

**FROM SOCIALIST HUMANISM TO NEOLIBERAL POPULISM: TWO REGIMES OF  
MEDIA IN LATE AND POST-SOCIALIST EUROPE**

by

Martin Yoanis Marinos

Bachelor of Arts, State University of New York, 2005

Master of Arts, Florida Atlantic University, 2008

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the

Kenneth P. Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

University of Pittsburgh

2016

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH  
DIETRICH SCHOOL OF ARTS AND  
SCIENCES

This dissertation was presented

by

Martin Marinos

It was defended on

April 29, 2016

and approved by

John Beverley, Distinguished Professor, Hispanic Languages & Literatures

John Poulakos, Associate Professor, Department of Communication

Lynn Clarke, Assistant Professor, Department of Communication

Dissertation Advisor: Brenton Malin, Associate Professor, Department of Communication

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# **FROM SOCIALIST HUMANISM TO NEOLIBERAL POPULISM: TWO REGIMES OF MEDIA IN LATE AND POST-SOCIALIST EUROPE**

Martin Marinos, PhD

University of Pittsburgh, 2016

This dissertation explores the central role media played in the redefinition of socialist culture following Stalin's death and explains how Bulgaria's transition from socialist to post-socialist media has hindered the emergence of a democratic civil society. Through a multi-method approach that engages with both primary sources in print and interviews with local journalists, politicians, and media experts, this project uses Bulgaria as a case study in order to offer a historical account of the post-1989 (neo)liberalization of media and its role in the proliferation of xenophobic, far-right discourses. The first part of the project seeks to explain how and why mass communication and especially the new medium of television intervened in the cultural and political changes that accompanied post-Stalinist socialism. I trace how, starting in the 1960s, high culture became a major feature of Bulgarian media. Through the television screen, opera, ballet, poetry and theatre entered the Bulgarian home. The goal of this ambitious endeavor was first to assist the population, rural for the most part, to achieve the socialist humanist vision of a holistically developed personality and second, to frame socialist consumption not simply as the accumulation of material goods, but also as the enjoyment of high cultural products. The second part of the dissertation, examines the construction of the media sphere after 1989. It shows that the conceptualization of civil society as separate from the sphere of the economy obscures the multitude of ways through which neoliberal capitalism subsumes mass media and corrupts the

public sphere. The dissertation argues that one of the most detrimental outcomes of this degenerated media field is the ongoing growth of the far-right political parties and movements.

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## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I would like to express my gratitude to the Department of Communication at the University of Pittsburgh. I would like to thank Dr. Lynn Clarke, Dr. John Poulakos and Dr. John Beverley for their invaluable input in preparing this thesis and for their guidance and openness throughout my graduate studies at the University of Pittsburgh. Without the support and direction of my advisor, Dr. Brenton Malin, I would not have been able to navigate the broad and difficult terrain of this dissertation. More importantly, I thank him for his friendship, kindness and selflessness. I am greatly indebted to the fifty journalists and media workers who took the time to share with me the values and frustrations of their profession. Finally, I would like to thank my family and friends, many of whom continue to struggle with the increasingly more unpredictable Eastern European past and the seemingly eternal neoliberal present.

## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

As Soviet-style socialism fades away into history, in the United States the importance of Eastern Europe also recedes. As with everything else in a world dominated by capitalist values, the universal signifier of money, the “god-term” as Kenneth Burke once called it, is the best indicator of this decline. In the last decade, the Title VIII program of the US Department of State, which supports language training and research on Eastern Europe and Eurasia, has dramatically cut funding for programs that focus on the region. In 2013-2014, the American Council for Learned Societies suspended all competitions in Eastern European Studies. Arizona State University, Indiana University, University of Illinois as well as the Woodrow Wilson Center Kennan Institute have all suspended long-standing programs and competitions linked to Eastern Europe. Despite the crisis in Ukraine, which resuscitated Manichean Cold War paradigms, it is quite obvious that the Middle East and North Africa are the priority of US knowledge production. At the same time, NATO and EU’s expansion into Central Europe, the Baltics and the Balkans, questions the very existence of the category of “Eastern Europe.”

In a world interconnected by flows of capital, people and media, the area studies approach to knowledge production in the US academe requires transformation. Nevertheless, today more than ever there are good reasons to revisit the historical legacy of Eastern Europe. The political transformations of 1989 generated excitement and hope across the region and beyond. But the story of Eastern Europe did not close with a happy ending epitomized by the

integration of the area into a democratic and prosperous European Union. Instead, perpetual economic austerity and vile, nationalistic discourse and politics proliferate across the region. What went wrong?

The revolutions of 1989 were seen as a triumph of civil society against a “totalitarian” state. In fact, the events of 1989 were the main reason why the concept of civil society reemerged in intellectual discourses after a century of relative obscurity. But the post-1989 definition of the concept was different than its Hegelian and Marxist origins, as contemporary scholars delinked it from the sphere of economics altogether. For this reason, it is important to return to Eastern Europe in order to understand how this redefinition of the concept reflects what took place in the public sphere during the last quarter of a century. Specifically, Eastern Europe offers a unique opportunity to examine the construction of a commercial media system as the major component of a fledgling civil society. In 1989 media in Eastern Europe were 100 percent state owned. Only a few years later, state media were a small island in an ocean of commercial newspapers, radio and television. Thus, contemporary Eastern European media history resembles a “controlled experiment” in which the first variable to change after 1989 was media. What was the place of these media within the new definition of civil society and how much can we blame them for the current nationalist zeitgeist? Needless to say, this is a pressing question with implications beyond the former Eastern bloc, as right-wing populism, racism and xenophobia thrives in the west. In addition, marking the defects of the post-1989 conceptualizations of civil society and the shortcomings of commercial media can serve as a lesson to societies fighting for democracy and free media.

Looking at Eastern Europe also demonstrates a unique model of media that functioned for decades in ways that were drastically different than the global corporate media system of

today. Even a cursory look at the press from the socialist era, the books of socialist media producers and the conversations of media workers who began their careers during socialism, reveals that the widespread portrayal of socialist media as tools of propaganda and social control is far too simplistic. This dissertation explores the functions of socialist mass communications in order to set this historical record straight, while also taking an opportunity to learn about the ideas and practices of socialist media producers in ways that could be useful in the construction of the democratic and socialist media spheres of the future.

