presumption of the need for constant monitoring of the media sphere, for long-term diagnosis of the public sphere. The monitoring of the press was commissioned to Bulgarian research and consulting agency Market Links, with which we have a well-established partnership. Sophisticated techniques, including the resources of the Europe Media Monitor (an electronic media monitoring system) were used to interpret the developments on the internet, where traditional media are now also effectively present. The television environment was monitored by experts at the Media Monitoring Lab. The analyses offered here used a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods.

Our experience to date shows that in Bulgaria communication between media experts and key figures in the media is rare. There is a need for greater partnership in order to improve communication between them and overcome their seemingly deliberate isolation from each other. Critical analyses rarely reach the people in media business. It is no coincidence that the initiatives of Foundation Media Democracy in the last few years have sought to create spaces of dialogue between researchers and their object of research: the people who work in the media. The personal analyses included in this book are designed for a wider informed public, including the actors in media and politics who shape the relationship between those two important public spheres. The quality of social life in Bulgaria depends more or less precisely on this relationship.

Georgi Lozanov
Orlin Spassov

The Law: The Media's Good Grandfather

2010. Bulgaria continued its slide in the annual World Press Freedom Index compiled by Reporters Without Borders. The Index shows a steady downward trend in Bulgaria's ranking since 2006, when the country was in an enviable 35th place. By 2007, Bulgaria had dropped to 51st place, then to 59th in 2008, 68th in 2009, and 70th in 2010. In just four years, according to Reporters Without Borders, the press in Bulgaria became two times less free. Furthermore, this decline over the years can hardly be explained by a particular political, economic or any other framework, or by ongoing scandals or momentary attitudes. It is obvious that the reason for this, along with all articulated and unarticulated problems facing the media and all local and global crises, should be sought not only and not so much in the actual public events than in the very structure of the public sphere, in a 'system-level error'.

Actually, one does not have to look hard to find the reason. The error has long since been identified in professional debates: in a rare show of consensus, Bulgarian media experts agree that there are serious flaws in the regulatory framework and insist on a complete overhaul of the effective Radio and Television Act (RTA), which is becoming increasingly incapable of regulating social relations in the sphere (on the prime minister's orders, an expert group has been appointed to draft a new law).

Furthermore, the issue of regulation has moved beyond the familiar ground of radio and television: *for the first time since the beginning of the transition in Bulgaria, newspaper publishers agreed that similarly to the activity of radio and television broadcasters, their activity should also be regulated, albeit partly, by special law.* Before, anyone who dared to suggest such an idea was subjected to unanimous criticism by all major newspapers regardless of the competition between them. Now, however, they themselves proposed introducing provisions into the Compulsory Deposit of Copies of Printed and Other Works Act to guarantee transparency of ownership down to the natural-person level. Parliament unanimously passed the relevant amendments to the Act on 7 September 2010.

Put most simply, this became possible because newspaper publishers felt threatened by what has come to be known in Bulgaria as Irena Krasteva's media empire,[1] which had gradually acquired (in addition to several television channels and without necessarily being the de jure owner) the national dailies *Monitor* and *Telegraf*, the sports newspapers *Express*, *Meridian Mach* and *Zasada*, the *Politika* weekly, the regional newspapers *Borba* and *Vyara*, and 50% of the shares in *Weekend*, the highest-circulation yellow weekly in Bulgaria. Actually, its market share and influence in the press neither were, nor were likely to become, bigger than those of the newspapers owned by the German media group WAZ (Westdeutsche Algemeine Zeitung), but the scandal around the German company's monopoly position in Bulgaria had long since faded from public attention. This scandal blew up more than a decade ago and eventually died down after the Commission for the Protection of Competition and the Supreme Administrative Court generously ruled that WAZ did not have a monopoly position. And then, no matter what people thought about the conquests of the WAZ empire, it was at least clear who owned it. Conversely, the real owner of the Krasteva empire was the subject mostly of speculations that easily transcended the realm of private business and ranged from the Turkish to the Bulgarian State.

In May 2010 the Union of Publishers in Bulgaria publicly accused the Krasteva empire of being de facto financed by the public purse because it was funded (through loans) by the Corporate Commercial Bank, in which 48% of the funds of Bulgarian state-owned companies are kept. In other words, Bulgarian taxpayers were unknowingly paying for those media and the State was using their money to buy influence in them (as indicated by the U-turns in their editorial policies serving the powers that be). From the point of view of the democratic 'economy of freedom', this directly injured the interest of taxpayers – as well as of the newspapers outside 'the empire', which had suddenly become so concerned about Bulgarian taxpayers.

In fact, the print newspapers' fear of themselves appeared long before the struggle between an established and an emerging monopolist. More than five years ago, the Union of Publishers in Bulgaria sought, for the first time, statutory protection (back then still within the framework of self-regulation) against the rise – both in terms of circulation and influence – of the yellow press. It even initiated the adoption of a Code of Ethics of the Bulgarian Media along with the relevant commissions on ethics in the print and broadcast media that would guarantee the observance of the Code. The hope was that this would enable those who followed the rules of the trade to protect themselves against unfair competition from those who profited from violating the rules.

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[1] New Bulgarian Media Group, owned by Irena Krasteva, a former civil servant-turned-tycoon rumoured to be connected to the DPS (Movement for Rights and Freedoms), widely regarded as an ethnic Turkish party.

The framework of the problem is well-known: the transition did not establish a clear boundary between yellow and serious journalism in Bulgaria and made their repertoires increasingly similar so that the boom in the former was largely brought about by the latter. The yellow newspapers turned out to be like Frankenstein's monster for the more serious newspapers which had become resigned to their own hybrid character. The huge circulation of newspapers like *Weekend* came according to the proverb that 'as you sow, so shall you reap' and reflected the absence of long-term and influential projects in the sphere of the quality press.

The preconditions for this were and are in the social environment itself. As well as, recently, in the internet which has established a new standard of freedom proportionate to the anonymity of the speaker – a freedom that only the yellow press now could ('had the capacity' to) reproduce in 'hard copy'. In fact, *the yellow press and the internet, both of which had acquired, albeit in a different way, the status of territories not subject to norms, without knowing or wanting it joined forces in an indirect plot against the hybrid press* and more or less 'expropriated' the heated debates, extreme positions, personal attacks, scandalous issues… And, above all, the style of writing according to the expectations and language of the reader, which was the proclaimed ideology and trademark of the 168 Chasa Press Group (publisher of the *168 Chasa* weekly and the *24 Chasa* daily which first introduced this style at the beginning of the transition in Bulgaria) and of the other newspapers that followed its lead.

This genealogically and technologically encouraged 'expropriation' of rhetoric was additionally facilitated by the financial crisis which the well-positioned national dailies decided to avoid by taking a moderate, conformist step back from criticism both of the government and of the business community. The delicate moment came when the government launched campaigns against one or another suspicious businessperson or against parallel institutions of power such as, say, the President of the Republic – then the media had to compensate for their compulsory inclusion in such campaigns by publishing PR pieces in favour of the 'victims'. But these were just obstacles along the way; the main problem remained the self-defence strategy chosen by the media, a strategy that failed when it came to competition – the marginality (rejection of official formality, of 'political correctness' and even of civility) of the yellow press and the internet changed its direction and, in a communicative respect, affected the more serious print newspapers, ousting them from the centre of the public sphere where they had had a guaranteed place for years on end. Thus, the opinion of newspapers like *Weekend* or *Galeria* began to matter in the institutional sphere (this was unthinkable before 2010), social networking sites began to put issues on the

public agenda and to form lasting attitudes, while the better-known bloggers began to acquire the authority of experts, including from the TV screen.

Some of those affected reacted by fighting for territory: refusing to simply give up the sensational approaches they had mastered even at the beginning of the transition, they continued to rely on them, even if in a 'tamer' version, that of lifestyle journalism. Probably encouraged by the fact that it was a weekly, *168 Chasa* was the only newspaper to abandon its status as a current affairs newspaper and to turn into an openly yellow newspaper. For their part, the publishers of other affected newspapers simply began to look for a way to withdraw from the battle with minimal losses and thus WAZ, the group which owned the newspapers that had created the model of the hybrid press, stepped down from the local scene at the end of 2010.

A brief overview of the outcomes of the competitive battles in the Bulgarian press at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century will show that the old 'print' players can still resist the rise of the yellow press because they know and have always used the latter's weapons, but feel much more helpless with regard to the internet. It is true that from the position of their journalistic experience they are trying to enter cyberspace with online versions of their newspapers – today no national newspaper can afford the luxury of appearing 'on paper' only. But, firstly, *Bulgarian newspapers seem to be afraid of their own 'electronic shadow' – they seem to be afraid they might disappear in it*, and the movement of the market in confirmation of their fears faces those that are leaders in internet communication (such as the *Dnevnik* daily, for example) with the risk of losing their print versions very soon. And secondly, in the general case, the websites of the established print newspapers have turned out to be just another projection of their difficult adaptation to an environment that has been changed dramatically by the new technologies. For *if one simply uploads on the internet content created for communicative purposes outside the internet, such content is bound to fade away*. The internet is not so much and not only a new information transmission technology; it is also a new cultural project for the generation and socialization of information, a project where 'anything goes'. Conversely, traditional media – in all freedom of speech doctrines – identify themselves in one way or another with the restrictions imposed on them, regardless of whether the latter are regarded as a form of censorship or as a form of civility.

One reaction to this asymmetry are the periodic attempts at regulating the internet, where 'the dirty work' naturally has to be done by politicians – both because this is within their remit and because they would benefit the most from possible control over this part of the public sphere. Through elections, the formation of public attitudes towards them directly turns into a power resource.

It is no coincidence that the latest attempt at enforcing the same regulations for the internet as those in force for broadcast and print media in Bulgaria (an attempt that caused public outrage and therefore remained confined only to a debate in the media) concerned precisely pre-election situations and was discussed in the summer of 2010 in the context of the drafting of a new Electoral Code. The idea was to prohibit the publication of anonymous materials, to obligate the media to give right of reply, to introduce sanctions for defamation of candidates, and so on.

The examples that were given of abuse of 'radical liberalism' on the internet (including abuse directed at the other mass media) usually sound convincing and seem to have the potential to mobilize the Bulgarian public in favour of imposing norms on the internet as well. Especially when it comes to the groups of people who do not use the internet and regard it according to the opinions expressed outside the latter. But except for openly authoritarian societies, both in Bulgaria and in the rest of the world such offensives are faced (for the time being at least) with insurmountable obstacles at several levels.

Firstly, identifying the culprits that are liable under the law in global cyberspace is an unrewarding task which requires, at the least, creating something like a virtual Interpol.

Secondly, *we are witnessing what I will call, paraphrasing Jean Baudrillard, a 'strike of concepts'* and especially of the concept of 'media'. The proponents of the need to expand the new Electoral Code's scope of regulation to cover the internet note the following: 'So far the internet has not been regarded as a medium and is not subject to regulation in Bulgaria, and it is high time this situation was rectified.'[2] But could this be done precisely by proclaiming the internet, too, to be a medium? Isn't the opposite truer – that thanks to the internet, in the foreseeable future it will be impossible to speak of media because the lines between them will have been blurred and people will be using 'mixes' equidistant from the press, radio and television? Isn't this already happening with the ever more persistent substitution in European law of the term 'media' by 'audiovisual services' or even 'information services' so as to account also for print publications? Incidentally, it is for that very same reason that in their effort to avoid regulation blogs do not want to be recognized as media despite the authority that their recognition as media can bring them.

Thirdly, and most importantly, despite the awareness of the risks associated with the internet as a vast, unregulated communicative territory, *the collective traumas from all violations of the freedom of speech to date, especially in*

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[2] See *Monitor*, 21 June 2010.

societies that have lived through communism, have turned the internet into a 'symbolic victory', an image of desire, an island of a long-awaited revenge. And this abstractly presupposed 'heroism of the messages', whatever their content, offsets the possible harm they may cause to politicians, journalists or even ordinary citizens. That is why here norms can come less 'by decree' than naturally, in the form of *gradual equalization of the 'regulatory pressure' between two converging public spheres, those of the media and of the medium that is not a medium.* Actually, this process is already underway. On the one hand, traditional providers of audiovisual services who want to expand their audience to younger people are disseminating content via the internet, thereby bringing regulation into the latter and 'contaminating' it from the inside. On the other hand, they want to remain competitive in a much more free environment and they are therefore calling for liberalization of their own regulation. The commercially most visible step in this respect was the permission of product placement on TV – in the foreseeable future, this will make commercial breaks, which are limited in time and place, a thing of the past.

But although tomorrow there will be less and less reasons to divide the media space into that of the press, radio, television, and the internet, today everyone in Bulgaria is eager to avoid the common-denominator approach, let alone the possibility of introducing a single law on information services. The Bulgarian media are trying to save themselves on their own. While the Bulgarian 'print press' has delicately opened the door to lawmakers, letting them in so that they will protect it, the internet is ready to resort to public protests to keep lawmakers away from its turf. For their part, Bulgarian radio and television, which may have lost their leading positions in the development of communications but seem not to feel really threatened by the internet, are trying to straddle the fence: 'as a rule', they declare they want a brand new law that will at long last take them into the digital age but, at the same time, they resist any change that may affect them directly. That is why they are overtly or covertly sabotaging any attempt to rewrite the effective Radio and Television Act, which was indeed capable of guaranteeing the successful end of negotiations with the European Union on the chapter on 'Culture and Audiovisual Policy' during the process of Bulgaria's accession to the EU but has now turned into a 'quilt' patched with twenty-six amendments meant to cater to the openly conflicting interests of the lobbies that brought them about. Thus, the stakes have become even higher: if the present government, unlike the previous two, succeeds in proposing a modern – in terms of philosophy, terminology and good practices – law on the media, it is certain to get an honorary place in their contemporary history. But until then – along with the hybrid character of the serious press and the unproven quality of information in the yellow press as well as inevitably in large areas of cyberspace – Bulgarian broadcast media will also contribute

significantly to the 'system error' that accounts for the declining freedom of speech in Bulgaria.

The major challenge comes from the growing discrepancy between the regulatory framework provided by the effective law and actual radio and television practices. *The programme licences, especially those for radio stations, often have little if anything in common in their programme profile and programme characteristics with what is actually broadcast on the air*. That is because soon after the Radio and Television Act came into force, those programme licences were won in local and regional competitive procedures but, under pressure from the market, they were later taken over by the so-called radio chains (or radio networks) broadcasting one and the same programme everywhere. Whereas such networks largely dominate radio communication in Bulgaria at present, they do not exist by law. *Social relations in the sphere have moved far ahead – or, as regulation purists would put it, to the side – while the law is living with memories*. This creates a feeling of shaken legitimacy, of the danger of a new 'piracy period' like the one Bulgarian media were in before the passage of the Radio and Television Act, but this time caused by legislative melancholy. This feeling is intensified by the now proverbial difficulties in negotiations between radio and television broadcasters and holders of copyright and neighbouring rights – difficulties created, in their turn, by obvious lacunae in the regulatory framework. The latter impede the protection of intellectual property in Bulgaria and, more generally, serve as an excuse for its cultural belittlement.

It is another matter that the refusal to regulate radio networks endangers the creation of profiles targeting local and regional audiences or smaller communities and, hence, programme diversity as a whole in Bulgaria. The year 2010 will be remembered for the strong commercialization of content and the fierce competitive battles not only and not so much in the sphere of radio as in the sphere of commercial television, caused by the growing investments in the media market combined with stagnation on the advertising market. This has led to *the proliferation of tautological formats and audiovisual products that scandalize public expectations in their effort to meet them at any cost*. Big Brother Family became the emblematic victim of this paradox when public disapproval turned for the first time against voyeurism and ultimately decreased the ratings of the show. Such reality shows cause guilty pleasure but when they also cause a public debate that ultimately makes people feel more guilt than pleasure they no longer have much to count on. Either way, it seems that *in 2010 Bulgarian television exhausted the communicative resource of the established reality shows and their singing and dance cover versions in Bulgaria, and from now on the game will be dictated less by licensed producers than by the local creative community*.

In addition to the partial de-legitimation and tendency towards tautology in the programmes of private media, another serious problem at the 'system level' in Bulgaria is the absence of legal provisions that categorically guarantee transparency of ownership and impose restrictions on the concentration of media ownership. Moreover, what is urgently needed are *specialized* legal provisions – because *information is not just a commodity but also a right*.

In 1998, as a member of the National Council for Radio and Television (NCRT), the then regulatory authority for broadcast media in Bulgaria, I ventured to say that in order to regulate the media we must first take their owners out of their SUVs with tinted windows and see their faces. Today tinted windows are more or less a thing of the past but the faces of media owners – of the natural not of the legal persons owning media – often remain murky silhouettes. Whereas it is true that bringing them to light requires complex legal work, it requires above all categorical political will – and the fact that the government has publicly declared such will is encouraging.

It is true that financial capital has its own ideology and that once it is invested in the media this ideology becomes more or less part of their message. But not even this is the main reason for guaranteeing transparency of media ownership down to the natural-person level. Such transparency is an obligatory precondition for the next step – introducing real limits to concentration of media ownership. Considering that the Bulgarian market is small and poor, I do not think that anyone can seriously argue for free, unlimited, protecting freedom of speech, acquisition of broadcast media, newspapers, distribution companies, multiplexes, and so on. And what is at issue here is by no means only fair competition in business, which is no doubt within the remit of the Commission for the Protection of Competition – what is also at issue is the *quality* of journalism. For if you do good journalism the risk of being fired or forced to resign is very high, especially in a society in transition. That is why it is very important to make sure that when *you go round knocking on the door of other media in search of a job you will not be invariably met by one and the same owner*.

Classic censorship of topics and names has long since given way to a media pluralism censored by ownership. Private media are not required to ensure internal pluralism – in every single broadcast they can rely only on the so-called external pluralism, on the clash of different points of view not within one medium but between media. This is supposed to be guaranteed precisely by the differences in their ownership – by the limits to concentration of media ownership. I firmly believe that setting such limits by law will of itself begin to improve Bulgaria's ranking in the World Press Freedom Index.

Last but not least, one of the reasons for Bulgaria's fall in this Index is the crisis of the public-service media in Bulgaria, which has nothing to do with the global crisis – here it is permanent and affects Bulgarian National Television (BNT) at times and Bulgarian National Radio (BNR) at others. In 2010 the crisis hit the BNT with such severe economic consequences that there was even talk that the BNT might go bankrupt. This of course is impossible – it is tantamount to the State's going bankrupt; furthermore, it would not be fair because, apart from the personal blame, the cause lies in the model itself.

Since the Radio and Television Act was passed in Bulgaria more than twelve years ago, the BNR and the BNT have remained a victim of contradictory treatment: while 'on paper' they are supposed to be public-service media, they are in fact something in-between commercial media that compete on the advertising market and state media such as they have been historically. In fact, they are more state media than commercial media, insofar as the ruling political majorities do not lose their influence in them and, moreover, their advertising revenues have been declining steadily in the case of the BNT and have always been negligible in the financing of the BNR. This contradictory treatment comes from the fact that the two public-service media remain one of the least reformed sectors in Bulgaria – both in terms of management and of financing. Ever since communist times, they have been receiving annual budgets determined according to unclear criteria and given as a 'lump sum' to the director general who then distributes them top down along the pyramidal structure. As a result, both the director general and his or her subordinates regard those funds as their own and this blocks the reform because any questioning of this status quo is met with fierce resistance. The BNT has recently been much more active in this respect simply because at the moment the BNR does not have 'money problems'.

But from the point of view of taxpayers, who are both viewers and listeners, the picture is seen in inverted perspective: they pay for an information service without being asked exactly what kind of service they want or whether they want it at all. It is true that this applies to many things in Bulgaria, but media communication is an intimate process aimed at forming opinions, including opinions about media communication itself.

For the reform of the BNR and the BNT to commence at long last, it is necessary that their programming work be preceded by a clearly formulated, announced and discussed public mission. Moreover, a public mission formulated not at the level of abstraction and slogans, but as subject to direct realization in audiovisual products. If until 2007 such a public mission could remain only a recommendation, since Bulgaria joined the EU it has become obligatory and is

required to be formulated in an authoritative statutory act, preferably in a law. And *state subsidies that are accountable and subject to control based on the 'net cost principle' should be granted only to the broadcasts that fulfill this mission*. Otherwise they are regarded as state aid, which is prohibited in the European Union.

Furthermore, it is necessary to apply a 'proportionality test' ('Amsterdam test') requiring preliminary evaluation of the democratic, social and cultural value of services due to be introduced in the public-service media. The rest of their programmes (which are not directly related to their mission) can be financed from advertising or revenue outside of the national budget. It is only in this way that despite their dual financing, the BNR and the BNT will not be unfair competitors of commercial broadcasters but *will play with the State according to the tasks assigned to them by society, and will play on the advertising market according to the rules valid for everyone (without subsidies), without being able to move money from one pocket to another*. Generally, behind the seemingly trivial question of who pays and for what, lies the big question – the question about the raison d'être of public-service media and whether viewers and listeners recognize them as their 'own'.

Here we are not making personal accusations against anyone, we are only noting the negative effects of an inertia that is increasingly distancing Bulgaria from the EU requirements regarding public-service media. To this we must add the shelved project for establishing a Radio and Television Fund that would independently finance the BNR and the BNT. The BNR and the BNT, however, stubbornly refused to have such a Fund set up because they were jealous that it would provide financial support, albeit in minimal amounts, for public-service projects of commercial media as well – regardless of the fact that the public-service media are permitted to broadcast advertisements which, in turn, has caused resistance from private media. Generally, *a new law cannot be passed unless the public-service and private media reach a modicum of consensus, instead of the public-service media claiming that they alone are entitled to state subsidies and the private media calling for the prohibition of advertising on public-service media*.

Another 'system-level' error lies in the weak – in terms both of relative share and efficiency and effectiveness – statutory support of digitalization. It is true that amendments meant to pave the way for digitalization were at long last introduced both in the Radio and Television Act and in the Electronic Communications Act, but those amendments de facto blocked rather than facilitated the digitalization process. On the one hand, they outlined *a surprisingly wide (from the point of view of European practices) range of television programmes entitled by law to must-carry*, which even led to an

inspection from the European Commission. On the other hand, they did not provide sufficient motivation for broadcasters to take advantage of this right, and the problem of the cost of the process remained outstanding. In such a situation the only thing that could be done was to postpone the planned deadline for completing digitalization. And this is what was done.

But media time flows ever faster… With the withdrawal of WAZ, after that of Minos Kiriakou and Rupert Murdoch who also sold their Bulgarian television channels, 2010 saw *the end of an era – that of big foreign investors in the Bulgarian media sector who came to profit from as well as to encourage the convergence of democracy and the market in the media*. From now onwards the liberal values in communication will be based less and less on marketing strategies and more and more on technological convenience. Information services will not seduce, they will simply be 'at hand' according to the catalogue of wishes declared in advance. And although this may not happen immediately, the change of the players who will make it happen has already begun.

Redefining Social Roles:
Media Heroes and Narratives of the Transition

Reading newspapers means living out stories...
Prof. Karl Bücher, early 20th century

Journalism is the production of news stories…
Prof. David Nordfors, early 21st century

Communication has been transformed into heavy industry.
Umberto Eco

The Autumn of Scandals

The period in which this text was written (October-December 2010) was dominated by scandals, street protests, demonstrations, and discontent of everyone with everyone else in Bulgaria: of the prime minister with the president and vice versa; of the public with the government because of the growing economic and financial stagnation; of the government with the public because of the latter's 'offensive' unwillingness to show understanding with respect to the dire legacy of the previous government and the global economic crisis. The period was filled with scandal after scandal, each one bigger than the last. As each new scandal broke, the previous ones quickly faded from people's memory. This brought the situation to the point of absurdity as public opinion swung, in just a week or two, from frustration caused by the successive new scandal to indifference and apathy towards the previous ones because of the obvious impossibility of influencing the processes in Bulgarian society in any way. In this situation, the civic agenda turned into a mirage and the sporadic expressions of civil society (whose voice was drowned in the avalanche of scandals) did not particularly worry the government. Meanwhile, the *Weekend* weekly increased its size to 94 pages, a record in Bulgarian print journalism. Several major sales on the media market led to strange configurations; there was a change of directors of broadcast media and a restructuring of programme schedules. Another weekly was launched: *Tornado,* which promised readers unexpected culminations and denouements in the constant stories of the

transition as well as presentation of long-known 'heroes' in new social (media) roles.

With the rise of the internet, media reality has become a parallel world that accompanies us in real life 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Furthermore, media reality has proved that it can push the ontological to the periphery and blur the lines between the real and the virtual. Narratives about the world are increasingly substituting the world, and the mega-narratives about passions, emotions and conflicts create a feeling that we are living and participating in the drama (the melodrama, comedy, history) written by the media in daily installments. It is somewhere in the space between *narrative* and *heavy industry*, between blogs and classic news pages or newscasts that we can probably find the specific features of contemporary journalism. Everything is text, Umberto Eco said years ago. Everything is information, Scott Lash argued in 2002.

Or Perhaps Everything is Narrative?

Today the new media allow everyone to be simultaneously a narrator (to search for, create and disseminate on the web all sorts of stories) and a reader/listener/viewer. Everyone can be a communicator and recipient, creator and user of different texts in the same real time. Everyone can be simultaneously an author and a protagonist, changing roles many times a day, each time presenting themselves in a different way, multiplying the Self and accommodating multiple identities within the Self. Whereas to the TV generation this may look schizophrenic, to the internet generation it is a reality reduced to banal life and anyone who does not share (or understand) it has no chance of being invited to play even a walk-on role on the stage of the social network. Anyone who wants to tell their story can do so; moreover, they are not required to be objective and impartial recorders of social facts. On the web I do not simply record the facts I am witnessing – much more often, I write about my presence in social facts, about my relationship with other participants in concrete situations, about my emotional experiences and subjective assessments of the facts I encounter in reality. Today more than ever, the information offered by traditional media is moving away from the impartial nomination of social facts and turning into an all-encompassing narrative. Personal and specialized blogs as well as social networking sites have imposed a specific type of journalism that creates its own genre forms – terms like 'blog genre', 'blog fiction' or 'blogvertising' are already in circulation. Pressured by market mechanisms and the new media constellation, newspapers, radio and television are increasingly following the model of narrative fiction, inventing plots and building more or less stable images of media actors. Instead of asserting yourself in a concrete, real social role which presupposes possession of cognitive (the future belongs to the cognitariat, which has replaced the proletariat, says Peter F. Drucker) and

volitional resources, as well as of capacity for social adaptation and emotional/psychological stability with respect to the environment, you are increasingly tempted to create (construct, fashion) a world of your own choice, to write yourself a role you can change as many times as you want to. Voluntarily or involuntarily, in the last decade traditional media have been increasingly functioning like playwrights, and not like documentary biographers and analysts of the transition in Bulgaria.

Sociologist Petko Simeonov, a popular figure and active participant in events in Bulgaria in the first years of the transition after 10 November 1989, declared a long time ago that the explanation of the transition depends on which narrative will prevail. In the last twenty years so many different narratives of the transition have appeared in Bulgaria that it would be difficult for an outside observer to get an idea of what really happened and changed in the lives of Bulgarians. The Bulgarian transition is pedantically marked by multiple sociological surveys, it is narrated by political scientists, sociologists, economists, writers, journalists, media experts; historians are, for the time being, more reserved about narrating the transition. For example, the narratives of the transition by writers like Teodora Dimova, Georgi Gospodinov or Georgi Tenev are entirely different from those by Hristo Kalchev, Alexander Tomov or Vladimir Zarev. Nor can the researcher ignore the characters populating the stories of journalists like Kevork Kevorkian, Valeria Veleva, Tosho Toshev, Svetoslava Tadarakova or Bobbie Tsankov, to name but a few. All narratives, however, represent the new spaces where the stories and actors are set. Through the narratives of the transition, one can clearly see how in two decades one and the same actors have been moving at first sight chaotically in the new age. A second, more careful look will reveal the economic predetermination of this movement – the 'actors' switch from role to role (and from political party to political party) without worrying that they might find themselves in a situation of social inadequacy. Political travesty has taken over the media, unleashing a wave of memoir-writing. The interview is undergoing something like a renaissance, public confession has displaced commentary, subjective evaluation has drowned out expert opinion; we have seen how particular actors on the Bulgarian political scene have unashamedly expanded, rewritten or, if politically expedient, even reinvented their biographies.

The New Constellation of Social Roles

The transformation of social roles during the transition in Bulgaria is difficult to decode even for the careful observer; to the outside observer, I believe it remains an enigma. We have seen, for instance, how a king became prime minister, but in some spaces his role was marked by the term of address 'Your Majesty', in others by 'Mr Saxe-Coburg-Gotha' and in still others simply by 'Simeon

Borisov'. Each of those spaces received media coverage. And while we believed that our life was difficult because we were compelled to live in a hitherto unknown (or at least strange) chronotope, while we were trying to guess *which* social role was adequate to the new – in historical and social terms – places where we ended up after the successive elections or political/economic/mafia deals, Jean Baudrillard laconically concluded that we lived in another space, that of catastrophe. According to Baudrillard, the East European countries 'can be wiped out physically and morally, but not penetrated. … [T]hey live in another space – shattered by catastrophe. They will never come back into ours.' Here I choose to quote Baudrillard because it is he who claims that '[w]hen the State ceases to be the State, the cook ceases to be the cook' (Baudrillard 1994: 48-49; 52). I think that the problems in Bulgaria's difficult transition directly stem from the fact that, for more than four decades, we saw what happens when Lenin's famous words that 'every cook can govern' are put into practice in all spheres of social life.

The classic social roles found in advanced democracies cannot be implemented in a society where the leading role of *The Party* in all spheres of life is the fundamental principle of state government while the aesthetic world, so important for the spirit of a society, is founded on the hazy postulates of *socialist realism*.

Redefining roles and creating their media equivalent is all the more difficult in former totalitarian countries, where the processes of objective emergence, existence and self-regulation of social roles and models of behaviour were repressed. The dominant role in totalitarian countries is that of the party apparatchik and functionary, all other roles being derived from and, in different ways, subordinate to it. The paradox (and drama of such societies) is that even traditionally autonomous roles such as those of the expert and of the intellectual are under total control. Nothing exists outside of the political doctrine and diktat of ideology and, in this sense, it is impossible to speak of the existence of clear social roles, resulting from objective historical and social processes, in Bulgaria before 10 November 1989. But when, instead of class social roles, there are pseudo-roles, when things are not directed by the free market, economy and free will but by apparatchiks with dubious education and culture, then the question of exactly which roles are redefined in the period of transition is of key importance. This sets new tasks for researchers. Unless we define the main actors in totalitarian society and the relations between them as well as their extrapolation in media and fiction texts, we cannot understand why in Bulgaria in the post-totalitarian period the *mutra* and the *mutresa*[1] have become a role model for

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[1] *Mutra* (plural *mutri*): literally, 'ugly face', a term for the organized crime mobsters, many of them ex-wrestlers, who made their fortunes in the post-communist anarchy of the early 1990s in Bulgaria, running protection

many teenagers, and why the nouveaux riches and white-collar yuppies imported from the City of London are lumped together and have become synonymous with corruption, mafia, plundering, national treason.

Constructing a new identity and new social roles is possible if there is a clear previous model which defined clear relations adequate to the social and political structure of the State. To reformat something, you need to have a format whose parameters are measurable. It was only to be expected that the transition would set a new value-framework that would presuppose also a new type of stratification in society. In Bulgaria's case, however, it turned out that one of the significant preconditions was absent: namely, the existence of autonomous and clearly defined previous roles. Erving Goffman defines social role 'as the enactment of rights and duties attached to a given status' (Goffman 1959: 16). This, however, does not happen in totalitarian societies. In such societies there are two distinct poles: the *Party*, the holder of all power to which all state structures are strictly subordinate, and the *masses*, whose main task is to carry out all orders given by the Party. The differentiation of social roles, the need for emancipating some of them from politics and power and regulating the relevant rights and duties within the *masses* is not of significant importance – here serving the *Party* is simultaneously a right and a duty; the individual must feel flattered that they can serve the *Party*. Considering the specificity of the façade democracy in the former socialist countries, I think that the definitions of the term 'face' or 'façade' introduced by Goffman can help us understand the situation (Goffman 1959). The façade of the communist party was a fact in itself which assumed the functions of all social roles. Furthermore, the existing social roles were devoid of content, they were pseudo-roles, something like social supernumeraries that played a supporting role vis-à-vis the main actor. Within the masses it was not particularly important exactly which social strata were represented by the different social roles – those of citizens and workers, of peasants or of the so-called scientific and creative intelligentsia. What was most important was that the masses corresponded to the definition of the word, that is to say, that they were literally as massive as possible. For when situated on such massive spaces, the façade became impenetrable and unshakeable. Only the Party and the senior party *nomenklatura* could change the façade. The masses practically had a single real role, that of assimilating and representing the façade in the best possible way. The totalitarian State used vast resources to maintain the façade, and the media were undoubtedly part of those resources. Like all totalitarian institutions, the media were also essentially para-institutions, they were deprived of their immanently inherent specific features and functions, and their main purpose was to serve the Party. Thus, the media were deprived of the possibility to create social and culture models and stereotypes; they only

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rackets thinly disguised as security firms or insurance companies – 'gangsters', 'Mafia types', 'underworld bosses', 'mugs' and 'thugs' all at once. *Mutresa* (plural *mutresi*): the wives and girlfriends of he-*mutri*.

informed the masses about the models created in the party headquarters. It was the party headquarters that invented heroes, myths and stories, and set the model for the only possible relations between them. This was simply one of the constructs created by the party brain trust. It was not the media that created images. The media's only concern was to dress the matrix in appropriate content. The Party did not care whether the public would find out that the media heroes did not have an adequate counterpart in reality; the only thing that mattered to it was creating heroes that had to be emulated.

To my mind, the absence of a clear previous model in Bulgaria is not due only to four decades of totalitarian rule. Emmanuel Todd tried to explain the ideological system adopted in a country's government through the family structure historically prevailing in that country. According to him, there are eight family types, and the type that prevailed in the countries attracted to communism was the so-called 'exogamous community family structure'. Todd argued that this structure traditionally prevailed in Russia and claimed a similar traditional structure for Yugoslavia, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Hungary, Finland, Albania, central Italy, China, Vietnam, Cuba and northern Italy. He argued that these countries were attracted to communism because 'communism is a transference to the party state of the moral traits and regulatory mechanisms of the exogamous community family' (cited in Hofstede 2001: 246). At the same time, Prof. Nikolay Genchev's analysis of the social-psychological types in Bulgarian history shows that Bulgarian society lagged far behind the advanced European democracies. The time between Bulgaria's liberation from Ottoman rule in 1878 and the 9 September 1944 coup d'état that led to the establishment of the communist regime was objectively insufficient for forming classic autonomous social roles of the western type, and this circumstance facilitated the rapid establishment of the communist façade. The absence of clearly differentiated and stable role models after Bulgaria's 1878 liberation facilitated their reformulation and substitution by pseudo-roles after 9 September 1944. The absence of a stable democracy was easily replaced by a façade democracy. Prof. Genchev argued that because of objective historical preconditions, authentic images of the bourgeoisie, the proletariat or the intelligentsia were never formed in Bulgaria. By their origins, all of them remained bound to the village and the peasant mentality. 'The peasant mentality of the non-peasant social strata would remain a typical trait in the development of the dynamics and structure of the Bulgarian national psyche until contemporary times. This also determined the "peasant" behaviour of all non-peasant strata of Bulgarian society' (Genchev 1987: 77). The works of other authors who have studied Bulgarian society in the twentieth century also give us reason to claim that all social roles were more or less characterized by a trait that can be generally defined as *rusticity*.

Before we evaluate how the Bulgarian media represent or define social roles and relationships, we must outline the sample scheme of the main social roles in Bulgarian society. It will then become clear that there are actors and narratives which have nothing in common with the classic roles in contemporary western democracies. It is important to trace the distribution of the social roles that made up the role repertoire of the regime in the totalitarian State: senior communist party functionary, apparatchik (those in the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party were at the top of the hierarchy; the apparatchiks in the former district and city committees of the BCP also held key power positions), party secretary (at all levels of the party hierarchy), party worker, agent of the DS (State Security, Bulgaria's communist secret police). The state of proto-democracy lasted longer than most people in Bulgaria expected (according to some analysts, it was deliberately extended in time), and the result was perfect transformation of the old social roles in the role repertoire of the regime into new ones: businessperson, banker, entrepreneur, boss of an organized crime group, political leader, media owner. Owing to a good education, fluency in foreign languages, frequent trips abroad, possession of an enormous amount of information and social contacts which ordinary citizens did not even suspect existed, the *DS agent* turned out to be the most adaptive social role in Bulgaria. Members of the *secret services* practically occupied key positions in all social spheres and communities.

As noted earlier, media reality defines a parallel world and this world is often more aggressive and more difficult to accept and assimilate than the real world. That is precisely why the social roles and models aggressively promoted by the media every day need to be studied and analyzed. It is important to bear in mind that it is entirely possible that a model constructed by the media may eventually become a reality in social and political life – this faces us, for the umpteenth time, with the critically important question of the responsibility of the media and of media regulation and self-regulation. Many of the images constructed by the Bulgarian media as 'carriers' of the idea of change and transition tend to have a negative influence on the public and form the notion of a world that is unattainable with the resources, inherited stereotypes and mentality of Bulgarian society. With the exception of Sofia and the big cities, stereotypes inherited from the (pre)modern Bulgarian patriarchal society have not only not disappeared from interpersonal relations – combined with a specific local patriotism and neo-nationalism, they have acquired a rather monstrous form. The role of the media in affirming such stereotypes can be neither ignored nor excused.

Profanation of Real Politics

This article cannot present even a summary of all the states the Bulgarian media have gone through in the last twenty years. There are, however, two key problems that are distinctly dominant from 2001 onwards: mass tabloidization of the media, which has imposed on the media market a style of journalism that sticks to mere reporting, and profanation of the political, of power, of institutions and government. When professional politicians cannot formulate conceptual and meaningful political messages, the media fill the void with a specific (and dictated by media owners) information and publication strategy. Due to the absence of clearly formulated policies where the competencies and responsibilities of the people in power are clearly defined, the pseudo-political has been substituted for the political in Bulgarian media. It is in this context that we may speak of a de-politicization of the Bulgarian media. In practice, they represent events in Bulgaria correctly, albeit with different priority and in different linguistic registers. More specifically, the Bulgarian media are in fact pedantically and consistently reporting the total absence of real politics adequate both to the complicated situation in Bulgaria and to the global economic crisis. The feeling that what is most typical of Bulgarian media messages today is the overexposure of the political in all its forms points us to the logical question: isn't it paradoxical to claim that there is overexposure of the political after concluding clearly that the Bulgarian media have become de-politicized? On the one hand, sociological surveys found an 8% increase in media interest in politics in April 2009. At the same time, after the successive transformations in media ownership and due to the way in which the people in power themselves began to speak about politics during the Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha government (in office from 2001 to 2005), politics ceased to be a serious tool through which socially significant problems are managed and resolved – politics turned into a spectacle, into a stage on which more talented or completely talentless actors move in a strange and sometimes illogical setting, juggling with words, statements and theses that are often incomprehensible to the public. Such a situation successfully and permanently deflects public attention towards looking for answers to the questions of 'who is it that hires precisely those actors' and 'why them, and not me?' Thus, the general public gradually forgets the fundamental question in the political spectacle: 'what are the people in power doing' and/or 'why is precisely this happening' on the political scene. The daily demonstration of luxury and excess of all sorts by the party, political and business elites has lent the Bulgarian political spectacle elements of frivolity, of a fashion feast staged with complete lack of taste. The new Bulgarian politicians after 2001 did not simply de-politicize the political message. By speaking nonstop in the media sphere – and, in doing so, often demonstrating their total incompetence and lack of professionalism and responsibility – they have lent the political message elements of frivolity and deprived it of meaning and content to

such an extent that many of the reality-heroes sincerely came to believe that doing politics is an easy job and that the only thing you need in order to take part in doing politics is to be a well-known media personality. Thus, we see people from show business earnestly trying to analyze complicated domestic or international political processes, to offer evaluations of the past instead of leaving that to experts, and to formulate political ideas about the future. This cannot but compel a large part of the educated public to look for meaningful dialogue, ideas and analyses in the blogosphere. It is in this sense that the de-politicization of the political has led to a situation where the most important issues on the public agenda are discussed on the pages of newspapers like *Weekend*, *Show*, or *Vsichko za Semeystvoto* (*Everything for Family*). If we look at Bulgarian prime-time television, we will see news programmes alternating with reality shows and all sorts of entertainment and commercial formats, while a serious project such as Re:TV's Profesorsko Kare[2] obviously has no chance of being broadcast even on the public-service Bulgarian National Television. Actually, the *news+entertainment* formula imposed by media conglomerates has been described by John Pilger as a 'corporate solitary confinement' designed primarily to isolate the population from the most significant social problems (cited in de Burgh 2000: 13).

A series of very interesting sociological surveys on the Bulgarian media have been conducted in the past two years by the Bulgarian research and consulting agency Market Links.[3] The data from those surveys eloquently show that the political message has become dissolved, melting away and adopting all characteristics of the social facts in Bulgaria in the last decade: the lines have been blurred not just between Left and Right, but also between political and non-political, private and public, individual and collective, yellow and serious, high and low, admissible and inadmissible. Never before have categories such as moral/immoral and good/evil looked so anachronistic. Everyone speaks everything about everybody in all possible ways in all possible places irrespective of whether the text is published or broadcast – this is the conspicuous characteristic of the Bulgarian media landscape. One finds a strange kind of universality, where all barriers have been lifted. Could we call 'yellow' and 'boulevard' a newspaper which has published, in a single issue, 17 long political articles that can readily be published also in the so-called serious press (*Weekend*, No. 27, 4 July 2009)?

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[2] Literally, 'Foursome of Professors', a programme on which four eminent Bulgarian professors of philosophy debated various fundamental philosophical and other issues, aired on the Bulgarian private TV news channel Re:TV which was shut down by its owners in November 2009 because of the economic crisis.

[3] The evaluations and conclusions about the texts, genre system, genre balance, dominant topics and political messages in Bulgarian media are based on the agency's monthly monitoring surveys of 16-20 print media and 5-6 broadcast media; their number varies within that range in the different months. These surveys covered a period of two years, from January 2009 to November 2010. They are the first ever representative surveys on the genre system of Bulgarian media, which allow formulating certain theses and evaluations. All data (in Bulgarian) can be found on the Foundation Media Democracy website at <http://www.fmd.bg/?cat=24>.

As for Bulgarian politicians, their performance, summed up by Market Links in some 200-300 long interviews a month (their number depends on the number of the media monitored in the respective month as well as on the particular period under review) leaves the impression that they are quite boring people in terms of spiritual horizon. Elementary in their manner of speech, they use a plethora of political clichés in interviews where one can hardly find more than a dozen-odd meaningful, original (as thoughts), logically coherent sentences. They unanimously swear by their party programmes, and some of them also swear by their party leaders. All promise one and the same things (fight against crime and corruption, radical changes in political practices) and, above all, they promise to make the European dream come true for Bulgarians. So far no one understands exactly what this is supposed to mean. On the whole, the interviews are boring, uninteresting, 'hollow', because the politicians themselves have no idea how their fervent and pompous promises can actually come true in the real, not virtual, Bulgarian State and reality. Precisely because they are not interesting in themselves, Bulgarian politicians have turned to the show formats and the yellow press in an effort to find a platform from where they can be heard: they can be seen cooking, dancing, singing, chatting casually to presenters and flirting with the audience. But in choosing precisely those formats as their platform, they have completely failed to take into account the extent to which they are profaning the political and the socially significant: there is just a short step from the frivolity with which every showman speaks about serious things like politics, the economy or the global crisis, to the serious bid for participation in government.

Indeed, what is the fine line between the serious, and the vulgar and entertaining? Is it normal to publish the tearful confession of a pop-folk singer side by side with, say, an analysis of the transition by former president Zhelyu Zhelev? This is exactly what is happening in Bulgaria today: narratives that are mutually exclusive in terms of their place in space appear side by side, the actors are simultaneously heroes and anti-heroes, the *mutra* – depending on the successive article – is both a serial killer and the perfect parent, the serious becomes kitschy while the kitschy 'sounds' serious. Depending on the kind and place of the narrative, Bulgaria's former communist ruler Todor Zhivkov was simultaneously a Partisan and a police informer (before 9 September 1944), a villain who ordered contract killings, a sly person and a political dictator (before 10 November 1989), and, at the same time, someone who did a lot for Bulgaria, according to Prime Minister Boyko Borisov:

> Building a hundredth of what he [Todor Zhivkov] built for Bulgaria and doing a hundredth of what was done in those years [when he was in power], and reaching the economic growth rate of the then State would be

a success for every government. … The fact that twenty years after his fall from power no one has forgotten him shows that quite a lot of things were done [in his time]. And then, it is also a fact that for twenty years now, we have been privatizing, we have merely been privatizing what was built until then.[4]

This logically brings us to the question: by what kind of *intellectual programme* (or, as Geert Hofstede puts it, *software of the mind*) was the transition in Bulgaria really governed? It is obvious that an unambiguous answer to this question is impossible because there was not just one programme: there were different programmes, each one of which presupposed a different time schedule of change. With hindsight, we can see that in the Bulgarian media system as a whole there were (and still are) clearly differentiated sectors serving the attitudes and interests of three communities: a premodern, a modern, and a postmodern community. Furthermore, in the last two decades a lot of capital was invested in keeping the status quo where the egalitarian and the étatist dominated media messages for years. As a result, 'corporate solitary confinement' and soap operas have widely supplanted news and current affairs programmes, high culture is completely absent from television, there is no quality elite press, there is an acute shortage of rational analysis and commentary, there are about 600 lifestyle magazines and newspapers, and *Cosmo* girls have landed directly in village house yards.

**How the Absence of Real Politics Led to Overexposure
of the Pseudo-Political**

The Market Links agency's data on texts about domestic politics in the Bulgarian media in the January-September 2010 period are, to put it mildly, paradoxical. Seven newspapers – *Trud*, *24 Chasa*, *Dnevnik*, *Monitor*, *Novinar*, *Sega* and *Standart* – published a total 11 412 texts at the following increasing rate:
- period I (January – March) – 1895 texts;
- period II (April – June) – 4485 texts;
- period III (July – September) – 5032 texts.

Of all 11 412 texts, those about Prime Minister Boyko Borisov are 4213 in all:
- 642 in period I;
- 1701 in period II;
- 1870 in period III.

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[4] Boyko Borisov said this about Todor Zhivkov in a live interview via satellite from Italy aired in the pilot edition of Martin Karbovski's talk show Karbovski: Direktno on Nova Television. The interview was quoted and discussed in almost all Bulgarian media. Here it is quoted from 'Borisov za Zhivkov: Nie sme nesaizmerimi', *Webcafe*, <http://www.webcafe.bg/id_870515779> [accessed 13 December 2010].

The most (both in number and newspaper space) political texts are in *Trud*, followed by *24 Chasa* and *Standart*. On the *negative/neutral/positive* scale, all texts in the *Government* and *GERB* categories are negative in the three periods, while all texts about Boyko Borisov himself are positive. For comparison, all texts about Boyko Borisov published in *Trud* in June-December 2009 are wholly negative. The data on 2010 confirm the formula: weak party – weak government – strong prime minister (i.e. leader). The data show that overexposure of the (pseudo)political in all its forms remains the most typical feature of Bulgarian media messages. But as we know all too well, the political is interested in redefining only and solely the political roles and largely ignores a number of areas of public life which, in purely pragmatic terms, are much more important for the everyday lives of people. The fact that the political is ultimately neutral towards dichotomies such as good/evil, moral/immoral or true/false cannot but cause concern. Or as Hannah Arendt says in her essay 'Truth and Politics', politicians are guided by considerations of *expediency* which objectively limit their ability to form models of behaviour and values that are universally valid in society. If we use a somewhat outdated cliché from literary theory, we may even say that it is difficult to understand from the Bulgarian media who is the 'new positive hero' today. The main problem is that the media do not promote a model of the fundamental values accepted by society with consensus; there is no attempt even to outline the framework of a new value system and to try to redefine the new social roles within this framework. In this sense, the concept of *modal personality* as formulated by anthropologist Richley H. Crapo would be appropriate for the situation in Bulgaria. According to Crapo, anthropologists are more interested in how the differences in the style of behaviour of the individual vary from role to role depending on the time, place or social context of the performed role. The modal personality reveals a typical set of personal traits that are hidden behind individual differences (Crapo 2000: 244). In Bulgarian media messages, it is difficult to identify any characteristics of what the modal personality actually was in the long period of proto-democracy in Bulgaria. Thus, the idea of a 'new civilizational choice' formulated in the 1997 election campaign programme of the anticommunist SDS (Union of Democratic Forces, whose government was in office from 1997 to 2001) failed to find an adequate translation into the language of Bulgarian media messages and remained merely an abstract idea to the general public. The same happened with the loudly proclaimed by the NDSV (Simeon II National Movement, now renamed to National Movement for Stability and Progress) in 2001 idea of a 'new time' and 'new morality' in politics. The previous, three-party coalition, government (in office from 2005 to 2009) did not deem it necessary to formulate special messages other than most general populist slogans. The present government of GERB (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria) is concerned primarily with overcoming the legacy of the previous government,

increasingly imposing in society the leadership – that is to say, strong-arm – model of government where the main argument is: *It is so because I say so*. In this context, it is difficult to speak of definition of any roles whatsoever. The image of the political actor – very aggressive in his or her presence in the public sphere – has almost completely supplanted the image of the *modal personality* or, more specifically, it does not allow the latter to 'happen' in Bulgarian media discourse. With the exception of some weeklies and specialized print media and TV programmes, the Bulgarian media create at the level of mundane, everyday consciousness role models and values that have to do more with show business than with serious politics.

