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Corruption and Freedom of the Press

Media, Mafia, and Monopoly in Bulgaria

Polia Alexandrova

July 17 2001

Sofia

Life used to be much simpler for Bulgarian journalists. Ten years ago, to talk about "free speech" would have seemed either tragic or laughable, so oxymoronic did the term seem. Everybody knew that the news media were little more than instruments of the Communist Party

propaganda machine. There were two state-owned television programs and two radio programs, all censored directly by the *Komitet za Televiziya i Radio* [the Television and Radio Committee] and the Communist Party. Under Articles 146-148 of the Bulgarian Penal Code, those who published "defamatory" material against government officials or representatives of the government faced up to five years in prison.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Bulgaria's state prosecutors have gradually interpreted these laws less broadly, allowing the press to criticize government officials far more than would have been possible before independence. On January 12, 2000, after 10 years of debate, Prime Minister Ivan Kostov's initiative to lessen the penalty for publishing defamatory material was signed into law. Under the terms of the new code, only truly libelous material would be punished, and then only with a fine of



A Press in Transition: Bulgarian men read the paper on election night (Photo: AFP)

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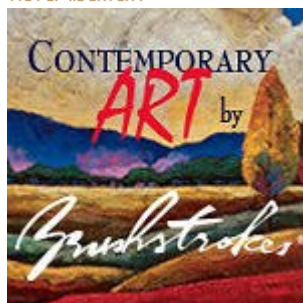
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between 5,000-15,000 leva [US\$2,500-\$7500]. Yet journalists working in Bulgaria today face a different, but no less perilous, set of challenges.

Today, it is much harder to see where the lines are drawn. A triangle of corruption blurs the lines between business, the mafia, and the government, leaving many journalists stuck in the middle. In a poll conducted last year by the Sofia office of Transparency International, a Berlin-based corruption watchdog, close to 90 percent of respondents viewed 12 broad aspects of Bulgarian society as "particularly corrupt."

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This circumscribes the press in unexpected ways. When Georgi Toshev, a journalist for Sofia's independent newspaper *Dnevnik* and former adviser to the Ministry of Culture in Sofia, recently published a series of investigative reports into the alleged criminal activities of the brother of a highly placed official in the Bulgarian government, he created a sensation—and difficulties for his employers. Toshev's discovery that the official's brother, who has lived in the United States for more than 20 years, had been tried in absentia for smuggling made headlines for weeks, though the case was quickly dismissed for lack of evidence. Momchil Milev, writing for the independent weekly *Capital*, also took up the story. Toshev, writing for *Dnevnik*, and Milev wrote stories outlining what they described as a sordid history of criminal activities and connections spanning 20 years and two continents. Immediately after the articles first appeared in *Dnevnik* and *Capital*, the Bulgarian prosecutor's office ordered a detailed audit of the papers' financial records, as well as those of their biggest advertisers. *Dnevnik*'s editors proclaimed the audits were an attempt to silence them and vowed to continue the investigation.

When the audits uncovered nothing unusual, Toshev says the prosecutor's office began threatening him and Milev personally.

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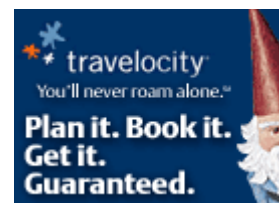
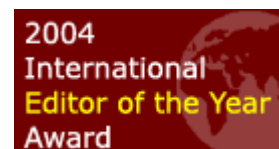
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"Somebody from the prosecutor's office called me at my home and told me to stop writing on this case or they would start an immediate audit of all my family properties," Georgi Toshev said in an interview. "That same week I also learned that [former] Prime Minister Ivan Kostov himself called Minister of Culture Ema Moskova and asked her to drop the case."

It wasn't the first time Toshev's stories had drawn fire. "In 1996," Toshev remembers, "I was working for [the independent Sofia newspaper] *Kontinent Daily*, and together with my colleagues Iovo Nikolov and Violeta Simeonova, I began investigating reports that former Prime Minister Zhan Videnov's main adviser Krassimir Raidovski was working with the Greek mafia in Bulgaria and donating the money back to the Socialist Party's political campaign. After publishing a story about this, somebody called my mother and threatened her, saying that her son would never work as a journalist again. My colleague Violeta Simeonova was publicly called 'a political prostitute.' "

Harassing telephone calls are often the least of journalists' worries. Two years ago, an organized crime ring published the names of 23 journalists "sentenced to death" for their meddling work.