The historian of the Balkans, Maria Todorova explains that Bulgaria “has been sorely underrepresented in studies on Eastern Europe, and at the same time, gratuitously represented in overall generalizations.”<sup>1</sup> This inattention is unfortunate, as Bulgaria offers an underappreciated opportunity to learn about media. There is no other country in Eastern Europe that has undergone more radical change when it comes to mass communications than Bulgaria. Before 1989 Bulgaria imported Soviet films at rates far higher than any other member of the Eastern bloc. In contrast, in the 1990s, Bulgaria became the Eastern European country most receptive to American movies. It transitioned from one of the most tightly controlled socialist media systems to the most deregulated and commercialized ones after 1989. As such, a case study on Bulgaria provides a clear view of the differences between socialist and post-socialist media. In addition, as the easternmost region of the EU and as the country with the largest autochthonous Muslim minority in the union, Bulgaria offers an important perspective on the role of media in ethnic and religious strife. Finally, as the poorest country of the twenty-eight members of the EU, while also the one with the most neoliberalized economy, Bulgaria provides a useful case study of the

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<sup>1</sup> Maria Todorova, “Introduction: The Process of Remembering Communism,” in *Remembering Communism: Genres of Representation*, ed. Maria Todorova (New York: Social Science Research Council, 2010), 17.

relationship between poverty and the creation of business models of media that thrive in such an environment.

In taking up these ideas, this dissertation explores the central role media played in the redefinition of socialist culture following Stalin's death and explains how Bulgaria's transition from socialist to post-socialist media has hindered the emergence of a democratic civil society. Through a multi-method approach that engages with both primary sources in print and interviews with local journalists, politicians, and media experts, this project uses Bulgaria as a case study in order to offer a historical account of the post-1989 (neo)liberalization of media and its role in the proliferation of xenophobic, far-right discourses.

## **1.1 CIVIL SOCIETY REDEFINED**

As I suggest above, it is held as common knowledge that Eastern European socialist media were mere messengers of the communist party's directives to the population. Known as the "transmission belt" theory, this belief features as a major component of the broader interpretation of socialism as a "totalitarian" political system. According to this paradigm, the governments in the former Eastern bloc regulated every aspect of human life through state-controlled media, surveillance and political repression. Alexei Yurchak points out that the hegemony of this interpretation stems from the fact that knowledge of Soviet socialism "has been produced either outside of, or in retrospect to, socialism in contexts dominated by antisocialist, nonsocialist or post-socialist political, moral, and cultural agendas and truths."<sup>2</sup> Indeed, to this day scholarship

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<sup>2</sup> Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 6.

on socialist media remains overshadowed by Cold War legacies. This complicates the task of the media historian because the omnipresent argument that socialist media were simply tools of control and state propaganda renders any research endeavor meaningless from the perspective of many researchers. One of the most prolific scholars of Eastern European media, Peter Gross, claims that in Bulgaria, even after 1989 civil society remained a “nonexistent” and “imaginary concept.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, communist officials issued orders, media channeled them to the population and the citizens obeyed. What is there to study?

According to this hegemonic approach to Eastern European modern history, in 1989, dubbed “the year of miracles,” the situation changed radically. “Citizenship restored” declared Vladimir Tismaneanu, one of the most prolific political scientists of Eastern Europe in US academia and an appointee of the former Romanian President Traian Bănescu to head the Presidential Commission for the Study of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania. According to Tismaneanu, the revolutions of 1989 represent “the triumph of civic dignity and political morality over ideological monism, bureaucratic cynicism, and police-state dictatorship.”<sup>4</sup> To this day, this line of reasoning remains the dominant narrative of the history of contemporary Eastern Europe in both scholarly and journalistic writing. It is a story of state repression and political violence defeated by a rejuvenated civil society guided by the wisdom of dissidents such as Adam Michnik, Václav Havel, Lech Wałęsa and many others.

This dissertation complicates the Manichean narrative of “bad communism” defeated by “good liberal democracy” in which “civil society” figures as the main protagonist of history. The first part of the project revisits the change in socialist media during developed socialism through

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Gross, *Entangled Evolutions: Media and Democratization in Eastern Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002): 22. Quoting Dina Iordanova, “Bulgaria. Provisional Rules and Directional Changes: Restructuring of National TV,” *Javnost/The Public* 2, no.3 (1995): 19-32.

<sup>4</sup> Vladimir Tismaneanu, “Citizenship Restored,” *Journal of Democracy* 21, no. 1 (2010): 128.

a focus on the educational and cultural functions of mass communications in the development of the post-Stalinist, socialist personality. As such, it offers an account that challenges the conception of socialist media as mere tools of propaganda and social control. The second, larger part of the dissertation, examines the construction of the media sphere after 1989. It shows that the conceptualization of civil society as separate from the sphere of the economy obscures the multitude of ways through which neoliberal capitalism has corrupted the post-socialist public sphere. Hence, the study offers a long overdue account of civil society during and after socialism, that provides a perspective diametrically opposed to the hegemonic liberal narrative.

Socialist media had cultural and educational functions that became a priority during late socialism. The omission of this part of the story prevents the examination of the socialist media system as a different model of communication that was in some ways more committed to the public than the entertainment media of today. The conceptualization of civil society as an entity independent of the economy fails to account for the political economy of media and the many ways in which free market corporate media prevent the construction of a democratic civil society in Eastern Europe.

After 1989, in Bulgaria and in Eastern Europe as a whole, the concept of civil society emerged as the major antagonist of the state. To this day, social conflict, protest and political campaigning continue to be framed along the “civil society” against “the state” line. The major shortcoming of this post-socialist formula is the fact that it ignores the repressive and anti-democratic tendencies of private capital. The idealization of civil society as autonomous from the economic sphere fails to account capital’s relentless expansion into all spheres of life and “into

every nook and cranny of the inhabited world.”<sup>5</sup> Civil society is not a sphere excluded from the flows of capital and there is no better area to examine the interactions between civil society and economics than mass media. This dissertation examines civil society precisely from the angle of its major channels—the network of mass media. In examining the political economy of mass communications and the media history of Bulgaria, this study offers a different approach to the study of civil society that not only shows its connection to the economy, but also demonstrates how the commercialization and monopolization of mass media has led to a degenerated public sphere and the proliferation of xenophobia and racism.

There are various definitions of the concept of “civil society,” but most scholars agree that it was Hegel who first distinguished the state from society and claimed that civil society was a product of the modern world.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, pre-modern notions of the concept, such as its Latin translation *societas civilis* or Aristotle’s *koinonia politike* did not suggest that society and the state were two different spheres.<sup>7</sup> Civil society encompassed the sphere of citizens’ economic activity and was supposed to be the engine that could overthrow slavery and feudalism.<sup>8</sup> In his *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville paid special attention to this realm as he was deeply impressed by what he called the “spirit of association” of Americans.<sup>9</sup> He marveled at the love of Americans for forming voluntary, private groups. “In my view, nothing deserves to attract our attention more than the intellectual and moral associations of America,” he wrote.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital and the Crises of Capitalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), vi.