The elections in the summer of 2009 demonstrated also somewhat forgotten practices of declaring an unconditional loyalty to the leader which deforms relations within the institutions of government and turns them into authoritarian ones. More precisely, there was a hyperbolization of the function of the party leader who extended the perimeter of the executive branch of government so much that he began to publicly define social roles, to pass judgments on everything, to condemn one type of behaviour and favour another – every day, through all media. Thus, after the successive elections and change of government in Bulgaria, the definition of social roles again failed to leave the sphere of the political; all evaluations and prescriptions are formulated first in the political sphere and then transferred to the other social spheres. We can only guess what is happening in the private sphere – the arbitrary fusion of the functions of the party leader with those of political power on the part of the prime minister has led to an unprecedented expansion of the political sphere which does not simply seek but demands media coverage. Tensions and conflicts in private interpersonal relations (as well as the results of those conflicts such as stress, depression, alcoholism, domestic abuse, unemployment), family relations, moral and academic education of children – that is to say, the entire complex of problems whose solution is directly connected with forming stable and effective social roles – remain confined, unfortunately, to expert and nongovernmental structures and organizations.

It is as though Bulgarian society does not feel a need for legitimating the new roles and identities; or perhaps it is not ready to accept the redistribution in social relations which – albeit slowly – is nevertheless objectively imposed by the new type of economy and market relations. To my mind, this is not due to resistance to accept the new roles. It is simply that in the different parts of the country there are different closed communities which live in a time-space of their own. This peculiar life-chronotope objectively produces and reproduces social roles that are adequate to it and that regulate relations in the local communities. Life in such isolated regions was depicted magnificently in the documentary *Tam Nyakade* (*There Somewhere*) aired on bTV Reporterite (bTV

Reporters) on 4 October 2009, while social anthropologist Haralan Alexandrov explained why those people should not be forced to live in a different way.

The paradox is in that the following phenomenon appeared in Bulgaria during the transition: parallel peaceful coexistence of the premodern and the postmodern, which can best be seen in media mass culture where celebrity gossip TV shows coexist with serious current affairs and political programmes. In the countless talk shows – there is talk nonstop, from dawn to dusk, and then the shows are repeated during the night – the range of topics discussed in each programme varies from the silicone breast implant of the successive pop-folk singer to political pre-election platforms and interviews with MPs and government ministers. This situation is partly due to the fact that the authentic postmodern was imported from outside in the second decade of the transition (according to some analysts, this happened when Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha's yuppies entered government in 2001) and represents a very thin social stratum which has succeeded in emancipating itself from the masses and in living, *up there somewhere*, autonomously and undisturbed, by rules that are not valid for the rest of Bulgarian society. While that which is widely recognized and promotes itself as being postmodern is, in its essence, pseudo-postmodern, pseudo-intellectual, pseudo-elitist. It emulates and imitates social roles but cannot create them.

One the problems of the Bulgarian transition was the sudden termination of the centralized 'production' of heroes and narratives. The façade was pulled down literally overnight and the bankruptcy of the façade democracy was announced ceremoniously, but the bright fireworks suddenly lit up an empty stage. It turned out that behind the façade there was nothing. Only real social roles and relations can be redefined; a conflict may be provoked only between socially active actors – a conflict that would lead, after a series of more or less dramatic clashes, to the reshuffling of roles in the new social chronotope. But nothing can happen between passive and apathetic individuals who have lived for decades with the thought that nothing depends on them and who are aware that they were pseudo-actors performing pseudo-roles. And nothing did happen for years. So the Bulgarian media again began to do what they always did in the 45 years of communist rule before 10 November 1989: serial production of heroes and narratives. The only difference is that the narratives have become increasingly tasteless and the heroes increasingly vulgar, while the media are no longer directed in a centralized manner.

To my mind, it is impossible to speak of participation of the Bulgarian media in redefining social roles or of construction of new social identities adequate to the situations imposed by globalization and the new century. This is an objective result from the specific media environment created by the former communist

party *nomenklatura* with the help of different intermediaries. For two decades, the Bulgarian media had one basic function: to legitimate to Bulgarian society the transformation of the roles from the former roles repertoire of power into a new repertoire, to legalize the transformation of national capital into private property. They performed this task successfully. The constant redistribution of media ownership in Bulgaria – the latest one has been happening before our eyes since the spring of 2009 – is just one of the preconditions for the creation of a permanently unstable environment where the media find it difficult to implement an information strategy that meets the requirements of the modern world as well as the specific peculiarities of a society undergoing restructuring. Where, and in what form, was there a redefinition of social roles in such a media environment?

The Bulgarian popular press and commercial television channels promote images, actors and narratives that represent a dispiriting picture of the transition. There is a vulgar deformation of the classic patriarchal relations. On the whole, *masculinity* (the *mutra*, primitive strength, the thick-necked, muscled type) has become synonymous with power and capital, and is associated with armoured SUVs, impenetrable sunglasses, black suits and thick gold chains. *The man* collects yachts or fancy custom-made cars. He is at the centre of glamorous events, invariably surrounded by beautiful girls. *The man* provides the money, home, elite education for his children and he is the lord and master both in the social and in the private time-space. The Bulgarian tabloids have promoted also a social role that is specific to the Bulgarian conditions – that of the *wife* or *widow* of the newly rich man or the *mutra*. For her part, the *mutresa* is the lady from the entourage, she shines at cocktail and other parties, she is an ornament for the man which he is proud of. Whereas it is difficult to differentiate those media images from kitsch, they are distinctly differentiated in the Bulgarian media and, unfortunately, public opinion polls show that precisely this type of roles are the coveted ideal for a vast percentage of Bulgarian teenagers. Even more alarming is the fact that many roles that should be significant in a contemporary society as well as the serious problems posed by the world of globalization are of no interest to the highest-circulation Bulgarian newspapers and commercial broadcast media. Thus, the media supplant, on a daily basis, the real picture of the world around us with pseudo-heroes and pseudo-narratives, while the impossibility of finding yourself in this glamorous and, viewed from the outside, problem-free world leads to multiple acts of aggression and depressive conditions. To my mind, one of the most accurate images of the new social roles and relations produced by the Bulgarian transition is to be found in the novel *Maikité* (*The Mothers*) by Bulgarian writer Teodora Dimova.

I have written many times that what is most characteristic of Bulgarian journalism is that it merely reports events. Indeed, it reports all significant

events in Bulgarian society but it does not go beyond that – it does not investigate causal relationships, it names the physical perpetrators of crimes (when they are caught) but does not reveal the masterminds and the people who ordered those crimes. That is precisely why the politicians and the government in Bulgaria are not afraid of the media – they rule the media and enjoy 'media comfort'. I think that parties like GERB and RZS (Order, Law and Justice) and, before them, Ataka and the NDSV, are, in addition to everything else, products of this type of journalism. They will cease to be a social and public problem and retreat to the normal, by European standards, political sphere that will not appropriate the social and civic sphere when Bulgarian journalism moves from mere reporting and mega-narratives to quality, merciless analysis and rational expert interpretation of facts, events and problems.

Until that happens, the Bulgarian media will carefully defend the Bulgarian public's unwillingness to look beyond the heroes and narratives they tirelessly produce…

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■ The Figural World: Displacement and Condensation in the Bulgarian Media

Here I do not intend to offer a psychoanalytic reading of Bulgarian media debates as 'another stage' on which, as in dreams, stories that are impossible in real life are played out. I will use the concepts of displacement and condensation as a tool to make visible some aspects of what is happening in the Bulgarian media today. The media narrative tends to displace attention from difficult issues that require concentration and change in what the public considers to be self-evident truths, onto figures that are (psychologically) safer and easier to deal with. On the other hand, those figures tend to become the focus of conflicting passions, bringing together contradictory political positions and neutralizing the contradiction – here I call this 'condensation'. Of course, this is a global problem that involves a gradual move away from the Weberian modernity of rationalization, of the value-neutral, emotion-free public sphere. We can also call it a crisis of the political as we know it, a transition to something we are yet to understand.

The Communist-Millionaire

The most obvious and therefore most invisible example in Bulgaria is the displacement of public discontent from social inequalities onto personalizations of public indignation. At the beginning of November 2010 Dimitar Ludzhev, a former deputy prime minister and SDS (Union of Democratic Forces) activist, declared that 80% of the rich people in Bulgaria today had worked for the DS (the Bulgarian acronym for State Security, the Bulgarian communist secret police).[1] Although it is not clear exactly how he calculated this figure, the reactions on online forums show that it is accepted unquestioningly:

> *Schumacher: SO WHAT'S NEW ABOUT THAT HUH!!!*[2]

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[1] See 'Ludjev: 80% ot bogatashite sa svarzani s darzhavna sirgurnost.' *Trud online*, 2 November 2010 <http://www.trud.bg/Article.asp?ArticleId=661296> [accessed 30 November 2010].
[2] <http://www.trud.bg/Article.asp?ArticleId=661296> [accessed 30 November 2010].

This topic has never disappeared from the public sphere: whenever the issue of illegal wealth comes up, allegations appear that the person in question was a member of the communist *nomenklatura* or had received briefcases full of money from the communist party or worked for the DS and controlled some smuggling channels or at least that he had friends in the *nomenklatura* or the DS and had been given bank loans or privileged treatment. Allegations about 'briefcases full of money' invariably accompany big businessmen like Dobromir Gushterov or Petar Mandzhukov, while rich Bulgarians like Todor Batkov, Krasimir Gergov or Tosho Toshev are alleged to have been DS agents. Some ill-wishers have gone as far as alleging that none other than Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, Bulgaria's exiled king and prime minister from 2001 to 2005, had worked for the DS.[3]

It is certain that there is a strong connection between getting rich and being involved in the former regime: from the point of view of social sciences, the opposite would have been strange; that is to say, it would have been strange if random, marginal people had suddenly made millions. The question is, rather, what does the furious condemnation of the secret connection between 'before' and 'now' express? It does not have to do with social analysis, it is an expression of anger. At first sight, this anger is directed at the lies: people who used to praise communism went on to become capitalists. But there are many lies today too. For example, the constant contradictions between what the present ruling party, GERB (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria), promised to do and what it is actually doing are ignored with indifference – the passions aroused by such contradictions are much more limited in scale. Furthermore, the Bulgarian public sphere, formed by the broadcast media as a collage based on the 'and-now-for-something-completely-different' principle (to use Monty Python's famous catchphrase), is less and less concerned about whether public speakers keep their word. The emotional debate over the origin of the wealth of Bulgarian millionaires seems to be driven by an unwillingness to accept the social inequalities that have grown drastically in the last twenty years.

How does displacement work? What we have in Bulgaria is a brutal form of capitalism which is increasingly at odds with citizens' notions of justice. Why are those particular people, whose exact contribution to society remains a mystery, so rich? Instead of analyzing the system that has made them rich – the absence of rules, the low taxes, the neoliberal ideology of privatization – the Bulgarian media direct public anger towards the history of those individuals: as though had they not been DS agents, capitalism in Bulgaria would have been wonderful. By the way, it is interesting that the widespread hatred for the people

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[3] See, e.g., 'Emigrantat Koycho Belchev: Simeon e chovek na KGB i DS. Balgaria veche e bananova republika.' *Vseki den*, 30 March 2010 <http://www.vsekiden.com/48185> [accessed 30 November 2010].

whose property was restituted after 1989 seems to have gradually waned: it is simply that such people are easy to identify, while the DS agents are everywhere and nowhere.

Bulgarian sociologists Andrey Raichev and Kancho Stoychev have defined this process as production of myths of mass consciousness, myths that will resolve the contradiction that has emerged between expectations and reality (Raychev and Stoychev 2008: 63-79). The term 'myth', however, is misleading as it suggests the marvellous, fantastic and ultimately unreal character of the explanation of the world. In fact, the statement that most of the newly-rich Bulgarians belonged to the communist *nomenklatura* or worked for the DS is by no means false. The point is that this personalized aspect of the problem is only part of the truth, a part that is substituted for the whole.[4] The unacceptable social inequalities, the privatization of the public interest, the liquidation of the welfare state, the cut-throat competition – all this is hidden behind a personalized indignation: why exactly them?

Speaking of displacement, I put an emphasis also on the dynamic of public emotions (without resorting to strange terms like 'synchronization' of the subsequent myths, as do Raychev and Stoychev 2008: 70): they are easily transferred from one figure onto another – for example, from the DS agent onto the corrupt customs officer whose mansion is filmed by tax inspectors from a helicopter in an unprecedented reality show organized by the present Bulgarian government. This easiness has to do with the inability of Bulgarian media discourse to produce an abstract, analytic, non-conformist analysis of events. I have in mind what Neil Postman describes as a transition from the hierarchical world of typography to a decentred universe of multiplying fragments of information produced by ever more diverse media – the telegraph, photography, radio, television, the internet (Postman 1985). In the first case there is an imperative that discourse must avoid contradiction and sustain the identity of speech; in the second the guiding principle is desire, which leaps from one figure onto another, avoiding any existential reflection or moral call for action.

As for condensation, it makes possible the coexistence of divergent positions within a separate media figure. Contemporary capitalism is disapproved of not only by the poor but also by the rich, by leftists as well as by rightists. When evil is personalized and acquires a recognizable form, it becomes possible for those positions to coexist. When it comes to capitalism as such, leftists and rightists cannot be of the same opinion by definition. But they are united in their passionate hatred of the DS agent-turned-millionaire: leftists hate him because he is an exploiter and rightists because he is a rival.

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[4] Let us recall that Jacques Lacan reformulates Freud's 'displacement' as metonymy, as opposed to metaphor (Freud's 'condensation').

La Piovra

The second figure worthy of attention is notorious businessman, ex-secret service undercover agent, advisor at the State Agency for National Security and suspected mafia boss Alexey 'The Tractor' Petrov.

The displacement of public indignation onto this figure is again due to the inability of the Bulgarian public to patiently analyze the disintegration of the State in the last twenty years, its unwillingness to reflect on the basis of principles and to listen to boring authorities. For its part, condensation leads to the projection onto Alexey Petrov of most of the evils of the Bulgarian transition: killings and kidnappings, prostitution and drugs, secret services and smuggling, networks of former athletes-turned-criminals and of the former three-party coalition government, protection business and even the questionable worth of Bulgarian universities insofar as Alexey Petrov turned out to be an associate professor at the University of National and World Economy. Here this multiplicity of metaphorical meanings was designated by the Interior Ministry itself with the name of a presumable organized crime group borrowed from an Italian TV series that was popular during the youth of the Ministry's senior officials: *La Piovra* (*Octopus*). Actually, this name itself gives away the mindset of the institution in question: 'The Octopus' is invincible and unprovable, hence the fight against it is eternal and the 'GERB government' series endless.

As in the previous example, the point here is not that Mr Petrov is not guilty but that one particular case conceals the systemic problems and is laden with total mega-passions. Some believe that GERB's very survival in power depends on the outcome of Alexey Petrov's ongoing trial:[5] whereas Petrov's arrest in February 2010 was seen as a triumph for the government, his subsequent release on bail and the dropping of many of the initial charges against him is widely regarded as a serious blow to the government. Alexey Petrov's statement in an interview that he might enter Bulgarian politics, at that, only if Boyko Borisov himself were to run against him in the 2011 presidential elections, naturally received much publicity. The drama was blown up to epic proportions: what is at issue is the very possibility that La Piovra may take control of the State forever.

Let me underline the ambiguities generated by the figure of Alexey Petrov at virtually every step of the way. The battle with the omnipresent octopus was

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[5] In a dramatic statement for Bulgarian National Radio after Alexey Petrov's arrest, Prime Minister and GERB leader Boyko Borisov declared: 'This is a war, whoever survives [wins].' See *Sega*, 11 February 2010 <http://www.segabg.com/online/new/articlenew.asp?issueid=5042&sectionid=hotnews&id=0000122> [accessed 30 November 2010].

instantly described as a settling of scores between mobsters insofar as Alexey Petrov and Boyko Borisov used to be partners in the protection business (e.g. in the company Budoinvest OOD together with another highly controversial figure, alleged crime boss 'The Pasha'). The Hollywood-style operation in which a special squad of heavily armed anti-terror police arrested Petrov, the most powerful person in the state according to rumours (possibly spread by the government itself?), was instantly turned into a parody. In an article in the *Galeria* weekly, journalist Yavor Dachkov claimed that the widely publicized video of Petrov's arrest released by the Interior Ministry Press Office was manipulated as Petrov had been asked politely to lie face down on the ground several times so that the cameraman could get the right shots.[6] Actually, even the uninformed viewer might wonder why the commandos in the video were screaming at someone who was obviously not putting up any resistance, threatening to shoot him if he so much as moved, and why they forced him to lie face down on the ground so ineptly.

The symbolic power of Alexey Petrov grew as a number of controversial public figures spoke out in his defence: President Georgi Parvanov, Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) leader and former prime minister Sergey Stanishev, and of course Petrov's most loyal defender, Yane Yanev, the leader of the opposition party RZS (Order, Law and Justice) who built his career on leaked information from the secret services. But then, aren't they communists and isn't Yane Yanev their own creation? Conversely, Alexey Petrov was attacked by western ambassadors and allied secret services. Quite a few public figures felt they had to defend Mr Petrov because of his violated human rights and his loyal service to the State to date; some even went on to found a citizen association called The Truth About Alexey Petrov.[7] The terrible secret he was alleged to be hiding now threatened to turn against GERB as allegations were made that Petrov had financed GERB, that he knew something about a missing million of euros from the Sofia Metro (subway) guaranty fund, and so on. Maverick journalist Sasho Dikov, who always has sensational information to reveal in such cases, said he had filmed an interview with Petrov to be broadcast in several installments.[8]

Alarmed by the loss of public trust, the government hastened to shift public attention onto a well-tried figure of anxiety: a suspected plot to assassinate the prime minister himself, allegedly discussed in an intercepted phone call. Interior

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[6] See 'Videoto s aresta na Alexey Petrov – manipulatsia. Komandosite go pomolili da legne vtori pat na poda – ne uspeli da zasnemat kadara! – s video.' *Skandalno. Tsyalata istina* <http://skandalno.net/българия-отблизо/видеото-с-ареста-на алексей-петров-е-ма-5909> [accessed 30 November 2010].

[7] The list of signatures in his defence contains 30 000 names, claims *Afera.bg* <http://www.afera.bg/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=14767&Itemid=1> [accessed 30 November 2010].

[8] See 'Sasho Dikov puska seriala *Kosopad* s Alexey Petrov.' *Dnes i utre*, 21 October 2010 <http://dnesiutre.com/curious-news/сашо-диков-пуска-сериал-„косопад”-с-а/> [accessed 30 November 2010].

Minister Tsvetan Tsvetanov tellingly refused to confirm or deny it, while Boyko Borisov heroically declared that EUR 400 000 (the fee for his assassination mentioned in the phone call) for his head was not enough, that many criminals would have an interest in killing him because of his government's firm policies and that he of course would be avenged if anything happened to him.[9]

I want to stress the structural connection between the media figurality analyzed here and crime news. Crime cases are individual by definition (in this part of the world guilt is individual), they are endlessly depicted in books and films, and they fascinate with their secrecy, transgression, violence that transgresses the normal social world. There is nothing easier than constructing media figures through crime cases, displacing and condensing public discontent onto and in them. Actually, this is a global problem: criminalization of social relations is increasingly replacing the political struggle. What is specific to it in Bulgaria is that the whole eroticism of what is happening is displaced onto the beginning, onto the charges, the preliminary arrest. Although the case of the associate professor aka The Tractor has not yet been brought to court, we have already said almost everything there is to say about it and about what it tells of Bulgarian society.[10]

The Wandering Gypsy

The last example takes us to the international scene: the expulsion of Bulgarian and Romanian Roma from France which caused a media stir that went far beyond Europe.

At the root of the scandal was something that looks trivial from the perspective of the Bulgarian public sphere. Illegal settlements have been evacuated before too, among them some built by Roma. The scandal broke out after the French press published a leaked circular letter by French Interior Minister Brice Hortefeux ordering prefects in every part of the country 'to undertake ... a systematic approach of dismantling illegal camps, *as a priority those of the Roma*' (emphasis added).[11] The French public was outraged at the ethnic definition of the problem, which violates one of the sacred principles of the republic: ethnic or religious identity is a private matter and it is not subject to

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[9] See 'Borisov: 400 000 evro za eliminiraneto mi sa malko'. *bTV novinite*, 8 November 2010 <http://www.btv.bg/story/1370413811-Borisov_400_000_evro_za_eliminiraneto_mi_sa_malko.html> [accessed 30 November 2010]. General Atanas Atanasov, a former chief of the National Security Service, described this 'obviously cooked up story' as a transparent attempt to divert public attention on the bTV morning show on 9 November 2010 <http://www.btv.bg/video/1912793318-Zashto_Aleksey_Petrov_se_zayavi_za_prezident.html> [accessed 30 November 2010].
[10] See Ditchev (2010).
[11] Circular letter dated 5 August 2010 <http://ovh.softdom.com/Circulaire_du_5ao%C3%BBt_2010.pdf> [accessed 30 November 2010].

public discussion and action. In the heated debates that followed this was somehow taken for granted and both the opponents and the supporters of the government began to speak, as if without realizing it, of Roma instead of Bulgarian or Romanian citizens as required by French republican political correctness, and not even of 'travellers', the non-ethnic European euphemism for nomads.

France attracted a volley of international criticism, the sharpest of which came from Viviane Reding, the EU's Justice Commissioner, who compared France's Roma policy to Nazi deportations of Jews in the Second World War. President Nicolas Sarkozy, who is known for his mercurial nature, suggested that Reding should invite the expelled Roma to live in her native Luxembourg. Finally, German Chancellor Angela Merkel took on the role of reconciler, declaring that the situation had gotten out of hand and even making Viviane Reding apologize for her extreme comments.

In the context of this analysis, it is curious to see what public emotions were displaced onto the figure of the Gypsy, what meanings were condensed by the media around the latter. For Sarkozy's new Right 'without complexes' (just as for that of Berlusconi's a year earlier) it is very convenient to displace the shock and discontent over the teetering welfare state onto other figures: the Arabs, the ghettoes around the big cities, and in this particular case, the Roma camps. Considering that two-thirds of the French do not want to have Roma living close to them, Sarkozy believed that the action against the Roma was bound to improve his government's drastically declining ratings. Why did the police PR campaign fail? Because France disgraced itself before the world: the homeland of human rights brought shame upon itself by conducting group deportations while failing to resolve the problems of immigrants in any way.

On the Bulgarian public scene, the figure of the Roma was inscribed into an even more complicated constellation. On the one hand, Mr Borisov decided to remain silent, and thus de facto supported President Sarkozy; the deal probably involved securing French support for Bulgaria's admission to the Schengen zone.[12] For his part, Mr Parvanov, who has been trying over the last year to step into the role of a political alternative vacated by Mr Borisov after the election of his party to government, declared that such group repatriation 'runs contrary to European values':[13] his stance was largely meant less to support the Roma than to criticize the government.

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[12] See 'Borisov: ne vlizam v debat za romite.' *Vesti.bg*, 16 September 2010
<http://www.vesti.bg/index.phtml?tid=40&oid=3266031> [accessed 30 November 2010].
[13] See 'Parvanov: bez nazidatelen ton ot diplomati. Prezidentat kazva, che bil "nerven" zaradi preporakata na frenskia poslanik Balgaria da naznachi ministar po romskite vaprosi.' *Vesti.bg*, 15 September 2010
<http://www.vesti.bg/index.phtml?tid=40&oid=3264411> [accessed 30 November 2010].

The old political divisions came into play in the debate on the problem. Is someone who denies the Roma the right to have a cultural identity of their own and wants them to be treated equally with all others a leftist? Is someone who calls for increasing pressure for education of the Roma and for development of Roma neighbourhoods a rightist? The issue was brought up of the embezzlement of EU funds (in this particular case, of EU funds granted for Roma integration), of vote-buying – in a word, all ills of the transition were experienced once again through the figure of the Gypsy. The latter brought together the traditional Bulgarian racism and the hatred for the West that asks us to observe principles which it itself does not apply.

In a strange way, the Right suddenly found itself on the side of human rights and European values, insofar as free movement of Roma promises to rid us of them. Here is what Volen Siderov, leader of the far-right party Ataka, said in an interview:

> What France is doing is a defensive reaction. …. Although this runs contrary to the principles of the European Union and of free movement, etc. The question is that the Europeans are sending the Gypsies back to Bulgaria, but then they come here and say: you aren't integrating the Roma. Well, please be kind enough and integrate those who have come to live with you. Five years ago the Swiss ambassador came to parliament to learn more about the Ataka party. One of his questions was: 'What do you think about the integration of the Roma?' I suggested the following to him: 'What about sending you 50 000 Roma – you're a rich, well-ordered democratic country. You'll start integrating them and show us how to do it, while we'll follow you around with notebooks and take notes.'[14]

To the average Bulgarian it is obvious that the Roma are a foreign body, that 'we' have nothing in common with 'them'. Let us leave aside the extreme racists and look at an article by a liberal-minded journalist such as Svetoslav Terziev from the *Sega* daily. According to his historical overview, the Roma settled on Bulgarian territory somehow accidentally, owing to the fact that the Ottoman Empire was tolerant towards them while they were being persecuted in the West. If they ended up here by chance, then why should we prevent them from leaving? We are the poorest country in Europe anyway. At that, the nomadic way of life is in their blood, and any attempt to regulate their life here is a form of communist-like coercion. In this sense, the EU should be kind enough to

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[14] See the website of the Ataka political party, 1 September 2010
<http://www.ataka.bg/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=5102&Itemid=91> [accessed 30 November 2010].

assume their responsibility because the Roma are a European problem.[15] In a word, the article sounds well-meaning, apparently defending the Roma against Sarkozy's extreme police measures, but it actually repeats what is a racist self-evident truth to the average Bulgarian and Romanian: the Roma are not our compatriots, therefore our states do not have to care for them.

The grim comparison to the Jews merits special attention. In the nineteenth century the figure of the wandering Jew in Europe embodied the fear of the rootless financial capital that travels from country to country, exploiting people without being accountable to the local populations. Of course not all capitalists were Jews, but a foreign, often incomprehensible culture, gives rise to fears and phantasms. Today, in this part of the world, the 'too' mobile Gypsy has become a personification of globalization, moving along kinship and friendship networks that are invisible to us, looking for the best place for himself and packing up and moving elsewhere when he doesn't like it there. Isn't this what a large part of the populations of countries like Bulgaria, Mexico or the Philippines are doing too? The very same accusations that are to be heard today against the Roma were levelled yesterday against the Bulgarians in Amsterdam, for example: they can't be integrated, they steal, engage in prostitution, live as illegal immigrants, don't observe elementary hygiene.

The problem is that the world has become mobile: someone from the other end of the world can suddenly invade your life-space, taking away your job, asking you to share your country's resources with them, to adjust your cultural practices to theirs. The majority of Europeans do not like this: whilst it is true that globalization and its regional dimension, European integration, have brought about economic growth, they have also made the world very insecure – no one knows any longer where their territory is, what are the things that cannot be taken away from them. Today the absence of clear rules in the jungle of globalization is personalized by the figure of the wandering Gypsy: he is much more visible, more recognizable than the financier, the privatizer, the international profiteer.

Today we are displacing onto the Gypsy on the Balkans all the bad things we want to get rid of: poverty, chaos, stealing, dirtiness. Is the Gypsy more of a nomad than us who are ready to leave our family and our job at any time in order to go and work abroad? We also hate the Gypsy partly because we envy his flexible identity, the ease with which he adapts while we bemoan the loss of order and stability in our lives. It is another matter whether the Roma themselves are what we think them to be – for what we are speaking of here is a phantasm, a

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[15] See 'Komunizma li da varnem zaradi romite?' *Sega*, 17 August 2010
<http://www.segabg.com/online/new/articlenew.asp?id=0000901&issueid=6793&sectionid=5> [accessed 30 November 2010].

figure invented by the media through displacement and condensation of social emotions.

Postscript

Will social reason succeed in returning to the analytic way of thinking founded upon universal principles and unbiased discussion of arguments? Or do we need to develop a new, inductive rationality of leaping from one concrete thing to another, from one emotion to another, from one figure to another?

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Political Advertising in the Media

Political Speech

Political speech, including political and election advertising, is an important factor for ensuring an informed choice in decision-making. Political speech is protected speech throughout the modern democratic world. Moreover, political speech is afforded a *high level* of protection. The US Supreme Court has ruled that, unlike commercial speech, political speech is *fully protected speech*.[1] According to the doctrine, it was *political speech* that Justice Holmes had in mind when he argued in 1919 for the importance of freedom of speech for the *marketplace of ideas*.[2]

Political speech is defined in different ways in the different countries and according to different legal doctrines. Based on a broad interpretation of the political, adopted in some countries, any *speech that defends* social and economic rights or causes *in any form* is treated as political speech. Important implications for political speech are contained in the judgment of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in the case of *Verein gegen Tierfabriken (VgT) v. Switzerland*,[3] according to which political speech is any participation in important public debates in the broadest sense, including in public debates on environmental and animal protection, a healthy way of life, etc.

This article discusses some aspects of political advertising that are of interest to modern law, with a focus on messages during election campaigns.

Political Advertising: Prohibited or Permitted

Political speech during election campaigns is subject to more detailed regulation. In some countries, paid political advertising in the broadcast media is

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[1] Bolger v. Youngs Drug Products Corporation. 463 US 60 (1983).
[2] Abrams v. United States, 250 U.S. 616 (1919) (Holmes, J., dissenting).
[3] ECHR, VGT v. Switzerland, Application no. 24699/94, Judgment 21 June 2001.

prohibited by law.[4] This prohibition is based on the understanding that the intensity of political parties' presence in the media should not depend on the financial resources of the participants in the election campaign. This legislative decision is a reaction (counter-model) to models where the financially stronger candidate manages to dominate in the media.

In Europe, the debates on the legality of political advertising are due to be given an unambiguous answer. In 2009 the European Court of Human Rights heard a case involving the prohibition of political advertising in the broadcast media. The law in Norway prohibited television broadcasting of political advertisements. In its judgment in the case of *TV Vest As & Rogaland Pensjonistparti v. Norway* (2009),[5] the ECHR ruled that this prohibition was a violation of Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

The Court noted the absence of European consensus on political advertising and the differences in the relevant legislative solutions according to the history and traditions that have led to different conclusions as to whether prohibiting political advertising is necessary for the proper functioning of democracy in the respective countries. The judgment argued that this absence of consensus speaks in favour of allowing a somewhat wider margin of appreciation than that normally accorded. The Court discussed the risks that financially powerful groups may distort the marketplace of ideas but found that the prohibition of political advertising also has an unfavourable effect on the freedom of political speech as paid advertising on television was the only way for the Rogaland Pensioners Party to put its message across to the public and that by being denied this possibility under the law, the Pensioners Party was at a disadvantage compared to the major parties. According to the Court, restrictions on political advertising are possible *in concrete cases* lowering the quality of political debate (for example, in cases affecting sensitivities, slander, etc.), but a blanket ban is not proportionate to the aims pursued by the law. Hence, a statutory prohibition of political advertising on television that is not justified by the concrete content of the advertisement (blanket prohibition) restricts the freedom of speech and political debate, and constitutes a violation of Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

In Bulgaria, the amount of airtime allocated to the different participants in national elections has been traditionally regulated by the electoral law.

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[4] The UK, Ireland, South Africa, Brazil, Belgium, Switzerland, Chile, Sweden – source: Canadian Green Party Report, 2 November 2010. This study was conducted in connection with the Green Party of Canada's request for banning political advertising on television.

[5] ECHR, TV Vest As & Rogaland Pensjonistparti v. Norway Application No:21132/05, Judgment 11 December 2008.

Political Advertising: Financing and Freedom in the Marketplace of Ideas

Election campaign financing is directly related to the freedom of expression of different viewpoints and ideas. In the contemporary world there are two views regarding the relationship between *campaign financing* and *freedom of expression*. One view holds that the possibilities of candidates in election campaigns to present their ideas to the public should not be limited through statutory restrictions on financing. The other view (which is also the view adopted in Bulgaria) holds that restrictions on election campaign financing guarantee an *equal start* and counter the formula that '*money wins elections*'. The Council of Europe has recommended measures to guarantee an equal start – for example, ensuring that all contending parties have the possibility of buying political advertising space on the broadcast media (where this is permitted by national law) *on and according to equal conditions and rates of payment*, including through a provision that *limits the amount of political advertising space and time* which a given party or candidate can purchase.[6]

The First Amendment to the United States Constitution prohibits the making of any law that abridges freedom of expression. There are precedents in US legal practice – the Supreme Court rulings in *Austin v. Michigan Chamber of Commerce* (1990)[7] and *McConnell v. Federal Election Commission* (2003)[8] – where laws that set limits on election campaign financing were held to be constitutional. But with its decision in the case of *Randall v. Sorrell*,[9] the Supreme Court ruled the opposite: limiting election campaign expenditures limits the freedom of political speech. The case in question addressed the constitutionality of Vermont's comprehensive campaign finance law, enacted in 1997. The Vermont law limited the amounts candidates may spend in a two-year election cycle as well as the amount an individual may contribute to a campaign. The law was challenged before the Supreme Court on the grounds that limiting election campaign financing violates the First Amendment: *It is not the government's role to tell candidates how much they can speak and to tell voters how much information they need to receive during an election campaign*. The Supreme Court accepted this thesis. According to its decision, no public interest was sufficient to justify the restrictions on the freedom of political speech imposed by the Vermont law. As this law *would reduce the voice of political parties to a whisper*, the Supreme Court ruled that the limits on election campaign financing constituted a violation of the First Amendment.

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[6] Recommendation CM/Rec(2007)15 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on measures concerning media coverage of election campaigns, item 5.
[7] Austin v. Michigan Chamber of Commerce, 494 U.S. 652 (1990).
[8] McConnell v. Federal Election Commission, 540 U.S. 93 (2003).
[9] Randall v. Sorrell, 548 U.S. 230 (2006).

At the beginning of 2010 the US Supreme Court took a new step in the same direction, handing down a 5-4 decision in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*.[10] The Court ruled that a provision of the McCain-Feingold Act limiting 'electioneering communication' by corporations and other non-profit legal entities violated the First Amendment. The Court upheld the requirement for disclosure by sponsors of advertisements with a view to enabling citizens to make an informed choice.

According to analysts, this decision can lead to distortion of political debate as it now legitimately gives *big* business *big* advantages in campaigns. In his weekly radio address to the nation after the publication of the decision,[11] President Obama also criticized the Supreme Court ruling. According to him, this ruling gives special interest lobbyists new leverage to spend millions on political advertising, and it therefore *strikes against democracy itself*: *The last thing we need to do is hand more influence to the lobbyists in Washington, or more power to the special interests to tip the outcome of elections*. The *Citizens United* decision has not put an end to the debate in the USA. The legislature is expected to react. As in Europe, political advertising is a highly controversial issue that has divided not just the court but also society at large. In September 2010, in another weekly radio address, President Obama commented on the difficult progress on the legislative amendments moved in response to the decision.[12]

In Bulgaria it is widely thought that the official financial reports of parties do not reveal the true situation and the real sponsors of candidates in elections, therefore *effective legal mechanisms* against dubious political funding practices, including against vote-buying, are expected to be introduced.

Political Advertising: Rules and Practices

In the US Supreme Court's *Citizens United* decision as well as in the ECHR's *TV Vest* judgment, the courts held that political advertising is subject to more detailed regulation in order to prevent hate speech or defamation of candidates in election campaigns, and to ensure that political advertising is readily *recognizable* as such.

This is also what the Bulgarian legal order aims at. *Political advertising* does not have a legal definition in Bulgaria's Radio and Television Act, it is not an expressly regulated type of advertising, and hence – insofar as it is allowed – it should conform to the general requirements regarding advertising, including the

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[10] Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission, 130 S.Ct. 876 (2010).
[11] Weekly Address: 'And as long as I'm your President, I'll never stop fighting to make sure that the most powerful voice in Washington belongs to you,' 23 January 2010.
[12] Weekly Address: September 18, 2010.

requirements for intellectual copyright protection, protection of children, identification and separation from the main content, prohibition of advertising that uses subliminal techniques (for radio and television advertising), etc. Similar court practices are to be found in other EU member countries as well. For example, in the UK, where the judgment in *Regina v. British Broadcasting Corporation* states: *The first question is whether the content of party broadcasts should be subject to the same restriction on offensive material as other programmes. The answer is yes.*[13]

During the last presidential elections in the USA, there was an interesting debate on whether the copyright infringement provisions of the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) were being used (or abused) to abridge the freedom of speech. The debate started after Senator John McCain, the Republican candidate, asked YouTube to give special consideration to videos posted by political candidates and campaigns on its site. McCain's lawyers wrote to YouTube complaining it had removed four of the campaign's videos after receiving takedown notices from various media organizations alleging the videos violated the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA). In their response letter, YouTube said they were very happy that the presidential campaigns were using YouTube as a platform to reach out to the public, and that they were looking forward 'to working with Senator (or President) McCain on ways to combat abuse of the DMCA takedown process on YouTube'.

During election campaigns in Bulgaria, too, there have been cases of copyright infringement, hate speech, etc. For example, in the 2009 parliamentary election campaign, private national TV channels broadcast a Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) video that used, without copyright permission, part of an interview with the leaders of the right-wing Blue Coalition on the subject *If taxes have to be raised, we will start with…* filmed by Re:TV cameramen and published in the *Capital* weekly. This was a violation of the Radio and Television Act provision that programme services may be broadcast solely after the copyrights and neighbouring rights have been settled in advance.

In the 2005 parliamentary election campaign, a video clip of the nationalist Ataka National Coalition used footage from the Bulgarian National Television's daily news programme in Turkish. Ataka had not asked the BNT for permission to use the footage. The video used the image and voice of a BNT presenter who had not given his consent to be included in the election campaign. In addition, according to Bulgaria's Central Electoral Commission (CEC) the footage used was out of context and incited to racial and interethnic hatred.[14] The CEC instructed the broadcasters to stop broadcasting the video but also notified the

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[13] Regina v. British Broadcasting Corporation [2002] EWCA Civ 297, [2003] UKHL 23.
[14] CEC Decision 302/2005.

prosecution authorities and the Council for Electronic Media (the Bulgarian regulatory authority for broadcast media), asking them to consider taking action under other statutory acts (the Criminal Code, the Radio and Television Act).

On the very first day of the 2007 European Parliament election campaign, another video of Ataka (whose slogan was *Let's stop the fezzes*, i.e. the Turks), broadcast by the TV channel Skat, was taken off the air. The CEC found that the video clip had content and messages that ran contrary to good morals, including by calling persons *national traitors* – among whom were a Bulgarian MEP, the prime minister of the Republic of Bulgaria, the leader of a political party, and the mayor of Sofia.[15]

Also noteworthy are some specific regulations on election advertising in Bulgaria, such as those requiring that all forms of election advertising must be *explicitly identified as such* or criminalizing vote-selling and vote-buying.

Political Advertising and New Media

Over the last decade many countries have been gradually expanding the scope of election campaign regulation to the internet. At the same time, it has become obvious that the laws from the *analogue era* are inadequate to achieve the goals of election campaigns, which are increasingly being conducted online.

In Bulgaria, a regulation was introduced back in 2006, in connection with the presidential elections, according to which the general regulations on election campaigns, including those for the broadcast media, are *also applicable to all internet sites*.[16] This regulation did not attract public attention at the time.

There are two restrictions which are applicable to a strictly defined period of time – namely, the so-called *day of reflection* (prohibition of canvassing on the day before voting day) and the *prohibition on publication and dissemination of results* of exit polls and opinion polls on voting day prior to the official end of voting. In the digital age, controlling, ascertaining and punishing violations of those prohibitions is relatively difficult.

In 2007, punishments for violations related to online content were imposed in Bulgaria for the first time. On voting day in the 2007 European Parliament elections, three websites (bgphoto.net, focus-news.net and express.bg) violated the prohibition on canvassing – according to the complaint submitted to the Central Electoral Commission for Election of Members of the European

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[15] CEC Decision 175/2007.
[16] Article 11d (6) of the Election of President and Vice President of the Republic Act.

Parliament from the Republic of Bulgaria (CECEP) – by posting banners of two parties. The CECEP found that the alleged violation had been committed and ruled that to ensure normal conditions on voting day and observance of the law, extraordinary measures ought to be taken, asking the Interior Ministry authorities for assistance in removing the above-mentioned campaign materials from the three websites.[17] A short while later, the Focus Agency submitted a letter to the CECEP certifying that all advertising banners of candidates in the elections had been removed from its website. The complaint about unlawful canvassing filed against the Focus Agency was withdrawn.

In 2007 the CEC was also approached in connection with a case involving campaign text messages. *Text messages are not subject to control and cannot be sanctioned because they constitute personal correspondence*, the CEC spokesperson announced.

Whereas no punishments have been imposed for text messages, the question regarding social networks remains open. In other countries, too, where similar restrictions are in force, no final decision has been taken as to whether the restrictions in question (day of reflection, prohibition of publication and dissemination of results of exit polls and opinions polls) are justified considering that television channels are punished for acts for which it is difficult to punish participants in micro-networks. More generally, the question concerns restrictions that are *legally justified* but *technically ineffective*.

Canada is a country where there is an active debate on the legislative measures against publishing poll results. There are six time zones in Canada, and information about election results in constituencies where the polls have closed can seriously influence voters in constituencies where polls are still open. There is a court ruling from 2007, according to which the confidentiality of elections requires imposing some restrictions on the publication of election results while the polls are still open, but the court is expected to rule whether those restrictions will apply also to social networks.

The process of drafting a new Electorate Code in Bulgaria (2010) raised the question of online political (election) advertising. As in the 2006 Election Act, the draft Electoral Code contains a chapter devoted to election campaigning which regulates in detail campaigning on radio, television and the press and outdoor advertising, but the idea is to regulate also online campaigning. Similarly to the prevalent practice in other countries, in Bulgaria, too, the declared intentions were that the Code would apply not to all online content but

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[17] CECEP Decision 247/2007.

only to *online public communication* which, precisely, is significant for the outcome of elections.

The scope of the Electoral Code is of key importance for the behaviour of candidates in future election campaigns. Here are some of the regulations[18] that are planned to be introduced for online content *within the scope of the Code*:

- The regulation remains in force regarding mandatory identification of the *issuer* of each item of campaign material.
- The publication and broadcasting of anonymous campaign materials is prohibited.
- Each item of campaign material (hence, also each online publication within the scope of the Code) should contain a statement that vote- buying and vote-selling is a criminal offence, and the said statement should occupy not less than 10% of the face space of the campaign material and should be boxed. In the audio and audiovisual materials, this statement should be contained as an unambiguous and understandable message.
- No canvassing is admissible during a period commencing 24 hours in advance of voting day and on voting day.
- Opinion and exit poll results may be made public after 7 pm on voting day.
- The election campaign should be conducted in the Bulgarian language.
- A right of reply online to a material that has encroached on the rights and has damaged the reputation of any candidate or of any person who represents the party, the coalition of parties or the nomination committee, is provided for the said candidate or person.

Effective application requires defining the scope of the Code as precisely as possible. In any case, the formulation in the 2006 Election Act – applicability to *all internet sites* – will be particularized.

The draft Electoral Code uses the term *media service*, including *linear media service*, by analogy with *audiovisual media service* in the Audiovisual Media Services Directive and its introduction into the Radio and Television Act (2010). The definition itself uses the Council of Europe definition in the relevant recommendation on measures concerning media coverage of election campaigns,[19] according to which

> The term "media" refers to those responsible for the periodic creation of information and content and its dissemination over which there is editorial

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[18] Draft Electoral Code, 2010.
[19] Recommendation CM/Rec(2007)15 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on measures concerning media coverage of election campaigns.

responsibility, irrespective of the means and technology used for delivery, which are intended for reception by, and which could have a clear impact on, a significant proportion of the general public. This could, *inter alia*, include print media (newspapers, periodicals) and media disseminated over electronic communication networks, such as broadcast media (radio, television and other linear audiovisual media services), online news-services (such as online editions of newspapers and newsletters) and non-linear audiovisual media services (such as on-demand television).

According to the draft Electoral Code, '*media service*' is the creation and dissemination of information and content, irrespective of the means and technology used for delivery, which are intended for reception by, and which could have a clear impact on, a significant proportion of the general public. Media services are:

a) print media (newspapers, magazines and other periodicals);
b) media disseminated over electronic communication networks, such as:
aa) broadcast media (radio, television and other linear audiovisual media services);
bb) online news-services (online editions of newspapers and magazines, and newsletters).

Social networks (Facebook, Twitter and other such) and blogs are not media services.

By analogy with the Audiovisual Media Services Directive, responsibility rests with the person (sole-trader natural person or legal person) who exercises effective control over the content, the programme schedules and the catalogue of the services provided. It is expressly provided that editorial responsibility *excludes* unmoderated forums and platforms for user-generated content.[20]

The fears that *blogs and social networks* will fall under the scope of the Electoral Code have turned out to be unjustified so far. Blogs and social networks are expressly excluded, as is *user-generated content*. Unlike the definition in the Council of Europe recommendation, *non-linear services* are also excluded. In practice, the Electoral Code includes additionally within its scope only *online editions of newspapers and magazines* and *newsletters*. This cautious extension of the scope of the Code to online content seems to be a correct approach. In fact, at the supra-national level, the above-mentioned Audiovisual Media Services Directive also extended its scope maximally cautiously.

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[20] Draft Electoral Code, §1, items 18 and 19.

The envisaged *right of reply online* requires separate attention. Whereas the right of reply online has long been on the agenda of the Council of Europe, it has not been made binding yet and appears in recommendations only.[21] There are countries (including EU member countries) which refuse to introduce such a right. The US Supreme Court has ruled that the right of reply is an *infringement on the freedom of the press*.[22] Bulgaria's stance on the right of reply *online* probably merits additional discussion.

A legislative decision that likewise needs to be analyzed is the envisaged provision that replies on radio and television should be broadcast *unaccompanied by any comment*. The public domain is a domain of public discussions. In the interactive digital world, comment is a contribution to the *marketplace of ideas*. The lawmakers' idea is probably to guarantee expression of dissenting views, but introducing a prohibition on comment does not seem to be proportionate to the aims pursued by the law, nor does it seem to be an effective solution.

Another difficult legal question is also noteworthy. The scope of application of the regulations on election advertising is significant not just insofar as it concerns prevention of unlawful content, but also from the point of view of the *financing* of election campaigns. Internet political communications placed *for a fee* are the subject of very detailed regulation in the USA.[23] Effective control over election campaign financing concerns online public communication in the cases involving payment or a fee.

In the future, the political contest will be conducted in another way and at another speed. Traditional voting will give way to electronic voting. The dissemination of information on the eve of elections and on voting day will become ever more difficult to control. The traditional models of political communication are already decreasing in importance, while the importance of new techniques and models is growing. Society is faced with new challenges, to which the law ought to respond with new rules.

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[21] Recommendation Rec(2004)16 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the right of reply in the new media environment.
[22] Miami Herald Publishing Co. v. Tornillo, 418 U.S. 241 (1974).
[23] FEC, 71 FR 18589 (4/12/06). Regulations governing certain types of Internet communications.

Kalina Petkova

Bulgarian Television Publicity: The Rise of Tabloid Politics

Against the background of the highly ideologized media landscape in Bulgaria during the Cold War, the emergence of private, market-oriented television channels was met with euphoria by the general public. Although the utopia of freedom and objectivity is marred by suspicions of corporate pressure and lobbying, TV viewers are almost unaware of some of the effects of the market. In the battle for rating points, the difference between making media and doing journalism is becoming ever bigger, and the mechanisms of show business serve as a recipe for success in the public sphere. To put it otherwise, the fragmentary and often misleading representation of political realities is not always due to political and economic pressure: audience tastes also play a significant role in this respect. The belief that freedom of speech and competition on the media market will make us better informed has largely proved to be deceptive. Of course this is well-known in countries where mass media content has long been determined by market mechanisms. For example, as long ago as 1985, American author Neil Postman wrote about the problematic effects of the comercialization of television in his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, formulating trends that are valid to this very day despite the dynamic changes in television.

This article looks at recent developments in the relationship between media and politics based on representations on Bulgarian television in 2010. The analysis focuses on the national terrestrial television channels. The findings are compared with the conclusions made by the Media Monitoring Lab (MML) in 2009, when three elections were held in Bulgaria (for the National Assembly, for the European Parliament, and local by-elections in key regions). The tabloidization of television and the connection between TV representations and electoral behaviour were two of the most important problems diagnosed by the MML in the field of political imagery and political representations on Bulgarian television in 2009. Those trends need to be examined in more detail as they shaped the Bulgarian television landscape in the context of which TV representations of events unfolded in 2010 and which will most likely continue to set the tone of Bulgarian television in the near future.

The Tabloidization of Television

The process called 'tabloidization' is sometimes also seen as a *dumbing down* of the media. Although there are quite a few examples of such dumbing down, it must be noted that the most influential television channels in Bulgaria have neither stopped covering the serious issues in the public sphere nor lowered their professional standards. It would be more correct to say that in the contemporary way of life, demand for television (and, generally, media) products is structured in such a way that some of the most common and competitive TV practices can be seen also as signs of tabloidization. Furthermore, the mechanisms for creating an attractive public image require precisely such tabloidization; that is to say, the effect is sought and intensified by professional PR.