And indeed, *Capital's* coverage had landed its reporters in trouble before. On June 27, 1999, Alexei Lazarov, a muckraking reporter for the paper, suffered multiple knife wounds and a broken leg when unknown assailants attacked him. Despite a firestorm in the press following the incident, not a single suspect has been apprehended in the case.

Sadly, Lazarov's case seemed all too familiar to Bulgarians. According to the Ministry of Information, 68 journalists have been killed in Bulgaria over the past 70 years. Though no journalists have died from attacks in the past 10 years, journalists here can still rattle off a list of colleagues attacked in the course of doing their job.

In October 1995, a group of men seriously wounded Svetlana Batalova, a correspondent for *24 Tchassa* from the town of Doupnitsa. The police caught four of her attackers, but five years later, the courts have still not sentenced them. The reasons behind their attack are still not public.

In May 1998, an unidentified man threw acid in Anna Zarkova's face as she was on her way to work, leaving her badly disfigured and blind in her left eye. As crime editor for the labor-affiliated *Trud*, Zarkova had written a series of pieces exposing organized-crime rings in Bulgaria. Her case attracted international attention, and she received a series of awards for her work.

The attention Zarkova's case attracted has done little to protect Bulgarian journalists. In early 1999, a disgruntled young man attacked Eftim Ushev, a journalist for *Zlatogradski Vestnik*, after

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Ushev published a story implicating the young man's father in criminal behavior.

And mafiosi wishing to influence the Bulgarian press need not always resort to methods as crude as violence. Last year, the Bulgarian Department of the Interior extradited Michael Chorny, a Russian citizen, to his native country because of his connections to the Russian mafia and illegal international operations. Despite his extradition, Chorny continues to operate three Bulgarian newspapers: *Standart News*, *7 Dni Sport*, and *Planeta Sport*. These give him ample opportunity to promote his other major asset, the popular soccer team Levski.

Against such a background, it is easy to understand how the entrance of international media conglomerates might afford Bulgarian journalists more freedom and protection. Today, international companies own the two most popular television stations in Sofia. Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation owns BTV. And Antena, an Athens-based media company, owns Nova Televiziya.

Bulgaria's two largest newspapers, *24 Tchassa* and *Trud*, are both owned by German publishing giant WAZ. This unusual situation gives WAZ a near-complete control of circulation and advertising revenues in the Bulgarian newspaper market. In effect, the old state newspaper monopoly has given way to a foreign corporate monopoly.

Other newspapers have mounted a series of legal challenges to WAZ's complete control, but with no effect. Perhaps more than any other paper, *Monitor Daily* has been at the forefront of this legal battle. After several unsuccessful lawsuits, *Monitor Daily* now launches its attacks against *Trud* and *24 Tchassa* from its editorial pages, accusing the two foreign-owned publications of spreading untruthful information.

Although the old state media monopoly has been dismantled, and government censorship has become a thing of the past, censorship of a more insidious form still exists. International media giants now provide an alternative to state-sponsored news. But even these new players depend on the relatively small local advertising market. According to *Capital*, last year total Bulgarian expenditures on advertising amounted to only US\$78.9 million. This figure seems paltry compared to the US\$233 billion McCann-Erikson, an international advertising agency, estimates companies in the United States spent in the same year. And since the mafia has connections to many of the biggest advertisers, cash-starved newspaper editors often think twice before publishing a mob exposé.

The dearth of advertising revenue in Bulgaria also means that journalists are often paid slender salaries and do not always have the equipment they need to work. As a result, many succumb to the temptation to accept kickbacks from corporations in

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exchange for favorable coverage. This has become such a widespread practice that it is not uncommon to hear Bulgarians grumbling about "bought journalists" over their morning paper.

Even if economic pressures do not lead a journalist to censor herself, the threat of bodily harm might. This is especially true in a country where suspicion of the police and the legal system abounds: According to a recent survey by Transparency International, 90 percent of Bulgarians view the police and the judicial system as "particularly corrupt."

If journalists are to help sunder the corrupt union between media, mafia, and monopolies in Bulgaria, they must have the support of the public at large and the judicial system. In Bulgaria, as elsewhere, breaking the power of organized crime is a necessary precondition for a truly free press. ■

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