<sup>6</sup> Maria Todorova, *Bones of Contention: The Living Archive of Vasil Levski and the Making of Bulgaria’s National Hero* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2009), 97.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Isaac Kramnick, introduction to *Democracy in America*, by Alexis de Tocqueville, trans. Gerald Bevan (London: Penguin Books, 2003), xxx.

<sup>10</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Gerald Bevan (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 600.



He saw these groups as an antidote to both the “tyranny of the majority” exercised by the government and the excessive individualism of Americans.<sup>11</sup>

Karl Marx was much less enthusiastic about civil society than Tocqueville. According to him, Hegel prioritized the state over civil society. Instead Marx argued that civil society, or the “material conditions of life,” were the basis for the state.<sup>12</sup> According to Marx, “family and civil society are the premises of the state; they are the genuinely active elements, but in speculative philosophy things are inverted...Family and civil society constitute *themselves* as the state. They are the driving force. According to Hegel, they are, on the contrary, *produced* by the actual idea” [Marx’s italics].<sup>13</sup> Thus, in his demystification of Hegel’s notion of civil society, Marx conflated it with the state, exemplified best in his famous quote from the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* that “the executive of the modern State is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie.”<sup>14</sup> In this way, Marx interpreted Hegel’s *bürgerliche gesellschaft* as a synonym for civil society.<sup>15</sup> As Althusser notes, because the late Marx developed the concepts of “forces of production” and “relations of production,” the term “civil society” as “the world of individual economic behavior and its ideological origin,” disappeared from his work.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Kramnick, xxx.

<sup>12</sup> Karl Marx, “Marx on the History of His Opinions,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert Tucker (New York: Norton & Company, 1978), 4.

<sup>13</sup> Karl Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert Tucker (New York: Norton & Company, 1978), 16.

<sup>14</sup> Karl Marx, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert Tucker (New York: Norton & Company, 1978), 475.

<sup>15</sup> Todorova, *Bones of Contention*, 98.

<sup>16</sup> Louis Althusser, “Contradiction and Overdetermination,” in *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso 2005), 110.

In the early twentieth century, Antonio Gramsci focused on the concepts of civil society and hegemony to an extent that no other great revolutionary Marxist thinker did.<sup>17</sup> However, his vision of the concept was much more complex than Marx's, because Gramsci "did not succeed in finding a single, wholly satisfactory conception of 'civil society' or the State."<sup>18</sup> In some parts of his texts Gramsci defines civil society similarly to Marx's conception of the term as synonymous with the state. In a passage that seems more pertinent to our times than it was for the early twentieth century, Gramsci writes:

The ideas of the Free Trade movement are based on a theoretical error whose practical origin is not hard to identify; they are based on a distinction between political society and civil society, which is made into and presented as an organic one, whereas in fact it is merely methodological. Thus it is asserted that economic activity belongs to civil society, and that the State must not intervene to regulate it. But since in actual reality civil society and State are one and the same, it must be made clear that *laissez-faire* too is a form of State "regulation," introduced and maintained by legislative and coercive means.<sup>19</sup>

Yet in other places in his *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci defines the concept not strictly in economic terms, but as a "political and cultural hegemony of a social group over the entire society, as ethical content of the State."<sup>20</sup> In this sense, it seems that according to Gramsci, culture plays a crucial role and civil society appears as a force that operates also at the level of superstructure as a producer of consent through various institutions, such as family, education, and syndicates. Althusser is one Marxist scholar who advances this interpretation of Gramsci's thought and claims that, since Marx and Engels, the Italian communist thinker is the only theorist

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<sup>17</sup> Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Smith, Introduction to "State and Civil Society," by Antonio Gramsci, in *The Prison Notebooks*, ed. by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Smith (New York: International Publishers, 2010), 206.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 207

<sup>19</sup> Antonio Gramsci, "Notes on Politics," in *The Prison Notebooks*, ed. by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Smith (New York: International Publishers, 2010), 160.

<sup>20</sup> Hoare and Smith, 208.

who attempted to elaborate “*the theory of the particular essence of the specific elements of the superstructure*” [Althusser’s italics].<sup>21</sup>

Hegel, Tocqueville, Marx and Gramsci were some of the most important thinkers who theorized the concept of civil society. Needless to say, they were not the only ones. But what is notable is that with the exception of Gramsci, most of these discussions were a part of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It was not until the crisis of Eastern European socialism that this concept took center stage again. As Todorova explains:

If we look at the historical genealogy of the concept, it is remarkable that after its early use in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it was largely abandoned, to re-emerge powerfully only in the 1970s, notably within the context of the crisis of the Eastern European socialist regimes. It is precisely the specificity of the East European context that effected an interpretation of civil society such that the very notion as to Eastern Europe in the 1980s was premised on a complete opposition between society and the state, and the rhetorical claims of “antipolitics” were taken seriously.<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, the “antipolitics” of the renowned Eastern European dissidents was the major impetus for resurrecting the concept of civil society after a long period of dormancy. But in their conceptual framework, civil society was in a stark opposition to the state, in a way that was perhaps comparable only to Tocqueville’s vision, but even more extreme. Civil society was the carrier of morality and as such it was the basis for decent politics. This argument was prevalent in dissidents’ writing across the region, but it was perhaps most explicit in Vaclav Havel’s work. “If your heart is in the right place and you have good taste, not only will you pass muster in politics, you are destined for it. If you are modest and do not lust for power, not only are you suited to politics, you absolutely belong there,” Havel wrote.<sup>23</sup> In this way, not only did civil society figure as the precondition for a good state, but “civil” was understood literally as polite,

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<sup>21</sup> Althusser, “Contradiction and Overdetermination,” 114.

<sup>22</sup> Todorova, *Bones of Contention*, 99-100.