The hybridization of TV programmes both in terms of form and of content has blurred the lines between the serious and the entertainment aspects of publicity. Politicians play in *Stani Bogat* (*Become Rich*, the Bulgarian version of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*) and even dance in *Dancing Stars* (the Bulgarian version of *Strictly Come Dancing*). Night-time talk shows discuss the most important problems of society with dubious celebrities. News and current affairs programmes use reality TV techniques. Although the different programmes have kept their separate formats and are presented as belonging to different genres, the techniques of making television are becoming increasingly similar, regardless of whether we are talking of a comedy show or a news programme. *Gospodari na Efira* (*Masters of the Air*, the Bulgarian version of *Striscia la notizia*), a programme originally devoted to TV gaffes, has evolved beyond recognition and now includes investigative reports. At the same time, news programmes have begun to simulate action in real time, placing their reporters on the site of a recent event to present material broadcast from the studio. Such 'hollow' live crossovers have become part of the professional standard, seemingly increasing the authenticity of the news but actually adding to the feeling that this is a reality show. Even if they are not entirely 'tabloid', those practices lead to tabloidization: the result is an easy-to-digest, fragmentary and hybrid television product known as infotainment, a combination of information and entertainment. This of course is not just a Bulgarian but also a global trend: Michael Curtin describes American television as being in a neo-network era foremost because of the hybridization of content (Curtin and Streeter 2001). Other observers of the media landscape in the USA go even further, arguing that the relations between media corporations and the White House are deliberately obstructing the emergence of a public format on the American media market (Lewis, Maxwell and Miller 2002).

Political Actors in the Pre-Election Theatre

All this brings us to the second main conclusion drawn by the MML on the basis of Bulgarian television monitoring conducted in the election year 2009. A connection between television representation and electoral behaviour was found at the level of both frequency and form of representation. Voter turnout and frequency of TV appearances by political actors were in amazing synchrony in all three elections: voter turnout was high in the elections that got extensive TV coverage and low in the elections that were given little TV time. Candidates succeeded or failed depending on their relations with the camera: those who were attractive onscreen succeeded in attracting votes and improving their previous election results regardless of their performance as politicians. John Hartley has coined the term *television knowledge* – knowledge formed in the audience as a result of the overall television picture (Hartley 1999). An electoral success such as that of Boyko Borisov (his newly formed GERB party won more than 40% of the vote in the elections for the National Assembly) can be defined not only as a political event. In the contemporary context where television has a key role in shaping public opinion and consciousness, this victory is also a cultural phenomenon resulting precisely from television knowledge. The ubiquitous presence on TV of the then candidate for prime minister, Boyko Borisov, turned him into a natural background of the everyday life of every viewer and into part of the environment the Bulgarians lived in regardless of whether they supported him or not. Borisov and other politicians who followed his lead constantly conveyed messages outside of the sphere of the serious – in appearances that facilitated the hybridization both of the forms and of the content of television. The appearances of politicians not only on night-time talk and game shows but also on news programmes succeeded in distracting, amusing and making Bulgarians think of them not as politicians but as people. At the international level, the universally recognized leaders in this type of practice are Silvio Berlusconi, Nicolas Sarkozy, as well as Barack Obama and first lady Michelle Obama. In the interaction between television and Borisov's public behaviour Bulgarians, too, saw a perfect example of TV news as a *packaged commodity* (Postman 1985).

An extensive television monitoring conducted in the UK between 1 and 31 May 2006 – immediately before, during and after the 2006 elections – arrived at conclusions that are remarkably similar to those drawn by the MML. One of them is that personalization coverage outweighed policy issues (Wayne and Murray 2009). In 2009 personalization coverage – a productive but tabloid media technique – categorically outweighed policy issues on Bulgarian television as well. This was facilitated also by the behaviour of party leaders themselves, and their symbiosis with the media bolstered the ratings of both sides. There was a distinct tendency for political stories to be represented

through concrete speakers – media-friendly party members. In addition, policy issues gave way, as a whole, to stories involving politicians which, however, were on random subjects and were most often promoted by the respective press offices.

The year 2010 reinforced the already existing trends in the thus-described TV landscape, adding new and unexpected touches. After its first months in office, the ruling GERB (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria) party developed its approaches towards presentation in public, while television channels developed their approaches towards coverage of GERB. Against the background of the attractive and de-politicized news in 2009, the first months of 2010 saw an obvious change in Bulgarian television. Politics did not simply come back, it took over the small screen. To put it even more precisely, the institutionally dictated political picture came to dominate television. And whereas during the pre-election period Bulgarians expected more politics but got more entertainment, after the election of the new government it turned out that the time had come for politics.

Politics Strikes Back

The significant change in the ordering of television news came with the saga involving Bulgaria's failed candidate for EU commissioner, Rumyana Zheleva. Political news often became the top story, and politics as a whole moved into prominence in news. The priority visibly shifted towards news from the corridors of power. TV coverage of such news had several main characteristics.

Above all, the media's own interpretation could not be found in them. As noted above, the picture was more institutionally dictated than constructed by the media themselves. Television news assumed the role of a PR forum of the government. The critical distance between media and politics, which could be seen during the transition period despite all suspicions to the contrary, as if disappeared before our eyes. Information was dictated by the government via or in the media. Media and those in power began to inform the Bulgarian public in an inseparable whole.

Of course, one of the reasons for the heightened journalistic interest in the political sphere can be found in the economic crisis. As a rule, the securer the life of a society is in economic terms, the less it is interested in political affairs. In other words, it was to be expected that the economic crisis would increase interest in a particular segment of news from the political sphere. The use of economic levers, the healthcare reform, the fate of different state-financed institutions and many other similar issues are associated with politics. Still, they directly affect people's lives, therefore it is normal that the public would want to

learn more about them in the context of the crisis and that television, for its part, would want to show them to the public. Partisan games and inter-personal conflicts in institutions, however, had long failed to make the top news story on the private national television channels. But they did so at the beginning of 2010.

After hurting Bulgaria's image in Europe, Rumyana Zheleva, Bulgaria's failed candidate for EU commissioner, restored television's interest in politics literally overnight. Together with her, however, the good old political intrigue likewise triumphed in mainstream news. MEP Antonia Parvanova and Rumyana Zheleva engaged in a conflict that made the headlines even though it was not the top story. Another example: the GERB parliamentary group's threat to initiate an impeachment procedure against President Georgi Parvanov may have raised an issue of national importance but, if we have to be honest, hardly anyone expected that the publication of a transcript of a conversation between President Parvanov and Finance Minister Simeon Djankov without the latter's permission would oust Parvanov from office. Although the story flickered and faded, it was allocated top place in newscasts as if by right. Such an ordering of TV news was not to be found during the term in office of the previous, three-party coalition, government.

The increased coverage of the purely political life of the new government is in line with the trends towards tabloidization in the ordering of the news: the GERB government itself readily responded to the demand for tabloidized media content. Being a business enterprise, private television channels need everything the Borisov government gives them in order produce news that will increase their ratings. The state-financed public-service broadcaster, Bulgarian National Television (BNT), is in a somewhat different position. In its news programmes priority is traditionally given to political news – that is to say, there was no change in the ordering of news on the BNT. Even so, being the immediate successor of the ideological state television from the communist period, the BNT is the object of permanent public suspicions. In addition, the fact that those suspicions are justified has repeatedly been confirmed by scandals over the dismissal of journalists on what are widely believed to be political grounds, non-transparent changes of directors general, etc. Still, it is a fact that of all national terrestrial television channels the BNT is the only one to have preserved the structure of its news upon the change of government, having regularly broadcast during the previous government's term in office political news regardless of their value in terms of ratings. What is more interesting is that the suspicions of excessively close ties with the power-holders, of which the state-financed BNT has always been accused, spread to include the private TV channels as well. This phenomenon even led to the coining of a new term in Bulgarian public life.

'Media Comfort'

'Media comfort' (i.e. media honeymoon) is a phrase promoted by Bulgarian television to describe the prime minister's relations with the media. The claim that the media were according him privileged, friendly treatment seemed more like a statement of fact than an accusation. The issue of pressure over the media entered their agenda and culminated in a showdown in May 2010, when Borisov sent a letter to a number of editors-in-chief insisting on a clear answer to the question of whether they felt they were being pressured in any way. In the media circus that followed neither 'yes' nor 'no' seemed like the right answer, and the letter itself came to be seen as the most obvious attempt at control over the media. From a researcher's point of view, however, it is more productive to change the perspective: the problem between the media and the prime minister is not that they are 'comfortable' for him but that he is 'comfortable' for them. With power such as the prime minister's one can generate many news stories, each one of them having the potential to become a hit. Moreover, the government flirts with the media and panders to mass taste. Resisting the 'politicotainment' provided in large doses by the government and representing it through its own prism has become the major challenge to television.

The manner in which information is dictated from above and reported to the public via the media is one-way. Issues and interpretations that do not come from someone in power are almost absent from the agenda of Bulgarian television channels. Even the incriminating disclosures about some of the people in power or criticisms and demands for conducting investigations against them are not initiated by TV journalists but by rival politicians. Television's reflex of diagnosing problems in politics is constantly replaced by a reflex of close interaction with political actors. One more proof of that is the sensational TV coverage which Yane Yanev, the dubious leader of a small party whose parliamentary group has fallen apart, has succeeded in attracting on several occasions. Each of the numerous allegedly compromising materials about people in power disclosed by him has enjoyed enviable TV time.

Considering that the scheme of doing PR now guarantees the presence in the media of political newsmakers, we should take a critical look at the actual mechanisms of newsmaking. Journalists ought to be interested in how a particular event gets into the news as well as in how it is financed. Given the present rise of PR, this would make up a large part of properly journalistic work. A drastic example in this respect was television coverage of 13 June, the birthday of Prime Minister Boyko Borisov.

Private Party

It is hardly a coincidence that two events were scheduled for this day: the inauguration of a monument to Garibaldi in Sofia and a visit by Silvio Berlusconi, with whom Borisov has good chemistry – for obvious reasons. The Italian prime minister has even declared on several occasions that he sees his Bulgarian counterpart as a serious rival in terms of image. In addition, Sofia Mayor Yordanka Fandakova symbolically *presented* the monument and the renovated garden around it to Boyko Borisov. At the same time, the MPs from his party donated BGN 30 000 (EUR 15 000) for the lions in the Sofia Zoo – once again, as a *present* for the prime minister.

One can hardly blame Bulgarian television for making a big fuss over Borisov's birthday: there was a mass-cultural event, footage from the zoo, and a visit by a foreign prime minister. This sort of coverage is less an example of fawning journalism than of stunted journalistic instincts. In essence, this was a public celebration of a personal holiday. The questions about it that PR reps would rather avoid were never asked by journalists. How much did the 13 June events, which were obviously deliberately scheduled for that day, cost the taxpayer? What were they intended and expected to achieve? How is the Borisov-Berlusconi relationship regarded in Europe? All of these are newsworthy issues that were not addressed in newscasts. Although some dared to be slightly ironic, all television channels confined themselves to the *official version*.

Police Operations, Financial Issues, and Publicity Stunts

This also applies to much of the news about two main topics in 2010: the state of public finances and the fight against crime. On the one hand, they are a permanent priority of every society; on the other, the Boyko Borisov government exploited them publicly in the most spectacular way possible.

The ideas of retribution, establishment of order, and equality before the law were promoted in populist form in various operations and led to some extreme examples, such as the Hollywood-style arrest of former defence minister Nikolay Tsonev or the summoning of former prime minister Sergey Stanishev for questioning by prosecutors. Despite the strong criticism, action-film-like footage of spectacular police operations continued to be broadcast on the news and even increased. As never before, TV screens were filled with handcuffs, guns and armed police officers in balaclavas. House searches and violent arrests became a staple in news programmes.

In addition to this purely visual strategy, the representation of the strong State and the tightening of rules had other interesting aspects too. The activity of the Interior Ministry began to be completely mediatized: everyday police operations were now given attractive personal names, from *Octopus* (*Oktopod*) and *Jellyfish* (*Meduza*) to *The Ignorant* (*Bezhabernite*) or *Bums* (*Dupetata*) and the bombastic definition 'special operations' (*spetsoperatsii*). Although some of those operations were nothing more than local neighbourhood raids resulting in the detection of a dozen stolen cars, they still got a name and media coverage. It must be noted that after the initial boom of such news stories, television displayed some journalistic sense and began to pay less attention to the less significant reports from the Interior Ministry. Still, TV coverage of the fight against crime remained extensive and consolidated its visual techniques. In September and October 2010 there were even *interviews* with masked police officers.

At the same time, increasingly urgent financial issues gradually pushed police news into the background but went on to form an interesting mix with the latter. After the budget deficit, the debates on it in different institutions, and protests about *financial* issues were reported separately for some time, the representation of the *strong arm* spread to them as well. Following various financial inspections and audits that found mostly abuses by former government officials, October saw tax inspections of properties conducted by helicopter.

Besides bringing to light undeclared super-luxury properties whose existence used to be a public secret, this operation had the advantage of being given spectacular media coverage. The stunning mansions and sprawling estates shown from the air arrested the attention of TV viewers and served as proof of the successful work of the government. The fact that the *helicopter* operation was paraded across TV screens without a hint of criticism is telling of the way of thinking of Bulgarian journalists. Given the availability of Google Earth, was the helicopter really necessary except as a publicity stunt? What did the flight by helicopter cost and were the tax inspectors responsible for the respective regions

actually on board? Exactly how will the amount of due taxes be determined and how will they be paid? Do such inspections violate the rights of property owners who pay their taxes diligently? The government's publicity stunts were once again used by television for uncritical attraction of viewers.

Colleagues and Rivals

In this line of thought, another unhappy conclusion about the state of Bulgarian TV journalism hardly comes as a surprise: the absence of a sense of community. Even when they are rivals rather than colleagues, the people working for different TV channels would feel more comfortable if there was a united journalistic community in Bulgaria. The ability of journalists to defend the freedom of speech and exercise public pressure together has permanently yielded to commercial interests and competition. The absence of a journalistic instinct for criticizing and keeping the powers that be on their toes became particularly obvious from the reactions to Boyko Borisov's refusal to answer a question from Nova Television reporter Maria Tsantsarova ('You know very well you're the last person on earth I'll answer…', he snapped at her). There was no reaction from any other television channel except Nova despite the fact that what was at issue was public ethics and the professional dignity of journalism. Excessive tolerance of arrogant behaviour of government officials is an old shortcoming of the Bulgarian public sphere. One of the reasons for it is no doubt to be found in the behaviour of journalists themselves: what happens on another's turf is regarded as news produced by a rival that ought to be countered by the production of an even bigger news story. Even in extreme cases such as the one noted above Bulgarian viewers are not offered a single picture founded on the civic functions of journalism. Although the tabloidization of news is a fact at the international level, in many countries the public sphere demands that political actors keep certain rules of behaviour. During his election campaign in May 2008, for example, Barack Obama addressed a reporter as 'sweetie' and then had to apologize and explain himself at length. Such things not only do not happen in Bulgaria, they are not even expected to happen. This type of behaviour by Bulgarian politicians is criticized only in the personal blogosphere or personally by the affected journalists.

'Allo 'Allo!

In addition to the issues of collegiality among television channels and the 'media comfort' accorded to the government, we must also note the practice of phone calls from politicians to journalists. Although it is rarely mentioned in media surveys, this is still widely believed to be a common practice in Bulgaria. In the 2009 and 2010 Freedom House global surveys on media freedom, Bulgaria

ranked 76th, with 'partly free' media. Proof of direct pressure upon the media from politicians was the report of a phone call from Lachezar Ivanov, the then head of the parliamentary healthcare committee, to Nova Television reporter Dilyana Gaytandzhieva. Ivanov had reportedly *requested* that incriminating disclosures about a customs officer who was a friend of his not be aired. Although Lazhezar Ivanov later resigned from his post as head of the parliamentary committee, this case should not be considered as a victory for the media. Firstly, he has remained an MP from the ruling GERB party. Secondly, although he is less often mentioned in the media, he is far from discredited – on the contrary, he can often be seen being interviewed by parliamentary reporters in the National Assembly and as a guest in the studio of various television channels. Thirdly, and most importantly, Boyko Borisov used the situation to his benefit in a very specific way.

On the one hand, the prime minister said that Ivanov *had only wanted to help a friend* and he thus invoked the code of honour and honourable relationships between men. On the other hand, Dilyana Gaytandzhieva herself said that she had contacted the prime minister immediately after Ivanov called her – now this was a more than puzzling request for advice and an even more puzzling admission on her part. Borisov's PR-conscious reaction that *there is no political umbrella over anyone* was widely covered by all television channels. It turned out that the offender kept his seat in parliament, even if not in an executive position, while the whole Bulgarian nation saw that the prime minister is a man of principle. However, something especially worrying remained unclear – why a journalist calls the prime minister before broadcasting an incriminating report and why the prime minister takes on the role of TV editor.

In Conclusion

According to Manuel Castells (1996), the media function as switches in the network society. According to Castells, by way of the media different financial and social networks enter new spheres of influence and subordinate them to their own rules. Bulgarian television reality and its relationship with the government are proof of this: a network of economic levers and social dependences was replaced before our eyes by another (the change of government) with the active participation of television. Being the main medium used by Bulgarians for information and entertainment, television is the mediator between political actors and the electorate. Considering everything said so far, Bulgarian television obviously cannot be regarded as an agent of civil society, an exponent of its principles and a guarantor of democracy. Although all those qualities are still seen as essential for the media, the expectations that the media will have them tend to come from earlier stages of the development of the media system. The present state of the television market and the contemporary practices of

producing news content indicate that civil society cannot afford to harbour illusions about television. Television's critical potential is diluted in its entertainment functions, and political news packaged as entertainment is guaranteed to succeed on television.

Television constructs the political in a form that makes it convenient for watching. This results in a fragmented picture of events and of actors that attract consumer interest and then fade away. Even scandalous disclosures on television are aimed less at real consequences than at attracting viewers. The structure of news programmes and the characteristics of each news story are not aimed at provoking a public-spirited position and citizen participation. As onscreen representations are largely secured by the press offices of institutions or by the personal charisma of government officials, journalistic work is relieved of the responsibility to create its own perspective.

One must bear in mind that infotainment and 'politicotainment' are cultural, and not just purely media phenomena, therefore television should not be studied didactically. In the context of the postmodern developments of the public sphere, the foundations of civil society leave their traditional fields and seek new forms. In such a context, civic education of the general public includes not just cultivation of a habit of looking for information but also development of a critical attitude towards media content. Just as in contemporary life being able to choose among the multiplicity of consumer goods is part of the everyday culture of living, so too the scale of media consumption constantly requires analyzing the relationship between journalism and politics. The most important questions transcend the limits of media studies: are today's late-consumer societies capable of producing a corrective through regulatory mechanisms? And also, is regulating the existence of public-service media by law enough to guarantee that the public sphere will function in the public interest? At the present stage it is certain that whatever new media or forms of public control may emerge, television is far from losing its influence. It follows, then, that the significant question concerns not just the influence of television but also the influence upon television.

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Life and Death on the Radio in Bulgaria: Traumas and Political Identity on the Airwaves

Radio journalism in Bulgaria is in its last days. If we were to follow the spirit of one of the most enduring academic ideas that has amused both students and teachers of journalism in Europe, the USA and Australia for years, our analysis of the political life of the radio ought to start from such a radical hypothesis. It is becoming increasingly difficult to favour radio events not because there are so many but because it is impossible to distinguish the time we spend listening to the radio from the time we spend doing other things. The radio is increasingly becoming a 'thing' rather than a name, a programme, a presenter. The most innocuous metaphor for 2010 as a political year on the radio is our daily trip home from work through the busy traffic of big cities. While hurrying home, we listened to 'something'. We do not remember exactly what it was or who said it. The very idea that one day we may be nostalgic for the short time spent listening to the radio on the move sounds absurd.

But do we really have reason to proclaim the end of serious political debate in the media and the last days of journalism? As long ago as 1997, Prof. Michel Bromley argued that the ongoing convergence of technologies undermines the basic skills and standards of journalism and fosters so-called 'multiskilling' in newsrooms which he saw as the result of economic pressures that cut back on resources while increasing workloads (Bromley 1997: 341). On a more optimistic note, Prof. Mark Deuze argues that, ultimately, journalism is not going to end because of cultural or technological convergence. In his view, in the last few years we are witnessing 'changing working conditions of journalists in different industries that are merging and to some extent collaborating in an attempt to reach new and especially younger audiences, while at the same time maintaining their privileged position in society' (Deuze 2007: 141). According to Deuze, contemporary journalism is expected to have a creative role in ensuring the collective memory and social ties of communities in the eyes both of the academic community and of journalists themselves.

In 2010 Prof. Mark Deuze defined our media life in one tweet as follows: We are: *1. everywhere; 2. making reality; 3. alone; 4. connected; 5. mobile; 6.*

living/dying in public; 7. media (Deuze 2010). Elsewhere, he argues that 'our media environment has become a key site of how we give meaning to the converging context of how we live, work, and play, as media connect us to each other, to our entertainment, and to our work – all at the same time' (Deuze 2007: 42). A similar idea has also motivated our choice of the metaphor of commuting in our analysis of Bulgarian radio publicity. In such a reality the representations of political discourse meet with a most authentic reception from listeners. Of course, what we have in most cases is a fragmentary publicity and momentary reactions of the audiences, but then the grand utopias about the radio had disappeared already at the beginning of the transition to democracy in Bulgaria. The factors that caused this fragmentation followed the chronology of the development of the Bulgarian radio market: the 'break-up' of the ideological syncretism of the totalitarian media environment where the most important role was initially assigned to the radio as the most popular mass medium; the superficial (slapdash or piecemeal) application of commercial radio formats without providing full details in the respective programme schedule; the aggressive promotion of radio stations through advertising campaigns instead of flagship programmes and journalists; the chaotic move to the internet, often without a consistent concept.

On the other hand, the most powerful political messages, especially for younger audiences, are to be found in the newscasts/news programmes of radio stations. According to Prof. John Hartley, news is 'the primary sense-making practice of modernity' (Hartley 1996: 32). In the Bulgarian context, newscasts inevitably follow the fragmentary (virtual) modernity described above. The news is often thought of as: a boring text that should be reduced to the minimum; cheap work – at a time of crisis, all it takes is a patient news writer and constant 'scanning' of news sites; purely formal, something that has to be included in the programme just to say it is there; dead bodies of words we must put up with until the next song comes along.

Twitter for Pensioners

However, the minimalism of messages on Bulgarian radio is not total. Of course, even in the age of cultural and technological convergence one can still find 'zones of nostalgia'. Colourful, uncontrolled but also intolerant political discourse can be heard most often in listener phone-ins, especially on the public-service Bulgarian National Radio (BNR). Whereas a significant part of young and middle-aged users spend their lives on the internet, the radio has played an important part in the lives of many older Bulgarians (something like Twitter for pensioners).

Here are two examples. 21 May 2009. Bulgarian-born Laura Chukanov, Miss Utah USA 2009, appears on the Darik Radio talk show Chelyusti (Jaws). The conversation in the studio is light and pleasant. Laura is easy-going and amusing: 'Please call and tell me' (what she can do to help her country; her Bulgarian is faltering but charming). But Laura's impressive biography suddenly triggers an old reflex in the minds of the active audience: the Radio Free Europe reflex from the early years of democracy in Bulgaria. Out of ten listeners who phone in, six speak about politics: for and against Gergana Passy, a Bulgarian politician and former minister of foreign affairs – 'I don't know if you know it, but she's a rather corrupt woman'; against the US government – 'which is to blame for the present crisis' and must 'stop interfering' in global affairs; and against the communists:

> I watched Laura on Slavi's [TV talk show] last night, she's really a wonderful girl, and because she's asking us what she can do to help I want (although this again brings us back to politics), umm, let her explain to all Americans over there, to all foundations, to all people, umm, tell them clearly and plainly that the word 'communist' in Bulgaria means terrorist and must disappear, and then everything in Bulgaria will be fine! Thanks! And greetings to everyone!

6 November 2010. Horizont, the current affairs talk show Dekonstruktsia (Deconstruction) with Petar Volgin. The subject of the show is 'Can President Parvanov's political project become a real alternative to the present government?' Volgin, a seasoned journalist who has many years of experience with strange audiences in live phone-ins, knows how to communicate with listeners. But even his polite reminder that listeners who have phoned in more rarely have priority on the show, does not stop those who simply feel like chatting:

> Hello. I'm an averagely intelligent, good-mannered person, and I've had enough of everything that's been going on in the last twenty years. So as an intelligent person, let me tell you: other than taking ourselves in hand and masturbating, there's nothing else we can do…. / Hello … When I go to Germany, France, and so on, why do the Turks put on contact lenses and change their name from Hassan to Hans?

Another listener talks about the people of the arts (the so-called 'artistic intelligentsia' in communist times), and two others suggest that a strong communist party should be founded in Bulgaria.

This unification of the democratic discourse is worrying: enclave-like stances, a hard-line, partisan style typical of the earlier years of the transition in Bulgaria,

speaking in generalities without a sense of decency and finding excuses for it in the endless trials and tribulations to which the nation is subjected. Radio and television phone-ins sound like an exotic perspective on serious issues. The most active radio audiences have acquired a specific new role – that of a convincing illustration that explains why Bulgarian politics, society and public debates are what they are. Twenty years after the beginning of the transition, their energy is inexhaustible and it is precisely the transition that is the most traumatic subject for them.

The BNR: Traumas and Identity

Every discussion about the BNR starts from one and the same thesis which is extremely annoying for media observers outside the BNR and quite 'inspiring' for those who work at the BNR: the BNR does not have an identity of its own. Viewed 'from the outside', the BNR is a vast territory, but viewed 'from the inside' it is an overcrowded beehive where, figuratively speaking, differences and mediocrities fight to the death for survival. Time does not flow in the same way for Bulgarian private radio stations, not even for those who broadcast mostly news, and for the BNR (despite the existence of cut-throat competition between them). That is also why at the BNR all radical moves are traumatic, all decisions are a compromise, and all 'strategies', 'ideas' and 'concepts' are suspected of serving private, political and other interests.

Paradoxically, the biggest but also the most ambivalent political issues on Bulgarian radio in 2010 were related to the crises of identity at the BNR. The events that provoked those crises were widely regarded as being the product of political intervention: the election of a BNR director general and the debate on the possible merger of Bulgarian National Television (BNT) and the BNR, as well as their public representations, especially in the other media, were strongly politicized.

After Valery Todorov, a veteran journalist and former correspondent of the BNR and BNT in Moscow, was re-elected BNR director general, Georgi Lozanov, President of the Council for Electronic Media (CEM, the national regulatory authority for broadcast media), said that 'it may be that many people at the BNR think differently but are afraid to say what they think, but fear has a price and in 2010 the fear is called Valery Todorov' (Antonova 2010); former BNR director general Polya Stancheva: 'When I took office it were as if I was treading on a minefield; we got help from professional psychologists, one of them had even worked with terrorists, but now I am certain that everyone is past this period and there is no going back' (Ivanova 2010); '…the BTA [Bulgarian News Agency] received a letter from one of the unsuccessful candidates for the post [of BNR director general], Chavdar Stefanov, which said that the name of Valery

Todorov was not on the Russian Media Association's list of awarded Bulgarian journalists. The only Bulgarian [on the list] was Chavdar Stefanov, former BNR correspondent in Russia' (Mediapool 2010).

It is noteworthy that all three emotions were authentic: 'fear', 'Russia', 'minefield'. It were as if what was at issue was not the Bulgarian National Radio, which celebrated its 75th anniversary in January 2010, but a revolutionary situation. At the same time, the representation and reception of political life on the BNR's Horizont programme service reveals an inclination to follow a tired routine. Today fatigue is an immanent condition not just of professional journalists but also of generations of listeners who have grown up listening to the BNR. And although the short-term forecasts are by no means pessimistic (Horizont ranks high in public opinion polls; it has kept many of its flagship journalists like Petar Volgin or Lili Marinkova), it is questionable whether the BNR will succeed in attracting younger audiences.

Nationalisms on the Airwaves

During the cold war the 'battle' for a place on the MW and SW airwaves was a strategic, ideological and patriotic one on the Balkans. In border areas the airwaves were like a 'battlefield' where 'our' transmissions had to be stronger than the neighbours'. In this decades-long rivalry the name and programme of the foreign radio station broadcasting on 'our territory' were of secondary importance; what was important was the language: Greek, Serbian, Turkish, Macedonian, and so on.

In August 2010 Bulgarian nationalist formations and media reenacted such an outdated conflict, this time on FM frequencies: '91 Turkish and 31 Bulgarian radio stations can be heard in the area around Nesebar, according to a survey conducted by the Burgas chapter of the VMRO [Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization, a moderate nationalist Bulgarian political party] and a Communications Regulation Commission [CRC] team…' (BurgasInfo 2010). 'After the authorities were notified by the VMRO, a working team of CRC and VMRO representatives was appointed to check the problems with the purity of radio airwaves on our country's territory' (VMRO 2010). At the beginning of September 2010 another part of Bulgaria – the area of Smolyan in the Rhodopi Mountains which has a sizeable Muslim population – became the focus of nationalist attention:

> Muslim prayers are being broadcast by an unknown radio station in Smolyan, a reporter of Radio Fokus – Smolyan reported. In the holy month of the Muslims, Ramazan, a Turkish radio station blaring out prayers conducted by clerics appeared in the Smolyan area. … Dozens of

Smolyan residents who have heard the radio are shocked by what's going on as this is the first time in their lives that they are hearing prayers in Arabic on the radio (Beshendzhiev 2010).

Turkish radio station shocks Smolyan… Could that be part of Turkey's plan called 'Islamic arc' in which the Rhodopi have an important role?[1]

Thus, the media reception of the us/them quarrel once again demonstrated at least three clichés that are used by 'patriotic' media in such cases: (1) the reports almost always concern unnamed radio stations, 'phantoms' of the neighbour country, which become more popular than the familiar 'native' broadcasters; the media lack the courage and competence to name the concrete 'irritator'; (2) competition in which the 'rivals' cannot do without each other – the neighbour country's nationalisms activate native nationalisms; (3) if the strategic goal is to 'irritate' each other, it won't work. Few foreign tourists listen to the radio in summer, especially in a Balkan language they do not understand. At the height of summer not even *cacao.fm*, Cacao Beach's trendiest online radio station, can attract more than a dozen international listeners, let alone conventional radio stations.

Family History as a Rejection of the National

In November 2010 protestors in the seaside town of Nesebar renounced Bulgaria several times. 'The town is 3000 years old, and Bulgaria just 1329,' one of the placards read. Meanwhile, everyone else in Bulgaria renounced Nesebar because of the local residents' signature-collecting campaign for delisting the Old Town of Nesebar as a UNESCO World Heritage site after the authorities began demolishing illegally built buildings in the town. The protestors claimed that World Heritage site status was stopping the development of their town. Bulgarian TV channels and newspapers quickly found someone to represent as a 'spokesperson' of the protestors: a 24-year-old student called Ivelina, repeatedly described as 'a blonde clad in black'.

Commenting on the messages on the protestors' placards, she said the following: 'We had the feeling we were under Byzantine rule, if you remember what it was like.[2] Back in the past Nesebar was conquered by Byzantium. But what happened now was worst because it was caused by Bulgarians.'[3]

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[1] See 'Tursko radio stresna Smolyan – maaneta i zurni oglasyavat rodnoto nebe – badi gord, che si bulgaristanets', <http://vbox7.com/play:0a013ea4> [accessed 29 November 2010].
[2] Bulgaria was under Byzantine rule from 1018 to 1185.
[3] See 'Mantalitetat na protesta: imotite ili UNESCO?' *bTV*, <http://www.btv.bg/story/1981436269-Mantalitetat_na_protesta_imotite_ili _YuNESKO.html> [accessed 29 November 2010].

Lacking visual imagery, the radio cannot rely on such instantly recognizable symbols. But two reports from 15 November 2010, by BNR correspondent Daniela Kostadinova and Darik Radio Burgas correspondent Rositsa Ameleva, described most truthfully the emotions stirred up by the demolition of illegal buildings in Old Nesebar. Television had someone to show as the 'face' of the protest demonstrations, but the radio suggested the true motives behind them.

On Horizont's morning programme Predi Vsichki (Before Everyone), Tanya Velichkova suggested the most tolerant perspective possible on the Nesebar case, introducing her conversation with the owner of a house with an 'illegally built superstructure' as 'the history of your house'. Although the owner had a problem with his voice and had to make an effort in speaking, the hidden elements of the story were gradually revealed: (1) 'I saw that there were at least 30 [illegally] built houses before mine and no one was doing anything about them, so I hoped that it [his house] would be legalized eventually'; (2) 'why did they [the authorities] have to begin with us when there are so many illegal things in this country'; (3) [I built the house] because I have three sons. I have to provide for them in some way'; (4) 'they are ruining the fate of our family'; 'I've done this for my family'.

The same motive was to be found in Darik Radio correspondent Rositsa Ameleva's conversation with an arrested protestor from Nesebar: 'You must understand, those people are defending their homes.' The concrete case involving the coverage of protest demonstrations in a small town by Bulgaria's top two news and current affairs radio stations unexpectedly turned into a phenomenal rehabilitation of radio journalism: revealing *unhappy family stories* is part of the creative role of reporters and journalists in 'ensuring the collective memory and social ties of communities' (Deuze 2007).

The End of Anarchy on the Airwaves

On 5 January 2010 Bobbie Tsankov, a popular but controversial Bulgarian crime journalist, former radio host and DJ with ties to the underworld, was gunned down in broad daylight in central Sofia. This criminal case instantly turned into a political one. Tsankov's death also sparked a debate about the difference between the radio journalist and the radio DJ, and about the risks of (mis)using the media as a toy. The radio host's murder also suggested the end of the specific Bulgarian postcommunist phenomenon of unpunished anarchy on the airwaves. How did this phenomenon work?

> I will never forget how one night I got a call around 11 pm [on my live phone-in music show] from someone who said he wanted to greet Maya and I told him that if she was good-looking I, too, might greet her. Now

that was a big mistake! Twenty minutes later Georgi Iliev [a notorious crime boss-turned-millionaire-businessman whose wife is called Maya] stormed into the studio (Tsankov 2010: 4).

'Someone', 'greetings for the good-looking chick', 'special calls', tiresome repetition of short sentences – this was the secret of Tsankov's 'scandalous' behaviour as a radio host. Entertainment on the radio acquired elements of something supposedly designed for 'a chosen few', where coded locations were at the top of the hierarchy of greetings: 'special greetings for the hotel, room seven, special greetings for room seven' (Savchev 2010).

Some people from the Sofia underworld probably still miss the coded greetings – the moments of carefree media bliss for thuggish listeners. But there was also envy – quite a few of the other listeners longed to be in the shoes of the greeted ones. This was the hidden mechanism of Tsankov's success on the radio.

In his articles for the tabloids Tsankov also tried to imitate journalistic investigations, but it was obvious at a glance that most of his stories about gangland feuds and plots involving the secret services were made up. That is also why journalists' feverish search through the cuttings from the tabloids for the truth that led to his death was not the only quick step to solving his murder. Anarchy in public discourse, encouraged by its first steps on the radio, sacrificed its most outstanding representative.

Names Without Media

In the last few years news radio stations have been gradually moving to the internet. This has blurred individualities, nostalgias, likings – our longest-lasting reasons to listen to the radio in the 1990s. Whereas 'our media environment has become a key site of how we give meaning to the converging context of how we live, work, and play' (Deuze 2007: 42), in it the political has been marginalized because of the subjective agenda we ourselves set in the virtual environment. At the same time, we can see large groups of people in the big cities who are slowly but surely turning away from traditional forms of media entertainment (reality shows, TV series, politics).

What we now have are postmodern listeners, but not media that can hold their attention. Types belonging to the category of 'young, active, with more than average income' who have turned off their TV sets and who (sometimes) switch from one station to another in search of a better song in the bad times of the radio. They do not want to hear what the presenter is saying because everything that can be said on the radio has long since been said. This group of people do

not have a medium of their own and for the time being they have not decided to create one themselves.

But postmodern listeners are becoming more and more noticeable as individuals capable of maintaining more stable communities and of legitimating authorities. Listeners have outstripped the media they do not have.

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Elena Koleva

◼ Pixels with a Message: Visual Representation of Politics in the Bulgarian Dailies

The media narrative of politics as constructed through photos in the print media is an important element in the overall perception of the image of a given actor: an individual, a political party or an institution. On the territory of the public sphere, the practices of media and politics clash in the battle for influence over public opinion – by the logic of unavoidable mutual cooperation. This article presents a summary of the most significant trends identified in a study monitoring the visual representation of politics in the major Bulgarian national dailies. The study focused on how the people in power sought and used the media to convey their political messages. And how the Bulgarian press represented those in power. The study covered the last months of the previous, three-party-coalition, government; the European and national parliamentary elections (2009); the victory and establishment of the political party GERB (Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria) and the figure of Boyko Borisov in 2010 as a political and media precedent through a snowballing increase in the number of personalized photos of Borisov. It monitored the visual representation of the ruling three-party coalition – made up of the BSP (Bulgarian Socialist Party), NDSV (National Movement for Stability and Progress) and DPS (Movement for Rights and Freedoms) – and of the opposition parties – GERB, the SDS (Union of Democratic Forces), Ataka, DSB (Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria) and others – before the 5 July 2009 elections and, after the elections, of the new government in the major national dailies (*24 Chasa*, *Trud*, *Standart*, *Telegraf*, *Sega* and *Dnevnik*). The study sought to identify the substantial peculiarities of the photos of political actors. It paid special attention to the location of the photos (front page, centre spread, inside page, box, back page) and the quantitative parameters of the published photos (size and number). How was political communication represented in the press?

A Few Words About Political Images and the Media

The study focused on the present Bulgarian political actors who, like pixels, form the mosaic of the political sphere seen in the press and offered to the public

outside of verbal discourse. As an element of the expressive system of newspapers, the photo is a visual code recording a particular political moment because it speaks in the language of suggestion and complements the attitudes of the public towards the perception of the identity of a given political actor. 'For a given individual, or for a collective actor, there may be a plurality of identities,' Manuel Castells notes (Castells: 1997: 6). Our analysis was interested primarily in the media presence of political actors, which could form longer-term attitudes in society. The study of their visual representations found several main characteristics of Bulgarian political life:

- Change/substitution of the existing vision during the 2009 elections;
- Shortened distance between the media and the government;
- 'Media comfort' enjoyed by the government;
- The effects of the mediatization of politics through political imagery.

In the context of media coverage of Bulgarian political life before, during and after the European and national parliamentary elections, the study identified facts that changed the status quo of official photography and displaced its institutional location.

Bulgarian politicians were less and less frequently depicted inside institutions; they were more often shown among the people, in the public exterior. The publicizing of government figures, and especially of Boyko Borisov, is a new trend that has remained highly influential among the Bulgarian public after the elections too. Examining the media effects of imagery, Maria Popova concludes that 'the political system is giving way to political imagery. What has become most important now is the image of a given politician imposed by the media, his or her eclecticism … personal qualities, physical presence, which dominate over and often even replace political messages and political ideology' (Popova 2010). Here we can give as an example Prime Minister Boyko Borisov, BSP leader and former prime minister Sergey Stanishev, Interior Minister Tsvetan Tsvetanov, Finance Minister Simeon Djankov, Bulgarian President Georgi Parvanov, DPS leader Ahmed Dogan (who rarely appeared in photos after the elections), SDS leader Martin Dimitrov, DSB leader Ivan Kostov, Sofia Mayor Yordanka Fandakova, National Assembly President Tsetska Tsacheva, to name but a few. In the period under review, the Bulgarian dailies allowed an over-centralization of dominant images (prime minister, president, government). The institutional functions of politicians were represented through coverage of their attendance at inauguration and consecration ceremonies for various sites, cocktail parties and other events outside the strictly official protocol. The fact that those in power came out of institutions and mixed with the people was approved of by a large part of the Bulgarian public and has obviously proved to be a winning political strategy promoted through the media.

The close relationship between elites and the government shows how the Bulgarian political class is using the media to attract voters or to impose certain models of behaviour. 'As in their election campaigns, politicians are trying to manipulate the media discourse to their own ends or, in other words, to transform it into a power discourse' (Manliherova 2003). Perceived as information, the images in newspapers complement and influence public attitudes. In the field of our study, media and politics inevitably met also in the relationship between power and communication. The visual representation of this relationship could be found in the reporting of news through TV footage and photos in the print and online press. The reflex of the press to complement news through photos of official actors complements the political portrait and transforms the image of the actor into a tool for his or her political activity. Here the newspapers can control the actor both through the provision and absence of visual information about him or her. The most often depicted members of the new government were Boyko Borisov, Tsvetan Tsvetanov and Simeon Djankov. It was precisely photos that built the image of the leader Borisov, of his right-hand man Tsvetanov, of Djankov as a successful yuppie for whom the position of finance minister is the successive challenge in his career. This could be seen in Djankov's easy manners and in the way he communicates with the media. His image invites comparisons to Slavoj Žižek's 'countercultural geeks' (Žižek 2006: 10).

As Scott Lash claims, we perceive information – in this particular case, photos – 'under conditions of distraction' (Lash 2002: 184). We may conclude that the political attitudes of the public are formed even with the public's passive but invariable participation. The media in general and the press in particular use hyper-coverage of official actors through event photos that often influence the public more than their political rhetoric.

The 2009 by-elections for mayor of Sofia were, to some extent, a counterpoint to this trend. There was no pre-election debate proper on who should be mayor of Sofia and it seemed that for the first time, the leading contenders for the position (GERB's Yordanka Fandakova and the BSP's Georgi Kadiev) were denied a platform on the pages of the dailies, unlike the parties that had nominated them. We witnessed a 'partisan vote' for mayor of Sofia, and not the all too familiar in election campaigns photos of the candidates inaugurating schools, kindergartens, important public events… Yordanka Fandakova's image evolved. She escaped from the shadow of Boyko Borisov, her predecessor as mayor of Sofia, as she inherited the media's interest in him but did not inherit his line of behaviour. The newspapers focused more on the person performing her municipal duties than on the woman Fandakova.

If in the case of men in power the focus is on visual representation of gestures and postures, in the case of women the newspapers satisfy the curiosity of the public about politicians through the style of dress. The image of women in politics is perceived more easily and comprehensively, and influences public attitudes more strongly than their verbal representations. The favourites of Bulgarian photo journalists in terms of style of dress in the period under review were Tsetska Tsacheva, Emilia Maslarova (BSP), Kalina Krumova (Ataka) and Nadezhda Neinski (formerly Mihaylova, SDS). Iskra Fidosova and Maya Manolova, prominent MPs of GERB and the BSP respectively, remained represented in the sphere of institutions (in the wings and in the plenary chamber of parliament). Antonia Parvanova (NDSV) and Rumyana Zheleva (GERB) were a counterpoint in visual terms. The photos of the passionate biker (Parvanova) and the elegant waltz dancer (Zheleva) captured the essence of their perception by the public.

The public's perennial desire for transparency in the actions of the people in power seems to have been satisfied by the promotion of Boyko Borisov's image as a messiah with a human face but with a strong arm. 'We have always been more interested in the public functions of the media – the media are a sphere where political attitudes and opinions are formed – than in their role in forming private life – the media as a sphere in which the images of intimacy, of social success, of the desired life-history are formed' (Znepolski 2010). All this happened before the eyes of the public, which obviously approved of such a model.

That is how the Bulgarian media shaped, through piles of photos showing his multiple faces, Boyko Borisov's public image as a successful political product.

A Brief Overview

The six monitored dailies are of the same type – general-interest – and this allowed us to study the visual representation of political news in all subject sections. We found that the WAZ-owned *Trud* and *24 Chasa* had a similar visual style, opting for large, moderately sensational, colour photos of events. Black-and-white photo reports prevailed in *Telegraf* and *Standart*, where the angles and meaningful references in the photos speak for themselves and do not need long explanations. They are sensational and biased. For their part, *Dnevnik* and *Sega* were more rarely tempted to publish sensational photos and, unlike the other four monitored dailies, preferred to stick to official political photos.

We found changes in the visual political content primarily in the high-circulation *Trud*, *24 Chasa* and *Standart*. Most of the photos published in 2010 were of Boyko Borisov, Tsvetan Tsevanov and Simeon Djankov, marking a

change in the 'top three' (Boyko Borisov, Sergey Stanishev, Georgi Parvanov) in July-December 2009. Photos with captions remained the dominant genre, stimulating media interest in the new political actors after the elections.

The Opposition or the Others

In the context of the growing economic crisis and approaching elections, the Bulgarian press began to publish an increasing number of photos of the people who played a main or supporting role in the formation of new configurations.

The creation of the Blue Coalition (between the SDS and the DSB) attracted attention to the figure of SDS leader Martin Dimitrov and former prime minister Ivan Kostov's return to active politics as leader of the DSB. Whereas at the beginning of 2009 there were few photos of them in the print media, the situation gradually changed and the Blue Coalition acquired better positions in the struggle for public attention.

The messages of the different political parties before the elections became more distinguishable thanks to media coverage of some initiatives, such as the NDSV's proposal for holding simultaneous elections for the European and national parliaments, or the scandal between Yane Yanev, leader of the opposition party RZS (Order, Law and Justice), and Maria Murgina, the then managing director of Bulgaria's National Revenue Agency, which broke out after Yanev accused Murgina of abuse of power and embezzlement, and made the RZS leader more popular.

After GERB won the elections, Ataka, the party which became GERB's most loyal ally in parliament, doubled its visual presence in the print media but remained represented almost exclusively by its leader, Volen Siderov. The other party that is identified with its leader, the DPS, was left in the shadows in terms of media coverage as indicated by Ahmed Dogan's less and less frequent appearance on the pages of the dailies. At least visually, Dogan was rarely present in the print media. Dogan tended to be represented as the person distributing 'the shares of the pie' among companies in Bulgaria – through photos of properties, yachts and mansions of people from his inner circle. Dogan himself, however, remained in the shadows. The figure of Dogan is the most interesting to analyze as someone who is present in the media and politics by his conspicuous absence.

As for the visual representation of political news about the European Union in the Bulgarian press, such news was almost absent with the exception of Meglena Kuneva's election as EU Commissioner of the Year 2008, and Kristalina Georgieva's successful election as Bulgaria's EU Commissioner in 2010. EU

topics continued to be represented mainly against an institutional background and through EU symbols such as the EU flag and logo.

Mayor vs. Prime Minister. Politics Mixed with Show Business

Before the elections, the figures of Sofia Mayor Boyko Borisov and Prime Minister Sergey Stanishev were dominant in the Bulgarian public sphere. In their indirect dispute, the mayor and the prime minister used the media for mounting verbal attacks against each other. Their war in the media continued through ostentatious imagery that attracted part of the Bulgarian public. Politics and show business mixed and presented the mayor and the prime minister in a hitherto unknown light. The mayor appeared in a Bulgarian TV series and got extensive media coverage. The prime minister hit back by appearing on a TV show (Dancing Stars on bTV, the Bulgarian version of Strictly Come Dancing). Their strong performance in several roles – those of politician, actor, showman – secured them a winning visual presence.

It was not the quantity of articles but the quality of headlines and photos that served as a magnet for post-TV coverage of the eagerly awaited pre-election debate between Boyko Borisov and Sergey Stanishev. *Dnevnik* covered their debate on the Bulgarian National Television's show Referendum in a professional and objective manner, publishing equal photos of Borisov and Stanishev from the show. However, we also saw an alternative visual version of the debate on the pages of *Standart* and *Telegraf*. *Telegraf* staked on visual interpretation, showing a smiling and calm Sergey Stanishev as opposed to a tense and troubled Boyko Borisov photographed holding his throat (under the headline 'Boyko Backs Down'). Photos from the same moment of the debate were also published by *Standart* on its front page, but under the headline 'Auditioning for Politicians in TV Debate'; here, however, one could see clearly that the mayor was actually adjusting his tie.

What has been said so far was only a trend, not a winning strategy of the political parties. The two leaders' image-related PR moves remained the only winning moves. By bringing the image of politicians closer to ordinary people, the parties lost some of the appeal of their political image. This trend continued after the July 2009 elections and the coming to power of the new government, as well as throughout 2010.

The media readily covered the entertaining, uninhibited political behaviour of politicians but the inertia with which they continued doing so confirms the feeling of a loss of balance along the lines of serious/entertaining in Bulgaria in the last few years.

One example of the blurring of the line between serious and popular press in Bulgaria is the publication of one and the same photos of the most commented politicians (such as Boyko Borisov, Tsvetan Tsvetanov, Simeon Djankov, Rumyana Zheleva or Tsetska Tsacheva) caught by the camera in an embarrassing situation, making an attempt to be original and to promote themselves (for example, Djankov's comparison of the 2010 State Budget to a pizza), during the inauguration of a site or at another event. Whereas the size of the photos varied in the different newspapers, the visual representation of the prime minister remained constant – it was given the largest amount of space. The media pre-election wave came into synchrony with the political party dynamics.

Boyko(t)

> *To start with, the effigy of a candidate establishes a personal link*
> *between him and the voters; the candidate does not only*
> *offer a programme for judgment, he suggests a physical climate,*
> *a set of daily choices expressed in a morphology, a way of dressing, a posture.*
> Roland Barthes, 'Photography and Electoral Appeal'

The image of Boyko Borisov underwent a truly unprecedented development. First as mayor, then as informal leader of the newly established and increasingly popular political party GERB and candidate for prime minister in 2009, Borisov won the attention of reporters with his casual behaviour that did not follow the strict rules of official protocol and of the political dress code, with his hand invariably in his pocket, but also with his expressive, and dynamic vis-à-vis the three-party coalition government, rhetorical repertoire. We may say that his image resource surpasses by far the familiar political rhetorical devices employed by his predecessors. At the same time, concrete issues increasingly influenced the public through political images. The campaign of GERB and personally of its leader relied mainly on exposing those who are to blame for the rampant corruption and non-transparent politics in Bulgaria.

The de-privatization of the private sphere was ushered in by way of the election campaign race. In her analysis of the 2009 parliamentary elections, Anna Krasteva notes that 'the private is displacing the political and visibility is replacing publicity. There is de-privatization both at the level of images and of messages: It's time for the good guys' (Krasteva 2009). In the first half of 2009, *Trud*, *24 Chasa*, *Sega* and *Standart* showed readers different moments characteristic of the private sphere of political actors: Ivan Kostov sitting in an asana position on a bTV show, Yordanka Fandakova in the park, Sergey Stanishev on a day out in the mountains with his girlfriend and their two dogs (March 2009).

The images of politicians achieved greater identifiability and media empathy in the colloquial style of informal photos. As Georgi Lozanov points out, referring to the end of the election campaign,

> Here everyone is on Boyko's turf because it was he who drew his charisma from the language of the private person, from the strong male body and eroticism. And look at what happened: the biggest story in pre-election political communication to date is his broken leg… Focus on the bodily through an injury creates the image of the wounded hero, who is a double hero. (Lozanov 2009)

According to the visual narratives in the Bulgarian daily press, outside of his life as prime minister, Boyko Borisov is an all-round person. He leaves the official sphere to enter new roles, and this becomes a highlight in the public sphere: bodybuilding legend Ronnie Coleman donned a T-shirt with Borisov's face, the prime minister made the first move with the white pieces of world champion Veselin Topalov at the world chess tournament in Sofia, Borisov marked Europe Day by scoring a goal in a football game… One example of intense visual representation of politics is the front page of *Standart* of 4 May 2010, which carried two photos of the prime minister and two government ministers at different events.

Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's visit to Sofia, which coincided with Boyko Borisov's birthday and the inauguration of a monument to Garibaldi in Sofia, was also given extensive visual coverage. The boundaries of the political and of the show merged at the international level – again with Prime Minister Borisov as the protagonist. This event was obviously used as a publicity stunt, with excessive coverage of personal stories from the lives of the prime minister and his guests. Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's visit to Sofia was represented in the same style: Putin was immortalized in photos in all newspapers showing him hugging a puppy that Borisov gave him as a present.

The monitoring study found that the prime minister's media image is constantly updated. Borisov appeared in a sphere where he had rarely, if ever, been seen before: the Church and religion. In the photos showing him side by side with senior Bulgarian clerics, being received by the Pope or welcoming Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, Boyko Borisov's charisma is given religious visual legitimation. One may even claim that he is visually represented as the Saviour. He is shown with his hand being kissed, blessing, attending consecration ceremonies, presenting icons, donating a reliquary… His image in the newspapers strengthens the notion of the strong, fearless hero who is ready to use any public event to prove his good intentions.

This photo from *24 Chasa* needs no comment. It is a brilliant example of conveying a political message through the image of the hero-and-saviour. Three thematic fields – religion, power, and people, laden with symbolic imagery (black cassock, clerics, the kissed hand, the blessing, the image of the old woman) – are intertwined in a characteristic political moment: the new government and the promises for change in the status quo in the person of the Saviour without a cassock. The roles have been swapped.

The convergence of the media and political spheres is also illustrated by something else – the name of the prime minister and his post have officially begun to be expressed only by the diminutive 'Boyko'. The 'Boyko-discourse' has turned into a discourse about Boyko Borisov. The familiar and the unceremonious have entered an extreme phase of intimacy: of the government towards the media and of the media towards the government. The absence of an alternative in the way Borisov is represented backfired on the media themselves and added new shades to political communication. From a field of competition, the pages of the newspapers turned into a mirror of the government. And in this mirror the media image of the prime minister began to carry the marks of the weight of the great expectations associated with him. In the last months of 2010 one could see the strain of government taking its toll: Borisov was more and more often shown frowning with disapproval, in close-up, scowling.

Media discomfort for the prime minister was caused by a public opinion survey conducted by MBMD from 23 to 26 April 2010, which showed that Tsvetan Tsvetanov had a 60% public approval rating, as compared to Borisov's 56%. This sensational news stirred up the public and became the top story, with multiple charts and photos of Tsvetanov and Borisov. For their part, the media came up with endless interpretations, ranging from biblical parables about the disciple who bettered his teacher to somewhat forgotten metaphors and Renaissance heroes such as 'the right-hand man' and grey cardinal.

This rating raised the issue of the media relationship between Tsvetanov and Borisov. The former's reticence and the latter's personalized, I-discourse were seen as a new means of attracting public attention. There was also a reversal in terms of visual representation. The newspapers published photos showing Tsvetanov in full length in the foreground, with Boyko Borisov behind him (*Standart*, *24 Chasa*, *Trud*). For the eye of the reader accustomed to the opposite situation, this moment aroused greater public and media interest. The frequency of publication of charts and statistical tables showing political ratings increased significantly.

Prime Minister vs. President. The Pressure on the Media

The indirect duel between the president and the prime minister became one of the main topics in the monitoring study. Wholly in the realm of the media, but also involving the media, the two politicians again found a convenient occasion to exchange accusations. It all started when President Georgi Parvanov declared in public on 29 May 2010 that he was witnessing a consistent campaign to exercise pressure on the media on the part of the government. The media were invited by the prime minister to say in public whether anyone was exercising pressure on them, and if yes, who and in what way. Borisov made an important declaration about the government's intentions to draft a new media law that would ensure transparency of media ownership. Unlike the Borisov-Stanishev conflict, the yellow, show-like, light style was replaced by an icy tone which also affected the visual representation of the conflict between Borisov and Parvanov. This conflict was not widely represented in photos.

The Government and the Culprits

Before and immediately after the elections, the culprits, in GERB's rhetoric, were said to be the members of the three-party coalition government who were accused of destroying the State. Later, the GERB government changed its focus and directed media attention towards organized crime. The spectacular special police operations against alleged crime bosses took up much space in the newspapers both with headlines and photos. The newspapers' selection of photos largely repeated the effect of the extensive TV coverage. The newspapers uploaded on their websites videos of the most spectacular police operations, such as the arrests of notorious businessman, ex-secret service undercover agent and suspected mafia boss Alexey Petrov and of former defence minister Nikolay Tsonev.

The brutality of some of the arrests fired a debate on the extent of the Interior Ministry's and the government's violation of human rights and of the

presumption of innocence. The code-names of the operations (such as Octopus or Killers) improved the ratings of the Interior Ministry and its image became the leading one in the press for months. The print media did not apply any visual self-censorship in representing the successive police operations. They published large-sized colour photos showing the police overpowering the arrested people. The latter's faces were often shown in contrast with the black balaclavas of the heavily armed police officers. The government was legitimated through the mask of law and order. Readers reacted according to the 'bread-and-circuses' principle, while the government concentrated on criminalizing everything associated with the previous government.

Epilogue

The monitoring study found that the images of politicians were sufficiently visible and capable of forming public attitudes in the period under review. The visual representation of politics in the print media included elections, hyper-publicity, top scandals, shows and lifestyle. As Georgi Gospodinov notes, 'the result is a familiarization of the political, which is in itself contradictio in adiecto' (Gospodinov 2009). The media increasingly resorted to mere reporting of events, and this lowered the level of media reflection. The visual representation of politics acquired the features of lifestyle politics and began operating according to the latter's rules. The shortening of the distance between the media and power grew into an exercise of power by, through and by way of the media. The visual policies of the Bulgarian press popularized the new government's manner of government. We witnessed the gradual disappearance of institutional discourse, which adopted the I-form of speech and of photography: the newspapers became like a photo album and personal diary of the prime minister.

Whereas the personalization of politics was comparatively weak in coverage of the 2009 election campaign, it gained momentum from the personal conflicts between particular actors and reached a point where politics mixed with show business. The issues of corruption, the property status of party leaders, crime, healthcare, education and major energy projects were 'amplified' through photos. The image of Bulgaria recovering from the crisis was represented through photo reports of the inauguration of construction sites, shopping malls, kindergartens, and so on.

Priority was given to representation of politicians with distinctly individual personalities (GERB ministers), while team players (party members) more often remained invisible. By purely visual means, by extensive coverage of the new faces in the government, the press developed their political image from that of experts with no experience in politics to that of people standing behind Boyko.

We may conclude that Bulgarian media and politics converged and blurred their boundaries. What is more interesting, however, is how the press focused on the new faces in politics as an alternative to the well-known old political parties and figures. The image of the prime minister remained a phenomenon in the period under review as this image was produced primarily by the media and promoted in all his visual incarnations as a unique self-made politician. As the most popular political actor, Boyko Borisov is the filter through which the whole picture of the Bulgarian political sphere is read. The media became a generator and user of their own product.

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The Bulgarian Blogosphere: Political (Non)Use

What did the USA in 2008 and Bulgaria in 2009 have in common? Elections and the internet. In 2008 the Americans voted for president and elected the first ever African-American president in US history. In 2009 the Bulgarians voted from members of the European Parliament and of the 41st National Assembly. In 2008 more than 44% of all Americans went online for political news almost on a daily basis during the campaign (Smith 2009). In Bulgaria in 2009 some 40% of the population used the internet every day or at least once a week; the percentage of those who did so rose to 43% in 2010 (Gotsev 2010). Overseas analysts kept stressing the key role Barack Obama's strong internet campaign had played in his victory. But what about the election campaign in the new media in Bulgaria? Did Bulgarian politicians succeed in making full use of the blogosphere during the elections in 2009 and one year after the elections, in 2010? This article analyzes different aspects of the issue and presents the results of a two-year survey of the blogs of Bulgarian politicians.

Permanent and quality internet access has enabled Bulgarians to make active use of the new media, such as blogs, microblogs, social networks and video-exchange websites. Although tens of thousands have created their own blogs, the number of Bulgarians writing regularly on their personal web pages is about 2500 (Bachvarov 2010). It has become popular for politicians, too, to have their own blogs. But although many Bulgarian politicians have personal web pages, in practice only about forty of them update their blogs on a more or less regular basis.

Politicians' Blogs in 2009: Pre-Election Frenzy

In 2009 we analyzed 32 active blogs of Bulgarian politicians from different parties, studying a total 912 postings. Among the blogging politicians were the then prime minister Sergey Stanishev as well as Ivaylo Kalfin, Evgeniy Zhelev, Kristian Vigenin and Georgi Kadiev from the BSP (Bulgarian Socialist Party); Meglena Kuneva, Gergana Grancharova, Mincho Spasov and Kiril Arsov from the NDSV (National Movement for Stability and Progress); Martin Dimitrov, Nadezhda Neinski, Plamen Yurukov, Ivan Sotirov and Stefan Ivanov from the

SDS (Union of Democratic Forces); Nikolay Mladenov, Rumyana Zheleva and Emil Stoyanov from GERB (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria); as well as Borislav Tsekov, Atanas Shterev, Miroslav Sevlievski, Lyuben Dilov Jr and others.

In 2009 Bulgarian politicians were most active in the blogosphere during the campaigns for European and national parliamentary elections and local by-elections. This stands to reason as the new media are yet another channel for communication and campaigning. Barack Obama no doubt understood this very well: his campaign has become an example not just of successful mobilization of online supporters and resources but also of the huge potential of internet communication for political purposes. The supporters of Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama were on average 10% more active online than those of his rival, Republican John McCain. Obama supporters took part in a wider range of online political activities and generated more political content. Nearly one in five internet users took advantage of the opportunities offered by new media to participate actively in the online political debate, posting their thoughts, comments or questions about the campaign on a social networking site, website, blog or other online forum (Smith 2009).

On the whole, Bulgarian politicians failed to follow the lead of the Obama campaign or to adapt the lessons learnt from it to Bulgarian voters. The number of postings increased as voting day drew closer, peaking in June at a total of 164. Just several months after the elections, in September 2009, there were only 21 postings. The content of politicians' blogs, however, remained problematic, leaving much to be desired.

In 2009 the blogs of Bulgarian politicians were strongly politicized in content but did not vary greatly by topic and tone of communication. Politicians used their blogs mostly to criticize their political opponents, to present their party's positions and platforms, as well as to report what they or their party had accomplished and to announce their political tours and meetings with constituents. Online reproduction of reports in the press about pre-election media appearances was also a common practice. The main emphasis in postings by opposition authors was on the unsuccessful policies of the then three-party coalition government. Opposition bloggers criticized above all the government's economic policies but also various other political issues such as the gas crisis or the problems in healthcare. For their part, the authors from the ruling parties took a defensive or self-promoting position, declaring that they had accomplished many things during their term in office. In the last months before the elections there were also many texts devoted to the possible variants for forming a new centre-right coalition. There were also different speculations

about which parties GERB might form a coalition with before or after the elections.

Politicians writing online rarely spoke about other politicians in a balanced manner, over-praising their own leaders and over-criticizing their opponents. Thus, opposition politicians were most critical of Sergey Stanishev and Ahmed Dogan, leader of the DPS (Movement for Rights and Freedoms), one of the three parties in the coalition government. Bloggers from the ruling parties were critical of Boyko Borisov and Ivan Kostov, the leader of the DSB (Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria). Quite a few bloggers were from the NDSV, the third party in the coalition government, and the politician they referred to in almost entirely positive terms was NDSV leader and former prime minister Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha.

Whereas it was only to be expected that politicians would toe the party line, their almost indifferent attitude towards visitors of their websites was not. Politicians hardly ever responded to comments posted on their blogs, thus missing the opportunity for informal contacts with voters. It is also noteworthy that many of the texts had nothing to do with the public agenda – that is to say, Bulgarian politicians created on their blogs a parallel reality that was convenient for them. It is obvious that this is how Bulgarian politicians want to use the state-of-the-art new media and blogosphere for political campaigning, but in failing to take into account the specificity of the respective communication channel they tend, instead, to disappoint online readers and, hence, voters.

The situation in the Bulgarian blogosphere changed significantly immediately after the elections. This shows that this type of communication was used primarily for campaign purposes. Many of the politicians became less active or stopped writing on their blogs. Some of them dropped out of active politics and therefore their behaviour is explicable, but others are still very much on the political scene. References to Sergey Stanishev decreased drastically, while items about the new prime minister and government increased, with those about Boyko Borisov being mostly positive or neutral in tone. The subject matter of the texts changed from mainly campaign-related to general policy issues.

In this context it is worth mentioning the political website http://otgovori.eu, whose format is innovative and unconventional for Bulgaria. The website, called 'Ivan Kostov: Answers', is a personal video blog where visitors can ask questions and get answers in video or text format. From June to October 2009 the DSB leader personally answered 574 questions, and the innovative format of the site attracted great interest among visitors. Unfortunately, this specific video variant of a blog was also maintained only temporarily. Like many of the 'standard' political blogs, it has not been updated for more than a year now.

Politicians' Blogs in 2010

In 2010 the activity of Bulgarian politicians in the blogosphere declined even further. From 1 January to 15 November 2010 there were 331 postings, or almost three times fewer than those in the same period in 2009.

Total number of postings on Bulgarian politicians' blogs by month, from 1 January to 2009 to 15 November 2010
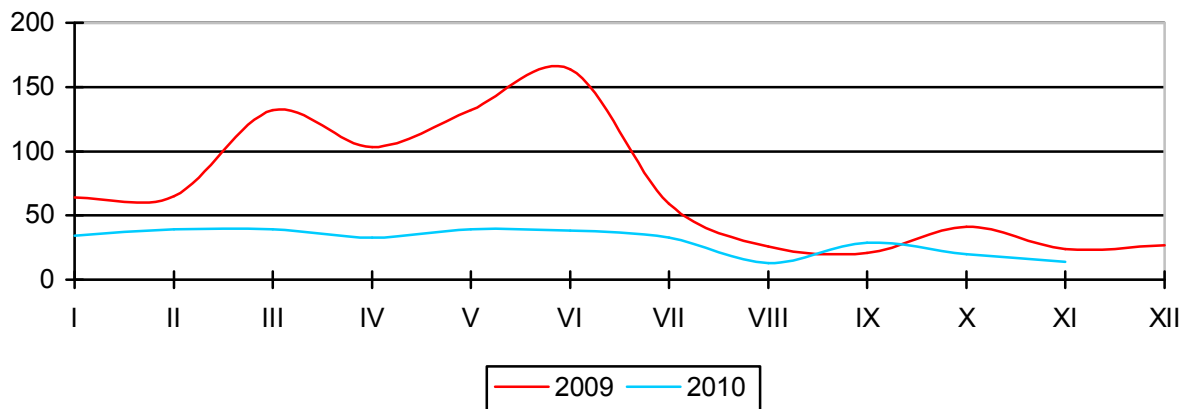
Many politicians stopped updating or even shut down their blogs. The blogs of Sergey Stanishev, Meglena Kuneva, Evgeniy Zhelev, Plamen Yurukov are no longer available. Those of others like Gergana Passy, Miroslav Sevlievski, Lyuben Dilov Jr, Rumyana Zheleva or Antonia Parvanova were last updated several months or as long as a year ago. Although they are few in number, some politicians – such as Ivaylo Kalfin, Georgi Kadiev and Nikolay Mladenov – updated their blogs with a new design or address. Nikolay Mladenov, former GERB MEP and defence minister before he became Foreign Minister in January 2010, moved his blog to a new address at the end of 2009 and posted several texts on it in 2010, but now his new blog is no longer available and he has also stopped updating his old one. Among those new politicians who have a personal blog are Bulgaria's EU commissioner, Kristalina Georgieva, and Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Simeon Djankov, whose website is called 'official blog' and looks very much like an official website presenting his schedule. Among those who blogged regularly in 2010 are Martin Dimitrov, Atanas Shterev and Borislav Tsekov, as well as Sofia City Council members Georgi Kadiev, Stefan Ivanov and Kiril Arsov. In fact, their postings made up 82% of the total number of postings in the Bulgarian political blogosphere in 2010.

The topics discussed were again related to various general policy issues, with few personal comments. The most discussed topic in 2010 was the performance

of the government, which was often criticized. The GERB cabinet attracted strong criticism, and since there were few bloggers from GERB whose postings could serve as a counterbalance the overall impression is that there is serious disillusionment with the new government. Other top topics in 2010 included energy issues (variations on the subject of should Bulgaria join particular energy projects and which ones), the debates on the proposals for amending the Electronic Communications Act and opposition against 'internet wiretapping', Rumyana Zheleva's hearing at the European Parliament as Bulgaria's (failed) candidate for EU commissioner, the scandal between President Georgi Parvanov and Simeon Djankov (after a transcript of a meeting between the two was published on the president's website without Djankov's permission), the moves to impeach the president, and issues related to education, healthcare and GMOs. It is noteworthy that the heroes and anti-heroes of 2009 changed. In 2010 Boyko Borisov replaced Sergey Stanishev as the main anti-hero, with the former prime minister rarely mentioned in blogs. Georgi Parvanov, however, continued to be much criticized, thus 'keeping' his negative image from 2009.

The government, the Interior Ministry and GERB were seriously criticized. In 2010 there were no elections and none of the blogger politicians made particular efforts to promote their party and its leaders. Hence the relative absence of positive postings about politicians and parties.

Just as in 2009, in 2010 Bulgarian politicians again did not understand or failed to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the new media. Instead of using them actively, they increasingly left the blogosphere – at that, at a time when Bulgarians were increasingly tending to use the internet. As noted at the beginning of this article, in 2010 some 43% of the population, or 3.24 million people aged 16 to 74, used the internet every day or at least once a week. This constitutes a significant part of the electorate. Politicians are also wrong in assuming that this type of media can be used only for campaign purposes. Their presence in the blogosphere could be just as beneficial for them throughout their term in office. It would enable them to get feedback from voters. Such feedback can serve as a quick barometer of public sentiments and attitudes. Unlike traditional media, which follow particular editorial policy lines, blogs are more representative of the true agenda of society. Politicians in developed democracies are well aware of this and use blogs as an additional means for evaluating different political positions or commitments, and for generating additional discussions. Astute politicians, be they in power or in opposition, could successfully take advantage of the rich opportunities offered by the blogosphere at all times, and not just during election campaigns.

How are the politicians from the ruling party in Bulgaria, in particular, making use of the blogosphere? Unfortunately, little if at all. GERB government

ministers and MPs practically do not use the blogosphere as a form of communicating with the electorate. The ruling party's official website has a blog, but it has only informative and official functions. Nikolay Mladenov's new blog is not available, and Simeon Djankov's blog is too formal. It is notable that the new power-holders observe the rules of party hierarchy and avoid informal communication. The prime minister is visibly appropriating the role of all institutional spokespersons, occupying almost every inch of the sphere of public political discourse. Boyko Borisov uses the language of the people and has privatized communication with the nation in a manner that hardly leaves room for other GERB politicians and officials.

Politicians vs. Bloggers

Although they do not participate actively in online communication, the power-holders are obviously aware of the influence, potential and power of the web. In the summer of 2010 it was leaked that GERB were planning to introduce amendments to the election law according to which the internet would be treated as a medium and every blogger would be punished for publishing slanderous information about a candidate in an election campaign. Although GERB MPs denied the idea, their alleged intentions caused outrage, discontent and criticism among the blogging community.

Politicians would unquestionably stand to gain from the introduction of statutory restrictions on freedom of speech on the internet. Attempts at state or institutional regulation of the content of blogs are to be found even in the advanced democracies. There are sufficient examples both during election campaigns – as, for example, during the 2008 presidential election campaign in the USA (Carroll 2008) – and at other times as, for example, in the UK (Merrett 2009). Some time ago Google released its successive report on transparency on the internet and on the number and type of requests from government agencies around the world for the removal of content. In 2009 Google received requests for removal of political content from blogs in Canada and Argentina, and in 2010 the Kazakhstan authorities demanded the removal of YouTube videos in support of the opposition (Transparency… 2010). On the whole, however, politicians refrain from interfering seriously when it comes to the internet since this runs against the understanding of the universal human right to freedom of speech. Diversity in the blogosphere is also seen as a reaffirmation of the democratic potential of the internet (Rojas et al. 2009). In all cases, however, blogs have something which politicians would like to control – namely, the serious potential for informing, influencing and mobilizing large groups of people.

Are Blogs Media?

It is precisely the possibility to disseminate information to an unlimited number of people that raises the question: are blogs media? This question is not as innocuous as it might seem because if blogs are defined as media then they can be treated like traditional media – with all subsequent possibilities for institutional or statutory regulation of their content.

In mid-2010 the *Capital* weekly organized an interactive debate, 'Are Blogs Media?',[1] inviting popular bloggers and experts to say what they think. Despite differences of opinion, everyone was unanimous that blogs should not be state-regulated. And although the question of whether blogs are media did not get a final answer, the opinion that blogs are media prevailed.

The many arguments and opinions voiced in the interactive debate revealed some specific aspects of blog communication. According to journalist and blogger Ivo Indzhev, blogs with quality content are not just media but also an alternative for they 'fill a void in the Bulgarian public sphere because of the absence of freedom of speech. In Bulgarian journalism some subjects are often avoided … because of compliance with the so-called corporate interest.'[2] Media law expert Nelly Ognyanova also supported the thesis that blogs are a form of new media, defending her argument by posting a link to the European Parliament resolution of 16 December 2008 on media literacy in a digital world, where blogs are defined as a form of media.[3]

Other participants in the debate, however, argued that blog communication is too informal and therefore does not need to be institutionalized. According to blogger Boyan Yurukov, the purpose of blogs is very different from that of media: 'The purpose is not to inform others about a particular news story but to start a discussion and to share resources (pictures, video, quotes).' To Yurukov, blogs are like 'platforms scattered in a square which society itself climbs on and speaks from, and not mediators between newsmakers and consumers such as the media are in fact.'[4] This line of thought was also taken up by blogger Petar Stoykov, known in the blogosphere as Longanlon, to whom 'writing a blog does

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[1] <http://www.capital.bg/interaktiv/debati/7_medii_li_sa_blogovete/935237_blogovete_sa_po-skoro_medii_no_ne_triabva_da_budat/> [accessed 22 November 2010].
[2] <http://www.capital.bg/interaktiv/debati/7_medii_li_sa_blogovete/927253_medii_li_sa_blogovete/> [accessed 22 November 2010].
[3] <http://www.capital.bg/interaktiv/debati/7_medii_li_sa_blogovete/931727_neli_ognianova_ekspert_po_mediino_pravo/> [accessed 22 November 2010].
[4] < http://www.capital.bg/interaktiv/debati/7_medii_li_sa_blogovete/927253_medii_li_sa_blogovete/> [accessed 22 November 2010].

not differ from ordinary speech. You say what you think and your friends respond.'[5]

Media expert Georgi Lozanov offered an interesting take on the subject. According to him, 'the internet as a whole could be called a new medium, of which blogs are a part. Blogs are, rather, a new type of journalism where … interactivity combines the two roles, that of the journalist who creates the message and that of the audience.'[6]

Journalists and Blogs

Blogs and the unlimited internet space have opened up new opportunities for journalists and media. More and more media are creating their own blogs (usually as an additional section on their websites) where journalists can express a more partial or less conventional opinion. This is increasingly becoming a normal journalistic practice and norm (see Singer 2005).

Bulgarian journalists and media are in line with the global trends in this respect. Many Bulgarian media have blogs on their websites, several newspapers have introduced sections featuring quotes from blogs, and there are news sites with separate panel sections aggregating content from various blogs. Journalists themselves sometimes use blogs as a source of information. Data from a recent survey on the sources of information used by Bulgarian journalists show that professional journalists are active in internet communication. According to the survey, 72.5% of the surveyed journalists keep a blog (a personal blog or a blog of the media they work for) or read and post comments on other blogs. To be informed or to inform their audience, 11.5% of them use the microblogging platform Twitter (Kakvo mislyat… 2009).

Many influential Bulgarian political journalists create personal blogs for social and political comments, where they voice their personal opinions openly without worrying that they might violate political correctness or implicate the media they work for. As *Columbia Journalism Review* staff writer Clint Hendler notes in a commentary for CNN, newspapers used to be aligned with particular political factions, but they have now become more objective and neutral. Now the new social media such as Twitter allow journalists to freely voice their opinions (Kade svarshva politicheskata … 2010).
In Bulgaria, too, there are journalists who have turned their blogs into a platform for commentary and critical political journalism – such as, among others, Ivo

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[5] <http://www.capital.bg/interaktiv/debati/7_medii_li_sa_blogovete/930172_medii_li_sa_blogovete_-_oshte_argumenti_za_i_protiv/> [accessed 22 November 2010].
[6] <http://www.capital.bg/interaktiv/debati/7_medii_li_sa_blogovete/933618_georgi_lozanov_predsedatel_na_suveta_za_elektronni/ [accessed 22 November 2010].

Indzhev, Ivan Bedrov and Nikolay Barekov. In 2010 Ivo Indzhev even published a book of selected essays and articles first published on his blog.

Twitter

Microblogging is also very popular around the world. The most popular microblogging platform is Twitter (twitter.com). According to statistics from Google's DoubleClick Ad Planner, by November 2010 twitter.com had 99 million unique users/visitors, of whom 180 000 Bulgarians.[7] Many registered users, however, do not write on their profiles or do so very rarely. For example, the Bulgarian blog-rating website topbloglog.com reports that in the last week of November 2010 just over 4000 people regularly used Twitter.[8] A significant part of them were 'counted' as active because of posted links to the author's blog or Facebook profile. Activity on the Twitter platform has another specificity as well: statistics show that 90% of Twitter posts are created by only 10% of users (Silverthorne 2009). The posts differ by subject: from personal to socially significant to professionally oriented comments.

Many bloggers also have a Twitter profile. Just as in the blogosphere, here, too, they unite instantly in support of a given cause. The most recent Bulgarian example is the Twitter bombshell at the end of November 2010 about Ivo Siromahov, leading scriptwriter for popular Bulgarian TV talk show host Slavi Trifonov. Siromahov was caught plagiarizing cult phrases from Twitter users and using them in the Slavi Show or on his Facebook profile as his own inventions or as 'folklore'. This outraged Twitter users who quickly united and, via the hashtag #siromahovfacts, literally flooded the microblog with sarcastic posts about Siromahov (for example, on 23 November 2010 there was one or more sarcastic posts a minute). This unambiguously illustrates the potential and power of the blogger community. The case is also interesting with respect to copyright on the internet, but this is the subject of another analysis.

Twitter is often mentioned together with the top social networking site, Facebook (facebook.com). Facebook is popular around the world for many reasons, the main ones being the possibility to view photos (which accounts for 70% of the time spent on Facebook) as well as the fact that it enables a 'delicate' way to pry into other people's lives without really prying (Silverthorne 2009). According to Facebook Vice President Blake Chandlee, however, Bulgarian users of the social networking site are significantly more active than those in Western Europe, now numbering almost two million, of whom half visit Facebook every day (Chandlee 2010). Without going into the question of why

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[7] <https://www.google.com/adplanner/#siteSearch?identifier=twitter.com&geo=BG&trait_type=1&lp=false> [accessed 22 November 2010].
[8] <http://topbloglog.com/twitter/> [accessed 22 November 2010].

Facebook is used in Bulgaria much more than in other countries, we will add another two reasons to those noted above. They are poor discipline at the workplace (Bulgarians browse the internet for private purposes during work hours every day) and love for 'fashionable' things (the other social networking sites are not so popular, therefore there is no 'rush' towards them). Compared with Facebook, which readily caters for the typical Bulgarian gossip mentality, Twitter, with its text-only posts, looks somewhat plain and dull. That is why Bulgarians prefer to create their own profiles on Facebook rather than on Twitter.

Politicians and Twitter

Compared with those who have blogs, fewer Bulgarian politicians have Twitter profiles. Surprisingly, the Bulgarian Twittersphere contains many fake profiles of politicians, where the postings usually make ironic accusations or directly discredit the person who is claimed to have written them. Of some thirty profiles of Bulgarian politicians on Twitter, half are fake and only a quarter are used more or less regularly. The profiles of National Assembly President Tsetska Tsacheva, Sofia Mayor Yordanka Fandakova, Simeon Djankov and Ivan Kostov are fake, and there are several fake accounts for some politicians – such as Sergey Stanishev, Boyko Borisov and Georgi Parvanov. The profiles of Meglena Kuneva, Gergana Passy, Mincho Spasov are real but they are not used regularly. Among those who regularly use Twitter are Kristalina Georgieva, MEPs Antonia Parvanova, Kristian Vigenin and Ivaylo Kalfin, and Nikolay Mladenov and Simeon Djankov (Djankov has not only a real but also a fake Twitter profile). It is noteworthy that most of the Bulgarian politicians who use Twitter regularly have studied, worked or are working in the USA or Europe and are therefore accustomed to another culture of communication and publicity. They are people who understand the significance and know the potential of new online communication. A positive example in this respect is Foreign Minister Nikolay Mladenov, who uses Twitter regularly to provide information about different international cases and Bulgaria's participation in them (for example, about the release of a Bulgarian ship seized by Somali pirates or about the fate of captured Bulgarian journalists from the humanitarian convoy in Gaza). Many of the traditional Bulgaria media follow his Twitter profile and report the latest news from it. Mladenov's Twitter postings are also followed by foreign journalists from Belgian, Macedonian, American, Iranian and other media. For the time being, however, Nikolay Mladenov remains an exception in his effective use of the potential of this type of media.

On the whole, the tweets of Bulgarian politicians are purely formal and dull, dealing with strictly political issues and lacking a more personal touch. Just as blogs, Twitter profiles are used on a campaign basis. Compared with the

blogosphere, Twitter postings are less politicized. As a whole, Bulgarian politicians do not want to or cannot generate sufficient activity on Twitter too.

Media and Twitter

Although they are active in the blogosphere, Bulgarian media are less active on Twitter than American or West European media. Some Bulgarian media already have a Twitter profile. For example, the newspapers *24 Chasa*, *Trud*, *Dnevnik* and *Capital*, Darik Radio and bTV have active Twitter profiles, taking advantage of the opportunity to inform users in real time about the latest news and to follow the activities of global media on Twitter. The website <http://dnevnik.bg/live/> is telling of the future of this type of communication in Bulgaria. It is a Twitter-like experimental microblog section on the *Dnevnik* daily's website where reporters and readers can comment on events in 140 characters. On the very first day of Dnevnik L!VE, postings by members of the public made a news story that was published in the newspaper. A reader reported on Dnevnik L!VE that 'Postal Bank issues certificates of paid interest for 2009 for a fee of BGN 50'. For their part, journalists checked the report which turned out to be true, and published an article about the shocking bank fee.[9] For almost a year now, this section has remained very popular, actively publishing news in real time, quotes and links.

In Lieu of a Conclusion

The new media are becoming ever more influential sources of information with more and more users. But whereas this has long been a fact in the USA and Western Europe, in Bulgaria this process is slower and more limited in scale. Despite the growing access to fast and quality internet for the majority of Bulgarian internet users, online social media are a new field for information and self-expression. Whilst it is true that the first bloggers appeared in Bulgaria five years ago, the percentage of Bulgarian internet users who are active in the blogosphere is still small. Also telling is the fact that the European Parliament defined the status of blogs as a form of media as long ago as 2008, while the debate on whether blogs are media began in Bulgaria only in 2010. This is one of the reasons why at present one can hardly expect a repeat of the success of Barack Obama's online election campaign in Bulgarian cyberspace. Nevertheless, the Bulgarian blogosphere already has an active core and a serious potential for political communication.

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[9] <http://www.dnevnik.bg/dnevnikplus/2010/01/31/850679_dnevnik_na_jivo_bip/> [accessed 22 November 2010].

The blogosphere is seen as a space without censorship, a space of active, educated and thinking people, a space of easy-to-mobilize like-minded people who unite to form an active civil society when the need arises. Bloggers are pro-active people, experts in different fields, often charismatic opinion-leaders who can suggest solutions and provide adequate feedback. Blogs are a citizen medium that could undoubtedly be a threat to politicians, but instead of being afraid and trying to control it politicians could understand and use this medium effectively. For blogs are a telling indicator of public sentiments, a good opportunity for getting feedback from the public, a potential brain-trust and generator of different ideas, a channel for introducing arguments into the information flow, etc.

That is why it stands to reason that politicians should modernize their approach to voters and engage in interactive communication via the new media. The effort of several Bulgarian politicians to create their own profiles in the blogosphere is laudable. But reality shows that the majority of them do so purely formally, only to show that they have adopted the new communication formats. Instead of trying to catch the pulse of society and to adapt to the new forms of communication, in 2009 Bulgarian politicians demonstrated only a formal and campaign-based attitude towards their online readers. In 2010 the situation in the blogosphere was even less favourable, with politicians demonstrating a lack of interest in and indifference to this type of communication. Both in 2009 and in 2010 Bulgarian politicians failed to make full use of the opportunities offered by the blogosphere. Their behaviour indicated not just a campaign-based but also a superficial interest in voters.

It is possible that Bulgarian politicians do not fully understand the long-term communicative effect and benefits for their image from effective use of the new media. It is possible that their aides focus primarily on communication in the traditional media which undoubtedly reach larger audiences and this makes them more influential both in pre-election periods and in everyday politics. But if they create their own profiles on blogs and social networking sites, Bulgarian politicians should do so professionally and keep the new channels active. It is not enough to create your own blog and reprint five of your interviews that have already been published in the press. There is a need for a complete change in the model of behaviour towards voters, where the messages are adequate to the needs of the audience and the peculiarities of the communication channel.

At present, the active Bulgarian politicians have withdrawn from the blogosphere. Conversely, citizens' blogs have become more political and critical of politicians. The discussion on the government's mistakes and successes is now being conducted less in the traditional media than on citizens' blogs. This applies to the three-party coalition government in 2009 and to the GERB

government in 2010. It is blogs that analyze in detail each decision of the government and that are most critical and disapproving of the government's performance. Actually, this difference of the main topics in the blogosphere and in traditional media is an indicator of alarming trends in the Bulgarian media sphere. It is a fact that more and more Bulgarians are looking for alternative and unofficial information on various issues, and some blogs are gradually coming to be seen as an additional source of information equal to the broadcast and print media.

The communication policy of those in power is focused primarily on the traditional media. For the time being, the GERB government has concentrated on an almost single-person and strictly one-way political discourse. At present there are no indications that the government intends to expand the range of information channels and change its way of communicating with the electorate. The good example of Foreign Minister Nikolay Mladenov's Twitter activities cannot make up for the overall political indifference towards communication via new media.

Yet as we noted earlier, despite their relatively small number bloggers can be unpredictable catalysts of public sentiments. Underestimating the power and potential of the blogosphere and the lack of communication are a form of political short-sightedness that can soon turn against the politicians themselves.

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◼ Metamorphoses of Civil Society and Politics: From Ganko's Café to Facebook

Bulgaria, 1876: 'Ganko's café was, as usual, full of customers, noise and smoke. It was the meeting place of old and young alike, where public matters were discussed, and the Eastern Question too, as well as all the domestic and foreign policy of Europe. A miniature parliament, one might say.' (Vazov 1976: 133).

Bulgaria, 7 October 2010, 6 pm, bTV. Rosen Petrov interviews journalist, writer and former politician Lyuben Dilov Jr on his talk show *Neka govoryat* (*Let Them Talk*):

…

L.D.: Very few people are aware of how Facebook is changing the world.

R.P.: Many people condemn it...

L.D.: They are making a big mistake. Facebook will soon take over... this type of social network will be the new internet ... .

R.P.: You're a very outgoing person and you have so many friends [on Facebook]. What does Facebook give you?

L.D.: The opportunity to do something and check it immediately among 55 000 people who react to what you've done. That's the number of unique visits I have on my [Facebook] page every day. It's comparable to a newspaper…[1]

Six Years of Facebook

The purpose of this article is to trace the development of Facebook as a tool for political influence from its creation in 2004 to the end of 2010. On the basis of analyses and consolidated data, we will try to find answers to some questions regarding the specificity and efficiency of this new type of online communication in political discourse.

The main prerequisite for the development of Facebook into a factor of political significance was its great popularity: in just six years, Facebook became the absolute leader in the sphere of social networks. One of the reasons why

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[1] See *Pozhelahte da govori: Lyuben Dilov-sin*, <http://www.btv.bg/shows/neka-govoriat/videos/video/1321294740-Pojelahte_da_govori_Lyuben_Dilovsin.html > [accessed 7 November 2010].

Facebook has become so popular so fast is that it has everything: it is an all-in-one site where you can blog, chat, make friends, have online discussions, share videos and photos, get news and entertainment, etc. Originally designed as a social networking site for Harvard students, Facebook rapidly grew into a universal medium of communication that is accessible across the world. Currently valued at around USD 25 billion, Facebook reported a USD 800 million profit in 2009 (in the conditions of a global financial crisis) and its founder, Mark Zuckerberg, is the youngest billionaire in the world.

Founded in April 2004, by the end of 2008 Facebook had 70 million active users, Compared with blogs, social network sites like Facebook saw significant growth in 2010. In July 2010, Facebook had 500 million registered users, 300 million of them having signed up in the last fifteen months alone. By November 2010, the number of registered Facebook users had grown to 540 million.

Facebook's growing influence worldwide increased its popularity in Bulgaria as well. Visiting Bulgaria in October 2010, Facebook Vice President Blake Chandlee announced that the number of active users from Bulgaria was now more than 1.7 million, which means that every fourth Bulgarian has a Facebook profile. Statistics show that some 46 000 Bulgarians a week sign up for Facebook (Anestev 2010).

The universal growth of social network sites is influencing the way we use the system to exchange information. In the last few years, email, which used to be one of the most popular means of online communication, has been giving way to alternative channels like Facebook (Nikolov 2010). Facebook's latest project, a new communication platform, is the successive step towards absolute universality of the service, which will most likely offer an alternative to all hitherto known forms of online communication. Against the background of the expansion of Facebook, in 2010 just 14% of online teens in the USA reported blogging, down from 28% in 2006. In 2010, 43% of internet users reported using social networking sites 'several times a day', a sizeable increase from 2009 where only 34% reported using social networking at the same rate.[2]

Along with the number of registered users, the amount of content on Facebook is growing as well. A typical form of communication on Facebook is the voluntary association of users in interest groups based on musical preferences, political affiliation, etc. In February 2010, Google indexed 620 million Facebook groups – up from just 52 million four months earlier, in October 2009. The reasons why users join such groups are several: needs for social interaction, entertainment, self-identification or information (Park et al. 2009).

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[2] See *PEW Internet and American Life Project. Social Networking*, <http://www.pewinternet.org/topics/Social-Networking.aspx> [accessed 23 October 2010].

Those characteristics of user attitudes also largely explain the presence of political content on Facebook. Beginning with Howard Dean's presidential campaign in 2004, 'political strategists realized that the Internet could provide additional methods of gauging the interest and opinion of the public as well as engaging community members in the political process.' The subsequent development of Facebook proved that it could provide political 'campaigns with the ability to organize and communicate with supporters in a very efficient way. At the same time, it provides members of the public with the ability to voice their opinions and organize independently' (Westling 2007).

The election campaign that ushered in a new era in the dialogue between voters and politicians was that of US President Barack Obama in 2008. As Claire Cain Miller points out, 'One of the many ways that the election of Barack Obama as president has echoed that of John F. Kennedy is his use of a new medium that will forever change politics. For Mr. Kennedy, it was television. For Mr. Obama, it is the Internet.' (Miller 2008)

By actively using social network sites (Facebook, YouTube) in his campaign, Barack Obama 'changed the way politicians organize supporters, advertise to voters, defend against attacks and communicate with constituents' (Miller 2008). Having proven to be successful, this form of communication marked a sea-change in political campaigning and many politicians from different countries began to use it in their campaigns. Facebook is gradually becoming an important tool for influence in pre-election situations, and this trend could be seen clearly in Bulgaria as well in 2009 – above all during the national parliamentary election campaign, but also during the European Parliament and local by-election campaigns.

Social Network Sites

Social network sites are 'web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system' (Boyd and Ellison 2007: 23). In recent years, new web technologies, known as social networks, 'have opened up possibilities for rich, online human-to-human interaction unprecedented in the history of Internet communication' (Kitchener and Kushin 2009).

The most popular network of this type is Facebook. According to statistics posted by Facebook, the average user is connected to over 80 pages, groups, and events. Users connect through the so-called *friending* process, which involves

inviting another user to be one's friend (by sending a *friend request*), and the other's acceptance of that invitation. Every registered user is allowed to have up to 5000 *friends* on his or her personal profile. This limit, however, does not apply to fan pages and profiles of organizations, which can have an unlimited number of *fans*.

Due to the explosive growth of social network sites, the number of studies devoted to them is still relatively small but it is rapidly growing. The first studies devoted to Facebook appeared at the end of 2006. The site is now the subject of intensive research, mostly for the purposes of academic, business and political projects (Baron 2008).

Politics on Facebook: Perspectives

Online political discourse on Facebook is of particular interest to researchers. According to Andrew Noyes, a spokesman for Facebook, 'Facebook is a tremendous tool for increasing transparency, collaboration and information sharing between politicians and citizens' (Gaudin 2010). Recent studies show that 'people are seeking beyond recreational use of these social media and are harnessing the capabilities of these technologies to engage in political discussion and express their views about issues they care about' (Kitchener and Kushin 2009).

Jürgen Habermas's concept of the public sphere is a good starting point for examining Facebook as a factor in politics. For Habermas, the public sphere is

> a place where community members could collectively form public opinion in an environment removed from the government or economy. Although Habermas's public sphere model provides an excellent outline for political communication among citizens, it does not explain how politicians and organizations should fit into the mix. For a community to really encourage political communication, it has to be more inclusive. (Westling 2007)

Facebook has the potential to expand Habermas's concept of the public sphere. It offers an independent environment that is freely accessible both to citizens and to politicians. Facebook allows 'the public to engage in political action both in conjunction with and independently of political campaigns' (Westling 2007). Political communication on Facebook takes place along several channels: from citizens to citizens, from citizens to politicians, from politicians to politicians, and from politicians to citizens.

Analyzing the specificity of political discourse on Facebook, it is important to note that the format of the site has given rise to a new trend among social

network users. Before Facebook came along, online self-identification tended to be limited to the use of *nicknames* that hid the true identities of users. In this way, consciously or not, users separated their virtual identity from their real identity. Cyberspace was not perceived as a real world, and existence in cyberspace was more like a masquerade or game than like an extension of real life.

Facebook has removed the level of anonymity previously enjoyed by users with its profile feature. The voluntary sharing of personal details in public has led to an increase in online openness. Many analysts note that 'anonymity affords users a level of freedom and power to act in an uncivil manner as well as avoid being held accountable for their statements' (Kitchener and Kushin 2009). As social network users are more inclined to share their thoughts and identities online, social network sites are likely to become an indicator of public attitudes and will offer an alternative to the familiar sociological methods of public opinion research.

Facebook groups are created precisely on the basis of shared identity. 'The ease with which individuals can create content and connect with one another to share content is viewed by others as a harbinger of a more democratic and egalitarian society' (Marichal 2010). Facebook's popularity is another step towards globalization. National, racial and religious identity lose importance in this world of a virtual citizenry where borders have been eliminated and members of different communities and cultures can communicate freely in real time from any part of the globe.

According to some analysts, social network sites provide new radical public spheres that provide additional spaces for voice cultivation and political citizenship formation (Salter 2005). Others, however, refer to the ease with which individuals can create and join online communities of interest as *slacktivism* (Morozov 2009). This ease of membership and identification detracts from more serious and coordinated efforts to bring about social change. The positive feeling of being affiliated with a movement might satisfy one's need for social connection without engaging with formal political power. Micah White decries the obsession with new marketing techniques, what he calls *clicktivism*. He argues that 'Political engagement becomes a matter of clicking a few links. In promoting the illusion that surfing the web can change the world, clicktivism is to activism as McDonalds is to a slow-cooked meal. It may look like food, but the life-giving nutrients are long gone' (White 2010). Precisely this contradiction raises one of the main questions that analysts of Facebook are trying to answer:

Does Online Activism Have Offline Dimensions?

We will try to answer this question by looking at facts and events related to political life in Bulgaria in the last few years. Facebook is currently the most popular social network site in Bulgaria, too. This trend began back in 2008, when the number of Bulgarian Facebook users increased rapidly. This increase was due, among other things, to the launch of the Bulgarian-language version of Facebook, which eased access to its content for many Bulgarian users.

The first event that made Bulgarian politicians pay attention to Facebook in the election year 2009 was the protest demonstration against the government on 14 January, which was organized online. Facebook proved to be the main channel of communication between the organizers and participants in the demonstration in front of the parliament building. This protest demonstration has gone down in history less for its effects than for the role of Facebook in its organization. The high level of mobilization in virtual space (tens of thousands joined the relevant Facebook groups) did not grow into a real event on a similar scale, although the protest demonstration nevertheless took place (only a few thousand protesters actually turned up on the day). We could ask ourselves about the essence of this type of online protest. Until very recently, the only way for a group of citizens to express their disagreement with a particular policy was by mobilizing in a physical protest demonstration. Could the efficiency of such a demonstration be measured by that of virtual protest, and do we have reasons to assume that online mobilization would become a mass practice? Does it make sense to waste our precious time on mass demonstrations in front of the buildings of public institutions when we can declare our stance in public in another form? To answer those questions, we must follow the development of social network sites in the coming years and analyze the extent to which virtual mobilization will become a fact that deserves attention. In Bulgaria on 14 January 2009, the traditional media took a back seat for the first time as the events had already happened online long before they were covered by television, radio and the press. By a hitherto unknown scheme, the idea, planning and news of the protest had reached tens of thousands of Facebook users by way of different groups devoted to the subject on the website. The feeling that this was unprecedented was strengthened by the launch of a platform for online protest which thousands of people joined on the day of the demonstration. This new form of online organization and protest marked the beginning of the election year 2009, in which social network sites became a factor in Bulgarian political life for the first time.

However, the performance of one of the political parties in the 2009 Bulgarian parliamentary elections points to the very opposite conclusion. The *Zelenite* (Bulgarian Greens) political party was founded in Sofia in 2008 by

environmental activists who declared that their objective was to preserve Bulgaria's most precious resources: the people and the environment. They organized and took part in a series of actions against the destruction of the environment aimed at guaranteeing a healthy living environment. With its mission and ideals, the party succeeded in attracting a large number of supporters, who declared their support for it online. On the eve before the parliamentary elections, the party won the highest number of votes on Facebook. Whereas just over 3000 followers had joined the unofficial Facebook profile of the future winner of the elections, GERB (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria), almost 5000 Facebook users had declared their support for Zelenite, making it the most approved of Bulgarian political party in cyberspace. But the actual results of the 2009 parliamentary elections showed a very different picture: 1 667 870 votes (39.71%) for GERB as compared to 21 704 votes (0.51%) for Zelenite.[3]

It is not always possible to draw conclusions about the real dimensions of a phenomenon only on the basis of its online dimensions. Discussing ineffective virtual activity, Ethan Zuckerman gives as an example the protest of the reformers in Iran in 2009:

> When Iranian reformers took to the streets to protest rigged elections last year, many people in America showed solidarity and support online. Over a hundred thousand people became [opposition leader] Mir Hossein Moussavi's friend on Facebook. … The net result? Well, online support likely helped ensure that CNN and other news networks covered the protests for longer than they otherwise might have. But US media attention didn't keep protesters out of jail or prevent Iran from censoring the internet. (Zuckerman 2010)

The Iranian government blocked access to Facebook to limit the influence of the opposition's campaign. According to Zuckerman, 'There's … a case to be made that there's nothing online activists could do in the face of a determined repressive government and that we shouldn't have expected any change to come from online activism' (Zuckerman 2010).

Given such contradictory conclusions about the effect of online mobilization, we may draw one conclusion only. After the example of Barack Obama's election campaign, we hardly need to give additional evidence in favour of the thesis that social network sites have become a factor in political life across the world. However, just as election campaigns prove to be effective for some but ineffective for many other politicians, so, too, online mobilization of voters in

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[3] See *Mazhoritarni izbori 2009. Okonchatelni rezultati za stranata. Proportsionalen vot*, <http://rezultati.cik2009.bg/results> [accessed 23 October 2010].

support of a given party or politician cannot be a guarantee of success in the election race. From the point of view of politicians, Facebook ought to be seen as a tool for influence that can complement the traditional means of communicating with the electorate. From the point of view of voters, however, social network sites provide a new, unique opportunity for voicing opinions and seeking out like-minded partners for discussion. Depending on the importance of the cause at stake, an opinion expressed online can reach millions of people, just as it can fail to attract any interest. It is this unpredictability of the effect of online communication that makes politicians curious but cautious about using such means in their campaigns.

Before the 2009 elections in Bulgaria, Facebook was full of various profiles of Bulgarian politicians, parties and political and other causes. However, very few of them had been created by the politicians themselves or their teams but, rather, by their supporters. When the Bulgarian *Media Monitoring Lab* project was launched at the beginning of 2009, the amount of political content on Facebook was still insignificant.