<sup>23</sup> Vaclav Havel, *Summer Meditations*, (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing, 1993), 11-12.

courteous and honest. The lust for state power, but also for money, was supposed to be countered by the morality embedded in the virtuous civil society. So firm was this moral belief in civil society, in which people developed virtues, invulnerable to the state, the system or the economy, that Havel even went as far as to argue that a nurse does not need to be paid well to be respectful to her patients.<sup>24</sup>

The rejuvenation of the concept of civil society did not take place only on one side of the former Iron Curtain. In the West, this trend was perhaps best exemplified in the sudden rise of popularity of Jürgen Habermas. It was not a coincidence that *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* appeared in English in 1989, twenty-seven years after its publication in German. Craig Calhoun, the editor of one of the most comprehensive volumes on Jürgen Habermas's thought, recounts that the events in Eastern Europe and China in 1989 turned a conference dedicated to the translation of Habermas' book into something "more than a purely abstract, academic undertaking."<sup>25</sup> The parallels between Habermas' account of the emergence of the Western bourgeois public sphere that confronted the absolutist state and the Eastern European civil society that resisted the "totalitarian" state appealed to social scientists on both sides of the former global divide. In addition, Habermas' definition of civil society echoed the discourse of the Eastern European intellectuals:

What is meant by "civil society" today, in contrast to its usage in the Marxist tradition, no longer includes the economy as constituted by private law and steered through markets in labor, capital, and commodities. Rather its institutional core comprises those nongovernmental and non-economic connections and voluntary associations that anchor the communication structures of the public sphere in the society component of the lifeworld. Civil society is composed of those more or less spontaneously emergent associations, organizations, and movements that, attuned to how societal problems resonate in the private life spheres, distill and transmit such reactions in amplified form to

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>25</sup> Craig Calhoun, "Introduction: Habermas and the Public Sphere," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 1992), 8.

the public sphere. The core of civil society comprises a network of associations that institutionalizes problem-solving discourses on questions of general interest inside the framework of organized public spheres.<sup>26</sup>

Similarly to the Eastern European dissidents, Habermas draws a strong opposition between the state and civil society and treats civil society as more important than constitutional guarantees, because the “communication structures of the public sphere must rather be kept intact by an energetic civil society.”<sup>27</sup> In this way, Habermas’s later work draws a much firmer division between the state and civil society than his seminal study on the bourgeois public sphere in Western Europe.

The scale of the fascination with civil society in the post-1989 world was impressive, especially when one bears in mind that the term was not a topic of systematic discussion for more than a century prior to its resurrection. All of a sudden the major academic journals on Eastern Europe were inundated by discussions about the role of civil society in “democratization.” But the influence reached far beyond academe. After 1989, George Soros, a former student of philosopher Karl Popper, launched the “Open Society Foundations” (OSF) to assist the countries in Eastern Europe in their transition to liberal democracy. Directly inspired by Popper’s book *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, in which the philosopher identified the teleological historicist thought of Plato, Marx and Hegel’s as a source of “totalitarianism,” OSF’s major goal was, and continues to be, funding civil society groups and promoting democracy. In the 1990s, OSF became the largest private donor of funds for NGOs and other similar civil society entities in Eastern Europe and today it is the second largest philanthropic organization in the US after the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. In other words, the discourse of civil society

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<sup>26</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 1992), 367.

<sup>27</sup> Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 369.

did not only stir academic discussion, but it also had tangible and lasting economic and political effects in Eastern Europe.

This study provides a different approach to civil society than the hegemonic interpretation of the past three decades that dissociates it from the economy. The theorization of civil society as antagonistic to the state and as disconnected from the economy distorts the understanding of both the situation of the public sphere during socialism as well as its post-socialist transformation.

In regards to Eastern European socialism, Habermas writes that in the “totalitarian societies of Bureaucratic socialism...a panoptic state not only directly controls the bureaucratically desiccated public sphere, it also undermines the private basis of this public sphere.”<sup>28</sup> Habermas is quite explicit that “robust civil society can develop *only* in the context of a liberal political culture.” [my italics].<sup>29</sup> The problem with this conceptualization, prevalent in the work of many other authors at the time, is that it presents the interaction between civil society and the state one-dimensionally with no room for a more complex interpretation of this relationship under socialism.

The first part of this project offers a very different narrative of the relationship between the state and the people in socialist Bulgaria through a focus on media and especially the medium of television. The first chapter provides a media history of modern Bulgaria that ends with a discussion of the Leninist theoretical underpinnings of the socialist media sphere that positioned the socialist journalist as an agent of social justice. In this part of the project, I argue that through letters and phone calls people interacted with socialist journalists in a process that often led to the resolution of certain social problems. Although there were limits to this interaction, such as the

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 369

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 371.

denial of criticism of socialism per se or the leadership of the country, these extensive interactions between the public and state media should not be dismissed. Thus, in this section of chapter one, this study follows Todorova's suggestion that "instead of denying the existence of a public sphere under state socialism, one should better speak of the specific characteristic deformations of civil society and the public sphere under different regimes."<sup>30</sup> But the major contribution of the first part of the project is the advancement of a new narrative of the functions of socialist media.

The widely accepted representation of Eastern European socialist media as purveyors of propaganda assigns to them a static, atemporal and uniform existence. As a result, crucial historical nuances and experiences remain unexplored. I argue that Eastern European media entered a transition period after the liberalization following Stalin's death. The first two chapters explain how Bulgarian media moved from a popular mobilization stage extolling the selfless work of the masses in the 1950s to a socialist humanist stage focused on "man" a decade later. Influenced by the early works of Marx, socialist humanism sought to emphasize the dialectical wholeness of a personality active in all areas of human activity: work, public duties, science, culture, entertainment. Mass communications, especially the new medium of television, were major purveyors of this ideology. The goal of media producers was to counter the legacy of the Stalinist "cult of personality" and respond to the unintended outcomes of the crash industrialization of the first post-war decade. Media were mobilized to frame socialist consumption not simply as the accumulation of material goods, but also as the enjoyment of high cultural products. Thus, through the television screen, opera, ballet, poetry and theatre entered

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<sup>30</sup> Todorova, *Bones of Contention*, 195.

the homes of working people. In this section, I historicize this media transformation and its significance for socialist societies.

As such, this part of the dissertation is a critical intervention in the history of Eastern European socialism that breaks away from the tired Cold War binary. It also offers a unique view of the workings of a mass communication system different than the globally hegemonic corporate system of today. Hence, it provides a productive contrast and opens a possibility for theorizing alternative models of media. Finally, it provides a perspective from “the East” on the question of humanism. It constitutes a concrete historical analysis of what took place in the socialist public sphere once Eastern European thinkers turned to the early works of Marx.

As Althusser explains, there was an “epistemological break” in Marx’s thought that took place in 1845 with the publication of *The German Ideology*. After this break, and a transitional period (1845-1857), Marx’s “mature” stage began with the founding of historical and dialectical materialism.<sup>31</sup> In his mature works, Marx launched a radical critique of “the theoretical pretensions of every philosophical humanism” and defined humanism as an ideology.<sup>32</sup> As an “ideological” concept humanism did not provide a means to know a set of existing relations. “In a particular (ideological) mode, it designates some existents, but it does not give us their essences.”<sup>33</sup> Thus, for Althusser the turn away in the Soviet Union from Marx’s “scientific” concepts, such as social formation, productive forces, relations of production, and superstructures, to “ideological” concepts, such as alienation, constituted the wrong type of de-Stalinization. For him this was not a revolutionary turn, but a mere “petty-bourgeois”

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<sup>31</sup> Louis Althusser, “Introduction: Today,” in *For Marx*, 33.

<sup>32</sup> Louis Althusser, “Marxism and Humanism,” in *For Marx*, 227.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.



inspiration.<sup>34</sup> As a leading proponent of anti-humanism, Althusser's vision clashed with the proliferation of New Left thinkers who did not see an epistemological break between the early and late Marx and who espoused radical humanism, such as Jean-Paul Sartre. This part of the dissertation provides an account of how socialist media producers envisioned socialist humanism and its role in mass communications. Unlike the largely academic debates in the West between humanists and anti-humanists, in Eastern Europe this issue had a profound effect on public policy, economics and the public sphere. As such, this part of the dissertation serves as a valuable contribution to a debate that is far from settled today.

The second part of the project turns to the radical transformations of media after the changes of 1989. The three chapters in this section demonstrate that the theoretical dislocation of civil society from the economic sphere has ignored, sometimes deliberately, the almost complete subjugation of the public sphere to the ideology of private capital. Jürgen Habermas's later work illustrates his own and others shift in this direction as they redefined the term as a sphere of nongovernmental and non-economic connections and voluntary associations.

There seems to be a significant change in Habermas's thought since he wrote *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. The second part of his book on the bourgeois public sphere contains criticisms of the degeneration of the public sphere that follow some of the culture industry arguments of the Frankfurt School. According to Habermas, after approximately a century of development (1775-1875), the bourgeois public sphere gradually lost its rational-critical functions while the "pseudo-public or sham-private world of culture of consumption" occupied its previous functions.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 239.

<sup>35</sup> Jürgen Habermas *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1989), 160.

According to the liberal model of the public sphere, the institutions of the public engaged in rational-critical debate were protected from interference by public authority by virtue of their being in the hands of private people. To the extent that they were commercialized and underwent economic, technological, and organizational concentration, however, they have turned during the last hundred years into complexes of societal power, so that precisely their remaining in private hands in many ways threatened the critical functions of publicist institutions.<sup>36</sup>

The criticisms by Habermas specifically targeting the mass media as the culprit that “transmogrified” the public sphere into a “sphere of culture of consumption” are numerous in this part of his work.<sup>37</sup> As Craig Calhoun points out, it was precisely his analysis of mass media and consumption that brought Habermas’s book closer to classical Marxism and “the older Frankfurt School’s analysis of the transition from liberal to ‘organized’ capitalism.”<sup>38</sup> But it is clearly noticeable that Habermas marginalizes this part of his early criticism as his later discussions of mass media range from a mere acknowledgement of their power to an outright dismissal of their negative effects on the public sphere. “The diffusion of information and points of view via effective broadcasting media is not the only thing that matters in public processes of communication, nor is it the most important,” he writes at one of these later moments.<sup>39</sup>

In *Between Facts and Norms*, Habermas essentially dilutes his criticism of mass media, advertising and consumption, despite the fact that he writes in the early 1990s when the influence of these phenomena was far stronger than thirty years earlier when he published his dissertation. However, Habermas dismisses the criticisms of the power of mass media launched by the “sociology of mass communications” and claims that “the more the audience is widened through mass communications, the more inclusive and the more abstract in form it becomes.”<sup>40</sup> He

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 162

<sup>38</sup> Calhoun, 6.

<sup>39</sup> Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 362.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 374.

admits that the public sphere depends on “sponsors,” but argues that “patrons or ‘like-minded’ sponsors do not necessarily reduce the authenticity of the public actors they support.”<sup>41</sup> His most critical remark on the mass media in this book is a half-hearted acknowledgement of certain negative effects of mass media such as “mixing of information with entertainment,” which is followed, however, by the following statement: “This is the *kernel* of truth in the theory of the culture industry” [my italics].<sup>42</sup> In sum, in respect to the role of mass media, Habermas transitions from following the arguments of the Frankfurt School in the early 1960s to acknowledging a mere “kernel” of their validity thirty years later.

Habermas’s shift of emphasis on the negative influence of mass media despite the fact that it was already clear in the 1990s that the commercialization and monopolization of the media sphere was only growing, is a good example of the problematic redefinition of civil society in the aftermath of the revolutions of 1989. The dissociation of the term from the economy and the marginalization of its Hegelian and Marxian characterizations led scholars such as Habermas to abandon criticisms of the political economy of media. Additionally, in the 1990s, Habermas was one of the most influential Western thinkers in Eastern Europe. Major Bulgarian media scholars, such as Alexander Kiossev, Ivaylo Znepolski and Georgi Lozanov cited him as an influence on their thought. This is not to say that Habermas was the only theorist who exerted influence in Eastern Europe (Marshall McLuhan—a thinker who also avoided political economic explanations of the media—was another prominent example). Nevertheless, his standing among Eastern European intellectuals and the shift in his own work, make his writing an excellent place to launch an analysis that shows that contemporary civil society cannot be dissociated from the ideological and financial flows of neoliberal capitalism.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 375.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 377.

Towards the end of his chapter on civil society Habermas concludes that we know little of the “internal operation and impact of the mass media” and adds that “even if we can make some reasonable conjectures about who has privileged access to the media and who has a share in media power, it is by no means clear how the mass media intervene in the diffuse circuits of communication in the political sphere.”<sup>43</sup> In essence, the second part of this dissertation tries to respond to these issues raised by Habermas using the Bulgarian media as a case study. Rather than fostering democracy, the emergence of corporate monopolies of developed post-socialism curtailed every attempt to create a democratic public sphere.

Chapter three demonstrates that the widespread assumption that anti-communist opinions emerged first in the private media, most notably the commercial press, is erroneous. In fact, it was state radio and television that became the purveyors of anti-communist ideology. Through their monopoly on the audience they were able to politicize the society and helped split it into two antagonistic blocs—anti-communist and ex-communist.