However, we noted even back then the profile of the now foreign minister, Nikolay Mladenov, which was very different from all the others. The then little known Bulgarian MEP from GERB was the third most approved of politician on Facebook, after GERB leader and now prime minister Boyko Borisov, and DSB (Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria) and former prime minister Ivan Kostov whose profiles, however, were not personal. Mladenov's professionally maintained and regularly updated personal profile was an example of adequate communication with a younger public, a large part of which was only just getting to know the new face of Bulgarian politics. A little after a year later, Nikolay Mladenov again proved to be one of the only three Bulgarian politicians enjoying public approval, but now the other two were members of the GERB government (Bachvarova 2010). We could hardly attribute the public approval for Nikolay Mladenov solely to his active online presence as a blogger and social network user. But we can say with certainty that his online activity has contributed to his high ratings and positive public image.

In this sense, it is difficult to measure the offline effect of online activities. In some cases they may remain confined to cyberspace, without leading to concrete events or changes in public attitudes or politicians' ratings. In other cases, however, an adequate online image may prove to be of key importance for the image of a given politician. Now a careless remark is capable of destroying someone's reputation because of the multiplication of the effect online – words no longer remain where they were spoken. A statement taped by mobile phone can be almost instantly uploaded on social network sites where it will reach thousands of users. One such example in the 2009 parliamentary elections in

Bulgaria was a statement made at a meeting with constituents by DPS (Movement for Rights and Freedoms) leader Ahmed Dogan, who declared that it was he who controlled power in Bulgaria. The video clip of his statement was posted online and downloaded by thousands, mobilizing many opponents of the DPS on Facebook. They united in different groups against the DPS, calling for a punitive vote against the party in the elections. According to a number of sociological analyses, in the context of high voter turnout it was this punitive vote that contributed to GERB's convincing victory. The people in power can no longer afford to ignore the potential of the internet and to remain indifferent to the voice of voters mobilized online. When the virtual vote is mobilized around a topical issue and information about that issue reaches a large number of social network users, the scale of the effect is unpredictable.

However, we should not overestimate the influence of social network sites like Facebook. Users rarely take certain issues to heart, while the path from clicking to interiorizing a given issue is a long one. *Clicktivism* is indeed a form of pseudo- activism online which simply satisfies the need for affiliating with a group and for social interaction. While taking into account the possibilities for influence through social network sites, we should not ignore the fact that their efficiency is directly dependent on the level of democracy in the respective society. Despite the democratic character of the new media, they are not immune from censorship, be it economic or political, as was the case in Iran. On the other hand, the growing influence and value of Facebook are increasingly attracting potential investors and shareholders. Although the planned initial public offering of Facebook has been postponed until 2012, it will inevitably increase control over content on the site which will be owned by more shareholders. The independence and democratic character of media become secondary considerations when the focus shifts onto financial interests and this, unfortunately, is a problem that is bound to affect the new mass media as well.

Traditional Media and Facebook

It is interesting to trace the interaction of traditional media with new media in the realm of political discourse. According to some analysts, the internet will gradually replace the press, radio and television as a universal medium. For the time being, however, the different mass media coexist in harmony, attracting different audiences. Media and politics are inevitably linked, and in recent years the internet has become one more channel of communication with the electorate. Some analysts have examined the relationship between the image of politicians in the traditional media and their popularity online. The candidates who have generated more positive media coverage are more likely to perform better in the elections, and are usually quite popular on the internet (Herrnson 2004).

What has turned Facebook into an important factor in political life is its multifunctionality. Until a few years ago, communication between politicians and the electorate before elections took place primarily in the traditional media (television, radio, the press). Politicians, cast in the role of communicators, showered the electorate, cast in the role of recipients, with all sorts of campaign messages. The response of the electorate was measured through opinion polls whose credibility was checked only on voting day. Today civil society has its own territory online, while social network sites are the environment where people can voice their opinions, seek out like-minded individuals and organize different events. On the eve of voting day, the campaigning voice of candidates is no longer the only voice to be heard. Voters also make themselves heard, and this is something politicians certainly care about. Hence, whereas there may still be politicians who underestimate the importance of social network sites, it is certain that there are no politicians who aren't interested in what's going on there.

The results of a number of studies show that people tend to gravitate towards news and information which agrees with their own views. Virtual communities are fairly homogeneous in terms of values and viewpoints, therefore online discussions tend to be a means for reinforcing preexisting views rather than changing and accepting new ones (Bimber and Davis 2003). As in all communities, however, among the members of online communities there are also opinion leaders who unite the others, set the tone of discussions and define their agenda less in terms of what the others should think but of what is to be discussed: the important and topical issues that are subject to discussion.

The rise of the internet has complemented the concept of Elihu Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld about the two-step flow of communication. According to this model, information flows from mass media to opinion leaders, and from them to a wider population. Thus opinion leaders influence the way information is received (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955). Unlike the theories of the direct effect of mass media on the public, this model focuses on the role of interpersonal communication in the relay of information. People with wider access to the media, who make sense of the media context, explain and transmit the content to the others. Opinion leaders resemble the other members of the community – in terms of personal interests, demographic features or socioeconomic characteristics.

The new media have brought new ways of communicating information. In addition to mediators between the mass media and the public, opinion leaders can now also act as direct communicators through their personal online media (blogs, social network pages, etc.). The mass media got off their high horses and came closer to everyday life, entering the homes of their target audiences. The

broadcast media are increasingly incorporating citizen journalism in their programmes. With the development of technology, journalism has become an accessible hobby for most active citizens.

A telling example of the interaction between traditional and new media in Bulgaria in 2010 was the case of Mima, a five-year-old dog who was found by her owner lying on the ground, still alive, with her four legs axed off by an unknown assailant. The news of this horrific case of animal cruelty was first reported by the *Trud* daily, and then taken up by the broadcast media. The case caused public outrage, and hundreds of thousands of Bulgarians united in different groups on Facebook calling for an amendment to Bulgaria's Animal Protection Act that would criminalize animal cruelty. A number of protest marches were organized in different towns and cities in support of this citizen initiative. But the Parliamentary Committee on Legal Affairs turned down the proposed amendments criminalizing animal cruelty. The public reaction to the news reported by the traditional media would have hardly been as strong as it was if this news story had not been picked up by the social network sites. Without them, it is also unlikely that we would have seen an initiative to amend the law. Although this initiative failed, it was proof of the influence of the new media.

This new reality in the digital era has extended Katz and Lazarsfeld's concept in another direction as well. Information no longer flows only from the mass media to the public, but also from the public to the media – and, moreover, not just in the form of feedback. The new opinion leaders use the mass media to transmit their messages to a wider public. Such an exchange of roles would not have been possible without the new media. In this way, traditional media are now increasingly assuming the role of transmitters of information, and not just of sources of information. The interactivity of the new media and the possibility for synchronizing computer-mediated communication are the factors which have transformed the mass media. We are witnessing a convergence process where traditional media are moving online and the characteristics of the different media are becoming increasingly unified.

Bulgarian Politics and Facebook

In the context of this new media reality, the interaction between voters and politicians is also acquiring new dimensions, especially in pre-election situations. Analyzing the Bulgarian content on Facebook in the last two years, we found several important trends which characterize the essence of this new type of communication in Bulgarian political life.

At the beginning of the election year 2009, Facebook was already full of groups supporting causes against the Sergey Stanishev government and the people who were in power at the time. Back then we noted a trend that was confirmed in the next months. The causes mobilizing a negative vote against a given policy or politician rallied more supporters than the positive groups on Facebook. The major political cause on Facebook in January 2009, the protest demonstration against the government, attracted a serious number of supporters. The initiatives for mobilizing the citizen vote in the coming elections multiplied into numerous Facebook groups urging Bulgarians to use their right to vote. The reasons given for voting often did not have to do with support for a particular candidate but with preventing another from coming to power. Voters urged each other to take part in the elections not to support the potential new government but to reject and condemn the old one. The unattained political objective of the 14 January protest demonstration mobilized even more people to protest again, but this time through their right to vote. Counting the supporters of different causes devoted to this initiative on Facebook, we found that the number of Bulgarians who had publicly declared on the site that they would vote exceeded 80 000. The high voter turnout in the Bulgarian parliamentary elections was a fact, but the trend was visible on Facebook long before the elections were held.

The analysis of political content on Facebook in the last two years points to another conclusion as well. The fact that Facebook can be defined as a significant phenomenon in Bulgarian political life is due more to the activity of voters in this respect than to the initiative of politicians and their aides. Whereas it was reasonable to suppose that the majority of causes and groups on Facebook were the work of voters, it was just as reasonable to expect that the political profiles on the site were the work of politicians. It turned out, however, that this was not the case. Most of the profiles of Bulgarian politicians on Facebook were registered by ordinary users and practically had the status of fan pages.

This, however, did not prevent several such profiles from attracting a number of supporters that exceeded several times the total number of supporters of all other personal pages of Bulgarian politicians on Facebook. The future prime minister, Boyko Borisov, ranked among the top-three in approval ratings even in 2009, although there was serous mobilization against him on Facebook before the elections. Contrary to expectations, the online support for the new prime minister after the elections proved to be much higher. Boyko Borisov's online ratings began to increase rapidly in 2009, reaching a record-high for a Bulgarian politician approval by a total 222 000 Facebook users at the end of 2010. This was the number of supporters of the prime minister on just two of his most

popular fan pages on Facebook.[4] By way of comparison, the visibly professionally maintained profile of Ivan Kostov, who ranked second in approval ratings on Facebook, had close to 10 000 supporters.[5]

We could long reflect on the reasons for the prime minister's unprecedented online popularity. It is difficult to prove to what extent this serious support is indicative of the general public attitude towards him. Again by way of comparison, his ruling party, GERB, is approved of by close to 8000 Facebook users. This is a trend noted also in the analyses of the content of Bulgarian print media in the last two years. The predominantly positive attitude of the print media towards the prime minister differs from the tone of the majority of publications expressing an opinion about the government and the ruling party. Here we could ask ourselves whether there is a connection between the attitude towards Boyko Borisov demonstrated by the traditional media which, according to analysts, afford him '*media comfort*', and the public attitudes expressed on Facebook. If we assume that Borisov truly enjoys '*media comfort*', we ought to expect that his ratings would increase. Despite the contradictory data of the different polling agencies, Facebook demonstrates precisely this trend.

In the last two years Facebook has become an important tool for political influence in Bulgaria as well. Abounding in content on the subject in the pre-election context and indicative of the public attitudes in the year after the elections, the potential of Facebook is likely to be used increasingly in future campaigns to mobilize public interest and opinion.

We Do Revolutionary Things

> Ognyanov opened the pamphlet. It had been published by the emigrants in Rumania. Like most such writings, this one too was a somewhat mediocre compilation, crammed with patriotic phrases, worn threadbare by constant use, commonplace rhetorics, desperate exclamations and curses against the Turks. But that was just why it aroused the enthusiasm of the people in Bulgaria, thirsting for each new message. The sad state of its leaves, soiled and dog-eared, almost falling to pieces with handling, showed that it had passed through hundreds of hands and fed thousands of persons with its fiery fare. (Vazov 1976: 97)

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[4] See <http://www.facebook.com/home.php?#!/pages/Bojko-Borisov/39210522041> [accessed 29 November 2010], <http://www.facebook.com/home.php?#!/pages/Boiko-Borisov/29880861985 > [accessed 29 November 2010].

[5] See <http://www.facebook.com/home.php?#!/pages/Ivan-Kostov/41466206654?v=wall> [accessed 29 November 2010].

I begin and end this article with quotes from *Under the Yoke*, Bulgarian writer Ivan Vazov's classical 1894 novel about life in a small town on the eve of the April 1876 Uprising against Ottoman rule, in order to make a comparison between reality then and now. One hundred and thirty years ago, the contemporary means of communication did not exist, and neither did most of the media without which it is impossible to imagine life today. Yet the Bulgarians still found ways to get information, their leaders disseminated their ideas, and Bulgarian society was always on the alert. Nowadays it is difficult to imagine how a revolt or a revolution can be organized in secret without the help of technology and the mass media.

The private motto of the company that owns Facebook is said to be *We do revolutionary things*.[6] Today revolution is conceived of as virtual mobilization of members of civil society who exchange ideas with like-minded people on topical issues. If the cause is sufficiently important, online activism may translate into entirely real action. This action could take the form of voting in elections, taking part in a protest demonstration or making a donation to a charity campaign. The only things that have changed are the means of information and the way we communicate. Ganko's café, where Vazov's characters discussed politics, has now moved online, in the form of different interest groups on Facebook and other social network sites. The dog-eared revolutionary pamphlet that has passed through hundreds of hands has turned into a posting or a banner somewhere in cyberspace from where its message can reach millions of people at the same time, regardless of their physical location. This, precisely, is the way Facebook is changing the world.

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[6] See 'Facebook s polovin milliard aktivni potrebiteli'. *Vesti.bg*, 22 July 2010 <http://www.vesti.bg/index.phtml?tid=40&oid=3142031> [accessed 29 November 2010].

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■ Vbox7: Homemade Politics

> *Rakia is made by distilling fermented fruits or wine. The raw material is called* dzhibri *[marc]. The distillation process is called* varene *[brewing or boiling] or* pechene *[baking or roasting]. The distillation apparatus is called* kazan *[still] (preferably made of copper)*
>
> http://rakiabg.hit.bg

Grandma's Media

Every self-respecting person knows that grandma is the best cook. In most cultures, the grandmother is revered as the modest protector of domestic life, security and traditions. She does things the way they were done *in the good old days*. Natural and authentic, grandma's recipes are the stuff of family legends. It is no coincidence that the grandmother is a key figure in a number of Bulgarian advertising campaigns such as those for *Grandma's Yogurt*, *Grandma's Lyutenitsa* (tomato and pepper relish) or other products *made to grandma's recipe*. Bulgarian advertisers often use the image of the grandmother to sell their products. The grandmother is like a seal of authenticity, the stamp of utopian childhood on mass-produced products.

The discourse around video sites and the videos posted on them is very similar. Just like grandma's cooking, they are not perfect, they are often cruder and less professional than the products of the big market players. But this is by no means a flaw – it is proof that they have been made with love, or if we use the rhetoric of YouTube, with a civic spirit. Video streaming sites are hailed as the heaven of civil society, the new agora, a breath of fresh air for a public sphere that is falling apart because of unilateral manipulation and control by news corporations.

Commercial news production is opposed to citizen journalism on blogs and video sites just as commercially made to homemade bread. In his essay 'Rhetoric of the Image', Roland Barthes makes a classic analysis of the advertisement for Panzani pasta: the image in the advertisement uses the aesthetic of the 'nature morte' or 'still life' to persuade us that the concentrate in

the tin is entirely natural and organic (Barthes 1977: 34-35). In the same way, professional media are trying to imitate the amateur aesthetics of video sites in an effort to persuade us that the information provided is entirely authentic, not doctored in any way. One Bulgarian example is the controversial advertisement featuring Andrea, a popular pop-folk singer, filmed naked as if by chance during the shooting of a commercial for *mastika* (anisette).[1] Of course, supposedly leaked 'authentic' footage is an inseparable part of advertising. Even the US Transportation Security Administration (TSA) has used such methods, releasing a series of security camera videos in the troubled times after 9/11 (Losh 2007: 112). The videos were deliberately meant to look amateurish and casual. Hollywood is no exception: films like Matt Reeves's *Cloverfield* (2008) attempt to create a sense of realism and immediacy, being made to look like amateur camcorder footage amateur camcorder footage. Expensive ads, glamorous images and smooth editing are no longer as effective as they used to be. That is because they lack sincerity. The new trends were especially evident during the 2009 parliamentary election campaign in Bulgaria, as Ivaylo Ditchev shows in his article 'Money Can't Buy Me Love':

> The web introduced an element of altruism that was becoming increasingly scarce in the old media. The many blogs, signature-collecting campaigns, parody collages or video clips created a feeling of authentic citizen engagement while, conversely, the ubiquitous 'Boykostov'[2] paid advertisement repelled instead of attracting voters. In this sense, the web became a new acid test – if not for altruism in politics then at least for spotting frankly commercial strategies. (Ditchev 2009)

Just like grandma's cooking, user-generated videos have a feeling of authenticity and homely sincerity. In a sense, they may be defined as 'grandma's media'. The big difference, however, is that the grandmother as the guru of the home has been replaced by her young grandson. The time has come of the Mark Zuckerberg-like hoodie-clad hacker who hacks into the Pentagon computer network from his bedroom. The young hacker has replaced the grandmother as the last pillar of the home, the family and authentic values that are now threatened by the big, faceless corporations. Or, rather, the grandmother and her hacker-grandson have divided the symbolic space of the home between them, with the grandmother taking the kitchen and the teenager holing up in his room with a big 'Do Not Disturb' sign on the door. In his room, the teenager remixes bits of TV commercials, songs and photos, creating fantastic video collages. In the kitchen, the grandmother mixes vegetables to make preserves for the winter.

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[1] *Andrea gola 18+*, <http://www.vbox7.com/play:5daadbdf>, [accessed 16 November 2010].
[2] A negative advertisement/commercial against Boyko Borisov, leader of the GERB (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria) party, whose punch line was 'If you vote for Borisov, you will get Kostov.' Ivan Kostov, prime minister from 1997 to 2001, is the much-demonized leader of the DSB (Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria) party. See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DJ3XGixxu5U [accessed 21 December 2010].

Both consume creatively and both use ready products to make something different, the only difference being that in the first case the mix consists of images and in the second of vegetables. 'Mix' is an appropriate metaphor for the Bulgarian video site Vbox7, where the amusing coexists with the absurd, with the comic, with displays of public-spiritedness, nationalism and racism – all this against the background of *chalga*, amateur rap and the latest hits from western pop culture. Both the grandmother and the grandson are guerrillas in the field of the commercial – they blow it up with their subversive creative tactics, but at the same time, they are incorporated into its strategies and commercialized in their turn.

Canfilm

Zlatin Radev's famous 1990 animation short, *Canfilm* (original title *Konservfilm*), tells the story of a society of food cans that are stuffed consecutively with different fruits or vegetables as an allegory for different ideologies. This is what the story looks like: 'At first, the proper contents to have are cherries, then tomatoes, chilli peppers, lemons, ending in a random, indiscriminate and hysterical mix – what we see on the screen smells strongly of post-totalitarian chaos' (Prodanova 1998). In contemporary 2.0 politics, chaos is the natural state of things – each one of us makes his or her own mix of fruits/ideas. The setting, however, is no longer the cardboard world of animation but the virtual world of the web. Mixing ideas is very easy on the internet, where different identities intermingle and overlap from link to link. This can have unexpected results. For example, here is what an eighteen-year-old Bulgarian girl, whose favourite video clips include Celine Dion's *Titanic* theme song 'My Heart Will Go On', has posted on her profile:

We are good-hearted Nazis,
We hate communists and black kids.
Let's make every Gypsy kid into a bar of soap, every Gypsy woman into two
[bars of soap],
And the whole ghetto into a box of detergent![3]

Here teenage love for the romantic, and scary nationalist fanaticism literally coexist unproblematically side by side. The internet does not overcome fanaticism, ideologies, extreme opinions. Tensions do not disappear. On the contrary, the status quo is explicated and conserved. A vast archive of hate speech, offensive comments and extreme statements is created. This is the

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[3] <http://www.vbox7.com/user:baradj88> [accessed 24 November 2010]. This is a literal translation; the original is in rhymes.

preserve for winter prepared by the internet for posterity. The winter of our discontent, perpetuated with an unknown 'best before' date.

Homemade Folklore

The internet is much more conservative than we would like to believe. The 2009 election campaign in Bulgaria has proved this beyond doubt. The winners were the people who were already well-known. It was difficult for new players and messages to break through the strict tradition of Bulgarian video sites. The unquestionable idol on the Bulgarian video site Vbox7 during and after the 2009 elections was the present prime minister, Boyko Borisov. Soon after he won the elections, loyal followers dedicated various *chalga* hits to him. 'Three-Party Coalition' ('Troyna Koalitsia', a pun on the name of Bulgaria's previous, 'three-party-coalition', government), a song by popular *chalga* singers Extra Nina and Nikol (both of them sexy blondes) suggests explicitly that the two would like to have a threesome with the present prime minister of Bulgaria:

I had another dream of lust,
Boyko between the two of us,
O Nikol,
I picture him naked.

Sweet dream, dear Nina,
We'll feel great as a threesome,
Two blondes, not one,
Beside the manly rock.[4]

Boyko Borisov has become a symbol of the archetypal man. In the Bulgarian collective consciousness he is simultaneously the father of the nation, the lover of pop-folk singers, the heroic policeman who protects us from evil. As one of the popular online legends about the prime minister goes, 'There are two types of women: those who want to have sex with Boyko Borisov, and those who want to have sex with him again.' After Borisov's government, the phrase 'three-party coalition' will never mean the same. In a sense, we can say that Boyko Boriov has become the new Krali Marko, the hero of Bulgarian folklore, and his only rival by number of songs.

The legends about Borisov[5] are an extremely interesting phenomenon in their own right. Most of them are short jokes about Chuck Norris adapted to the

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[4] *Extra Nina and Nikol – Troyna koalitsia – Bate Boyko*, <http://www.vbox7.com/play:fb0cc18e> [accessed 24 November 2010]. This is a literal translation; the original is in rhymes.
[5] *15 fakta, koito ne znaete za Boyko Borisov*, <http://www.vbox7.com/play:d2464260> [accessed 24 November 2010].

Bulgarian context. Their number is constantly growing as they are often told by popular Bulgarian TV talk show hosts and stand-up comedians. Every few months the successive video compilation of the best legends is posted online. Boyko Borisov actively stimulates folklore. His role as a mythmaking factor in Bulgarian folklore is extremely strong at present. And as often happens, the myth of Boyko attracts similar motifs from other myths. Thus, we now have the figures of SuperBoyko, Batman Boyko, Boyko the Godfather. Krali Boyko has the characteristic ambivalence of the folk hero – he is brave, valiant, manly, but also cunning and flexible. The first characteristics do not conflict with the second in folk consciousness. We only have to browse the most popular video clips of Borisov to see his ambivalence. A parody of Borisov from a popular TV show (Gospodari na efira/Masters of the Air), an account of his alleged betrayal by Slavi Trifonov (a popular TV talk show host who initially supported but later turned against Borisov) told to a TV journalist (Sasho Dikov), an arrogant insult addressed at a Nova Television journalist, a statement that he had beaten up his daughter's boyfriend, paparazzi photos of him in swimming trunks on the beach at a Bulgarian seaside resort – those are the faces of Borisov on Vbox7. Insolence and arrogance are combined with manliness and machismo. The key thing is that all video clips mentioned above focus on Borisov's personality, and none on his politics. Borisov's very personality is his politics. The epic folk tales about Krali Marko do not have a definite plot, they are defined as a set of tales centred around the protagonist. The epic tales of the present Bulgarian government are a set of themes and people around the prime minister, blended into his charisma as a cool macho man. In fact, what we are witnessing in the new media is an extreme form of the tendency towards 'Berlusconization' and 'boulevardization' of the Bulgarian media noted by Orlin Spassov.[6]

Boyko Borisov is a bridging figure between the past and the future who draws around himself other key figures such as former communist leader Todor Zhivkov and the returned king Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha. The eighth most popular video clip about the prime minister, with almost 70 000 viewings, is an eleven-second video showing a photograph of Borisov as Zhivkov's bodyguard.[7] Although here Borisov is shown discreetly in the background, it is he who is the focus of attention. In the same way, Interior Minister Tsvetan Tsvetanov, Finance Minister Simeon Djankov and National Assembly President Tsetska Tsacheva are always eclipsed by the charismatic, larger-than-life, Borisov on video sites. Vbox7 is a kingdom of images, not of stories. And just as in folklore the character of Krali Marko attracts and unites within himself the images of a number of other, lesser known, characters, so too on Vbox7 Boyko has become

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[6] *Orlin Spassov: Borisov e sablazan za mediite*, < http://www.glasove.com/article-8891.php> [accessed 16 November 2010].

[7] Boyko Borisov, who owned a private security company before he went into politics, served as the bodyguard of Todor Zhivkov in the 1990s and, later, of Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha. See *Boyko Borisov predi 20 godini*, <http://www.vbox7.com/play:c16c45b6> [accessed 24 November 2010].

a collective image of the whole government. What we see on Vbox7 are the epic tales of the Borisov government revealed in the laconic but expressive gestures of the hero-protagonist.

'Many of your sort have already shed tears,' the prime minister tells a phone prankster in the now emblematic video 'Boy Pulls Borisov's Leg on the Phone' ('Momche se bazika po telefona s Boyko Borisov').[8] The phrase became even more popular after Bulgarian rap band Apsurt included it in their song 'The Star' ('Zvezdata'). Folklore is a single whole, a collection of quotes and references migrating from media to media. Constant reference and self-reference keeps alive the folkloric notions, the feeling that they are perpetual and invariable. In his article 'MyBrain.net', Geert Lovink notes that we are witnessing the colonization of real-time. We are constantly microblogging, updating our Facebook status, noting what we are doing and thinking about at the moment. Reality is not becoming more virtual. Conversely, the virtual is becoming more real. Information is not static, it has turned into a flow, a flow of constantly new and changing information (Lovink 2010). Unlike this colonization, what we are witnessing on Vbox7 is the very opposite – a return to the cyclical time of folklore. The same videos are uploaded over and over again every few months. Thus, the video featuring Borisov in the popular Bulgarian TV series *Zabranena Lyubov* (*Forbidden Love*) has been posted every couple of months in the last year and a half. More than one year after the elections, the well-known old videos are being posted over and over again. Repetition creates a sense of security, a stable narrative framework about a government at a time of crisis. Video sites lock us up in their small world of striking images, of the entertaining and the personal, of constant epithets, where we remain immune to the flow of real-time, to changes and shocks. Just like folklore, they provide a frame of reference for making sense of the ever-changing reality. Just like the home, they offer a safe haven where we do not have to think about what is expecting us outside – in the public sphere of life, in the struggle for daily survival. The folklore of grandmothers has been replaced by the online folklore of grandchildren – the jokes about the prime minister, rap music and quotes from television that help us to make sense of and accept what is happening around us.

My Home Is My Castle

Folklore is the perfect system for identity construction. In addition to the hero, the figure of the enemy is always present in folklore. Video sites like Vbox7 are not just conservative, they are outright reactionary in this respect. The archenemy in Bulgarian online folklore are the two largest ethnic minorities in

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[8] <http://www.vbox7.com/play:3bdaa504> [accessed 24 November 2010].

Bulgaria: Turks and Roma. Bulgarian new media are a mother to some, and a stepmother to others. Free speech has turned into a breeding ground for nationalism of all stripes.

Behind the high garden walls are the neighbours with whom we quarrel all the time. The neighbours who make eyes at our wives, who beat our children and who are the embodiment of Otherness (*Etnicheskoto nasilie v Balgaria/Ethnic Violence in Bulgaria*[9]). Although they are close to us, our neighbours are completely different. The only thing that can infuriate us more than the very fact of their existence is their attempt to enter into our home – to speak their own language and worship their own God inside our own castle. One cannot be both Turkish and Bulgarian. Such an identity is impossible. The video clip 'I Am Bulgarian – in Turkish' ('Az sam balgarche – Na turski ezik')[10] has provoked outrage within the Bulgarian online community. There are many videos uploaded from SKAT, a Bulgarian nationalist television channel. The main message is that the others are desecrating our home, that they are a threat to us: '[DPS[11] leader] Ahmed Dogan's Thugs Attack SKAT Crew' ('Mutrite na Ahmed Dogan napadnaha ekip na SKAT');[12] 'Turks Beat Up Bulgarian' ('Turtsi prebiha balgarin');[13] 'Outrageous: They Want to Register Islamist Party!' ('Izvrashtenie – iskat da registrirat islyamistka partia!').[14] The very use of the word 'Turk' in the title arouses fierce indignation among users. For example, below an innocuous video clip showing a car chase between Turks[15] one can read comments such as the following:

misfits 5 months 2 weeks ago
TURKISH SCUM!

mentata1988 4 months 3 weeks ago
AAAAAAAAGH f—k your mother you bloody darkies f—k you

horche 6 months 2 weeks ago
you're a total joke you ugly turks if you have something against the bulgarians then what are you doing in bulgaria? what are you doing on a bulgarian site? just go and circumcise your dicks and shut up

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[9] <http://vbox7.com/play:fb8a99c6> [accessed 24 November 2010].

[10] <http://vbox7.com/play:cccc7ca0> [accessed 24 November 2010].

[11] The political party DPS (Movement for Rights and Freedoms) is widely regarded as an ethnic Turkish party.

[12] <http://www.vbox7.com/play:afa217cc> [accessed 24 November 2010].

[13] <http://www.vbox7.com/play:75783199> [accessed 24 November 2010].

[14] <http://www.vbox7.com/play:62faf82a> [accessed 24 November 2010].

[15] <http://www.vbox7.com/play:edd06b3a> [accessed 24 November 2010].

The Turks do not even have to be doing something bad – their mere presence is more than enough. So much so that a person uploading a Turkish song forbids any comment as follows: 'I didn't post the video clip to start a quarrel on racial issues…! You can comment somewhere else, fight, do whatever you want to, but not here!'[16]

It has been rightly noted that this is no longer simply about ethnicity, it is about racism. This may explain the great popularity of a video showing archival footage of Adolf Hitler.[17] The video is from an English-language documentary and ends with the provocative question: 'Could Adolf Hitler have been gay?' The intent of the video clashes with the intent of the users of the Vbox7 site, who have rallied to the defence of the dictator:

bitk 1 month 1 week ago
gay is the mother of the guy who says such nonsense, shameless bastards…… how dare some people say such things about such a great man

me4opuh12 3 months 1 week ago
hitler saved us and we betrayed him we were stupid he helped us and we betrayed him we're idiots

It is only by the perverse logic of the internet that someone nicknamed *me4opuh12* (which translates as winniethepooh12) can rally to the defence of Adolf Hitler. Even some of the comments that are against Hitler are quite disturbing:

barbiy 1 week 3 days ago
you call such a guy a great madman who killed people millions of people he didn't kill gypsies only but also evangelical christians (everyone who believed in GOD)!!!!!!!

The person who wrote this comment wonders how could we call 'great' someone who killed not only Gypsies but also evangelical Christians. Killing people who are one of us was a serious mistake that should never happen again…

We see how sites like Vbox7 have become a bastion of nationalism and even of racism. Vbox7 is an embodiment of ossified patriarchal values. This is not to say that there aren't any videos showing sex, graphic scenes and naked bodies on this site. On the contrary: there are plenty of them, but in the comments to such

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[16] <http://www.vbox7.com/play:a78ce0a2> [accessed 24 November 2010].
[17] <http://vbox7.com/play:1a1a149a> [accessed 24 November 2010].

videos the women are invariably described as 'tarts' (the most euphemistic of all definitions). Nothing could be more offensive to the patriarchal fanatic than the symbolic betrayal of everything native by women, the keeper of the home. Only this can explain the wave of outrage at pop-folk singer Malina for singing at a DPS campaign concert. A video with the telling title 'Malina Kisses DPS's Ass' ('Malina tseluva gaza na DPS')[18] scored almost 50 000 hits and provoked indignant comments. All conceivable insults about a woman traitor during a war are to be found in those comments. Malina's betrayal during elections is probably comparable only to the horrific act of betrayal committed during the French Revolution by the Virgins of Verdun who carried a basket of sugared almonds to the King of Prussia's tent and were punished for that with their lives. In the Bulgarian patriarchal society, the fact that a Bulgarian pop-folk singer sang for Dogan is seen as a betrayal of the national, the nation and male honour as a whole. This was bound to cause a scandal, destroying her reputation as a woman who is allegedly no better than a prostitute.

Everything Bulgarian, national, native, is carried in the blood. It is natural, organic and sacred. 'Blood's drenched the earth in pain! Blood's on the hands of the guy with the turban! Blood flows when it's time for retribution': this is part of the lyrics of the popular amateur rap song 'Blood' ('Krav').[19] The virtual reality of the internet does not distance us from bodies; it desperately looks for something true, substantial, in order to latch onto it. Blood, the cross, the home – the old symbols – have not only not lost their significance; in the agony of virtual reality, they are becoming fetishized, turning into ever more powerful symbols of a reality that is slipping away and is therefore defended all the more passionately. As David Morley notes in his article 'What's Home Got to Do With It', the rumours about the death of geography are grossly exaggerated (Morley 2006: 24). Tradition uses the new technologies for its own ends. Moreover, physical access to those technologies itself depends on one's geographic and social status. It will be curious to check to what extent people from ethnic minorities in Bulgaria actually have access to a computer and whether they use sites like Vbox7 at all. Although from time to time one can find comments to Turkish videos written by users with Turkish names who, in their turn, swear and spark a debate, there are hardly any comments in defence of the Roma. Vbox7 is a native space for some and an entirely foreign land for others. What is at issue here is not just symbolic domination over the virtual territory. What is at issue is the all too real access or lack of access to the medium for people of a different social status. The situation becomes even more complicated if we take into account the opinion shared by many Bulgarian bloggers that they prefer YouTube to the Bulgarian Vbox7: 'Judging from their

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[18] <http://www.vbox7.com/play:d3cbd053> [accessed 24 November 2010].
[19] <http://www.vbox7.com/play:b8196aee> [accessed 24 November 2010]. This is a literal translation; the original is in rhymes.

comments, most users of YouTube are better educated or at least better-mannered. The majority of serious bloggers use YouTube.'[20] Similarly, most video clips from the 2009 election campaign of the Blue Coalition (a coalition of the SDS, or the Union of Democratic Forces, and the DSB) were posted on YouTube because – as noted by Komitata, a blogger and the person responsible for their online campaign – this is the more serious medium.[21]

Vbox7 is seen by the Bulgarian blogging community as a space of less-educated, 'unserious' users. Many of the uploaders on Vbox7, however, see the site more as a bastion of everything Bulgarian, 'ours', national. The largest and most popular channels offering nationalist videos are to be found precisely on Vbox7. Vbox7 is the citadel of everything Bulgarian. What is worrying is that nationalism is to be found not just in user-generated videos but also in the language of those in power. Suffice it to mention the countless videos by the Bulgarian nationalist party Ataka or even Boyko Borisov's highly controversial statement made at a meeting with Bulgarians living in Chicago in February 2009, where he explained that the Roma and pensioners were 'low-quality human material'. As Mila Mineva ingeniously notes, we Bulgarians are inclined to fight less for our national interest than for our national dignity (Mineva 2009). The video site is not a public space where Bulgarians discuss and look for the common good. On the contrary: it is, rather, a well-guarded home of everything national whose dignity is above all. Bulgaria above all.

According to Theodor Adorno, not feeling at home anywhere is a sign of morality. Ardent Bulgarian nationalists, however, feel too much at home on the Bulgarian Vbox7 where they command, swear, condemn, and express their pride. The figure of the triumphant hacker who breaks the rules of corporations is increasingly being replaced by that of the nationalist teenager who is even more devoted to traditions than his grandmother. The grandchild obsessed with stories about crosses, graves and time-honoured symbols which he includes into rap songs. The grandmother keeps the traditions of everything Bulgarian in the home, while the grandson keeps the traditions in the online home. Politics on the Bulgarian video social network site Vbox7 is founded upon exclusion, hate and the absence of debate just as much as it is founded upon inclusion, tolerance and dialogue. This is traditionalist politics *par excellence*, interwoven in Web 2.0 structures.

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[20] Interview with Boyan Yurukov, 2 September 2009.
[21] Interview with Konstantin Pavlov, aka Komitata, 12 June 2009.

The Wish Room

Actually, Vbox7 is certainly not a very political site. On the contrary: both by number of videos and by number of viewings, 'Politics' is not particularly popular on Vbox7 – it ranks thirtieth by number of videos from a total thirty-three categories on Vbox7.[22] The fifteen most popular political videos have less than 170 000 viewings – as compared with the fifteen most popular videos on the site, which have more than 800 000 viewings. Politics is the last thing of concern on a site devoted to the entertaining, ephemeral, unexpected and funny. The videos uploaded by users on Vbox7 can almost entirely be classified into the Leisure Time category: Auto-Moto, Animation, Pets, Extreme, Funny, Sports, and so on. The new media proclaim themselves to be media of participation, but participation in what? The possibility for political change and democratic participation obviously gives way to the possibility to watch nude girls, sneezing pandas and car stunts. The new media do not continue the tradition of the literary salon but that of the private room where we lock ourselves up to discuss private affairs, read science fiction and dream about distant lands. The salon is a public space where people discuss issues that are of importance to the community. The room is a private space where both cherished intimacy and the boldest dreams of journeys to distant lands are played out. The room is the place of personal self-realization. In this respect we can define Vbox7 more as a version of the private room than of the public salon.

In Andrey Tarkovsky's 1979 film *Stalker*, the characters pass through all kinds of ordeals in order to reach the Room where one's secret wishes come true. But when they eventually reach it, they change their minds and decide not to go inside. Similarly to the Wish Room, Vbox7 makes various wishes come true, but not necessarily those we have consciously made. We wished to have a new democratic platform and we got a heaven of leisure time, carefree entertainment and non-commitment. We wished for open dialogue and we got militant nationalism. We wished for something new and we used the most advanced technologies to defend the most retrograde values. Vbox7 is like an ultramodern futuristic time machine which we use to return to the past, to past experiences, over and over again. Time materializes before our very eyes, turning into a space, image, video, in order to remain frozen in an eternal present.

Contemporary politics is played out in a situation of instant feedback:

> Politicians act within a hyper-reactive environment in which each move provokes a torrent of images. Instead of pursuing strategic goals and being judged according to results, their activity is scrutinized live: it is as if the

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[22] *Vbox7 kategorii*, <http://www.vbox7.com/categories> [accessed 16 November 2010].

patient on the surgical table has acquired the right to scream, 'It hurts, stop cutting!' so that the operation is suspended, re-started at some other place, stopped again, and so on. (Ditchev 2010)

Democracy live is complemented by the 'constant replay' function. Each gesture, each statement of politicians can be endlessly replayed in the manic repetition of video sites. Everything happens *here and now*, but *here and now* never go away forever. In the incessant flow of information, video sites become like rooms for collecting memories. Similarly to the wall in Liev Schreiber's 2005 film *Everything Is Illuminated*, the walls in the virtual space of video sites become covered with information – funny falls, gaffes, arrogant remarks or amusing statements that are constantly replayed. Live democracy never dies. It is periodically resurrected and, in this sense, it lives forever. In an alarmingly sadistic scenario, we watch a surgical operation that is conducted over and over again.

The Global Home

Marshall McLuhan spoke of what he called the 'global village'. We can just as successfully speak of a 'global home'. The global home that has become visible thanks to the video blogs of thousands of users. The global home which we invite everyone to take a look at. Keenan Cahill's video 'Down On Me'[23] is the ultimate fantasy virtual home. The teenager's idol, 50 Cent, enters into Keenan's untidy room to sing with him. The line between reality and fiction is obliterated. The glamour of celebrity enters into Keenan's home, and Keenan's home enters into the homes of millions of people watching the video. There is no boundary between the home and the public sphere. The global home is everywhere.

Video sites are turning into a global home, a 'home page', a portal to the home. The home is becoming global. But the opposite is just as true – the global is becoming domesticated. As the Vbox7 example shows, although we can now get news from virtually the whole world, we are increasingly interested only in our domestic issues. According to statistics,[24] Vbox7 is a site primarily for home use: the people who use this site at home significantly outnumber those who use it at school or at work. Actually, it is very likely that this video site merely reproduces the general structure of internet access in Bulgaria. The global is being opposed to the homemade. Homemade in terms of content but also in terms of way of use and, last but not least, as an aesthetic of authenticity. A home for its own sake.

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[23] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dwimc4cvUmQ> [accessed 24 November 2010].
[24] Audience Demographics for Vbox7.com Alexa, <http://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/vbox7.com#> [accessed 24 November 2010].

Making Homemade *Rakia* Alone

Making homemade *rakia* alone is the Bulgarian equivalent of bowling alone, as in Robert D. Putnam's groundbreaking book *Bowling Alone* devoted to the decline in all forms of social interaction and the atomization of society in the USA (Putnam 2000). Making *rakia* used to be a collective act in Bulgarian villages, a ritual that involved cosy chatting around the still and reinforced the sense of community. After the bans imposed by the EU, now most village distilling facilities have been closed down and people make *rakia* alone at home. In a way, the situation with the mass media is similar. Back in the past it took whole TV crews to make and broadcast a single video material. Now one person and one web camera at home are more than enough.

Only real men make homemade *rakia*. Only real citizens make amateur videos. And although homemade *rakia* may taste awful, the very fact that it is homemade obliges us to praise it. Similarly, although user-generated videos are often poor-quality, fuzzy and nonsensical, we praise them as an emblem of participatory democracy. If we were to believe folk medicine, homemade *rakia* is a cure-all; if were to believe internet analysts, social network sites are a cure-all for all problems of contemporary society. In both cases there is something true and something exaggerated. In both cases there is something that has nothing to do with the quality of the product – namely, the authenticity of the homemade, of the own. Although in the world of mass consumption this authenticity has always been appreciated, today it enjoys true cult status.

The homemade politics we see on sites like Vbox7 is in a way similar to *rakia*, that beloved Bulgarian symbol. It is not made officially: it is made at home, after stubborn experiments and by trial and error. The materials downloaded from traditional media are thrown into the 'marc' and mixed into all sorts of pastiches and collages. The still has been replaced by the virtual platform where ideas are distilled over and over again until they become stronger. The result is a tasty drink that brings tears to our eyes but also lifts our spirits and intoxicates us. The new media cocktail gives an answer to the key question asked by most Bulgarians when they get drunk: 'Do you respect me?' 'You' was *Time* magazine's Person of the Year 2006. The question is, aren't the new media the glass that gives us the courage to speak out but prevents us from acting? The fact that the new media rarely lead to real-life mobilization in Bulgaria is an alarming indicator in this respect. To paraphrase a catchphrase from a popular Bulgarian song ('Win or lose, we'll get drunk anyway'), win or lose, we'll keep watching Vbox7.

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The Government and EU Affairs in Internet Media Discourse: A Comparative Analysis of Official and Independent Views

Now that Bulgaria has become a member of the European Union (EU), the country faces serious challenges in communicating 'European' values to Bulgarian citizens. A survey of the coverage of official Bulgarian policy on EU affairs in the fastest growing media – online media – can help reveal the extent to which there is a sense of belonging to the EU as a political community.

The purpose of this article is to outline how the policies of the GERB (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria) government on the EU are covered by Bulgarian online media, which I provisionally classify into three groups: positive, neutral, and critical towards the government. I analyze the frequency of news stories with a focus on the EU where a national or supranational stance is announced and interpreted.

My main hypothesis is that in the Bulgarian context of the European public sphere, the coverage of EU issues is relatively independent from the government's official position because of the absence of a consistent communication policy. The analysis also shows that the focus of national interest is on defence of Bulgaria's positions in critical situations, and not on formation of a long-term European vision.

A European Public Sphere: Essence, Main Actors, Types of Europeanization

In the theoretical debates about the existence of a European public sphere, two main views are discernible (Machill, Beiler and Fischer 2006: 61):

- a pan-European public sphere which is independent of individual states;
- a European public sphere which emerges as a result of the Europeanization of the national public spheres.

The prevailing opinions in theoretical literature are in favour of the second view. A European public sphere can emerge when 'in the national public spheres, over time, reporting increasingly focuses on the European decisions and the elites taking the decision'. This will lead to an increase in the reporting of European topics in the national media. Four indicators are frequently cited for the more precise determination of the term 'Europeanization' (Machill, Beiler and Fischer 2006: 63):

- Protagonists in one place in the EU enter into debate with protagonists in other places – this is called 'horizontal Europeanization'. The idea is that the governments of the EU member states must look to the neighbouring states with regard to many of their decisions in order that a compromise is finally reached in Brussels.

- The second indicator assumes that protagonists in different EU states participate in debates on the same topics and agree with regard to the delineation of the problem. This indicator is based on the previous one and it is directed towards the fact that a topic is discussed simultaneously in several EU states, including in their media.

- According to the third indicator, protagonists from EU states enter into debate with protagonists at the EU level – this is called 'vertical Europeanization'. It is encountered when there are communicative links between the national and the European level which are reflected in the respective national reporting.

- In the fourth indicator, protagonists debate uniform aims and the same means from the perspective of the entire EU area.

Since communication at the level of the political community that is under examination in all four indicators takes place mainly via the mass media, these debates can be followed and analyzed on the basis of the content of national media. It is only in the case of the existence of one or more of the above-mentioned indicators in the public sphere that it is possible to talk about Europeanization tendencies.

Bulgarian Public Policies on Europeanization

The public policies implemented by the State to ensure that citizens are pluralistically and widely informed about the EU include involving citizens in decision-making and communicating the benefits and responsibilities of EU

membership. In the Bulgarian context, the only relevant document is the Communication Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria on European Union Accession. It was adopted by the Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha government (in power from 2001 to 2005) for the 2002-2006 period and was extended in 2007-2009 as a Communication Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria for the European Union.

The Communication Strategy was elaborated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Delegation of the European Commission (EC) to Bulgaria, and representatives of various government ministries and NGOs under a project of the Institute for European Studies and Information with the support of the MATRA/KAP Programme. The 2007-2009 Communication Strategy was developed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the basis of an analysis of the experience of EU member states and EC initiatives on the 2005 Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate, and the 2006 White Paper on a European Communication Policy.

A Communication Strategy for the period after 2010 has not been prepared yet. For 2010 there is only a Working Programme on Measures at the International Level with a limited budget of BGN 900 000. Neither has an evaluation of the implementation of the relevant measures been made to date.

The Communication Strategy was developed under three consecutive governments, including that of GERB. It has a national and an international component. With regard to the media, the aim is to ensure possibilities for the provision of balanced and objective information about the EU.

The media are not indicated as an active participant in clarifying the rights and duties stemming from EU membership. The media are an addressee of public policies, and the information about the EU is centralized and limited to the big cities and particular groups of beneficiaries. That is why the focus in the period after 2007 is on regional and new media. The term 'new media' is used to describe

> networked digital information and communication technologies; … those new technologies foster the dissemination of information and diversity of input and make for a more deliberative democracy; … electronic social media create new forms of public, which are physically dispersed but bound by a shared interest in the same topic, with the potential to create new transnational public spheres (Report… 2010: 2).

In implementing the 2007-2009 Communication Strategy, the following means are listed at the national level: direct communication, communication via the

media, work with partners and with NGOs; and at the international level: the internet, information materials, work with foreign media representatives, public diplomacy. The efficiency of the means is measured through public opinion surveys. Although they are public, there is no register of the number of such surveys conducted to date or the topics they were devoted to.

However, to give an idea of the possible media interpretations on EU topics, I will trace the dynamic of the understanding of Europe as a political community in Bulgaria in a relatively short period: 2009-2010. The 'average hierarchical image of Europe' (Nedelcheva 2010: 97-98) consists of:

- Observance of the law;
- Adequate remuneration of labour;
- Administrative order;
- Respect of fundamental human rights;
- High quality of education;
- Encouragement of individual enterprise;
- Environmental protection;
- Respect of minority rights.

According to the Standard Eurobarometer 71 conducted in June-July 2009 on the territory of the EU and candidate countries, Bulgaria was second among the 27 member states in terms of positive image of the EU. The trust of Bulgarians in all national institutions declined in the spring of 2009. According to Eurobarometer 72, in the autumn of 2009 the levels of trust in the EU and European institutions reached a record high (69%) since 2004. According to Eurobarometer 73 carried out in the spring of 2010, a total 30% of the respondents knew their rights as EU citizens, while the rest insisted on more information on the subject.

The Place of New Media in the European Public Sphere

In 2010 the European Parliament adopted a 'Report on journalism and new media – creating a public sphere in Europe', in which it recognizes 'the media's special role as an intermediary in the process of shaping the democratic will and public opinion, the need for reliable political information, including in the area of new media'. In this Report the European Parliament asks 'the Commission, via Eurostat, to monitor EU news broadcasting by public and private service networks in the Member States, at national, regional and local level' (Report… 2010: 1).

In this connection, it is necessary to examine the level of development of online media in Bulgaria as part of the European public sphere – 'a space in which

public policies may be better understood by, and discussed with, all EU citizens and all sections of the population, in all its diversity, with a view to meeting their expectations more effectively' (Report… 2010: 1).

Whereas internet access is still limited in Bulgaria, online communications are developing rapidly. According to the Special Eurobarometer 335: E-Communications Household Survey carried out in November-December 2009, just 37% of all households in Bulgaria had access to a computer, which put the country in one of the last places in the EU. The average household computer access in the EU was twice as high, 64% (Special Eurobarometer 335 2010: 11).

Internet media played a significant role in the parliamentary elections and the vote for a European Parliament in Bulgaria in 2009. As Yulian Popov notes, 'In addition to migrating to the internet, the media are also moving in another direction …: they are increasingly becoming media of headlines, not of content. That is why those who control the headlines also control the media' (Popov 2009).

Although the internet audience in Bulgaria is limited in number, there are interested groups that could become carriers of the sense of belonging to the EU and will follow EU news. For the purpose of this analysis, those who are actively interested in the EU can be identified relatively accurately.

The first target group consists of EU managers and experts who are professionally involved in managing EU affairs and administration. They are carriers of a specific EU culture and jargon. The second active target group is made up of beneficiaries of EU programmes. This group includes experts who are directly involved in such programmes, and know both sides of the process of absorbing EU funds and the mechanisms of their management. The third target group consists of people whose experience and professional development are not directly related to the EU. Young people can be identified as the fourth target group for asserting a European identity (Dronzina 2005: 19-20).

To answer the question of what kind of European news is followed by those interested in the subject, four types of news about Europe can be distinguished (Trenz 2004: 293). According to Hans-Jörg Trenz, the European public sphere is simultaneously a form and a process of mapping the political landscape of Europe. He claims also that visibility of structured communication on European topics is the necessary precondition of the European public sphere.

Trenz introduces the following classification of newspaper articles which take up or push forms of European political communication:

- European articles: articles that discuss European topical issues. According to Trenz, 'The process of selecting and presenting European news does not necessarily lead to convergence of the national media agendas and debates but, at least, assures a minimum degree of information about the EU-policy-process and constitutes a background reality framing a political world that is known and shared among Europeans' (Trenz 2004: 296-297).

- Europeanized articles: articles that discuss national topical issues with reference to one or several European sub-issues. Such articles give evidence of a trend towards the 'domestication' of European issues.

- Articles with a European referential frame: articles which discuss no European issue at all but only include different rhetorical references to Europe. Such articles can contain simple nomination of European events, actors and institutions or the reference to European law (Trenz 2004: 296-297).

Journalists are usually granted 'plenty of professional autonomy' by their editors (Lecheler 2008: 451). To have a viable European public sphere, they ought to be regarded as participants, not as passive mediators of European debates. European institutions and especially the European Commission are the most important sources of information.

Bulgarian Internet Media with a Pronounced Interest in European Topics

The media selected for the purpose of this analysis include media with a pronounced or exclusive interest in European topics. Among them are internet media (www.europe.bg, www.euinside.eu, www.focus-news.bg), online versions of daily newspapers (www.dnevnik.bg, www.segabg.com), the website of the Bulgarian National Radio (www.bnr.bg) and the website of the government press office (www.government.bg).

The attitude of those media towards the government's view on European topics can be classified into three main categories: positive, neutral, and critical. Since in most cases there are tendencies towards switching between those categories, their number can provisionally be increased to five. Three types of articles are to be found in those media: European articles, Europeanized articles, and articles with a European referential frame.

Table 1. Classification of online media according to their attitude towards the government's view on European topics

Positive attitude	Positive to neutral attitude	Neutral attitude	Neutral to critical attitude	Critical attitude
government.bg	bnr.bg	focus-news.bg	europe.bg	euinside.eu
			dnevnik.bg	segabg.com

Those are part of the active internet media in Bulgaria. They represent characteristic trends in the communication of European topics.

Empirical Analysis

Media with a Positive Attitude Towards the Official View on European Topics

In its 'News' and 'In the Media' sections, the website of the government press office (www.government.bg) offers selected information from the media appearances of the prime minister and members of the cabinet. The website presents the official views of the Bulgarian government in summarized form, but it is not an active source of news on the subject. It only reports the government's views as expressed in various media appearances. Most of the items are Europeanized articles.

GERB promised an open dialogue that would improve Bulgaria's image in the EU and lead to public recognition of the benefits and responsibilities of EU membership. Two factors have turned out to pose a serious challenge to the achievement of those goals: the severe economic crisis and the need to 'translate' big politics in Brussels into the language of ordinary citizens. The 'translation' of EU policies which require united action and serious social and financial commitment at the community level has turned out to be indispensable in order to keep public opinion in favour of EU integration.

Although the 'European discourse' of the Bulgarian prime minister and government ministers is politically homogeneous, the messages are delivered in different styles: from strictly expert to clichéd to strongly populist. There is a conspicuous absence of professional advice from PR specialists, but this does not lead to weak presence in the media: 'The total media presence of [Prime Minister Boyko] Borisov and his team in the new government's first year in office is twice as high as that of the red [i.e. Bulgarian Socialist Party] media presence in the last year in office of [the previous government headed by Socialist] prime minister [Sergey] Stanishev' (Daskalova 2010).

The government's communication with Bulgarian citizens does not engage citizens into the major debates of the Community. The government's website does not present positions at the supra-national level, it only offers a positive perspective on Bulgaria's participation in EU policies.

Media with a Positive to Neutral Attitude

The Bulgarian National Radio (BNR) website (www.bnr.bg) offers information from the BNR's three services – Horizont, Hristo Botev, and Radio Bulgaria – about Bulgaria's participation in setting and implementing the EU agenda through a network of correspondents in the capitals of EU member countries and in Brussels. To be able to play their key role in European society in the 21st century, public service broadcasters must '[p]resent a balanced view of society in their programming, reflecting the various interests and viewpoints at the local, national and European levels' (European Broadcasting Union 2005: 40).

The BNR website serves as a source of information for national and regional media as well as online media. Europeanized articles prevail: 'Bulgaria to Demand Recognition of Grape *Rakiya* [Brandy] as a Traditional Bulgarian Drink' (BNR 12 November 2010). Because the BNR is a public service broadcaster, the editors of its website do not take sides on controversial issues. For example, the biased commentaries on Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's visit to Bulgaria were presented through a review of the Russian press: 'Vladimir Putin's Forthcoming Visit to Bulgaria' (BNR 10 November 2010).

The BNR seeks opinions of international experts and officials: 'Europe After the Crisis: Citizens and Politicians Look 10 Years Ahead' (BNR 22 April 2010). Users can also learn about the unofficial Bulgarian position on the crisis, but as expressed only by experts (Prof. Petar-Emil Mitev, Prof. Georgi Karasimeonov, Assoc. Prof. Ognyan Minchev): 'The Crisis in Europe and the Challenges to Bulgaria' (BNR 28 June 2010).

The BNR focuses on Bulgarian success stories: 'Two Bulgarians Are Part of the European Community' (BNR 24 September 2010). The BNR website does not cover public scandals related to Bulgaria's EU membership.

When the situation requires coverage of a controversial issue, the website tends to offer favourable expert opinions and news with a non-judgmental character, as in the following three articles on Rumyana Zheleva's withdrawal as the Bulgarian candidate for EU commissioner: 'Rumyana Zheleva: EU Best Prepared for Fighting Climate Change' (BNR 19 December 2009), 'Hanes Svoboda: The Zheleva Case Wasn't a Political Game' (BNR 19 January 2010), 'Nomination for MEP of the Year' (BNR 13 October 2010).

Media with a Neutral Attitude

The internet news agency Focus (www.focus-news.bg) reports the Bulgarian position on EU policies in brief news items or interviews. Part of the international news is devoted also to supra-national positions. The agency uses different sources of information: official, national, international. All three types of articles – European articles, Europeanized articles, and articles with a European referential frame – are to be found on the agency's website, but Europeanized articles prevail. Articles with a European referential frame are the fewest in number.

In the work of the Focus Agency one can find bias in the selection of news about topics related to the Bulgaria's historical heritage and the Balkans.

Neutrality does not mean lack of a critical attitude, but the latter is presented through a third party. The Focus Agency does not conduct journalistic investigations and avoids publishing own disclosures that could harm Bulgaria's image: '*Kommersant*: South Stream – A European Project? (REVIEW)' (Focus Agency 15 November 2010). At the same time, the agency is open to expert opinions on pan-European topics about which the Bulgarian public wants to hear different points of view: 'Stanimir Ilchev: Bulgarian Higher Education in Long-Term Crisis' (Focus Agency 22 October 2010).

The Focus Agency covers a significant part of the European public sphere. It presents Europe-wide news in brief and reports on the work of Bulgarian institutions on European issues. The agency does not strive to be an active participant in the public sphere; it is only a source, but not an exhaustive one, of information for other internet media: 'European Council Adopts Conclusions of Its Spring Meeting' (Gateway EUROPE citing Focus Agency, 26 March 2010).

Media with a Neutral to Critical Attitude

The online version of the *Dnevnik* national daily (www.dnevnik.bg) has prominent journalists who are specialized in EU affairs, as well as its own correspondent in Brussels. It uses difference sources and also serves as a source of information itself. The editors of *Dnevnik* have a well-developed network of contacts with EU institutions and participate actively in communication campaigns and projects. All three types of articles are to be found in the online version of *Dnevnik*.

Most of the Europeanized articles provide in-depth reports on the positions of the institutions concerned. Emphasis is given to the absorption of EU funds, and economic and energy cooperation. *Dnevnik* has specialized journalists who have

sources outside the official ones: 'EU Funds for 2011 Cut by Half' (*Dnevnik* 20 June 2010). The Bulgarian government's participation in European politics is presented through participation in different forums as well as from the point of view of the *Dnevnik* correspondent in Brussels: 'EC: We're Ready to Help Bulgaria Get EU Funds if It Follows Procedures' (*Dnevnik* 12 November 2010).

Dnevnik is openly critical of the way the government is coping with the European challenges, but it does not criticize anyone directly. It regularly cites critical expert opinions: 'I[nstitute for]M[arket]E[conomics]: Bulgaria Remains Last in EU in Property Protection and Fighting Corruption' (*Dnevnik* 16 November 2010). Official positions and statements are reported as facts: 'Borisov: We're Starting Reforms with Unprecedented Support from Europe. Let Anyone Make a Crisis if They Want to' (*Dnevnik* 21 October 2010).

As regards European articles, *Dnevnik* offers exclusive reviews of different Community policies as well as information about the possibilities for studying and working in the EU, presented in partnership with foreign media.

Gateway EUROPE (www.europe.bg) was created as a project with EU co-financing. It does not have its own correspondents but participates actively in communication projects and campaigns with EU partners and therefore has access to different points of view. The medium also offers detailed reviews of European policies and provides a platform for citizen control. It has a rich library of documents on European topics.

Gateway EUROPE is an active initiator of and participant in European debates. European articles prevail, followed by articles with a European referential frame and Europeanized articles. Bulgaria's positions are reported neutrally, with an accent on their possible influence in Europe: 'Tomislav Donchev: Bulgaria's Coped with Draining of EU Funds' (Gateway EUROPE 4 November 2010). The analytical articles on Bulgaria's positions are also expert in character: 'Bulgaria's Priorities in Common Agricultural Policy Reform' (Gateway EUROPE 16 November 2010). Gateway EUROPE reports extensively on the work of the European Parliament – of the Bulgarian MEPs, of the legislative process. One of its strengths is that it offers different, mostly international, opinions that can serve as a corrective to national actions as well: 'State-Forced Mortgages: Is Bulgaria Violating European Law?' (Gateway EUROPE 11 August 2010).

Gateway EUROPE's critical attitude consists in the provision of sufficient material for comparison and reflection. It offers opinions of MEPs, researchers and, to a lesser extent, of officials – such as those, for example, on the subject of

the Europe 2020 Strategy: 'The Citizen's Vision of EU-2020: Highlights from Brussels and Paris' (Gateway EUROPE 13 May 2010).

Media with a Critical Attitude

The online version of the *Sega* daily (www.segabg.com) reports international and European news in a section called 'Abroad'. It does not have a special sub-section devoted to the EU.

The medium offers Europeanized articles, but in the 'Bulgaria' section. It covers Bulgaria's positions on specific issues as well as positions of EU institutions. The latter are very popular with readers because they provide critical inside information on controversial issues. The European articles and articles with a European referential frame are devoted to highly topical issues.

Sega asks critical questions about concrete cases of Bulgaria's participation in the EU: 'EU to Stop Funds for Bulgaria, Again' (*Sega* 21 June 2010).

Evidence of the medium's critical attitude towards the government is to be found in the choice of headlines: 'State N[ational]P[ublic]O[pinion]Centre Halts [Decline of] Cabinet's Ratings' (*Sega* 16 November 2010) or 'Why Bulgaria's in the EU Remains Big Mystery' (*Sega* 13 July 2010).

The attitude of a new 'independent online medium focused on European politics and Bulgaria's place in it', euinside (www.euinside.eu), can be defined as openly critical. The medium is run by two journalists who used to work in state-owned media. They write Europeanized articles and articles with a European referential frame, whose most distinctive feature is the very critical personal position in interpreting the news.

The choice of headlines clearly shows the medium's attitude towards the government: 'This Inappropriate Bulgarian Absence' (euinside 3 November 2010), 'Country with Monitoring Mechanism: What's "Ticking" in EC Report on Bulgaria' (euinside 21 July 2010). The authors of news that include more than one point of view participate in a dialogue with users in the comments below the texts.

The website is also critical of the state of the Union: 'Energy Solidarity or Energy Dependence?' (euinside 17 September 2010).

The internet medium actively seeks its own place in the information niche mainly with respect to EU affairs and the global scene: 'Beyond G20 Promises'

(euinside 12 November 2010), 'Debunking Green Myths' (euinside 26 April 2010).

Table 2. Frequency of thematic articles by medium

Type of article / Medium	Europeanized articles	European articles	Articles with a European referential frame
government.bg	3	0	0
bnr.bg	3	2	2
focus-news.bg	3	1	1
europe.bg	1	3	2
dnevnik.bg	2	2	1
segabg.com	3	1	1
euinside.eu	2	3	2

Legend: 0 – never; 1 – rare; 2 – occasional; 3 – frequent.

Conclusion

As the analysis of European topics in the reviewed Bulgarian online media shows, there is a process of 'vertical Europeanization'. The presence of this – for the time being, only – indicator is insufficient to mark the beginning of a stable trend towards Europeanization of the public sphere. The European Union is recovering from a severe economic crisis in which the national and the Community levels often diverge as an expression of the interests of citizens. This situation calls for finding a balance between the two types of interests through simultaneous realization of more than one scenarios of Europeanization of the public sphere.

In the Bulgarian context, the government and institutions are engaged in implementing reforms to attain the above-mentioned 'average hierarchical image of Europe'. As long as this situation does not change in terms of real participation in EU policy formation and involvement of citizens in a supra-national debate on the vision for the EU, it seems that the only possible version is that of 'vertical Europeanization'.

Even the European Parliament itself admits that 'there is no overarching European public sphere at present, but … there are very lively national public spheres'. The European Parliament '[t]akes the view that EU news coverage must be provided by all types of media, in particular the mass media' (Report… 2010: 2).

What distinguishes traditional from new media in terms of coverage of EU policies and Bulgaria's participation in them? To begin with, the freedom of the new type of online journalism, the scope and speed of dissemination, the greater mobility of news. Coverage of European topics requires working with multiple sources of information in more than one language, and engagement in pan-European debates. More and more Bulgarian journalists are using the new media and online networks as a source or means of disseminating information because they offer both information and a platform for exchange of opinions.

Websites are increasingly regarded as a natural extension of print media and of traditional broadcast media. New media are successfully catalyzing the process of Europeanization of the public sphere for they can encourage civic debate on issues beyond the narrowly defined national interest.

The strong presence of 'the Government of European development of Bulgaria' (Programa… 2009: 4) in the media is realized in the context of tough national reforms: 'Boyko Borisov: People's Incomes to Grow When We Maximally Absorb EU Funds' (Focus Agency 26 November 2010). Hence, in order to keep the high level of support for the benefits of EU membership it is necessary to give priority to Europeanized articles in all kinds of media – that is to say, materials where the focus is on Bulgaria's position in European politics. The independent new media, however, have a greater potential for specializing in European topics if their audience is interested in the latter. This enables them to more rapidly engage in a supra-national discourse with a wide range of users.

Finally, it is also interesting how pan-European topics enter the Bulgarian media – by way of Bulgarian EU politicians ('Gallup: Kristalina Georgieva, Number One Politician', BNR 14 November 2010) or the threat of sanctions. '[EU Aid Commissioner] Kristalina Georgieva is someone who is not implicated in the heated political debate of the day. This phenomenon has to do with the positive image of [living and working] abroad,' Gallup sociologists note. Bulgarian EU politicians also have a stronger presence in European media than any other Bulgarians. In 2010 one of the most notable examples was related to the choice between Rumyana Zheleva and Kristalina Georgieva as Bulgaria's candidate for EU commissioner. They propelled Bulgaria into the European news, attracting controversial publicity. Such presentations of the Bulgarian view on the EU and vice versa confirm the unique, but still wanting, image of Bulgaria which, despite being a member of the EU, still looks on Europe as a 'foreign country'.

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◼ New Realities: 'Mediatization' of Politics or 'Politicization' of Media Content

This article presents the results of an almost two-year-long monitoring study of Bulgarian news sites via EMM (Europe Media Monitor – http://emm.newsexplorer.eu).[1] In the period between December 2008 and November 2010, the study found stable trends in the generation of online news (reviewed in the first part of this article), which are indicative of the nature of Bulgarian news sites. It also found curious changes in the way news are presented as well as in the degree of interest in the different topics – changes which can be attributed to the changes in the Bulgarian political environment. As the monitoring study focused primarily on the way politics was represented in the context of the July 2009 parliamentary elections in Bulgaria, it was able to identify the change in media representation of politics simultaneously with the change in the political status quo. Some of the theses in this article are also based on data from Market Links, a Bulgarian research and consulting agency which compiled monthly graphic reports with a *Media Index*[2] for the purposes of media monitoring.

We can say with certainty that the contemporary concern about the so-called 'mediatization' of politics is valid in the Bulgarian context too. Following Mazzoleni and Schulz, we can sum up the essence of the mediatization of politics as follows: instead of serving as *mediators* between political institutions and citizens, the media are increasingly becoming a key player in the political arena; indeed, it is impossible to imagine modern politics without the existence and influence of the media (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999). The notion of 'media society' used in this context hints at consequences of political transformations, as do neologisms like 'media democracy', 'electronic democracy' or 'videocracy' (see Mazzoleni 1995). Although they are different, they name one and the same tendency and emphasize the dependency of political action upon

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[1] EMM is an electronic media monitoring system developed by the European Commission's Joint Research Centre. EMM monitors news sites worldwide 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and produces daily news summaries in 19 languages. EMM monitors the following Bulgarian-language news sites: dariknews.bg, netinfo.bg, dnesplus.com, actualno.com, news.ibox.bg, mediapool.bg, dnevnik.bg, capital.bg, novinar.net, segabg.com, topsport.ibox.bg.
[2] The reports are available at <http://www.fmd.bg/?cat=24>.

the media. Some scholars prefer to view the process as being reciprocal – as interdependence of the spheres of politics and the media. Timothy Cook, for example, argues that political news (in the USA) are the result of a 'negotiation of newsworthiness' between journalists and political actors (Cook 1998: 61ff.). In this sense, mediatization is an effect of the clash of two very different and often opposite logics: those of the media and of the political system. And while the media feel the influence of, say, legislation, of pressure from political actors and/or symbiosis with them, the media themselves generate significant changes in political systems by imposing their own discourse upon the communication patterns of political actors. The second part of this article offers an analysis of some of the significant changes in the discourse of Bulgarian politicians as a result of the mediatization of politics in Bulgaria.

Some Aspects of the Nature of Bulgarian News Sites

For the purposes of this study, the daily news summaries in each month of the monitored period were classified into the following categories: Political News, Economic News, Incidents (including crime and court news, and news about natural disasters, accidents and conflicts), International News, and Sports News. Special attention was paid to another category, Top Stories, that is to say, the top story on each day of the month. A very small part of the news summaries (between 1% and 6% per month) fell outside of these categories – they were mostly news summaries offering useful or curious information. International News, Incidents, and Political News made up the largest proportion of news; although they varied in number from month to month, they invariably remained the top three categories.

This classification made it possible to gain an insight into the very nature of Bulgarian online resources. As part of the monitored sites are online versions of print media, the theses expounded below largely describe the nature of the Bulgarian press as a whole.

International News

The analysis of the International News category pointed to several important conclusions. The permanently large number of international news stories attests to the very strong interest of Bulgarian (online) media in foreign political events. The analysis also showed that most of the top stories in the respective months fell into this category. The content analysis demonstrated that the actors and topics in international news stories were identical. The focus was mostly on military, economic and social conflicts or natural disasters in different 'hot' parts of the world. The main actors were key international leaders, followed by

countries like the USA, Pakistan, Israel, Russia and Ukraine as well as sites of military conflicts like the Gaza Strip, Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq. Another micro-conclusion seems important to me as well: the news rarely dealt with Europe. Those that did were mostly news about violent events or weather disasters. Europe and European institutions were rarely mentioned in a political or economic context, and they were represented primarily as a tool for influence and solution of local problems, as a distant mentor, and not as a political partner. One is left with the impression that the Bulgarian (online) media do not see themselves as part of a common European public sphere. The important debates concerning the Community are absent from or rarely present on their pages, unlike European topics that have a national frame of reference. The Bulgarian media (as well as Bulgarian society) still cannot integrate into themselves the European dimension of their identity.

This important trend towards priority publication of news about international events suggests a more general conclusion about the policy of the monitored online media. The very nature of online media is also important – the possibility to constantly update content is their most important characteristic. It is precisely the desire to offer a constant flow of 'fresh news' and, if possible, 'all' news on one website that explains the priority presence of international news. They come above all from external news sources such as international news agencies or other leading foreign media which have correspondents in different 'hot' parts of the world. (This finding implicitly points to the Bulgarian media's limited capacities for generating original news content.) That is also why most news stories are about military conflicts, terrorist attacks, international scandals. This type of news are published instantly in order to serve as a 'testimony' to the occurrence of a given event. The instant publication of news gives users the illusion that they are following events 'live' and, hence, that they are personally involved in and thoroughly informed about them. This is what makes them log on to the website of the respective medium several times a day, while the number of hits on the website is the raison d'être for the existence of the news site.

Incidents or Faits-Divers

The idea of this category is borrowed from Roland Barthes. In his essay 'Structure of the *Fait-Divers*', Barthes describes it as 'total, immanent news'. The *fait-divers* 'contains all its knowledge in itself' and does not require knowledge of the context, a critical gaze, analysis or several points of view in order to consume it. The *fait-divers* suggests that 'this is what life's like' and the new about it 'refers to man, to his history, his alienation, his hallucinations, his dreams, his fears' – to every single person (Barthes 1972: 186).

In the Bulgarian context, the media offer a vast amount of personalized news about incidents or *faits-divers*. The information strategy of Bulgarian news sites stakes on fear, reducing reality to accidents, murders and suicides, shootings, explosions, court cases, allegations of corruption and abuse of office, special police operations and disclosures. The main actors are the prosecution authorities and the court, along with alleged organized crime bosses whose court trials last forever. A morphological analysis of the corpus shows the frequent use of a number of words referring to physical violence: 'killed', 'murder', 'died', 'beaten', 'shot and wounded' 'shot and killed', 'exploded', 'accident', 'crashed', 'stabbed', and so on. They vastly outnumber words which suggest detection of or coping with crime, such as 'arrest', 'detained', 'charged', 'convicted', 'detected', 'caught'. The prosecuting authorities and the court are represented mostly as inefficient institutions: for example, the word 'convicted' occurs much more rarely than the words 'arrested', 'detained', 'detected', 'caught', which refer to functions of the police. In addition to crime news, the pervasive sense of catastrophe is conveyed through news about natural or manmade disasters. When there are no such news, the media pedantically remind users of the anniversaries of such incidents as, for example, the tragedy at the Sofia disco club Indigo in which seven children were trampled to death in a stampede in December 2001, or the fire that broke out on the Sofia-Kardam train in February 2008, killing eight people.

One may say with certainty that crimes, accidents, scandals, conflicts and natural disasters are at the centre of attention of Bulgarian (online) media. In the period under review, incidents often made up the largest category, with almost 50% of all significant domestic news as well as almost 30% of the top stories. On a psychological-social plane, such news can be interpreted as catering for the need of readers for projecting their negative emotions and fears. But viewed from our research perspective, the invariably large number of news in this category points to the processes of tabloidization of Bulgarian (online) media. It is here that one can best see the taste (and aspiration) for sensationalism, the unwillingness to analyze causal relationships as well as the desire to report everything happening not just in social and political life but also in the sphere of private life.

Political News

As noted at the beginning of this article, there were certain changes in the coverage of political news. In the first months of the monitoring study, political news made up the third largest category but they were as many as 10-12% behind the two above-mentioned categories. Despite expectations that the pre-election atmosphere would become increasingly charged, the word 'elections' appeared in the textual corpus only at the end of the second month of the

monitoring study (January 2009). Regardless of the news about in-party shifts and the heated debate on changes in the Bulgarian electoral system and on the law on the conflict of interest, the overall impression was that politics was of significantly less interest to Bulgarian news sites than crime and investigations. The above-mentioned trend towards stronger, permanent interest of Bulgarian media in crime in the first months of the monitored period was also confirmed by the comparison between the frequency of references to political actors and to alleged criminals. Figures from the underworld were often a serious rival of politicians in terms of number of news items and distinct presence. This trend degenerated to the point where the 'mixing' of politicians and criminals occurred outside of the plane of news coverage – in real life during the actual pre-election process when some notorious Bulgarian underworld bosses declared they were considering going into politics. Could the intensive media focus have provided legitimating resources to people like the notorious Galevi Brothers or Zlatomir Ivanov, aka Zlatko Baretata (The Beret), and encouraged them to say publicly that they wanted to go into politics?

In March 2009 the share of domestic political news shot up by 8% and continued to grow, making politics the leading category of news in July 2009, the month of parliamentary elections in Bulgaria. That is also when politics at last found its place among the top stories. The growing media interest in politics came at the expense of coverage of international news and, to a lesser extent, of incidents, while the percentage share of the other categories remained more or less the same. This heightened media interest was all the more symptomatic against the background of two foreign events that received extensive international coverage: the earthquake in Italy and the swine flu epidemic.

Although they kept their increased share, from July 2009 to the end of the period under review political news stories became increasingly intertwined with the news classified in the Incidents category; in fact, a significant part of the political news could be classified into both categories. Almost a year before the spectacular police operations against alleged organized crime bosses took over the TV screen and the minds of the electorate, Bulgarian (online) media gave priority to crime news involving political actors – active or candidate-politicians. News stories about vote-buying, indictees running for parliament, allegations of bribery and abuse of office against government ministers and municipal councillors largely replaced coverage of election campaign messages and events. Even after the elections, what was to be found in the Bulgarian media sphere was less heightened politicization than heightened criminalization. This trend strengthened the general impression of negative campaigning and negative media coverage of politics in general. This is something for which the media are often held responsible as they are thought to contribute to voter apathy, political disaffection and cynicism among citizens (Pinkleton et al.

1998). On the other hand, it is true that the attitude of Bulgarian media reflects the prevalent public suspicions of widespread abuse of power and influence on the part of Bulgarian politicians and distrust of the political elite since the beginning of the transition.

After the elections, we witnessed a curious symbiosis between media and politicians. The expectations that media attention would again shift away from political issues and back to incidents and international conflicts did not come true. Something much more curious happened: political discourse kept its appeal and demonstrated an inexhaustible potential for attracting media attention. With the change of government, media logic completely took over the political process, and the media agenda changed significantly.

The Effects of Mediatization

The term *media logic* was introduced by Altheide and Snow (1979) to describe the (powerful) impact of the media on contemporary society. 'Media logic consists of a form of communication; the process through which media present and transmit information [to their audiences]… how material is organized, the style in which it is presented, the focus or emphasis on particular characteristics of behaviour, and the grammar of media communication' (Altheide and Snow 1979: 10). With regard to coverage of political affairs, this means that the decision as to what to report in the news is ever more autonomously being taken by the media themselves according to their own criteria. Media logic is the driving force of the process of mediatization of politics. Mediatization is precisely a process – not a final state – which is implicit in the relationship between politics and the media (Strömbäck 2008). According to Mazzoleni and Schulz, the process of mediatization of political actors, political events and political discourse is a major trend in western democratic political systems from the 1990s onwards. 'It is a phenomenon that dates back at least to the introduction of television, but it has certainly gained speed with the expansion and commercialization of media systems and the modernization of politics. The term *mediatization* denotes problematic concomitants or consequences of the development of modern mass media' (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999: 249). 'Mediatized politics is politics that has lost its autonomy, has become dependent in its central functions on mass media, and is continuously shaped by interactions with mass media.' (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999: 250) In short, politicians take the media logic into account and adjust their behaviour and decisions to it:

> [T]he language of politics has been married with that of advertising, public relations, and show business. What is newsworthy, what hits the headlines, what counts in the public sphere or in the election campaign are

communication skills, the style of addressing the public, the "look," the image, even the special effects: All are typical features of the language of commercial media. (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999: 251)

From a political communication perspective, media logic impacts upon political institutions in various ways: individuals (candidates, politicians, leaders) become more important than parties; attention shifts from local, regional issues to national (and global) issues; the news values influence the actions of political actors; especially during elections, running and winning at any cost become much more important than the debate on public issues. Thus formulated, the hypothesis of mediatization is based on a study of political content in the media and their influence on the political process.

Who Influences Whom?

The power of the media is in that they construct the public sphere where political protagonists on the media stage act in front of mostly passive audiences that are consumers of politics; that is to say, it is left to the media to decide who will be presented/shown, and hence, who will get access to those audiences. In the same way that the media select and frame the events that will be shown, the media do not simply select which actors will receive attention but also how they will actually look, thus framing their public images. A second aspect of the influence of the media concerns their agenda-building and agenda-setting functions. By giving attention to particular actors, the media increase those actors' status. In the same way, the media assign political relevance and importance to particular social problems by selecting and emphasizing certain issues and neglecting others.

It cannot be denied, however, that 'the media also benefit from such transactions since they make politics more newsworthy and conveniently formatted' (Schulz 2004: 89-90). The theatricalization of political events has been a characteristic feature of politics for centuries. Today, in the era of mass communications, in a context where the media are driven primarily by commercial imperatives, the theatrical dimension of politics takes the form of a spectacle that follows the rules of show business. In this spectacle the communication tools of candidates are attractive image-building, sensationalism, seduction, conflict.

At least three political parties in Bulgaria (Ataka, GERB and RZS) emerged as a structure centred around their attractive leaders who seduced their electorates primarily through the media. The three parties in question won the trust of their electorates after their leaders had 'seduced' the public from the TV screen. They cleverly took advantage of the high news value of conflicts – as we know, 'the

more bellicose politicians make it into the news, at the expense of the more conciliatory ones' (van Aelst et al. 2008: 198).

That is how RZS (Order, Law and Justice) leader Yane Yanev rose to prominence in the period under review. In-between his 'sensational disclosures' of alleged compromising materials against people in power, Yanev succeeded in gradually building a parliamentary group and, later, a political party of his own. It is precisely his ability to attract and keep media attention that made him a key player on the Bulgarian political scene. In a short time, he became the fourth most often mentioned politician in the news after GERB (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria) leader and now Prime Minister Boyko Borisov, Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) leader and former Prime Minister Sergey Stanishev, and President Georgi Parvanov. Although it was a new and small political party, the RZS succeeded in becoming a generator of news and largely left the impression that it was precisely a media product (as was its leader). Almost all activities of Yane Yanev's political party were stories that were created in order to be reported. The analysis of the news, especially in June 2009, clearly showed a clever staging of pseudo-events with the aim of getting into the news. The stories around the RZS and its leader were created according to the *fait-divers* principle: short-lived, sensational, seductive, promising surprise and unexpected twists and turns. Such activities strengthened the image of the new party and got it into parliament, while Yanev has remained one of the favourite subjects of Bulgarian media to this very day.

The complete convergence of media and politics could be seen in the construction of the media image of the present Prime Minister, Boyko Borisov. The monitoring study found that the charismatic Boyko Borisov had a significant presence in Bulgarian online media too. The spotlight of media attention also turned on some of his fellow party members, who even came to rival his popularity with the electorate. After the elections, the variety of political topics and opposition political actors gradually gave way to conformist coverage of the new political reality. The media's desire to capture and report even the slightest shift in power was cleverly used by the new power-holders. It was politics that began to shape the agenda of the media, rather than vice versa. From September 2009 onwards we witnessed the rehabilitation of politics as a daily activity involving actual decision-taking, and an attempt to turn politics into a transparent process. Generally, doing politics is regarded as a 'dirty', and above all, a behind-the-scenes 'game'. But the new power-holders made public every step related to the taking and implementation of government decisions: Council of Ministers meetings are now recorded and the transcripts are published on the government's website, MPs who are absent from parliament or let someone else vote with their voting card in parliament are reported to the public, and so on. Even the everyday lives of some politicians, and especially of

Prime Minister Borisov, are made public: we know (from the media) at what time the prime minister wakes up and goes to work, whom he speaks with at 3 am, when he plays football, and so on. This confirms the suspicion that we had lived until now in years of rampant corruption and shady deals behind the back of the public, and that the doing of politics behind-the-scenes must be overcome through accurate reporting of the facts in political life 'such as they are'. We saw how the media were seduced to readily take part in the realization of this process.

It is true that the new Bulgarian politicians initially won the attention of journalists with their awkwardness and incapacity to take part in political dialogue, producing inappropriate or mutually contradictory statements. But we may suspect that this behaviour was deliberate as it guaranteed the government wide access to publicity where even the government's most drastic measures gradually came to be seen as acceptable. The new government cleverly used the public's thirst for transparency to put unpopular measures on the Bulgarian public agenda. The reports about such measures, parallel with the incessant flow of 'sensational' disclosures about the 'shady dealings' of the previous government, still generate universal approval and support. This parallel also serves as an excuse for every possible failure, drastic shortage of funds or punitive procedure against Bulgaria. The suspicion that the government itself is making deliberate efforts to get its proposals or actions into the news is confirmed by the consciously mediatized actions of some government ministers (such as Finance Minister Simeon Djankov's presentation of the 2010 State Budget as a 'small, meatless, but well-apportioned pizza' or Interior Minister Tsvetan Tsvetanov's spectacular police operations against alleged crime bosses). The problem is that the Bulgarian media have readily accepted to serve as media that merely 'report' the government's each and every move to the public and often reprint materials in which European and other international institutions declare their approval of or trust in the Bulgarian government. As a result, at the beginning of the Borisov government's term in office there were almost no critical headlines in the media. Later, the monitoring study found the following paradox: what was often expressed in materials was a positive attitude towards Boyko Borisov and Tsevan Tsvetanov, and a neutral, tending towards positive, attitude towards Simeon Djankov, but a negative (albeit moderately negative) attitude towards the GERB government. This paradox can be explained with the conformism of the Bulgarian media which are obviously not afraid to exercise their critical energy when the latter is not directed at a concrete responsible political actor but are quite reluctant to direct it at the power-holders. Actually, the critical energy in Bulgarian society itself is just as weak.

In fact, this massive coverage of the government's each and every move has substituted the public agenda as the corpus of news in the monitored period

contains mostly insignificant news and news that diverted public attention from the main issues in Bulgaria. The huge amount of press releases and statements from the Government Press Office suggested two things: intensive work and expert skills in every field. Moreover, they suggested that Prime Minister Borisov was everywhere, that he was concerned about the problems of every citizen and acted with a 'strong arm' in response to public expectations. The rest of the news confirmed the suspicion that the new government needed an enemy to deflect the critical energy and public disapproval. Whereas the enemy took on different personified forms (Ahmed Dogan, Sergey Stanishev, Georgi Parvanov, Alexey Petrov), it has remained key in the political rhetoric primarily of Borisov and Tsvetanov to this very day. These observations directly attest to the substitution of the agenda and influence of the government over the media. One can also observe here the effect of the conflict between media logic and party logic.

Media Logic vs. Party Logic

The media system is inclined to be biased in favour of and loyal to the government. It is not that journalists demonstrate a bias in favour of particular political parties (this can be observed in Bulgaria, but not on the basis of the data analyzed here) but that they respect them as initiators of political news (van Aelst et al. 2008: 196). A number of scholars think that the perception of who holds political power is crucial for who will be highlighted in the news. Since the words and actions of the members of the government have a direct impact on the life of readers (viewers, listeners), they are more likely to be reported. Furthermore, politicians in government are often perceived as a solid source of information. The government does not simply make news, it has a monopoly on the official version of the facts. Hence, one may 'expect members of government to receive a *bonus* in the distribution of media attention' (van Aelst et al. 2008: 198).

This was to be seen with amazing clarity after the election victory of Boyko Borisov and his GERB party (the above analysis of data proves it, as does the disappearance of opposition rhetoric in the corpus of news). However, proof of this thesis is also to be found in the earlier period of monitoring, when the previous, three-party-coalition, government was in power. Month after month, the micro-analyses stressed the presence of the three ruling parties in news that were not newsworthy from the point of view of media logic (Kutseva 2009a, 2009b, 2009c).

The Bulgarian media's gravitation around the powerful of the day was also indicated by the fact that they reported the pre-election moves only of those political parties that had a chance – at least according to the opinion polls – of

entering parliament. In giving attention to the candidates for parliament, the Bulgarian media were governed by a party logic according to which the presence of political parties in the news is proportionate to their electoral strength. Traditionally, the BSP, GERB, NDSV (National Movement for Stability and Progress) and DPS (Movement for Rights and Freedoms) were most often in the news without having done anything that was particularly newsworthy. Only the difficult formation of a coalition between the SDS (Union of Democratic Forces) and DSB (Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria), which attracted media attention primarily because it involved an explicit conflict, followed a media logic.

It is curious to mention what at first sight appeared to be a major contradiction: the media permanently neglected the nationalist political party Ataka and its leader, Volen Siderov. However, we should keep in mind that Siderov, a journalist by profession, has a serious media background and that Ataka, too, tends to be a media product, even if it is not a product of the commercial media. Volen Siderov's schizoid-populist style failed (or maybe did not aim) to seduce the mainstream media. Siderov, however, had at his disposal a television channel (he had a quite popular talk show on Bulgarian cable TV channel Skat) and, later, a party newspaper (*Ataka*, his party's official daily) which secured him wide electoral support seemingly without media visibility.

Negativization of Political Messages

As Jesper Strömbäck points out, 'conflict and personalization are among the important storytelling techniques that the media prefer when choosing what and how to cover politics.' Knowing this, political actors 'will construct events that include a focus on these aspects, which in turn leads to a political world in which conflicts and personalities become more important' (Strömbäck 2008: 238).

This relationship was confirmed by the study of political news in Bulgarian (online) media. The monthly monitoring studies found a dominant presence of negative political messages and frequent negative representation of politicians. The actual election campaign programmes remained on the fringes of attention not just of the media but also of the parties. The data proved that media attention towards politics was attracted primarily by political scandals, and that the political struggle itself was reduced to disclosures of compromising materials against political opponents. The news showed an acute shortage of real and meaningful political messages and projects about the future. What took place was not a true clash of ideas but only a clash between separate individuals, characterized by aggressive rhetoric and often misleading arguments. The indirect political debate between the two main political opponents, Sergey

Stanishev and Boyko Borisov, was symptomatic. Throughout the election campaign, the contest between them took place exclusively in the sphere of the media, where the exchange of mutual accusations secured their presence in the news. They ultimately failed to formulate a clear and realistic political platform proposing a reliable way out of the global economic crisis that was at its height at the time.

Personalization

As noted above, the media personalize political action. Social problems, causes or party values become visible through personalization. Media narratives prefer stories where the characters are real people with a peculiar temperament, with their own ideas and views – preferably controversial ones. The winners here are political actors with a distinct individual profile and significant communication skills who readily become generators of news. It must be noted that this media logic also performs a cognitive function – it reduces the complexity of political discourse. This is a specific form of reduction that reduces what is difficult to comprehend to something comprehensible in an affective way (see Marshall 1997: Part III). In other words, it is a simplification of the idea of politics.

The individualization/personalization of politics weakens the traditional model of party-oriented politics. According to Mancini and Swanson,

> The voter's choice depends increasingly upon the voter's relationship with the individual candidate. This relationship replaces traditional ideological and fiduciary bonds between voters and the party apparatus. As a result, the party is weakened as a symbolic and as an organizing structure. … At the same time, charismatic figures of leaders built up by the mass media system replace the symbolic links previously assured by the political parties. (Mancini and Swanson 1996: 14)

The overall impression of the way political news are reported in the Bulgarian media as well as Market Links data for April-June and July-October 2010[3] unequivocally confirm the thesis that we are witnessing an increasingly explicit process of 'personalization' of politics in Bulgaria, too. The media are the battlefield where we are witnessing a battle between different actors who see each other as opponents in the political process, but not a battle between parties and ideological platforms. Against this background, the parties themselves have less and less weight in policymaking. The focus in the news is on individual politicians and parties are mentioned mostly to specify the respective politicians' political affiliation or line of behaviour. Personal names are used in the headlines much more frequently than the names of parties.

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[3] See <http://www.fmd.bg/?p=5679>.

The Soundbite Effect

The frequent use of personal names also marks another effect of the mediatization of politics: the phenomenon of soundbites. Politicians have simplified their discourse, turning it into almost a cliché in order to respond to the peculiar patterns of news reporting (Jones 1995). The data show that the names of politicians appear in news headlines precisely when the media are quoting someone's soundbite. This creates the feeling that the political messages are elementary and that politics does not need in-depth analysis of facts and issues. Precisely such a deficit was constantly observed in the course of the monitoring study.

Mediatization or Politicization

The findings noted above clearly attest to strong two-way influences between the sphere of politics and the sphere of media in Bulgaria. The question of whose influence is stronger and whether it is erosive for democratic culture is not unambiguous and cannot be given an immediate answer.

The politicization of Bulgarian media content remained a stable trend throughout 2010. The new government left a strong imprint on the Bulgarian media agenda, massively increasing the news value of news about, say, the inauguration of newly built roads. The media image of Prime Minister Boyko Borisov was fleshed out and expanded to the point where it filled the entire media sphere. Reporters were relegated to serving as his most loyal entourage with whom he felt free to chat on first-name terms and, in some cases, even to be angry with or scold them: take, for example, his statement to Nova Television reporter Maria Tsantsarova, 'You know very well you're the last person on earth I'll answer…'; or the live programme on Bulgarian National Television where he admonished the presenters for giving priority to the news about President Georgi Parvanov while inviting Borisov to merely comment by phone, and told them, 'You could have invited me [to appear] in the studio!' Politics itself began to be done directly, on air. We are witnessing how government ministers and the prime minister voice their stance on particular issues for the first time on the radio or television, where decisions are also taken as to political issues/appointments/dismissals (Minister of Economy, Energy and Tourism Traicho Traikov, for example, is often the last person to learn from the media about otherwise strategic decisions of Borisov concerning major energy projects that are within Traikov's remit – as in the case of Borisov's decision that Bulgaria would withdraw from the Burgas-Alexandroupolis oil pipeline project). The media are used as a technical tool for access to publicity and, at the same time, as a source of power that legitimates the government's decisions. Instead of being discussed in parliament, actual policies are just formally approved by the latter ex post.

The effects of media influence upon political culture have already been discussed above: personalization, negativization of messages, speaking in soundbites, and so on. However, another thing is worth noting as well. The Bulgarian media themselves felt their power and began experimenting with it. It was precisely the Bulgarian journalistic community that advanced the thesis that the Borisov government was the first Bulgarian government to change its decisions according to the front pages of the newspapers (Venelina Gocheva, *24 Chasa*). To my mind, this proposition is a dangerous, publicly declared assertion of the 'feedback' between the media and the government. It is a fact that some key figures from GERB were dismissed from office after media reports that tarnished their reputation (as, for example, in the case of Lachezar Ivanov, who had to resign as vice-president of parliament and vice-chief of GERB's Sofia headquarters after he was accused by a journalist of trying to prevent the broadcasting of her investigative report depicting the luxurious lifestyle of six Bulgarian customs officers because he had 'friendly relations' with one of them). In a recent case, journalists ventured to 'trick' and discredit MPs with a false invitation and promise of an expensive gift. In all likelihood, such provocations will continue.

It is difficult to say how much further the effects of the excessive interdependence of media and government may go. As long as politics is interesting and popular, the media that cover it will also be popular with and in demand from the public. And as long as the media are a convenient stage, political opponents will challenge each other to virtual duels and compare each other's ratings after participating in TV morning shows. The present media-political symbiosis in fact 'trivializes' the perception of politics and promotes superficial and populist decisions. Still, the lacks of a government, especially the lack of administrative capacity, cannot be made up for through the media and public rhetoric. Yet without true pluralism and freedom from dependences on the part of the mass media, democratic access to publicity of alternative points of view and policies cannot be guaranteed.

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News Value of Political Actors

The relationship between media and politics is complex, multifaceted and often difficult to pin down. This article examines one aspect of this relationship: the presence of political actors in the news. It focuses on recent developments in the Bulgarian public sphere, analyzing Bulgarian news sites. The study is based on primary data gathered via NewsExplorer, an application of the Europe Media Monitor (EMM) system.[1] The EMM-generated daily lists of the most often mentioned people on Bulgarian news sites were analyzed systematically over two years (from December 2008 to November 2010). The secondary processing of data included calculating aggregate monthly news ratings of the mentioned names, classifying them into categories, and calculating percentage shares on a monthly basis. The structure of the thus generated monthly data about the people most often mentioned in the news was further examined. The identified changes and trends over time were complemented by data from the monitoring of Bulgarian national dailies conducted by Market Links, a Bulgarian research and consulting agency.[2]

This research approach to the media environment has two distinguishing features. Firstly, it allows covering a large section of the news domain and hence of consensual news policies of prioritizing political actors. If we paraphrase McCombs and Show, who refer to 'the media's composite definition of *what* is important [emphasis added]' (McCombs and Show 1995 (1972): 160), this article examines the news flows' composite definition of *who* is important in the context of the Bulgarian public sphere. Secondly, media processes are viewed within the strict framework of statistically identified trends. The theses expounded below are based on an in-depth analysis of the generated data.

What does the monitoring show?

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[1] EMM is an electronic media monitoring system developed by the European Commission's Joint Research Centre. The EMM system automatically extracts and analyzes information from news portals around the world in near real time. The NewsExplorer application generates daily news summaries in 19 languages, allowing users to see the major news stories (news clusters) and the people, organizations and locations most often mentioned in the news. The news summaries can be filtered by language and country.
See <http://emm.newsexplorer.eu/NewsExplorer/home/en/latest.html>.
[2] See Appendix, *Media Index: Media Monitoring*.

Priority of Politicians

Bulgarian news sites give priority coverage to politicians. In the monitored period an average 52% of the monthly data about the names most often mentioned in the news were names of Bulgarian and international politicians. Of the remaining 48%, most were those of sports people, followed by those listed in the 'crime' and 'show business/arts' categories, and other occasionally found marginal categories such as 'historical figures', 'science', 'religion', 'media' and 'civic organizations'. Another categorical indicator of the priority given to political actors by Bulgarian news sites is the frequency of mention. The individual monthly ratings of the names most often mentioned in the news were invariably topped by politicians.

The dominant presence of politicians in the news is hardly surprising. This finding is entirely in line with the oft-noted tendency of journalism to give priority to news about 'high' politics. In media practices of selecting newsworthy events, priority is given to stories about the economy, government politics, industry and business, foreign affairs and domestic affairs (Hartley 2002: 166). In this sense, the observed tendency towards priority coverage of political actors in the news is by no means a specific Bulgarian phenomenon. A comparative study of eight European news sites (British, German, Russian and French) offering 'quality' journalism also found that political actors play a central role in the online news (Quandt 2006: 12). It is curious, however, that whereas in the Bulgarian context political actors have a relative share of more than 50%, the average share of politicians on European new sites is just 22.4% (Quandt 2006: 12).[3] If we assume that the established politicization of news sites is a formal indicator of quality journalism and hard news, could we claim that Bulgarian news is becoming 'too hard'? Part of the answer is to be found in the analysis of topics in Bulgarian online news. The relevant findings (again made with the help of EMM) show that the main topics are less politicized (as compared with the politicization of the main actors), and that there is competition for media coverage between politics and incidents as well as an intertwinement of politicization and criminalization (Kutseva 2011). It turns out that the formal 'hardness' of news as manifested in the dominance of political actors is offset by news about 'softer' topics.

News and Politics: Main Dependences

The July 2009 parliamentary elections in Bulgaria marked a turning point in the study. The change in the political status quo led to serious shifts in the news

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[3] As the cited study used a different algorithm, here the comparison of percentage shares serves only as an illustration of general trends.

value of political actors. The trends that emerged after the elections continued throughout 2010. Hence, the important comparisons here are not between the calendar years but between the periods before and after the elections. The key indicator is the changes in the coverage of politicians grouped by party affiliation. The study identified two main phenomena: direct dependence between power positions and news value; increased but short-lived presence of secondary political actors in the news during the election campaign.
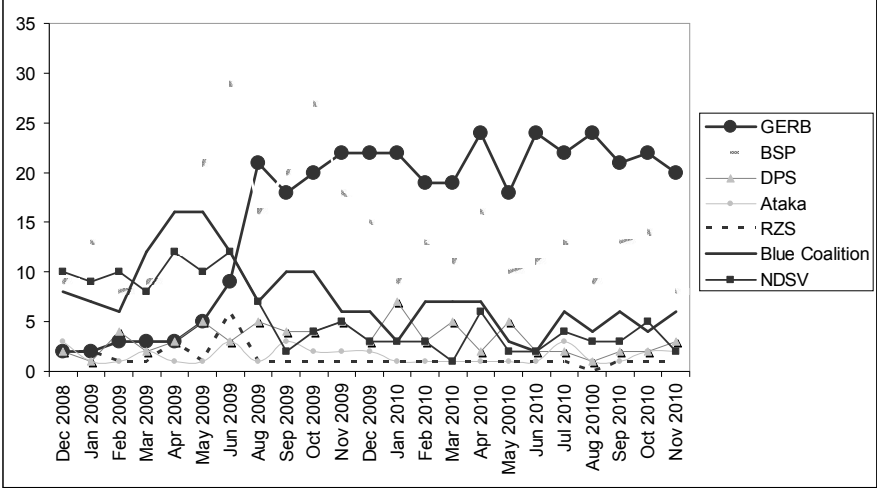

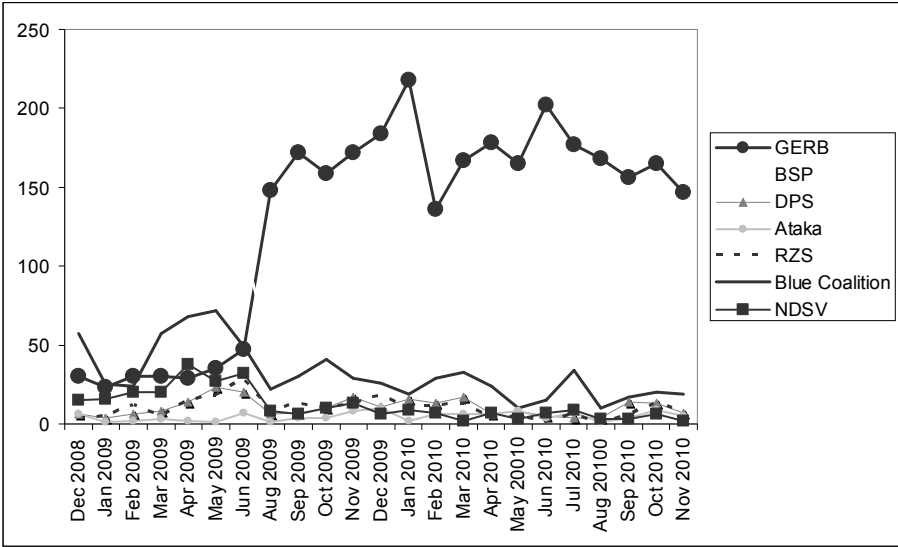Figure 1. Political actors in the news: number of persons by party affiliation.[4]

Figure 2. Political actors in the news: total frequency of mention by party affiliation.