Chapter four and five focus on the commercialization of the Bulgarian press and television. The extreme outcome of this process was the emergence of what I call “neoliberal media populism.” Today’s Bulgarian media serve as a tribune for neoliberals that wish to ignore voices critical of free market practices; but they also embody neoliberalism in their institutional structures. Without any pretense that they will serve as “watchdogs” to check power or push authorities to act, media themselves have appropriated the functions of the state. The Rupert Murdoch owned News Corporations’ television station BTV, for instance, organizes campaigns to collect street trash and “clean the capital in one day,” it provides gold gilding for the national cathedral’s dome and it assists patients with life-saving medical treatments abroad. In this part of

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 378.

my dissertation, I theorize how these neoliberal media represent themselves as the servants of “the people” and as a substitute for the state.

This historical analysis of the development of Bulgarian media shows that in the highly deregulated commercial media market of post-socialism capital colonized civil society making it impossible to dissociate it from the economic sphere. Hence, Marx’s analyses of the relationship between civil society and the mode of production are still relevant today, while the perceptions of civil society as a network of non-government organization and citizens’ associations appear too abstract. In other words, the political economy of media trumps the non-economic vision of civil society. Finally, the importance of political economy is not only restricted to questions of media and civil society. The difficult economic conditions of post-socialism require a level of economic analysis regardless of what one studies. This is especially true for Bulgaria.

## **1.2 THE POST-SOCIALIST ECONOMIC DEBACLE**

During the Renaissance the division of Europe was between South and North. The city states of Italy were the unquestioned centers of art, learning, rhetoric and philosophy while in the North laid the lands of the barbarians.<sup>44</sup> Machiavelli’s work is one of the most well-known examples of this partitioning of the continent by European thinkers. During the Enlightenment, philosophes such as Voltaire, “elaborated their own perspective on the continent, gazing from west to east, instead of from south to north.”<sup>45</sup> As a result, “the old lands of barbarism and backwardness in

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<sup>44</sup> Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1994), 4.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

the north were correspondingly displaced to the east.”<sup>46</sup> Not a minor reason for this shift of division was the five centuries long consolidation of the Balkan Peninsula as a province of the Ottoman Empire. As industrialization in the west accelerated and the ideas of the Enlightenment spread, the Ottoman Empire came to be perceived more and more as an outdated entity. As a supranational Islamic State with strong medieval elements,<sup>47</sup> the Ottoman Empire reaffirmed the “backwardness” and “barbarianism” of the east in the eyes of the industrializing and secularizing west.

When the Ottoman Empire crumbled, it left behind large rural Balkan populations. The new states on the peninsula were weak, poor and predominantly peasant. After Bulgaria gained independence in 1878, even the capital Sofia retained strong rural features. International politics, frequent internal crises, and wars maintained the economic underdevelopment in the post-Ottoman era. Hence, on the eve of World War II, the Balkan states were still predominantly agricultural, overpopulated and poor.<sup>48</sup>

This was the economic situation that the post-World War II socialist governments inherited. Their response was massive industrialization modeled on the Soviet Union. Following five-year plans, the centralized economy and collectivized agriculture accelerated the modernization of the formerly rural states. In the decade following World War II, almost one million Bulgarian peasants (out of a population of seven million) moved to work in the new industrial plants in the burgeoning Bulgarian cities. Bulgaria created a robust welfare state, with free healthcare, cheap housing and a globally competitive education system. Thus, during the forty-five years of socialist governance the living standards of Bulgarians improved dramatically.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 162.

<sup>48</sup> Mark Mazower, *The Balkans: A Short History* (New York: Random House, 2000), 13.

The United Nations Development Program's (UNDP) Human Development Index (HDI), which measures the average of real purchasing power, life expectancy, literacy, and educational level ranked Bulgaria 27<sup>th</sup> in the world in 1990. As a country with "high human development" Bulgaria ranked above South Korea, Singapore and Portugal. This was a tremendous achievement for a Balkan country associated with backwardness and rural poverty for a long time.

The repressive, intransigent and bureaucratic nature of Soviet-style states is one part of the history of Eastern Europe's experiment with socialism. But socialist modernization and its achievements in health, education and social security is also a part of this story. Unfortunately, the changes of 1989 reversed these social gains. In the first years of the transition to capitalism the wellbeing of the population deteriorated and in the Bulgarian case it is yet to recover to socialist levels. The 2015 UNDP's HDI placed Bulgaria in the 59<sup>th</sup> position, behind Antigua and Barbuda and on the same level with the island nation of Palau.<sup>49</sup> As some political scientists put it, during post-socialism Bulgaria transitioned from a Second to a Third World nation. This context of economic decline provides the necessary background to the political economy of media and the neoliberal media populist business model they adopted.

Commissioned in early 1990 by the ex-communist Prime Minister Andrey Lukanov, a team of economists from the US Chamber of Commerce produced the first plans for economic transformation of Bulgaria.<sup>50</sup> Headed by Richard Rahn and Ronald Utt, who worked in the Reagan administration as well as neoconservative think-tanks such as Cato Institute (Rahn) and The Heritage Foundation (Utt), the team came up with the standard package of neoliberal

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<sup>49</sup> United Nations Human Development, "Human Development Report 2015," 215.

<sup>50</sup> David Binder, Bulgarian Strategy Made in the US, *New York Times*, October 9, 1990, accessed March 12, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/1990/10/09/business/bulgarian-strategy-is-made-in-us.html>.

policies advocated by the IMF and the World Bank: privatization of state assets, liberalization of the economy, deregulation and dramatic cuts in government spending. Most recently, Rahn and Utt have sought to delink their recommendations from the actual economic outcomes arguing that their plan was never officially adopted. Nevertheless, it is a fact that both the ex-communists and the anti-communist opposition embraced their recommendations. But it was the anti-communist government (1991-1992) of the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) that initiated the first radical economic reforms. Headed by the staunch anti-communist Phillip Dimitrov, who described himself as a Moses, “who will lead the Bulgarian people through the desert until they permanently tear their links to the communist past,” this government believed that “communism” remained intact in forms and places that it had created.<sup>51</sup> The UDF saw the destruction of these places as its mission.