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[4] In this and all subsequent figures, the persons from the SDS (Union of Democratic Forces) and the DSB (Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria) are represented under the name Blue Coalition for the entire period of the study, which includes the months before March 2009, when the two parties officially formed the Blue Coalition. This makes it impossible to distinguish some of the nuances of media coverage in December 2008, and January and February 2009.

The new political reality radically changed the place of former and incumbent power-holders in the news (figures 1 and 2). The fall of the BSP (Bulgarian Socialist Party) from power and the rise of GERB (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria) was reflected by their presence on the media scene. News interest in the representatives of political parties proved to be a function of their position in power. This shift of media attention from the old to the new power-holders was logical, considering that part of the civic and democratic role of the media is to serve as a watchdog over those in power. The data, however, also show another specific tendency: a growing difference in the frequency of coverage of the government and the opposition. This was due also to the fact that frequency of coverage is directly related to the phases in the lifecycle of the respective governments. The fall of the old government corresponds to a comparatively more balanced media interest in political parties, whilst a newly formed government tends to be given excessive media coverage.

The dependence between the lifecycle in office and the news value of political actors is, in essence, also a dependence of the media upon the dominant public attitudes. This formula of following public opinion can be interpreted as formal media populism. On the one hand, the media strongly gravitate towards the new government in line with the electoral wave of approval. In this case, the gap between news coverage of the government and of the opposition widens, and this is also a form of structural silencing of the opposition. But when public trust in the government hits a low point, as has been the case towards the end of the term in office of all Bulgarian governments since the beginning of the transition in 1989,[5] media interest in the political opposition grows, and the media give more room to the voices of the opposition and, on the whole, promote political polyphony to a larger extent.

In the monitored period, political differences and diversity escalated precisely when public trust was at its lowest, in the months around the parliamentary elections and the change of government. In this process, secondary political actors attracted heightened but short-lived media interest – their overall news ratings rose on the eve of the elections, only to drop again after the elections. One of the reasons for this is to be found in the behaviour of politicians and parties themselves – they mobilize their resources for greater public visibility precisely when the need for winning public approval is most immediate. The alternating of low-profile and high-profile positions in the news is not unproblematic. Such a game-like representation in the news makes the political process itself look like a game where some political figures flit in and out of public sight but are eventually voted into parliament.

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[5] This is not the case with the terms in office of Bulgaria's presidents, but here we are discussing the lifecycle of the parliament and the executive branch of government.

News Ratings of Politicians: Ups and Downs

The data on the media presence of individual Bulgarian politicians reveal interesting additional aspects of the public game. Figures 3, 4 and 5 show the changes in the monthly presence of the politicians who were most often mentioned in the news in the surveyed period. The charts feature the top five most mentioned political actors in the respective months (by number of days).
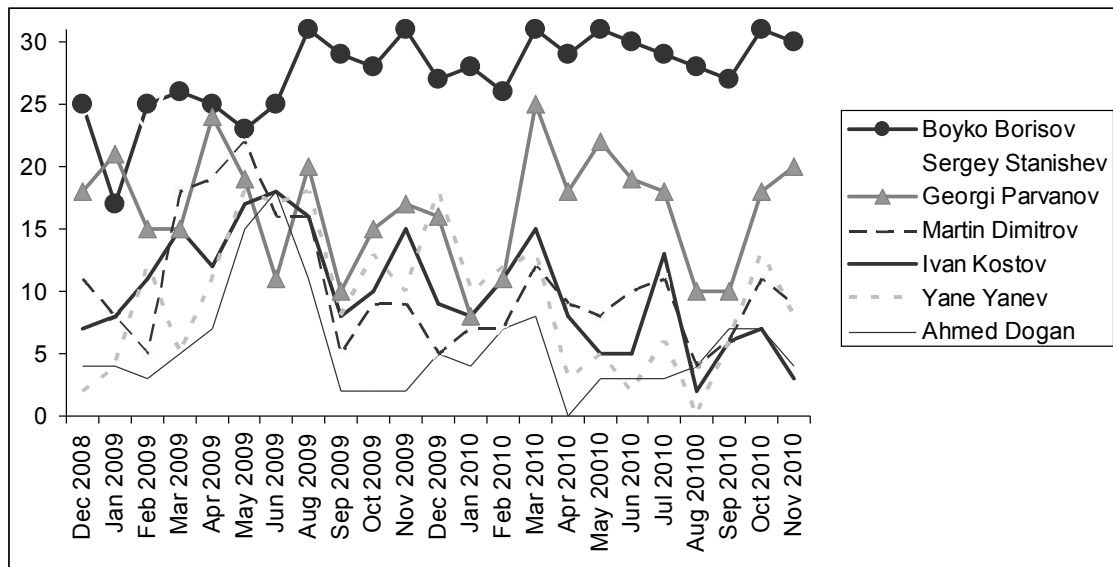
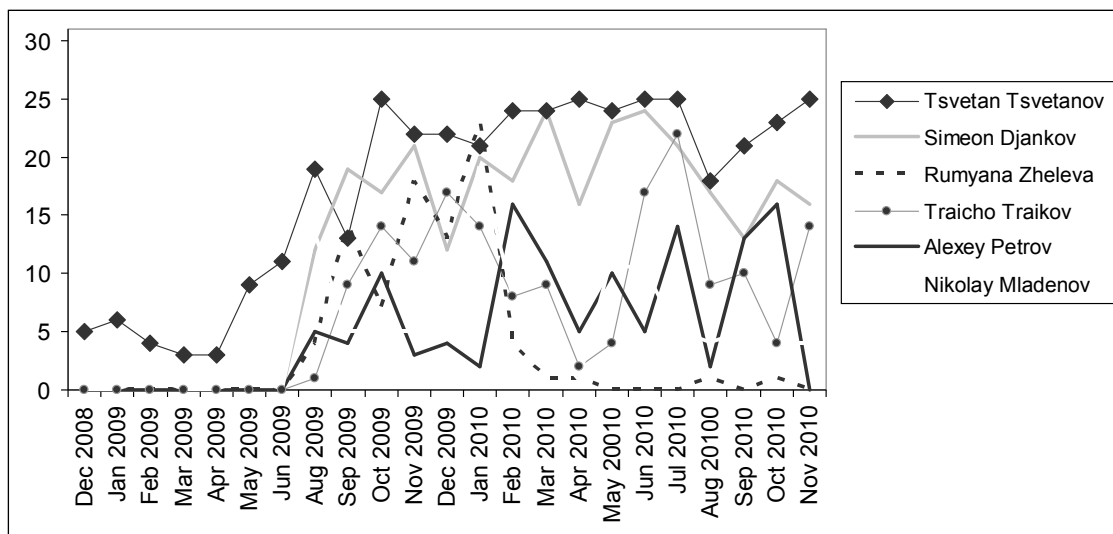Figure 3. Politicians most often mentioned in the news (1).

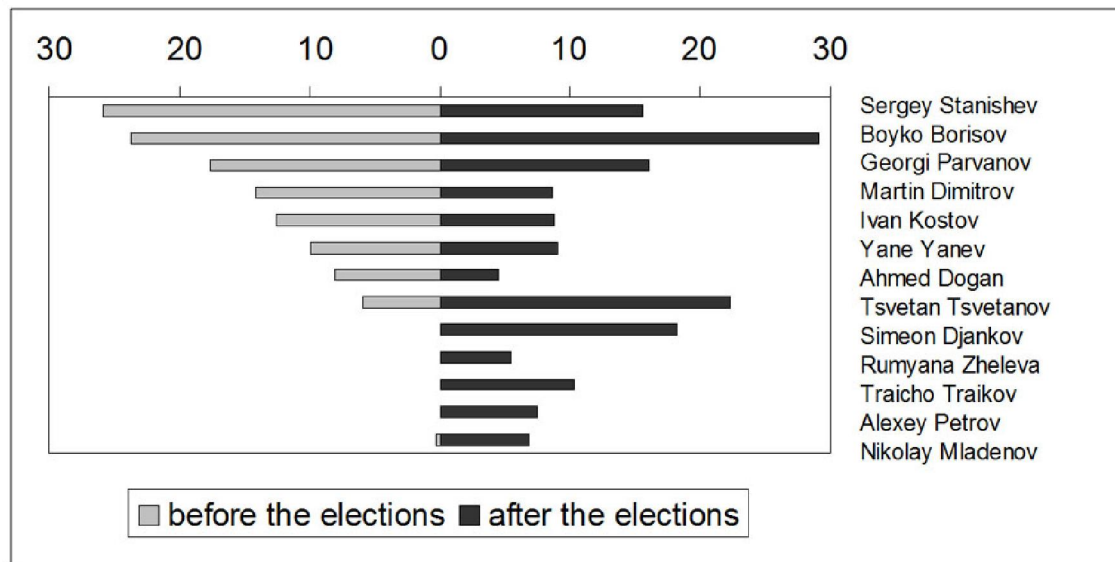Figure 4. Politicians most often mentioned in the news (2).

Figure 5. Politicians most often mentioned in the news: average monthly presence before and after the elections.

What is characteristic of this constellation of 'top' figures? The political actors can be generally classified into two groups. Figure 3 shows those who figured prominently in the news before the elections, and Figure 4 those who rose to prominence after the elections. It is noteworthy that the first group actually consists of the politicians who were successful in the elections – the leaders whose parties cleared the electoral threshold (4%) needed to enter parliament. Once again, media interest coincided with voter interest. With one specific exception: the leader of the fourth largest political force in parliament, Volen Siderov. In the course of the surveyed period, the leader of the far-right, nationalist Ataka party was rarely mentioned in the online news. Siderov's marginal position, however, was successfully offset by the extreme niche coverage accorded to him by his party's daily (and website) of the same name, *Ataka*, as well as by the comparatively stable interest of the Bulgarian national dailies in him (Market Links 2009).

As for the second group of political actors, their main characteristic is that they were virtually absent from the news before they shot to prominence on the political scene (figures 4 and 5). With the exception of Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister Tsvetan Tsvetanov and Foreign Minister Nikolay Mladenov, the top names in the new government entered government and the top news without any media track record, be it positive or negative. Moreover, the lack of previous popularity is a distinguishing characteristic of the majority of people from the ruling GERB party. As a whole, GERB's candidates both for the European Parliament (the elections for which were held in June 2009) and the Bulgarian parliament won categorical public support even though they remained invisible in the media at the time (see the illustrations of the

conspicuous absence of the GERB candidates for MEPs in the news in Daskalova 2009b).

The prerequisites for the thus created 'GERB phenomenon' inevitably point to the 'Boyko Borisov phenomenon'. One may say that the model of media behaviour of the present government emerged as a model of contrasts. On the one side was the excessively publicized GERB leader Boyko Borisov, with high media and public ratings consistently accrued over the years; and on the other, the unknown multitude of newcomer party activists. The former, with constant positions at the centre of media interest, with a political career as former chief secretary of the Interior Ministry and mayor of Sofia. The latter, with no news record. In-between those two polar positions on the media scene was Tsvetan Tsvetanov, the formal leader of GERB before the elections, but before he became deputy PM and interior minister he was much more in the position of a supernumerary in the shadow of Borisov than in the role of media protagonist. Ultimately, Borisov's popularity and personal qualities benefited the entire GERB party. Borisov's larger-than-life media image[6] proved to be the most successful capital investment in the election campaign – a stronger news 'currency' than paid political advertising (cf. data in GARB 2009).

The contrasts between the leader and those around him, between the person and the party, acquired new dimensions after GERB's election victory. From quantitative, they became qualitative. In 2010 the GERB government and party topped the ratings of institutions most often mentioned in the national dailies (with 11 018 and 3575 news items respectively), parallel with Prime Minister Borisov's top position among the most mentioned persons (6625 news items).[7] At the same time, however, the attitude towards the prime minister and the GERB government/party expressed in the press turned out to be diametrically opposite: increasingly positive towards the prime minister and distinctly negative towards his government and party. This internally disproportionate media criticism, the radical split in the attitude towards one and the same meta-political actor, may be interpreted as a specific, schizophrenic 'media comfort' accorded to the prime minister.

As a whole, the quantitative and qualitative data from the analysis of the Bulgarian media environment in the last two years contain eloquent examples of media favouritism towards the prime minister. In the first place, Borisov is in himself a powerful centre of media attention without this necessarily being warranted by the positions he holds as a politician. The interest in him as an

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[6] The Media Monitoring Lab (MML) project has analyzed in detail the various aspects of Borisov's public image. See MML micro-analyses and expert analyses on the Foundation Media Democracy website at http://www.fmd.bg/ (in Bulgarian).
[7] Here and below, the cited quantitative and qualitative data on the coverage of political actors in the Bulgarian national dailies are from the Market Links graphic report – see Appendix, *Media Index: Media Monitoring*.

individual surpasses the interest in his institutional role. It is no coincidence that as mayor of Sofia, Boyko Borisov was much, much more popular than the present mayor of Sofia, Yordanka Fandakova: whereas as mayor of Sofia Borisov was among the most mentioned actors in the online media on average 24 days a month, the corresponding figure for his successor is just seven days a month. As prime minister, Borisov is again more popular than his predecessor, Sergey Stanishev: before the elections, the old prime minister was in the news on average 26 days a month, while after the elections the new prime minister was in the news on average 29 days a month (Figure 5).

Another indicator of the existence of a favourable public climate around Boyko Borisov is the interesting fact that Borisov has largely stage-managed the positive attitude towards himself. The survey of the Bulgarian national dailies in 2010 found that he was not just the most mentioned politician and the most frequently evaluated person (4332 news items), but also the actor who most frequently expressed evaluative attitudes (1157 news items). Towards himself and towards his opponents, as the content analysis of the prime minister's statements shows – Borisov consistently promoted his personal world through the 'I am' refrain and persistently pushed to the foreground the figure of his antipode, naming as his enemy most often Sergey Stanishev (cf. Daskalova 2009a).

The most obvious symptom of the 'media comfort' that gave rise to the 'Boyko Borisov phenomenon' is the character of the media attitude towards him. In the surveyed period, it became increasingly positive. The survey of the Bulgarian national dailies in the Appendix illustrates this well: a consistently very positive attitude in *Monitor*; an increasingly positive attitude in *Trud*, *24 Chasa*, *Standart*, *Novinar* and *Dnevnik*; a neutral attitude in *Sega*.

The picture regarding the other leading politicians is significantly different. Since the July 2009 elections, former prime minister Sergey Stanishev and President Georgi Parvanov have claimed, more than any others, that they are acting as opposition to the new government. Their voices, however, have failed to attract significant media support – although the attitude of the national dailies towards both tended to 'soften' in the surveyed period, the general attitude remained negative towards Stanishev and negative tending to neutral towards Parvanov.

The top ministers in the government, deputy prime ministers Simeon Djankov (who is also Minister of Finance) and Tsvetan Tsvetanov were not immune from criticism either. Djankov and Tsvetanov were the two most often mentioned politicians in the news after Borisov. In the period after the elections and throughout 2010, they were invariably among the persons with highest

newsworthiness – Tsvetanov with an average 22 days a month, and Djankov with an average 18 days a month in the news (Figure 5). The situation was identical in the sphere of the press – second and third position by number of mentions in 2010 respectively for Tsvetanov (2996 news items) and Djankov (2563 news items). Their constant prominent presence in the news was accompanied by an ambivalent media attitude. The attitude towards Djankov alternated between positive and negative. For his part, Tsvetanov long enjoyed an increasingly, mostly positive attitude. But in the autumn of 2010, his positive image – the only adequate rival of Borisov in this respect – cracked. Tsvetanov's implication in a property scandal had a negative effect both on his public ratings and on his media ratings. Ultimately, the only person that remained positive and interesting was the prime minister, the main protagonist in the Bulgarian media sphere.

Among the other models of attracting media interest towards political actors the one that stands out as foolproof is that of scandal, drama and negative messages. It is no coincidence that the peaks in negative references in the press to Stanishev, Parvanov, Djankov, Tsvetanov as well as to DPS (Movement for Rights and Freedoms) leader Ahmed Dogan coincide with the peaks in media interest towards them. That scandal and crisis served as generators of news could also be seen in the concrete contexts in which the news ratings of politicians shot up. In the case of President Parvanov, for example, these were the gas crisis in January 2009, the Sofia waste disposal crisis in April 2009, and the impeachment threats against him in the spring of 2009. An especially effective generator of scandals was Yane Yanev, the leader of the political party RZS (Order, Law and Justice). In the surveyed period, Yane Yanev proved he was best at juggling with the tools of political scandal, which guaranteed his presence in the media and parliament. From alleged disclosures of corruption schemes and tax fraud to defence of his sexual orientation, the RZS leader cleverly capitalized upon the media's thirst for sensation by his evenly distributed over time publicity stunts (Figure 3). Former foreign minister Rumyana Zheleva also had an extremely dramatic public presence. The episode involving Zheleva's hearing at the European Parliament became one of the major public scandals in 2010. The trials and tribulations of Bulgaria's failed candidate for EU commissioner made a top news story and caused a media boom, followed by a drastic decline in her presence in politics and in the news (Figure 4).

Also indicative is the trajectory of the presence in the news of another public actor, Alexey Petrov. The arrest of the notorious businessman, ex-secret service undercover agent and suspected mafia boss in February 2010 turned Petrov into an emblem of organized crime which the Borisov government had promised to overcome. Petrov was consistently condemned as the anti-hero – publicly and

loudly. The time he spent in detention from his arrest in February to his release under house arrest in October 2010 was also a time of heightened media 'fame' for Petrov – infamous but intense (Figure 4). The public focus on the figure of the former agent and advisor at the State Agency for National Security (DANS) as a personification of evil proved to be a case of successful news engineering. This strategy, combined with the Interior Ministry's effort to invent attractive codenames for its spectacular operations, attracted media attention and largely succeeded in convincing the public that the government was cracking down on organized crime. Actually, if we look at the data on the number and frequency of mention in the news of actors in the 'crime' category, we will find many symmetrical figures for the period of the previous and the present government (Figure 6). Moreover, the identical frequency of mention of this category of actors in the news after the elections came from the more frequent mention of a smaller number of persons. It is precisely here that the successful, from a media point of view, approach of personifying the problem by fixating upon Alexey Petrov becomes obvious.
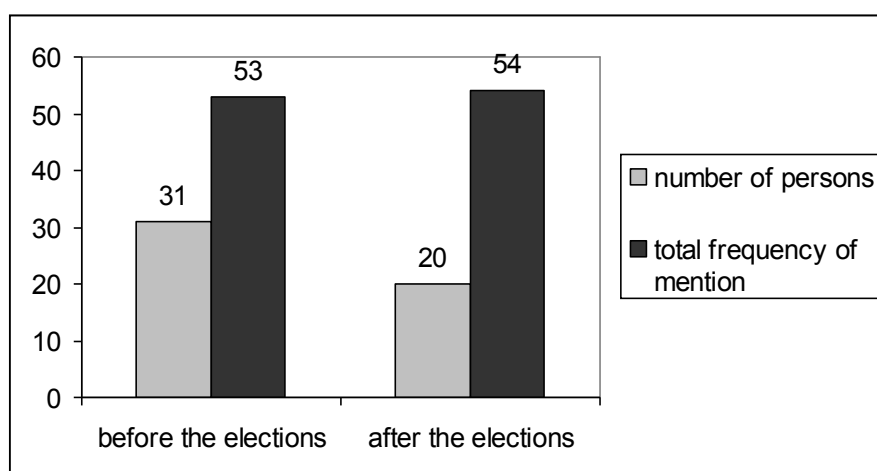

Figure 6. Actors in the 'crime' category: total frequency of mention in online news before and after the elections.

Media Competence and Political Competence

John Hartley argues that news values are neither natural nor neutral – they form an ideological code for perceiving the world in a particular way (Hartley 1982: 80). At the end of this analysis of the Bulgarian media environment, the question arises: what framework of perception of political life do Bulgarian (online and press) news promote? The trends presented above point to three central imperatives around which the public process revolves: what is important is power, rating, and personality. This tempts us to sketch out two scenarios, one real and the other possible.

What is real is what happened in the last few years: the media environment invented, propelled to the top and continues to intensely favour one personality. However interesting and charismatic that person may be, the uncritical attitude towards him is far from the understanding of the media as a corrective. The closeness between journalism and power-holders usually serves the latter. It is no coincidence that politicians have always wanted to 'own' the media. In the Bulgarian scenario, we can also see the opposite desire: the media want to 'own' rating politics, to have it on their pages and on their screens.

The media's hunger for 'dramatic' politicians makes us ask ourselves: could the diktat of ratings ultimately turn an anti-hero into a hero? The publicly proclaimed possibility that the antagonist Alexey Petrov might go into politics (Petrov declared he might run for president in the coming presidential elections in Bulgaria in 2011) sounds like an entirely logical move. At the end of the day, this would amount to capitalization of the high public interest in the controversial figure of Alexey Petrov. And then, the former adviser at the State Agency for National Security is largely a symmetrical image of the colourful protagonist, Boyko Borisov – with his biography as security service agent, university teacher, karate player and businessman.

The main message in both scenarios is that political competence has been supplanted by media competence. Both the real and the hypothetical attainment of positions in power through media engineering means above all a high level of media competence. It is a fact that politicians are increasingly learning to conform to news criteria and to use effective media strategies in order to get into the news. As a result, 'journalists – paradoxically – risk being reduced to marionettes deceived by their own news criteria' (Petersen 2003: 253). Considering that the relationship between media and politics inevitably reflects upon society, the question remains: what competencies do citizens develop in this situation – political or media competencies?

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◼ Media and Politics:
The Decline of the Fourth Estate?

Today many of the concerns about the media expressed by authors ranging from Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer to Pierre Bourdieu and Jürgen Habermas have become Bulgarian concerns as well. Tabloidization, commercialization, infotainment, privatization and mediatization of public life – phenomena which first appeared in the USA and then in Western Europe – are now basic characteristics of the Bulgarian media landscape, too. It is as if we only have to give the necessary examples in order to show that 'things are the same here'. But does the fact that the models are the same mean that they necessarily have similar effects?

Soon after the beginning of the transition, the Bulgarian media opened up to western experience and to the cultural logic of postmodernism. This logic, however, was to a large extent reproduced mechanically because it lacked the economic base of late capitalism from which it emerged naturally in western societies. In Bulgaria, the dominant western cultural experience was imposed upon an undeveloped economic base. The idea behind this transfer was that cultural practices would gradually produce a normal market, including a normal media market. With hindsight, it is obvious that this reversal of cause and effect has had ambivalent results. Ultimately, because of the fact that a late capitalist economy never appeared in Bulgaria, the cultural logic of late capitalism was imposed here only partly. It meets constant resistance from the natural cultural logic of an undeveloped capitalism to which Bulgaria remains captive. That is why, as in many other spheres, instability and division continue to be key characteristics of the media landscape in Bulgaria. The Bulgarian media landscape is well-developed in some respects and undeveloped in others; democratic and undemocratic practices can be found side by side.

Of course Bulgaria is not particularly unique in this respect. We only have to look at some neighbouring countries to see that the situation there is quite similar. Bulgaria is by no means an exception when it comes to corruption or shady practices in the media, an unhealthy relationship between the media and politics, oligopolization of the market or insufficient freedom of speech, parallel

with efforts at normalization. In Bulgaria and the region the problems are often more visible because they are more severe and have more serious consequences. The reason lies in the shortage of corrective factors that can balance the development of the media environment and mitigate the extremes. These shortages are well-known: critical public opinion, serious journalism and quality media, established democratic practices in the formation of the market.

Against this background, the media in Bulgaria must constantly cope with the consequences of the imbalance between the logic of late capitalism (cultural, institutional, financial) imported through globalization and the logic of undeveloped capitalism (low cultural practices, immature media institutions, a shady media economy) that resists it. There is a constant doubling of reality: there are two media markets, two media regulations, two media cultures. They form parallel worlds that are in conflict but – and herein lies the big challenge – which often become hybrid in order to survive.

Market and Regulation

The main developments in the Bulgarian media landscape in 2010 were related to important changes in ownership and in the sphere of regulation. From the point of view of future influence on the media environment, the most significant sales were three: of bTV, of the newspapers owned by the German media company WAZ (Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung), and of the National Unit Radio and TV Stations (NURTS). New initiatives in the sphere of regulation began to outline the rules that will define the Bulgarian media landscape in the next few years.

After a strong ten-year presence in Bulgaria as part of Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, bTV was bought by Central European Media Enterprises (CME), a company owned by Ronald Lauder. CME is a prominent player in Central and Eastern Europe, where it owns numerous radio and television channels. Before it acquired bTV, the company already owned other media in Bulgaria, including the TV channels ProBg and RingBg. As part of News Corporation, bTV succeeded in becoming a medium emblematic of Bulgaria with a permanent leading position on the market. bTV won its leading position with an Americanized vision, flexible programme schedule and successful choice of formats and presenters as well as with guaranteed advertising revenues that gave it an advantage over its main rivals. That is why the main question following the change in ownership is whether this will lead to a change in leadership on the television market. Whether bTV will manage to keep its leading position depends above all on the logic of programming. CME focuses on thematic television channels and encourages locally produced programmes that are targeted specifically at the local audience and which are cheaper to make.

However, the question remains how such a reorientation will be received by the bTV audience which is accustomed to the hitherto model. For the time being, bTV has kept its polythematic profile, with specialized content offered by the other two channels (bTV Cinema and bTV Comedy) of the newly established bTV Media Group. To keep its leading position, bTV can rely on its serious advantage over the second biggest player on the Bulgarian TV market, Nova Television. In 2009 bTV was the leader with an audience share of 35.3%, compared to 20.6% for Nova Television.[1]

However, there were suspicions that the sale of bTV may have had something to do with the 'other' market. Advertising mogul Krasimir Gergov, until now consultant of bTV, disclosed facts that suggested he may have held a share in bTV at a time when the Radio and Television Act prohibited owners of advertising agencies from owning broadcast media. Thus, the problem of transparency of ownership, usually associated primarily with Bulgarian media, turned out to be a problem involving a big foreign player as well. Suspicions have remained that other, invisible to the public, relations could be hidden behind the front of a global media corporation. In this way, possible conflicts of interest can also easily turn out to be hidden behind the public interest. After the purchase of bTV by CME, Gergov officially owns a 6% stake in the television channel (Neykov 2010).

The sale of WAZ at the end of 2010 marked, in turn, the end of an important period for the Bulgarian press. The German company's entry into Bulgaria in 1996 was the first large foreign investment in the local media market. WAZ contributed to the normalization of the Bulgarian press market after the initial chaos in the early years of the transition. It established the hybrid model of the daily press, combining serious with entertaining content. This model became the main model on the newspaper market in Bulgaria and was long reproduced by most Bulgarian dailies. The hybrid press ensured the coexistence of two cultures: a higher culture associated with serious journalism, and a lower culture associated with popular genres.

The new owner of the company, now renamed to Bulgaria Media Group, is BG Printmedia. Its majority shareholder is Vienna-registered BG Printinvest GmbH. After the sale went through, BG Printmedia announced that Bulgarian partners were also involved in the deal. According to the new owners, the key motive for the purchase was the fact that 'there is a vast niche for independent news media on the Bulgarian market'. They announced they did not intend to change the editorial policy, while promising 'even more strict requirements for observing journalistic ethics and checking the reported facts' (Antonova 2010b). The

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[1] See <http://mavise.obs.coe.int/country?id=29> [accessed 18 December 2010].

company plans to optimize the present business structure and change the advertising policy of its newly acquired newspapers.

The initial declarations indicate that Bulgaria Media Group will invest efforts in improving the quality of content. In fact, this problem was 'the tough nut to crack' for Bulgarian media throughout the transition period. The hybrid model of the daily press was so successful because it combined a business approach with the dominant cultural needs of the general public. The model, however, gradually began to be exhausted less because of internal reasons than because it became too widespread and the dailies gradually became more and more alike. This gave the openly yellow press a chance to flourish. At the same time, given the small size of the Bulgarian market, one could hardly expect that a classic serious daily would appear in the niche of the largest-circulation newspapers anytime soon. The serious press in Bulgaria tends to be 'niche-interest' and holds a position close to that of the specialized press. That is why we are yet to see how Bulgaria Media Group will orient the *Dneven Trud* and *24 Chasa* dailies, which in recent years have lost their position as unquestionable leaders on the market and of public opinion. Intentions have been declared for a more active online presence of the two dailies. On the other hand, the proclaimed independence in itself cannot be a sufficiently strong argument. Today independence has become an image product for many media. At the same time, it is often feigned or accompanied by a populist policy of newspapers and magazines that do not abide by consistent editorial values. The history of the Bulgarian transition has taught us the lesson that independence does not automatically lead to the emergence of good media.

The third emblematic deal in 2010 was the sale of NURTS. Telecom operator Vivacom sold 50% of its share in its subsidiary company to Mancelord Limited, a Cyprus-registered company represented in Bulgaria by Tsvetan Vasilev, majority owner and Chairman of the Supervisory Board of Bulgaria's Corporate Commercial Bank (CCB). The new company, NURTS Bulgaria, has inherited a monopolist position as the only network transmitting the programmes of national television and radio broadcasters in Bulgaria through a system of relay facilities covering the country's entire territory. In its turn, in 2010 NURTS Bulgaria acquired Towercom Bulgaria, one of the two multiplex operators licensed by the Communications Regulation Commission (CRC).

These market moves are especially important in the context of the coming digitalization of television. They were preceded by numerous suspicions about different political and economic influences in the process of awarding frequencies and about irregularities in the competitive procedures for multiplexes even at the time of the previous, three-party coalition government in Bulgaria (until mid-2009). The 'other' market and the 'other' regulation

diminished the transparency of the process and led to legal and moral chaos. In practice, the digitalization process was drastically politicized.

The acquisition of 50% in NURTS Bulgaria by a company close to the CCB fuelled fears of continuing politicization. The CCB is behind the financing of the media owned by New Bulgarian Media Group, which follow a very conformist policy towards the now ruling party, GERB (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria). Before the elections in 2009, they supported the previous government and criticized the party of the present Prime Minister, Boyko Borisov. The lack of value-consistency on such a grand scale casts a shadow over the traditional role of the media as a watchdog of democracy. In such cases the media abscond from the public functions they are expected to perform.

The politicization, lack of sufficient transparency and frequent sabotage of the digitalization process brought it to a standstill. Against this background, the digitalization of television was logically postponed at the end of 2010. Instead of the previous deadline, 31 December 2012, the government announced a new one: 1 January 2015. The official explanations for the reasons for the delay are related to the technological difficulty of the transition to digital broadcasting and the lack of sufficient funds to finance the process. There is no doubt, however, that the postponement of digitalization is also a direct result of the overall policy in this sphere to date.

The year 2010 also saw important changes in the sphere of media regulation. There were personnel changes in the Council for Electronic Media (CEM), the regulatory authority for broadcast media in Bulgaria. The number of CEM members was reduced from nine to five. From the very beginning, the new Council imposed a style of greater publicity and possibility to exercise citizen control: over competitive procedures, over the discussion of changes in media legislation, over the day-to-day operation of the Council. The CEM conducted an election for new directors general of the public-service Bulgarian National Television (BNT) and Bulgarian National Radio (BNR) in conditions of unprecedented transparency: the hearings of the candidates were broadcast live on a popular television channel. The Council is faced with the difficult task of guaranteeing and encouraging the development of the public-service media while at the same time keeping them in the context of competition where they have to compete for influence and market shares with the private channels. In an overcrowded media environment with cut-throat competition, the problem facing the CEM is to make sure that regulation does not become hostage to political and economic interests.

The most important activity in the sphere of regulation in 2010 in Bulgaria was the initiated drafting of a brand new law to replace the present Radio and Television Act (RTA). An expert group formed under the Council of Ministers is working on the new law. The numerous amendments and supplements to the RTA in the last few years were often part of the 'other' regulation that easily allowed direct partisan and business interests to interfere in lawmaking. The main public expectations of the new law are related to ensuring conditions for a balance between the interests of public-service and commercial media.

The year 2010 also saw the long-awaited declaration of political will for guaranteeing greater transparency of ownership in the print media. At the initiative of the Union of Publishers in Bulgaria, the Council of Ministers proposed and approved an amendment to the Compulsory Deposit of Copies of Printed and Other Works Act. According to this amendment, publishers are obligated to name the real owner of the medium in a declaration submitted to the Ministry of Culture as well as in a special box published in the first issue of the year of the relevant print medium. A positive signal in the same direction also came from the area of auditing of print media circulations in Bulgaria. Set up ten years ago, the Audit Bureau of Circulations had so far practically failed to perform its mission and served more as a democratic appendage to the press market. There was no will for transparency in the publishing business. Against this background, the Bulgarian Association of Advertisers sent a letter to the Union of Publishers in Bulgaria insisting on openness and precision of data on circulations.[2] This demand is an indicator of the greater maturity of the Bulgarian media environment. Its gradual development has reached a stage where the media business itself now has a vested interest in transparency and observance of the rules.

The processes in the media sphere largely depend also on a 'natural' regulator of the market such as advertising. In 2010 the financial crisis continued to affect advertising revenues, which declined further. This decline was more serious in print media. Thus, for example, in the first half of 2010 the dailies *Dneven Trud* and *24 Chasa* saw a 20% fall in their advertising revenues compared to the same period in 2009.[3] The total decline for the weeklies was more than 24% (Kandov 2010a). The situation with advertising on television was not so drastic. In January-June 2010, television advertising revenues fell by 9.3% compared to the first half of 2009 (Kandov 2010a). It is obvious that at a time of crisis, advertisers prefer television. The reasons for this are several: falling circulations of print media, absence of reliable and transparent data on circulations, increasing time spent watching television (one of the effects of the crisis), more

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[2] For more details and a detailed analysis, see Antonova (2010a).
[3] See<http://www.capital.bg/biznes/media_i_reklama/2010/12/14/1011148_vac_izlizat_ot_vestnikarskiia
_Pazar_v_bulgariia/> [accessed 27 December 2010].

easy and certain targeting of the audience through television advertising, and so on.

Advertising, however, did not serve only as a 'natural' regulator of the media market in Bulgaria. It also kept its potential as a powerful tool of influence. Some developments in Bulgaria in 2010 confirmed this. Against the general background of a serious decline, part of the print media owned by New Bulgarian Media Group recorded remarkable growth. According to some analyses, these data 'do not reflect the actual situation. Among the main advertisers in the print media owned by the group are companies from the circle of banker Tsvetan Vasilev, Chairman of the Supervisory Board of Corporate Commercial Bank, as well as advertisements of the CCB itself' (Kandov 2010b). The situation is similar in some other print media where there is a close connection between owner and advertiser. Thus, the 'other' advertising distorts the actual market picture in the media sphere, privileging particular print and broadcast media by creating a semblance of advertising prosperity in the conditions of universal crisis.

Freedom and Dependence

Against the background of the events related to the media market and regulation in Bulgaria, it is safe to say that since GERB came to power in 2009 the Bulgarian media have largely found themselves in a new situation. For the first time since the beginning of the transition, one person, the country's prime minister, dominates political life so strongly. This situation is new for the media because this domination is realized primarily through the media themselves. How are they to react to this? How are they to distinguish the positive representation of Boyko Borisov from the critical distance expected of them? This dilemma has become a main problem for many Bulgarian media.

Unlike his predecessors as prime minister who, like Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha (former king of Bulgaria and prime minister from 2001 to 2005), relied on historically inherited symbolic capital, or like Sergey Stanishev (Bulgarian Socialist Party prime minister from 2005 to 2009) who relied on the resources of an old political party, Boyko Borisov's political career is practically a product entirely of the media. Borisov entered big politics by way of the media, and more specifically, television. The media were his ladder to success and they are the main stage on which key events associated with his personality and government are played out. The rise of Boyko Borisov marked the end of traditional politics realized through institutions such as parties and parliament in Bulgaria.

Borisov's big success is in the fact that he has managed to keep the interest and benevolent attitude of the media for a long period of time: both before and after the elections in 2009. Although at the end of 2010 the popularity of Borisov's ministers was declining, his own reputation remained constant and was the highest among Bulgarian politicians.[4] It made up for the lower trust in the government and ensured its relative stability. It was as if nothing could undermine the popularity of the prime minister.

The survival of his image to date is due to several important reasons. Borisov is a figure who constantly generates contradictions. Whereas this may be a shortcoming when it comes to implementing a consistent longer-term policy, it is effective in maintaining popularity. From a semiotic point of view, Borisov is an anomalous personage. The main distinctive feature of the anomalous personage is the mixing of extremes and, hence, the extreme ambiguity of his actions. This is due to the possession of qualities vacillating between diametrically opposite poles outlined by his behaviour. Thus, Borisov is an anticommunist but he likes long-term communist dictator Todor Zhivkov; he is regarded as uncultured but holds a PhD; he has had a career as a bodyguard but he plays the piano; he is resolute but constantly changes his mind, and so on. It is precisely this indeterminacy, this 'neither-nor', this mixture of extreme elements that make Borisov's actions anomalous and ambiguous, or in other words, that concentrate more symbolic power in him. It is no coincidence that Borisov is not just the key figure in political and media life but also the central interpreter of reality in Bulgaria. Through the struggles for the definition of reality he constantly legitimates and defends his own anomaly as a source of power. From the positions of indeterminacy, he persistently defines his political rivals as non-anomalous: the previous government was criminal, the President of the Republic is a provocateur, former prime minister (from 1997 to 2001) and leader of the party DSB (Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria) Ivan Kostov is an envious man. It is clear who is good and who is bad; no one else should be allowed to be simultaneously good and bad. This role is reserved for the prime minister himself. Thus, the positions of Borisov's opponents gradually began to lose importance. In this way, Borisov turned them into simple walk-ons, reducing them to simple, elementary categories: of the criminal, of the liar, of the envious man. To be elementary means, at best, being a boring, more or less insignificant, secondary personage in the political theatre. Borisov's well-guarded anomalous position has easily allowed him to theatricalize more than anyone else the public rituals of power and to move them into the media. The constant staging of publicity needs an anomalous personage just like every literary plot needs a complex and interesting main character. Otherwise it is impossible to keep the story flowing. Anomaly is the main source of originality,

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[4] See <http://news.ibox.bg/news/id_1421350740> [accessed 18 December 2010].

the driving force of literature, film and now also of politics and media in Bulgaria.

On the other hand, a peculiarity of Bulgarian journalism also played an important role in Borisov's great media popularity: the strong feminization of the profession. Had the journalistic community been dominated by men, Borisov's media triumph would have been inconceivable. Borisov rose to media fame on the shoulders of women journalists. The Bulgarian media world is mostly a woman's world. Borisov is constantly surrounded by female reporters, he appears on shows usually hosted by women and gives interviews much more often to women journalists. Unlike other Bulgarian leaders, he takes full advantage of the fact that he is not simply prime minister but also a man. His predecessors Sergey Stanishev, Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha and Ivan Kostov were, each in his own way, of no erotic interest to the media. Stanishev was alleged to be gay, Saxe-Coburg-Gotha was too old, while Kostov was too sullen and regarded the media with contempt as if they belonged to an inferior gender. President Georgi Parvanov opted for a mothball image much more suitable for a 'father' than for a 'man'. Against this background, the media's focus on Borisov's political libido is hardly surprising.

Another factor that has significantly changed the relationship between the media and power is the 'extension' of the election campaign into a permanent state of Bulgarian political life after the 2009 parliamentary elections. Between mid-2009 and the presidential and local elections due in 2011, Bulgaria is de facto in a permanent pre-election situation for the first time in recent history. The main characteristics of this process are several. At its basis is the large-scale entry of PR into politics and the media. Even as chief secretary of the Interior Ministry (from 2001 to 2005) and then mayor of Sofia (from 2005 to 2009), Boyko Borisov gained experience in directly converting PR activities into an iconography of power. After GERB's victory in the 2009 elections, this process became much more prominent. Officiating at countless inauguration ceremonies for all sorts of significant and insignificant sites, and permanent presence in TV studios and the press are part of a clever PR campaign that has gradually turned into a main face of and substitute for politics. The constant promotion of Borisov's personal successes combined with constant attacks on his opponents has compressed the process of doing politics to the intensity of a permanent campaign. This manner of behaviour was quickly adopted by the opposition, whose internal party life waned in line with the GERB model in contrast to the increasing media appearances of the party leaders.

The constant generation of scandals and 'disclosure' of compromising materials also contributed to the acceleration of politics and the rise of the permanent campaign. In 2010 this practice acquired threatening proportions. Scandals

turned into a norm of the daily political process. It became difficult for the media to even just register the flow of scandalous events. For many media, chronicling such events became a main activity and left little if any room for serious reflection. Ultimately, however, the wave of scandals blurred the distinction between the different cases as they were quickly 'submerged' by the next ones with an intensity that made it impossible to identify the winners and losers from the disclosure of the particular facts. In such a context, the media were unavoidably pushed in a 'yellow' direction and they were compelled to accept, more or less uncritically, an agenda imposed from the outside. Serious journalistic investigations requiring time and effort disappeared almost entirely from the Bulgarian media. In one of the rare cases of a significant investigation, a journalist called the prime minister himself to get a green light for her report.[5] Against this background, politicians gradually expropriated the territory of 'investigations' from the media. A typical example in this respect is the political party RZS (Order, Law and Justice) which has become specialized in 'investigative' politics. Thus, the 'investigation' of some politicians by others became a main source of scandals and, hence, of content for the media. Instead of organizing investigations, they found it easier to engineer events in order to restore their critical reputation. One such case was an 'invitation', organized in hidden- camera style by bTV and the *168 Chasa* weekly, to MPs to take part in the promotion of a luxury mobile phone in exchange for which they were promised a free phone each. Even though it is useful in itself, this easy way of exposing politicians who are ready to use their public office for private gain cannot replace the much more difficult task of unraveling complex cases of political corruption.

The growing importance of ratings was, in its turn, one of the factors for the transition to a permanent campaign. Polls began to be conducted and published much more frequently. In practice, political ratings adopted many of the principles applied in television ratings: the popularity of politicians became equated with quality. Thus, sociological surveys began to define political behaviour more directly. In this context, the attitude towards public opinion as a factor in politics changed as well. Some media were tempted to present their content as a direct product and expression of public opinion. Thus, for example, Venelina Gocheva, Editor-in-Chief of *24 Chasa*, noted that:

> The Borisov government is the first [Bulgarian government] that changes its decisions according to the front pages of the newspapers. And I do not find such behaviour to be wrong because this is the way to see yourself in

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[5] The case involved Nova Television journalist Dilyana Gaytandzhieva and her investigation into customs officers who could not account for their wealth. After GERB MP Lachezar Ivanov called Nova Television and asked that the part concerning a customs officer he knew be edited out of the investigative report, Gaytandzhieva phoned the prime minister who approved the broadcasting of her report.

the mirror of public opinion. In a word, today it is easier for the media to exercise pressure on the government, and not vice versa. (Yordanova 2010)

Such equation of public opinion with the media illustrates a significant substitution. As Umberto Eco notes, 'the mass media can influence political life in the country only by shaping public opinion' (Eco 1999: 41). The inversion of this relationship to the point where the media claim to directly influence politics as immediate exponents of public opinion can even be dangerous for democracy. On the other hand, Gocheva's statement clearly illustrates the Bulgarian media's increasing attempt to define the agenda of politics.

One of the unquestionably most important moments in the relationship between media and politics in Bulgaria in 2010 was played out as an episode of the conflict between President Parvanov and Prime Minister Borisov. The media became involved in their personal political conflict. After vetoing the amendments to the Radio and Television Act because of the reduced number of members of the Council for Electronic Media and the Communications Regulation Commission, President Parvanov began to speak of 'a consistent campaign for exercising pressure on the media' aimed at 'intimidating particular media'.[6] Prime Minister Borisov reacted instantly, sending a letter to the editors-in-chief and directors of major Bulgarian media in which he asked if the government 'had exercised pressure on the editorial and news content', if it was restricting 'the rights of the media … to be freely financed', and could the reduction of the number of members of the CEM and CRC be interpreted as 'restriction of the independence of the Bulgarian media and influence upon their editorial policy in the interest of the government' (Yordanova 2010).

Whereas the president's statement sounded false because it was seen less as an expression of genuine concern about the media than as an attempt to keep his influence in the regulatory authority and to use the occasion to attack the prime minister's policy, Borisov's questions to the media elite were in themselves a precedent. Those asked unanimously denied that the government was interfering in the media in any way. Because of the very context in which the questions were asked, the answers unavoidably created an impression of premeditation. At the same time, in their letters of response to Borisov some of the influential Bulgarian media kept their dignity and rejected any attempt at being used by politicians 'as a side in their disputes' (Lyuba Rizova), as 'an arbitrator in political struggles' (Silva Zurleva) or as 'a referee in [their] battles' (Venelina Gocheva).[7] On the whole, however, the outcome left an aftertaste of forced acknowledgments and false feelings. Against this background, the clashes

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[6] See <http://www.trud.bg/Article.asp?ArticleId=496837> [accessed 11 December 2010].
[7] See Yordanova (2010).

between Georgi Parvanov and Boyko Borisov continued throughout the year, encouraging the transition to a permanent pre-election situation.

Also telling of the developments in 2010 were the more and more frequent direct conflicts between politicians and media. Boyko Borisov and popular TV talk show host Slavi Trifonov openly confronted each other. Borisov accused Trifonov of lying and of having political ambitions. For his part, Trifonov declared that Borisov was 'terrorizing the media every day' and asked how long he would go on 'directing them … by sending them text messages and phoning them?'[8] 'All media in Bulgaria are praising Borisov. We are the only ones who criticize them, we are the opposition,'[9] declared the showman from bTV. Appearing on a bTV show, the prime minister in turn severely criticized the TV channel for being too critical of the government:

> Why didn't you say for example on your own TV channel that there isn't a single day on which the government isn't attacked on one of your programmes? You have five days of Slavi Trifonov, who attacks the government nonstop, you have Svetla Petrova on Saturday who attacks the government nonstop, and on Sunday you have [Mira] Badzheva who attacks the government nonstop. In other words, on bTV we don't have a single day of respite from you. Give the government at least one day of respite on bTV.'[10]

The prime minister also criticized other media which do not report the government's policy as they are expected to. The *Sega* daily was classified among 'media that … have nothing to do with free journalism because they are directly dependent on the corporate interests of their owners.'[11] A presenter of the bTV morning show was reprimanded for reading headlines from *Sega* and showing cartoons of the prime minister published in *Sega* in the daily review of the press.[12] Borisov also criticized the BNT at a government meeting: 'Last night I watched the programme "Referendum" on the state television channel and all guests were selected in such a way that everyone was against the fact that the tax inspectors had brought to light unlawful palaces, properties and everything else.'[13] Borisov's disapproval targeted even the newspapers owned by New Bulgarian Media Group which follow a conformist policy towards the government. To dissociate himself from their quite explicit and direct support,

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[8] See <http://www.vesti.bg/index.phtml?tid=40&oid=2714231> [accessed 21 December 2010].

[9] See <http://frognews.bg/news_19226/Sl_Trifonov_Borisov_zvani_po_mediite_da_go_hvaliat_nie_sme_opozitsiiata/> [accessed 9 December 2010].

[10] See <http://www.mediapool.bg/show/?storyid=172512&srcpos=4> [accessed 12 December 2010].

[11] See <http://www.dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2010/10/21/979995_borisov_pred_bnt_tova_ne_e_nacionalizaciia_tova_sa/> [accessed 26 December 2010].

[12] See <http://www.mediapool.bg/show/?storyid=172512&srcpos=4> [accessed 14 December 2010].

[13] See <http://www.vesti.bg/index.phtml?tid=40&oid=3344631> [accessed 11 December 2010].

Borisov declared that these newspapers, which are believed to be close to the DPS,[14] were praising him because they were 'carrying out an "active measure"' 'as the agents of the DS are very experienced.'[15] Separate journalists were personally affected by the prime minister's anger. Asked a question by a Nova Television reporter, Borisov snapped back, reverting to the singular 'you' (the informal form of address in Bulgarian): 'You know very well you're the last person on earth I'll answer…'[16]

This reprimanding attitude was in stark contrast with the pompous way the media 'celebrated' Boyko Borisov's birthday. The event turned into a culmination of the public display of respect for the prime minister. The Bulgarian broadcast and print media tried to outdo each other in providing the most detailed and most extensive coverage of the event. Borisov's birthday was the high point in PR stage-management of media events in 2010. The prime minister's personal holiday 'happened to coincide' with a visit by Silvio Berlusconi to Sofia and the inauguration of a monument to Garibaldi by the two prime ministers. This 'amplification' of the event by PR means was received uncritically by the Bulgarian media. Only in separate newspapers and channels could one find a hint of irony towards the reporting of long lists of gifts and gestures of respect for Borisov from his close politicians. In a non-European way, the prime minister's birthday turned into the most significant and central event, into a lavish spectacle of ostensible display of respect for him. All this left a feeling of kowtowing and total lack of criticism even in media with a good reputation.