The farm cooperatives and the rural areas, a traditional hotbed of support for the ex-communists, were the first targets of the new regime. The outcome of this process, known as the “Liquidation,” was the destruction of Bulgarian agriculture. “Machines and buildings were sold, while livestock that could not be sold was simply slaughtered and thrown away.”<sup>52</sup> One million heads of cattle, more than five million sheep, and three million pigs were killed. Forty-thousand tractors, ten thousand harvester combines, equipment for irrigation, thousands of buildings and many other assets worth billions of dollars were destroyed by “liquidation councils,” as the squads who destroyed state property were officially referred to, or sold at nominal prices.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Evgenia Kalinova and Iskra Baeva, *Balgarskite Prehodi 1939-2010 / The Bulgarian Transitions 1939-2010* (Sofia, Bulgaria: Paradigma, 2010) 283.

<sup>52</sup> Georgi Medarov and Jana Tsoneva, *The Bulgarian Deindustrialization* (Berlin: Rosa Luxembourg Foundation, forthcoming), 41.

<sup>53</sup> Stefan Severin, “Predi 20 Godini: Likvidatori Razigravat na Tombola Kravi i Svine” / “20 Years ago: Liquidators Give Away Cows and Pigs through a Raffle,” *OMDA*, February 21, 2012, accessed March 1, 2016. <http://prehod.omda.bg/IDArticle=531>.



The assault on rural Bulgaria was further exacerbated by a new law, which returned land collectivized in the 1950s to its “original” owners. However, many of these new/old owners had lived in the cities for a long time and had no intention to work this land. The result was the proliferation of idle plots and severe land fragmentation that made large-scale agriculture impossible. In sum, the restitution of land and the destruction of farm cooperatives led to agricultural deindustrialization, mass impoverishment, loss of food sovereignty and the depopulation of rural Bulgaria. Deprived of subsistence and elementary means of agricultural production, entire villages and small towns emigrated to Greece, Spain or Italy in search of a better life.<sup>54</sup> Thus, instead of “democratization,” the destruction of the “places of refuge” of communism resembled instead a Stalin-era policy of forced famine as a form of punishment for disobedient peasants.

The new geopolitical situation exacerbated the economic downfall. In 1989, 84 percent of Bulgaria’s foreign trade was with the Eastern bloc countries. Bulgaria lost these foreign markets after the collapse of socialism. Trade turnover between Bulgaria and Russia (formerly USSR) fell more than 90 percent from \$17 billion in 1988 to \$1.2 billion in 1998.<sup>55</sup> At the same time, in spite of the very liberal foreign investment acts that allowed full foreign ownership and unlimited repatriation of profits, Western investments remained negligible.<sup>56</sup>

In the mid-1990s the combined result of the “Liquidation,” the economic liberalization and the new geopolitical order were painfully visible. From 1989 to 1994, Bulgaria’s GNP dropped by 44 percent, industrial output and total exports fell by 50 percent and agricultural

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<sup>54</sup> Ivaylo Ditchev, Metamorphoses of a Territory, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 14, no.2 (2006): 216.

<sup>55</sup> Rossen Vassilev, “De-development Problems in Bulgaria,” *East European Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 347.

<sup>56</sup> Rossen Vassilev, “The “Third-Worldization” of a “Second-World” Nation: De-development in Post-Communist Bulgaria,” *New Political Science* 25, no.1 (2003): 104.

production by more than 35 percent.<sup>57</sup> During the same period the real per capita income decreased by 57 percent. After price controls were removed (February 1, 1991) the cost of food rose 239.5 percent between 1991 and 1994 and the cost of milk tripled during the same period.<sup>58</sup> In general, the prices of goods and services increased more than 23-fold from 1989 to 1994.<sup>59</sup> Unemployment also skyrocketed with the levels of employment falling by 30 percent between 1989 and 1994.<sup>60</sup> Health indicators plummeted to the point that tuberculosis and anemia, two diseases eradicated in postwar Bulgaria, remerged in the 1990s.<sup>61</sup> As a result of this anthropologic collapse crime rates rose. In 1989 there were 663 crimes per 100,000 people, but by 1997 this figure had quadrupled to 2,898 per 100,000.<sup>62</sup> The power of organized crime grew and in the mid-1990s “nearly every private business [was] forced to pay protection money to racketeers and bribes to corrupt policemen, judges and bureaucrats.”<sup>63</sup> Another outcome of these policies was a demographic collapse. Between 1990 and 1998, the country’s birth rate declined by more than 35 percent, the death rate increased by 15 percent, and the general fertility rate decreased by 37 percent. This left Bulgaria with “the lowest total fertility rate (TFR) ever recorded for a European country in peacetime.”<sup>64</sup> As a result, the country’s population has dropped precipitously. In 1990 Bulgaria had nine million citizens, compared to only 7.2 million today. Thus Bulgaria is the fourth fastest shrinking country in the world.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Vassilev, “De-Development Problems in Bulgaria,” 354.

<sup>58</sup> Rossen Vassilev, “Bulgaria’s Population Implosion,” *East European Quarterly* XL, no. 1 (March 2006): 77.

<sup>59</sup> Vassilev, “De-Development Problems in Bulgaria,” 350.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>61</sup> Vassilev, “Bulgaria’s Population Implosion,” 78.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>63</sup> Vassilev, “De-Development Problems in Bulgaria,” 350.

<sup>64</sup> Quoted in Vassilev, “Bulgaria’s Population Implosion,” 72.

<sup>65</sup> “World’s Fastest Shrinking Countries. No.4 Bulgaria,” *Bloomberg Business*, accessed January, 12, 2015. [http://www.bloomberg.com/ss/10/08/0813\\_fastest\\_shrinking\\_countries/index.htm](http://www.bloomberg.com/ss/10/08/0813_fastest_shrinking_countries/index.htm).

The overall result of the liberalization of the economy was catastrophic. As mentioned above, the UNDP, Human Development Index ranked Bulgaria 27<sup>th</sup> in the world in 1990, but it slipped to 33<sup>rd</sup> in 1991, 48<sup>th</sup> in 1994 and 69<sup>th</sup> in 1997.<sup>66</sup> Motivated by nostalgia for the security and economic stability of socialism, the Bulgarian people overwhelmingly elected the ex-communists in 1994. This was not unique to Bulgaria. Polish dissident Adam Michnik called this period of return of socialist governments through elections a “velvet restoration.” But instead of a reversal of the prescribed economic policies, the socialists furthered “structural reforms,” most notoriously through the liberalization of the banking sector.<sup>67</sup> The deregulation of the banks allowed them “to finance various economic activities without having to calculate the risks involved in them or to require guarantees.”<sup>68</sup> By 1995 a sizable portion of the loans were declared uncollectible, prompting a banking crisis that led to the bankruptcy of fifteen banks, a currency crunch, and skyrocketing inflation. While the Bulgarian currency, the lev, was exchanged at 1.27 lev to one US dollar in 1990, in February 1997 the devaluation of the lev precipitated by the crisis led to a record rate of 3,000 lev/US dollar.<sup>69</sup> In addition, at 310.8 percent in 1996 and 578.6 percent in 1997, Bulgaria’s inflation rate was the highest in Eastern Europe.<sup>70</sup> The situation deteriorated so much that by the fall of 1996, “Bulgaria was plunged into the deepest economic crisis faced by any post-Communist country in Europe.”<sup>71</sup> For the first time since World War II, long bread lines appeared in the cities.<sup>72</sup> The banking system collapsed and the losses for working people with small savings were estimated to be more than 5 million

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<sup>66</sup> Quoted in Vassilev, “Bulgaria’s Population Implosion,” 79.