Shortly before sending his letter with questions to the media elite, Borisov declared at the Sixth World Meeting of Bulgarian Media in Vienna that in Bulgaria there was 'an extremely comfortable working environment for all media' and that the government did 'not interfere in the media; they operate in a wonderful environment.'[17] These statements as well as the media bosses' answers to Borisov were seriously at odds with some external assessments of the media environment in Bulgaria in 2010. According to the 2010 World Press Freedom Index compiled by Reporters Without Borders, Bulgaria is the lowest-ranked EU country, in 70th place, down from 58th in 2008.[18] According to Olivier Basille, President of Reporters Without Borders Belgium,

> The situation in Bulgaria has not changed in any way. Although there has been some change at the political level, the problem of media freedom has

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[14] The DPS (Movement for Rights and Freedoms) is widely regarded as an ethnic Turkish party. It is believed to be full of former agents of the DS, or State Security, the Bulgarian communist secret police.
[15] See <http://mediapool.etaligent.net/show/?storyid=172512&p=4> [accessed 26 December 2010].
[16] See <http://www.mediapool.bg/show/?storyid=166310> [accessed 16 December 2010].
[17] See <http://www.mediapool.bg/show/?storyid=166310> [accessed 16 December 2010].
[18] See <http://society.actualno.com/news_320384.html> [accessed 25 December 2010].

remained. The grey economy and the mafia are increasingly gathering momentum. The pressure exercised upon investigative journalists working on subjects like drug trafficking, smuggling of cigarettes or medicines or even on public affairs is very great.[19]

For his part, Jean-François Juilliard, Secretary General of Reporters Without Borders, noted that 'Bulgaria is not a good student when it comes to freedom of speech.'[20] Aidan White, General Secretary of the International Federation of Journalists, concluded that in Bulgaria 'there is a crisis in the media and it has become a crisis of society as a whole. There is political and corporate intervention, and the ownership of media is not transparent.'[21] A report of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe noted that 'the fact that major media are ruled by persons with important political influence contributes to a climate of mistrust towards the media and the perception of their lack of independence from the executive, as well as from all spheres of influence' (Antonova and Georgiev 2010).

The Price of the Fourth Estate

At first sight, the very enumeration of those criticisms and the review of the authoritative sources they come from seem to eliminate the need for special commentary. Still, the question remains of the contrast between the government's self-evaluations and external observers' impressions of the state of the media environment in Bulgaria. The difference between them is too great to be ignored. It is an indicator of a serious difference in the approach to the problems. There are two different perspectives on the two parallel media realities mentioned at the beginning of this article. Each gaze wants to see what it expects to see. The first perspective recognizes primarily the positive developments in the media market, in regulation and advertising, in the public sphere as a whole. The second notices above all what is happening in the 'other' market, the 'other' regulation and advertising, the 'other' public sphere. Actual practice tends to mix the two realities. It is anomalous. Like their main personage, Boyko Borisov, today the Bulgarian media are dramatically swinging from one extreme to another and sending ambiguous messages. In this way – paradoxically only at first sight – their political price is tending to rise. One may say that in Bulgaria this price is still too high as compared to the traditional understanding of the place of the media in democratic societies. That is why for the external observer, the main problem is less the separate cases of deviation from democratic standards than the anomaly of the media environment itself.

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[19] See <http://www.mediapool.bg/show/?storyid=171495&srcpos=14> [accessed 26 December 2010].
[20] See <http://www.sbj-bg.eu/index.php?t=10028> [accessed 16 December 2010].
[21] See <http://dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2010/11/22/997617_shefut_na_mfj_shte_seziram_es_che_v_bulgariia _mediite/> [accessed 25 December 2010].

There are no doubt attempts at normalizing this environment in Bulgaria. In 2010 Krasimir Gergov, one of the key players in the media sphere, declared that he would like to own a television station

> that is like a grocery store you go to in the morning, open shop, and people buy your goods if they are good and don't if they are bad. This is what happened with bTV. This is a purely market mechanism and I reckon I shouldn't have any problems that are different from those of a seller in a grocery store. (Neykov 2010)

Understood in this way, however, 'normalization' is taken to an extreme opposite to anomaly. Reducing media content to a pure commodity is just as unacceptable as turning the media into a substitute for politics. Such 'normalization' makes us forget the pitfalls of the 'market censorship' (Keane 1991: 90) imposed by the most aggressive commercial media.

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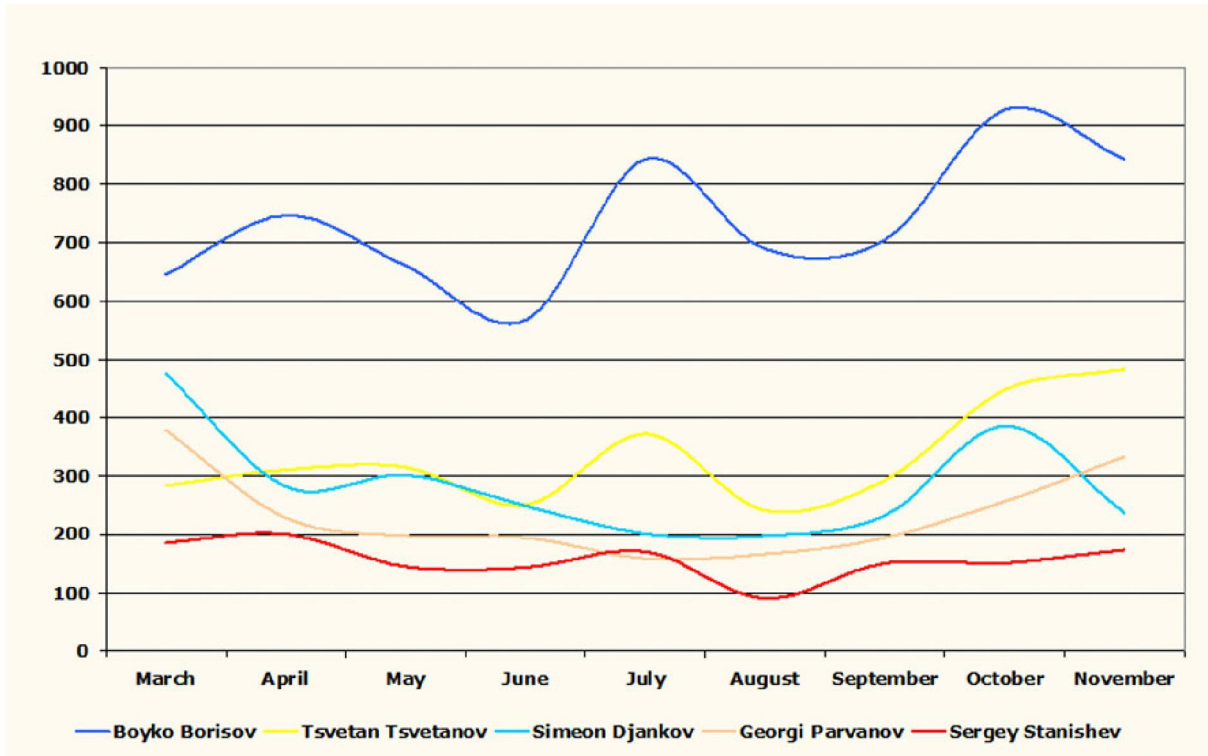
Appendix

Media Index: Media Monitoring

Graphic Report (March – November 2010)

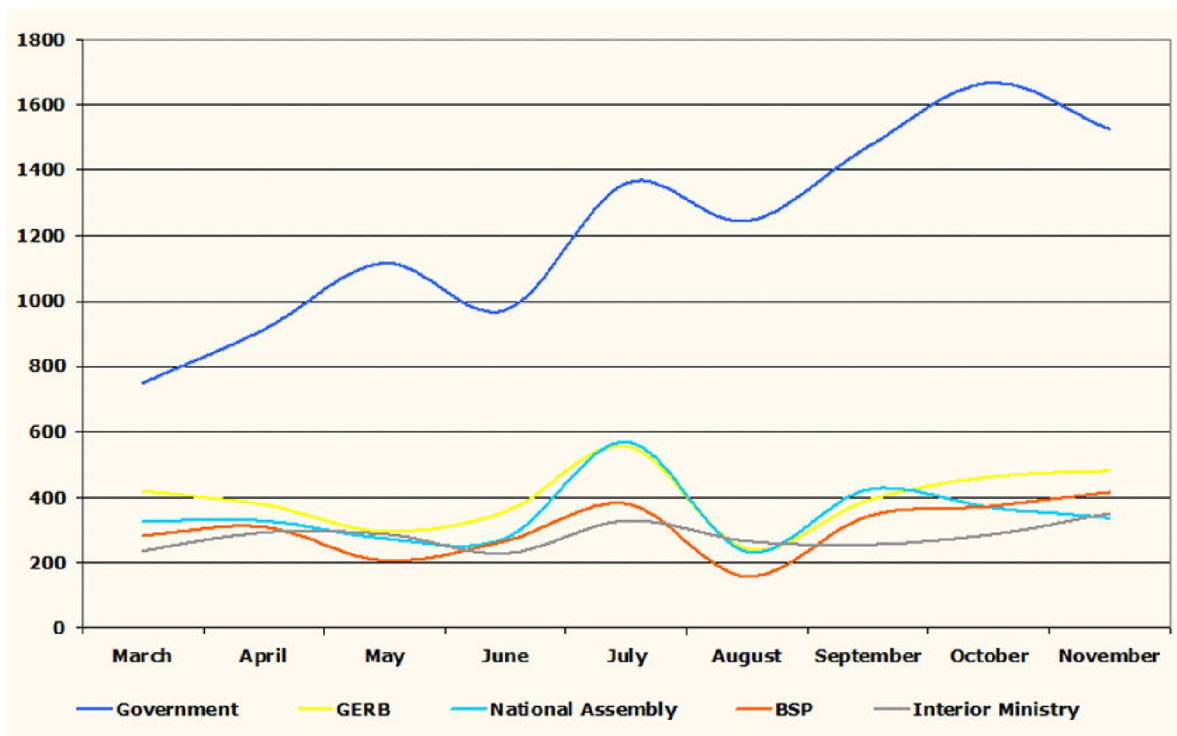|	
PERIOD	1 March – 30 November 2010
COMPARED PERIOD	1 July – 30 November 2009
MEDIA MONITORED	
Dailies	24 Chasa, Trud, Dnevnik, Monitor, Novinar, Sega, Standart
TOTAL NUMBER OF REGISTERED ITEMS	17 759
REGISTERED INDICATORS	Date of publication, month, medium, mentioned persons, parties, institutions, speaker (expressing attitudes), referent (of expressed attitudes)

The data included in this report are from a monitoring survey commissioned by the Media Monitoring Lab at Foundation Media Democracy (FMD) and conducted by the research and consulting agency Market Links. A combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods was used. Seven Bulgarian national dailies were monitored over two compared periods: the first phase of the GERB government after the July 2009 parliamentary elections, and political developments in 2010. The data include: frequency of mention of the main political actors and institutions in the monitored dailies; number of references in the monitored dailies; frequency of expression of attitudes by individual politicians; way of 'treatment' of political actors and parties in the monitored dailies, represented as attitudes on the negative-neutral-positive scale. We call this last type of monitoring 'Map of Media Dependences'. The FMD presented such a map for the first time at its annual conference at the end of 2009 (the results, in Bulgarian, are available at the FMD website, at http://www.fmd.bg). The data on 2010 included in this book enable tracing the changes in the editorial policies of the monitored dailies over a two-year period. The results presented here are summarized on the basis of separate monthly monitoring surveys of the dailies conducted by Market Links (http://mmlinks.net).

FMD

TOP 5 MOST MENTIONED PERSONS
(by number of news items)

Legend: Boyko Borisov — Tsvetan Tsvetanov — Simeon Djankov — Georgi Parvanov — Sergey Stanishev

TOP 5 MOST MENTIONED INSTITUTIONS
(by number of news items)

Legend: Government — GERB — National Assembly — BSP — Interior Ministry

EXPRESSED ATTITUDES TOWARDS BOYKO BORISOV
(by number of news items)
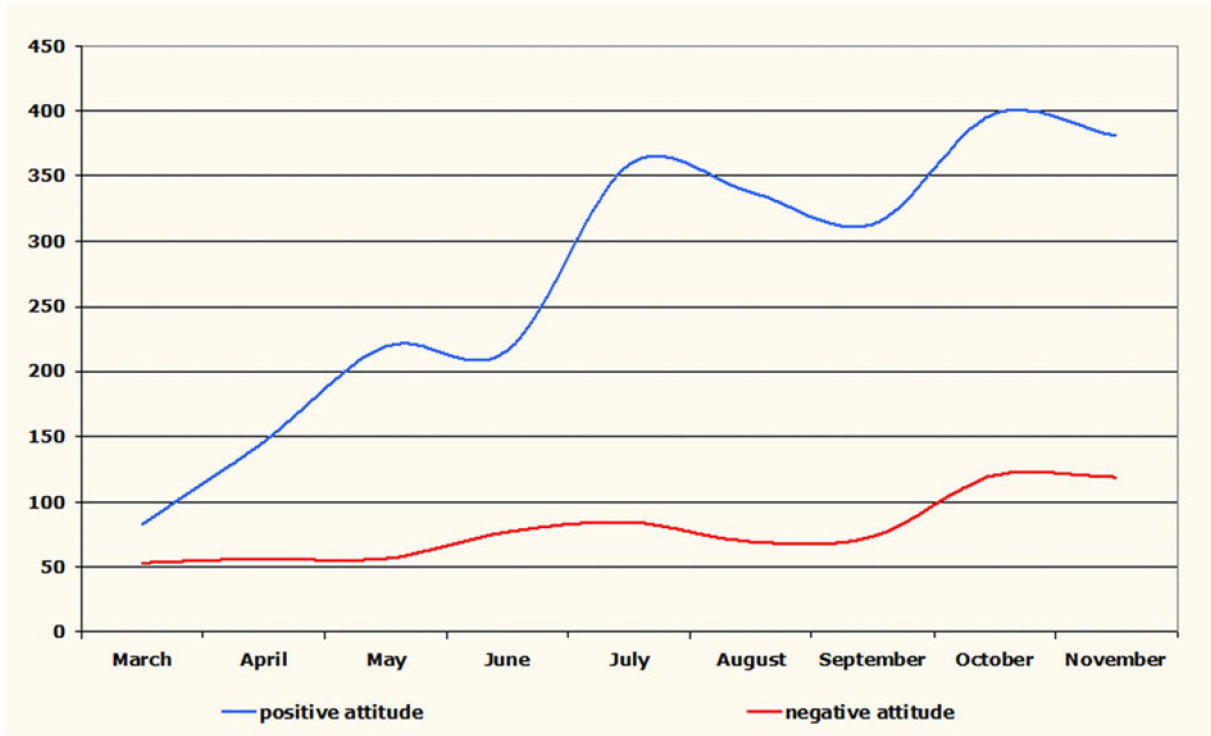
EXPRESSED ATTITUDES TOWARDS SERGEY STANISHEV
(by number of news items)
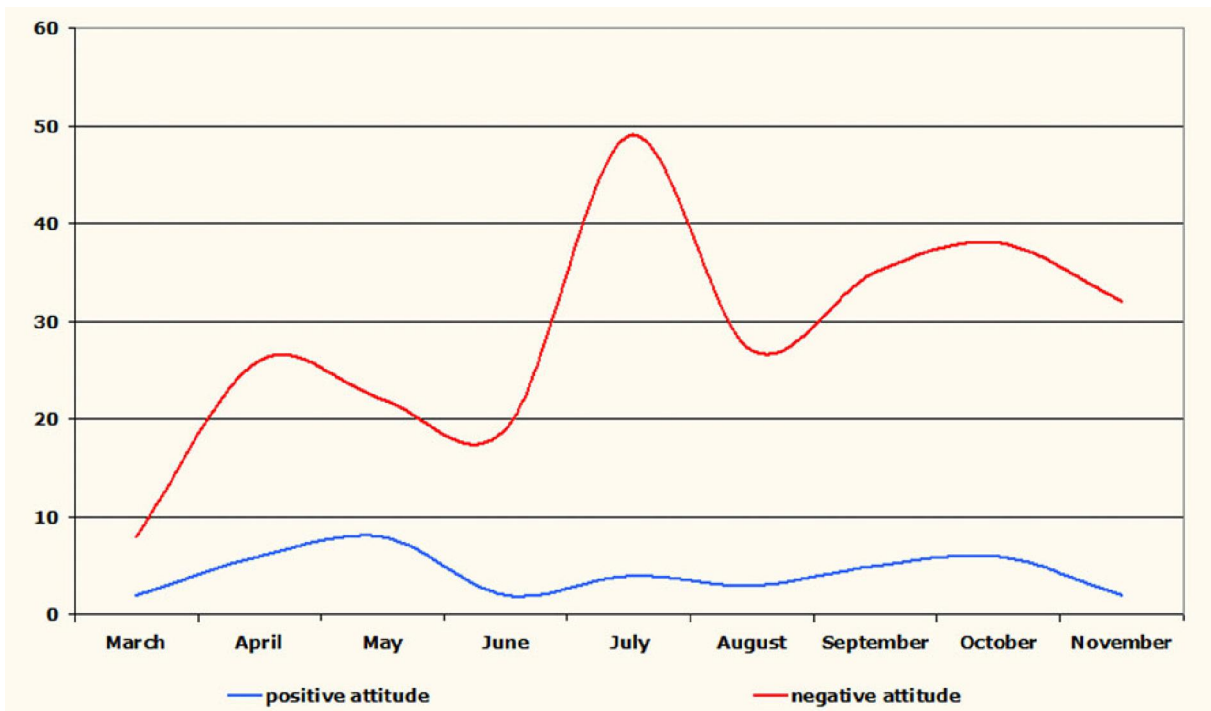
EXPRESSED ATTITUDES TOWARDS GEORGI PARVANOV
(by number of news items)

positive attitude — negative attitude
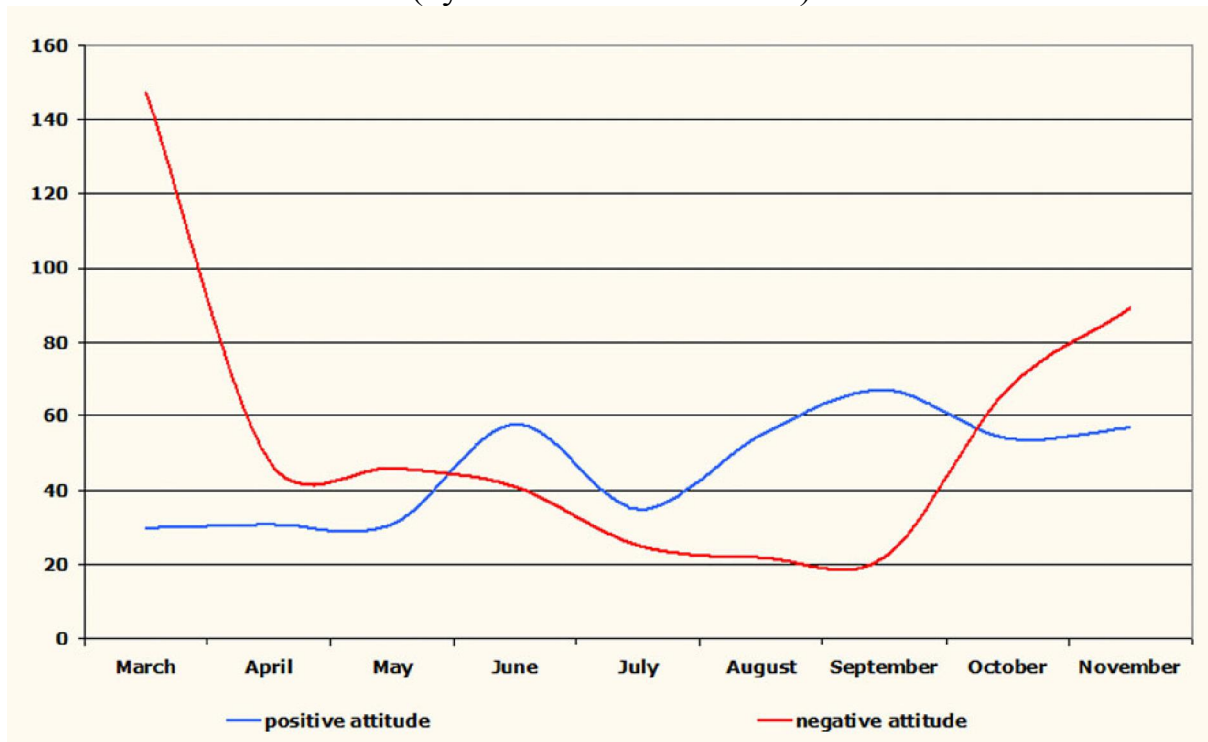
EXPRESSED ATTITUDES TOWARDS SIMEON DJANKOV
(by number of news items)

positive attitude — negative attitude
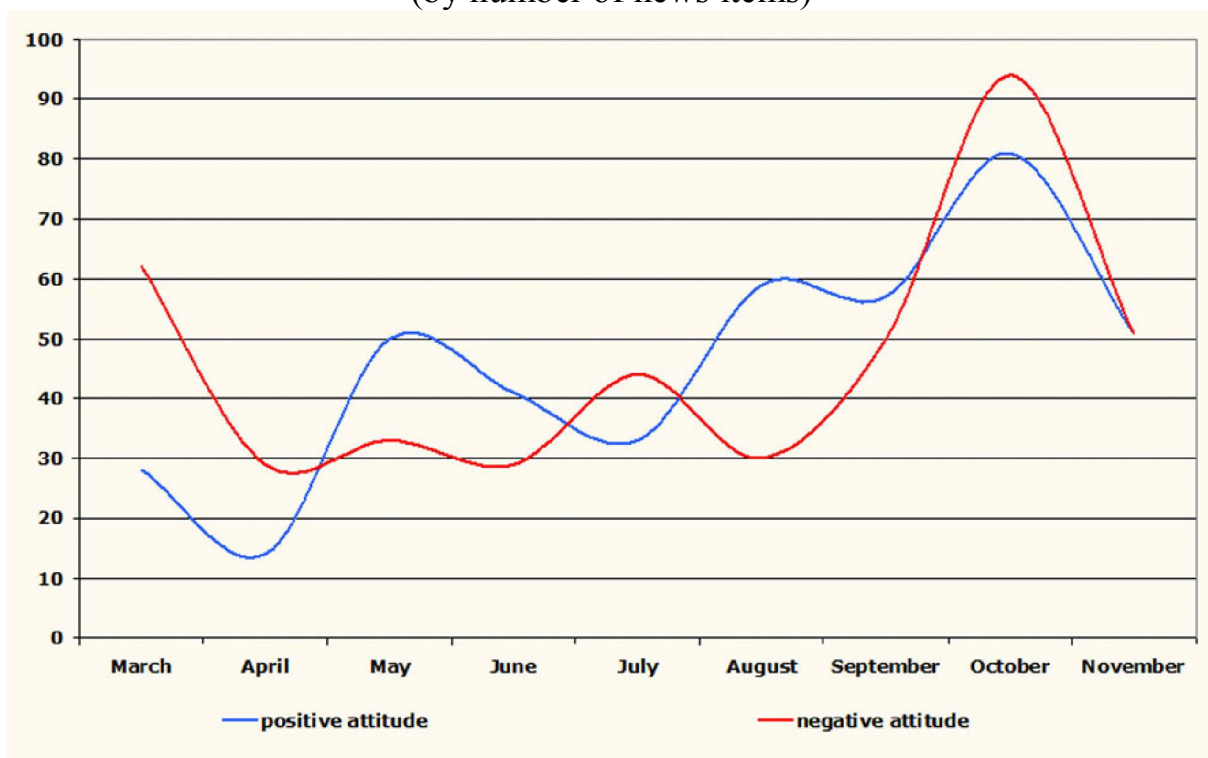
EXPRESSED ATTITUDES TOWARDS AHMED DOGAN
(by number of news items)
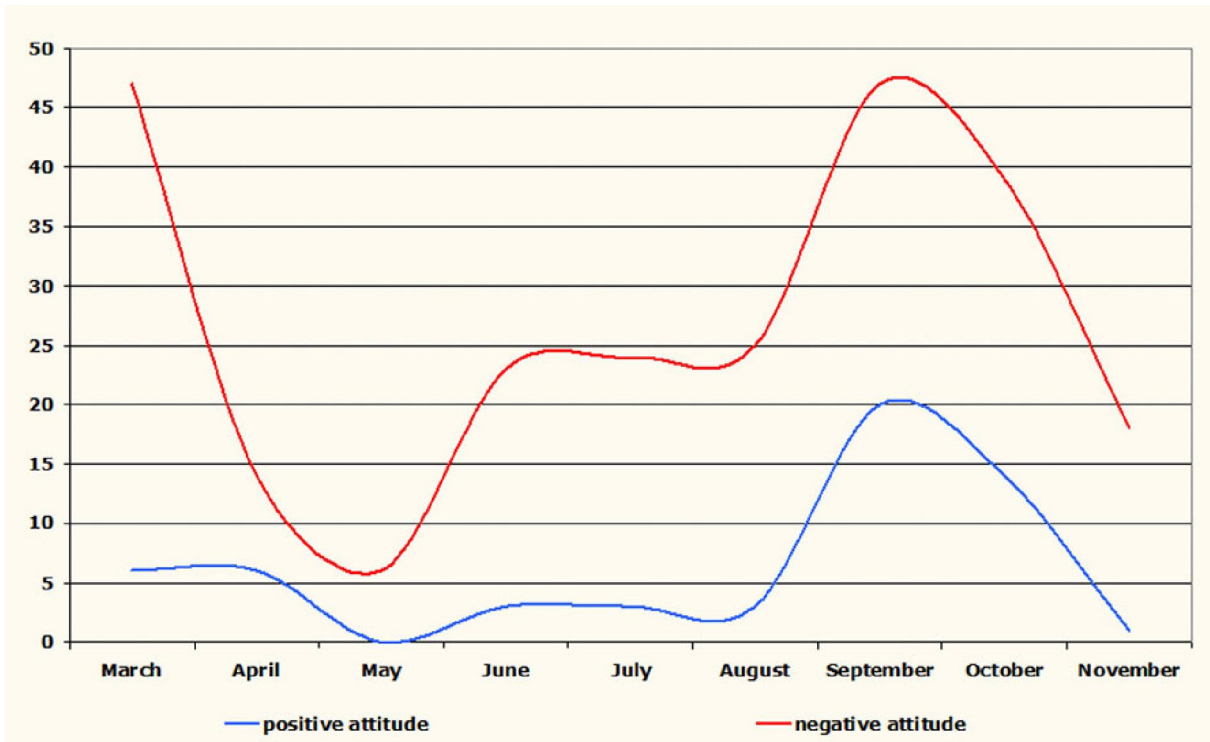
EXPRESSED ATTITUDES TOWARDS TSVETAN TSVETANOV
(by number of news items)
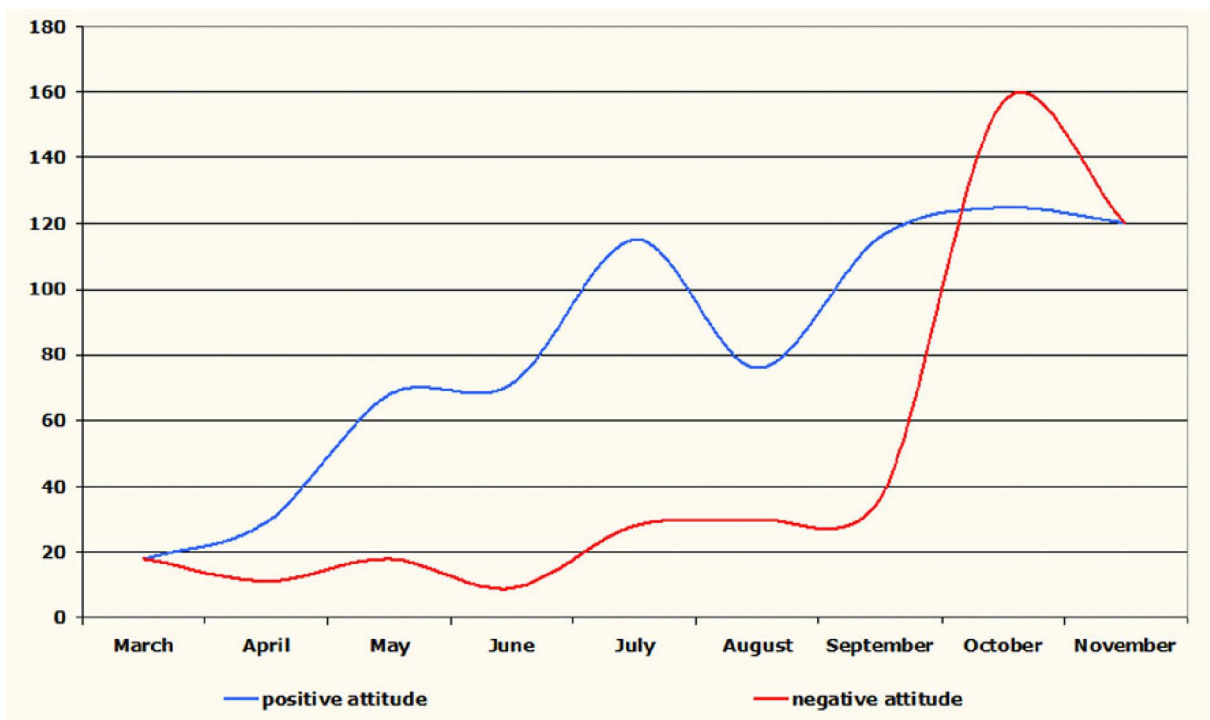
EXPRESSED ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE GOVERNMENT
(by number of news items)

PERSONS MENTIONED
(by number of news items)

Person	Number
Boyko Borisov	6625
Tsvetan Tsvetanov	2996
Simeon Djankov	2562
Georgi Parvanov	2108
Sergey Stanishev	1411
Traicho Traikov	946
Ivan Kostov	922
Tsetska Tsacheva	919
Ahmed Dogan	704
Miroslav Naydenov	669
Rosen Plevenliev	631
Alexey Petrov	609
Totyu Mladenov	598
Anna-Maria Borisova	586
Yane Yanev	576
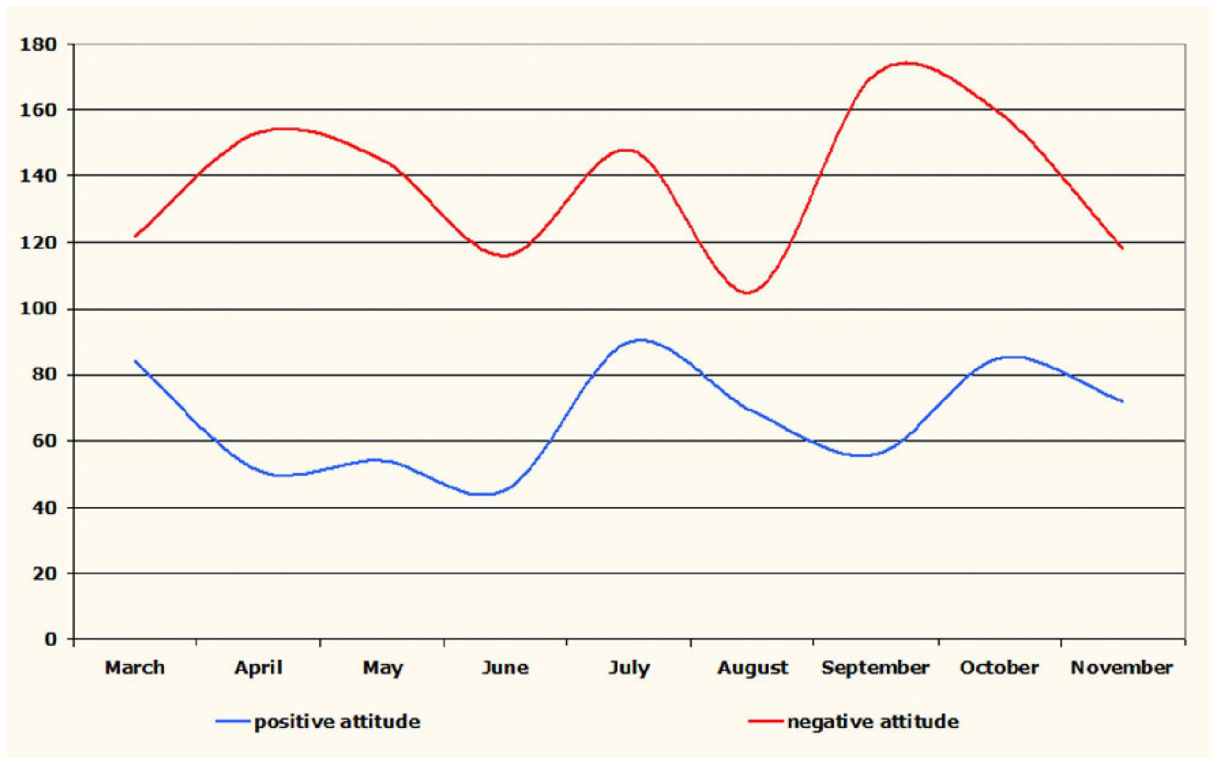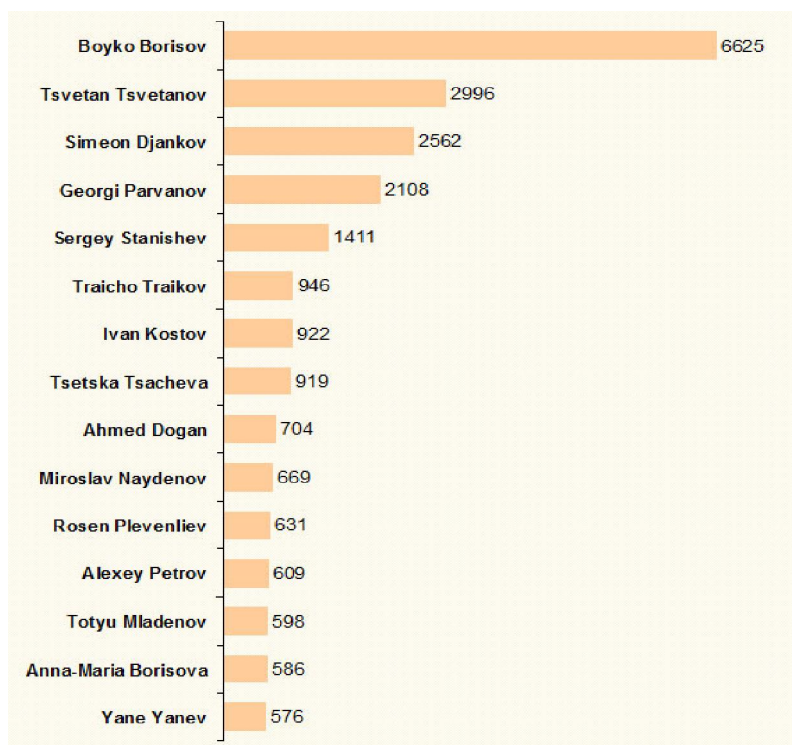
INSTITUTIONS MENTIONED
(by number of news items)

Institution	Number
Government	11018
GERB	3575
National Assembly	3134
BSP	2730
Interior Ministry	2527
European Union	1885
President's Office	1676
DPS	1517
Prosecution Office	1254
State Agency for National Security	929

ACTORS EXPRESSING ATTITUDES
(by number of news items)

Actor	Number
Boyko Borisov	1157
Tsvetan Tsvetanov	581
BSP	564
Georgi Parvanov	416
Sergey Stanishev	369
DPS	356
Ivan Kostov	296
Bulgarian citizens	269
Blue Coalition	259
Prosecution Office	258

ATTITUDES EXPRESSED TOWARDS BOYKO BORISOV
(JULY – NOVEMBER 2009 AND MARCH – NOVEMBER 2010)

The size of the bubbles represents the average daily reach of the respective medium

high interest

medium interest

low interest

Trud 2010

24 Chasa 2010

Standart 2010

Sega 2010

Monitor 2010

Dnevnik 2010

Novinar 2010

Standart 2009

Novinar 2009

Dnevnik 2009

Sega 2009

24 Chasa 2009

Monitor 2009

Trud 2009

negative attitude

neutral attitude

positive attitude

ATTITUDES EXPRESSED TOWARDS SERGEY STANISHEV
(JULY – NOVEMBER 2009 AND MARCH – NOVEMBER 2010)

high interest

medium interest

low interest

The size of the bubbles represents the average daily reach of the respective medium

Trud 2010

Standart 2009

Monitor 2010

24 Chasa 2010

Sega 2009

Standart 2010

Trud 2009

Novinar 2010

24 Chasa 2009

Sega 2010

Novinar 2009

Monitor 2009

Dnevnik 2009

Dnevnik 2010

negative attitude

neutral attitude

positive attitude
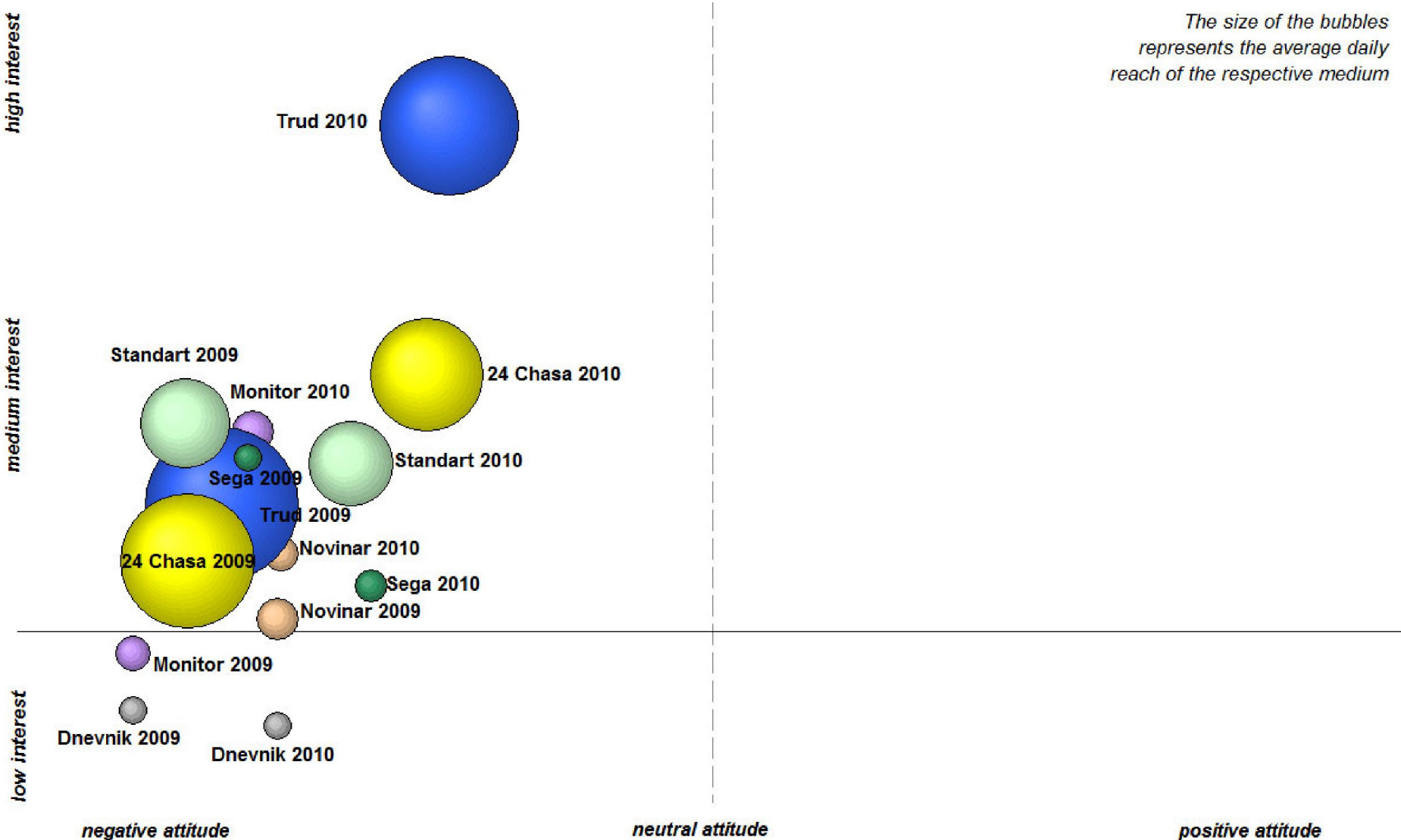
ATTITUDES EXPRESSED TOWARDS GEORGI PARVANOV
(JULY – NOVEMBER 2009 AND MARCH – NOVEMBER 2010)

The size of the bubbles represents the average daily reach of the respective medium

high interest

medium interest

low interest

Trud 2010

Standart 2010

24 Chasa 2010

Monitor 2010

Sega 2010

Novinar 2010

Dnevnik 2010

Trud 2009

Standart 2009

Monitor 2009

Sega 2009

Novinar 2009

Dnevnik 2009

24 Chasa 2009

negative attitude

neutral attitude

positive attitude
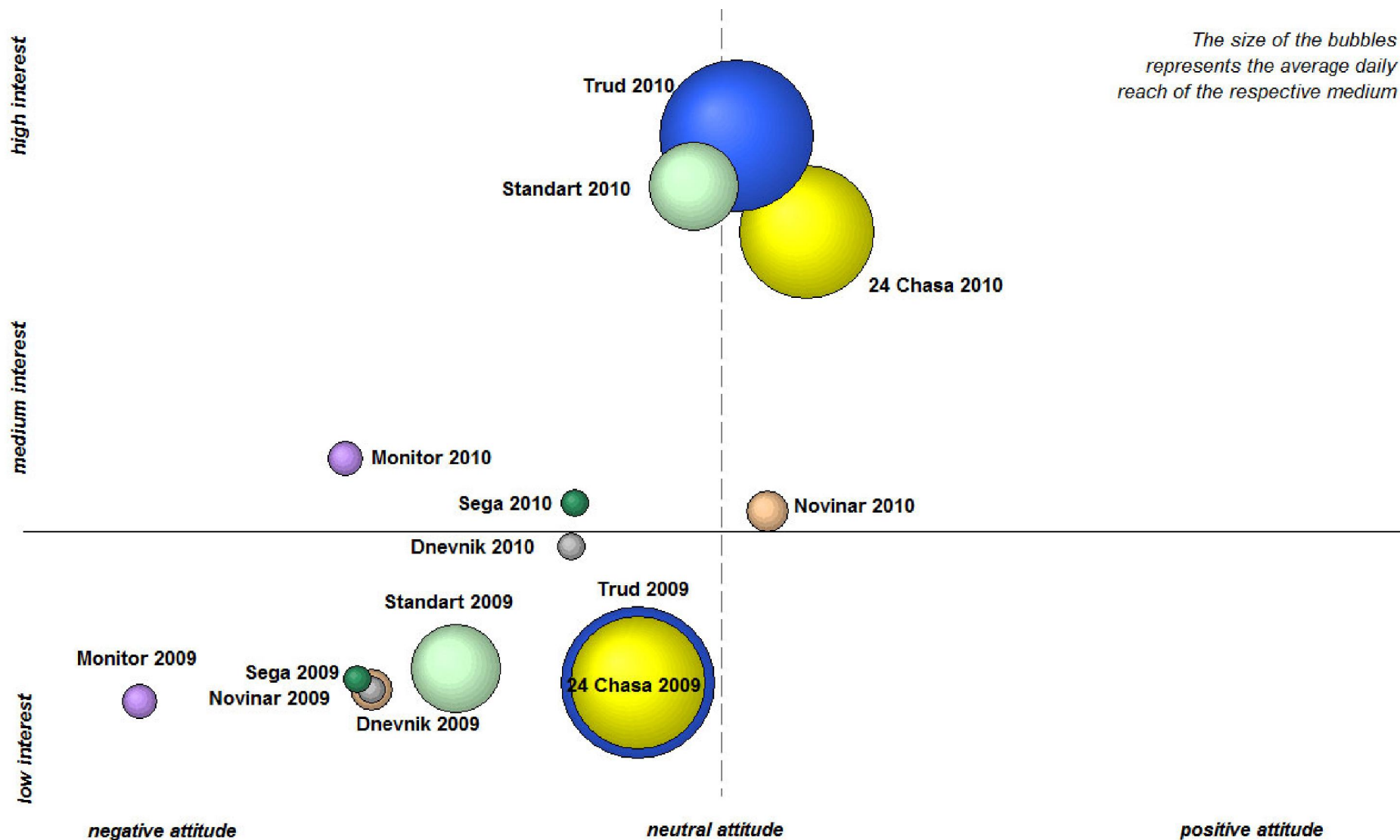
ATTITUDES EXPRESSED TOWARDS GERB
(JULY – NOVEMBER 2009 AND MARCH – NOVEMBER 2010)

high interest

medium interest

low interest

The size of the bubbles represents the average daily reach of the respective medium

Trud 2010

Sega 2010

Standart 2010

24 Chasa 2010

Dnevnik 2010

Novinar 2010

24 Chasa 2009

Standart 2009

Sega 2009

Novinar 2009

Dnevnik 2009

Monitor 2010

Monitor 2009

negative attitude

neutral attitude

positive attitude

ATTITUDES EXPRESSED TOWARDS BSP
(JULY – NOVEMBER 2009 AND MARCH – NOVEMBER 2010)

high interest

medium interest

low interest

The size of the bubbles represents the average daily reach of the respective medium

Trud 2010

24 Chasa 2010

Standart 2010

Monitor 2010

24 Chasa 2009

Standart 2009

Sega 2010

Novinar 2010

Sega 2009

Dnevnik 2010

Novinar 2009

Dnevnik 2009

Monitor 2009

negative attitude

neutral attitude

positive attitude

ATTITUDES EXPRESSED TOWARDS DPS
(JULY – NOVEMBER 2009 AND MARCH – NOVEMBER 2010)

The size of the bubbles represents the average daily reach of the respective medium

high interest

medium interest

low interest

Trud 2010

24 Chasa 2010

Sega 2010

Standart 2010

24 Chasa 2009

Trud 2009

Sega 2009

Standart 2009

Dnevnik 2009

Novinar 2010

Dnevnik 2010

Novinar 2009

negative attitude

neutral attitude

positive attitude
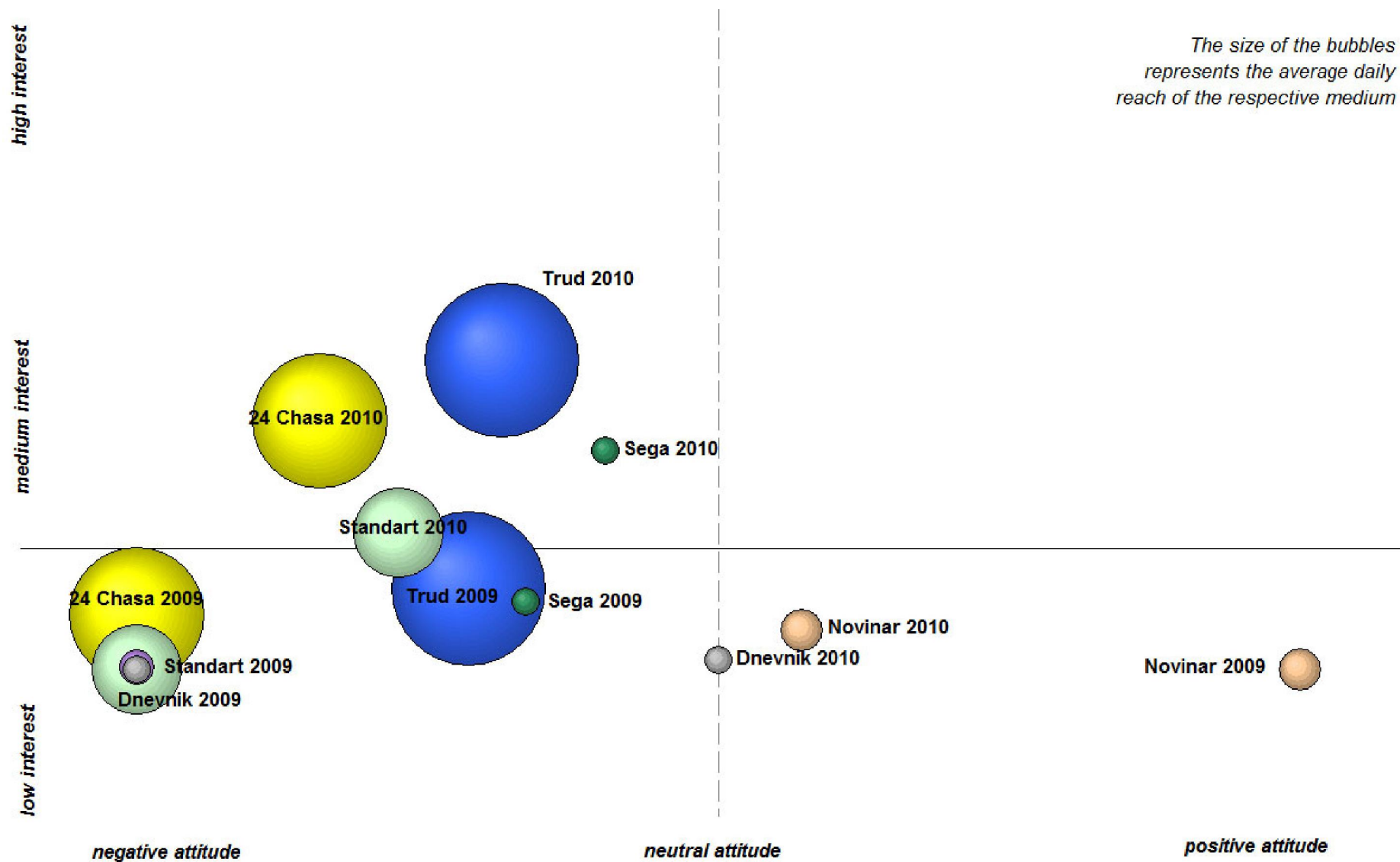
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