<sup>67</sup> Medarov and Tsoneva, 41.

<sup>68</sup> Vesna Bojicic-Dzelilovic and Victor D. Bojkov, “Informality in Postcommunist Transition: Determinants and Consequences of the Privatization process in Bulgaria,” *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 5, no.1 (2005): 76.

<sup>69</sup> Vassilev, “De-development,” 348.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 350.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 354.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

euros.<sup>73</sup> In January 1997 protests overthrew the socialist government and the financial situation was stabilized after the introduction of an IMF-prescribed currency board that pegged the national currency to the German Mark and then to the Euro.<sup>74</sup>

The anti-communist UDF government that replaced the ex-communists of BSP after their overthrow in 1997 was one of the most neoliberal administrations in Bulgaria's post-socialist history. Its elimination of the remnants of social welfare left by the socialist state, introduction of tuition in state universities and fees for healthcare services and the elimination of free textbooks for pupils were some of the anti-social features it imposed.<sup>75</sup> Rapid and massive privatization of state enterprises, oftentimes at nominal prices, became the hallmark of the cabinet of Prime Minister Ivan Kostov. Some economists estimate that 15 billion Euros worth of public assets were privatized but only 2 billion were paid to the treasury.<sup>76</sup> On June 30, 1999, Kostov declared that the transition in Bulgaria was complete because most state enterprises were eliminated or sold by that time.<sup>77</sup> The costs of this reforms were very high. In particular, unemployment rose dramatically and stood at 19.5 percent in 2001 while youth unemployment reached 38.3 percent.<sup>78</sup>

Elected in 1997 on a wave of hope amidst the deep economic crisis, the UDF left the governance of the country in 2001 with little fanfare. In the elections of 2001, the anti-communist alliance received only 18 percent of the votes, confirming the unpopularity of their reforms. However, for the first time, the beneficiaries of this development were not the ex-

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<sup>73</sup> Andrey Raichev and Kancho Stoychev, *Kakvo se sluchi? Razkaza za Prehoda v Balgaria i malko Sled Tova / What Happened? A Story about the Bulgarian Transition and a Little Afterwards* (Sofia, Bulgaria: Trud, 2008), 56.

<sup>74</sup> Vassilev, "'Third-Worldization' of a 'Second-World,'" 102.

<sup>75</sup> Kalinova and Baeva, 310.

<sup>76</sup> Tsoneva and Medarov, 44.

<sup>77</sup> Kalinova and Baeva, 313.

<sup>78</sup> Tsoneva and Medarov, 21.

communists. Instead, a newly minted party led by the Bulgarian former king, Simeon II of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, won the elections. After a long exile following the abolishment of the monarchy in 1944, when he was only six years-old, in 2001 the heir to the Bulgarian throne returned to Bulgaria triumphantly and became its Prime Minister. Thus, “the King” became only the second monarch to return to power in postwar Europe after the Spanish King Juan Carlos I.<sup>79</sup>

“The King” tapped into the disappointment of the two parties (the anti-communists and the ex-communists) that dominated Bulgarian politics in the 1990s and promised to be an alternative to them. But after his overwhelming electoral success the popularity of the National Movement for Simeon II evaporated. Famously, he promised that in 800 days after his election, the Bulgarian people would notice a significant improvement in their standard of living. However, poverty and unemployment remained rampant and his tenure as Prime Minister was marked by numerous high-profile, mafia-style assassinations that only reinforced the widespread feeling of insecurity and decay. Thus, while polls showed that his movement enjoyed a 65 percent approval rating in July 2001, by May 2007 the support for “the King” dwindled to 1.6 percent.<sup>80</sup> His movement ceased its existence.

While the enthusiasm for local politics was low in the 2000s, the Bulgarian people remained hopeful that the entry in NATO (2004) and in the European Union (2007) would lead to an improvement of the economic situation. But Bulgaria’s entry into the EU was accompanied by yet another collection of neoliberal measures. In 2007, the tripartite coalition led by the socialist party adopted the lowest flat income tax (10 percent) in the EU and globally<sup>81</sup> as well as

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<sup>79</sup> Rossen Vassilev, “The Failure to Restore the Monarchy in Post-Communist Bulgaria,” *Romanian Journal of Political Science* 9, no.1 (2009): 54.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>81</sup> Daniel Mitchell, “The Global Flat Tax Revolution: Lessons for Policy Makers,” *Prosperitas* 8, no.1 (2008): 5.

the lowest corporate tax (10 percent) in Europe.<sup>82</sup> In 2009 the government of the new conservative party Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (CEDB) headed by Boyko Borissov, a former Chief of Police, a top level bodyguard, and former coach of the Bulgarian national karate team, intensified the neoliberalization of the economy. CEDB's vision of an economy "free to the minimum of state intervention" was duly enforced by the Vice Prime Minister and Finance Minister, Simeon Dyankov.<sup>83</sup> Prior to his appointment, Dyankov worked as a Chief Economist of the World Bank for fourteen years and during his term with CEDB, Dyankov presided over one of the most austere budgets in Europe. In fact, on a number of occasions German conservative Chancellor Angela Merkel has cited Bulgaria, EU's poorest member, as an "exemplar of fiscal virtue" in contrast to its southern neighbor, Greece. But in February 2013, the discontent over Bulgaria's experience with capitalism finally erupted.

In what were deemed the biggest protests since 1989, Bulgarian citizens angered by the unbearable price of electricity and heating bills marched across every major city. The center-right government resigned, but the protests continued unabated and even took a highly disturbing turn. Seven Bulgarians burned themselves alive in public, six of them fatally, in protest at the worsening poverty levels.<sup>84</sup> Self-immolations as a form of protest and destitution continue to this day and since 2013 approximately 30 people have burnt themselves alive in a country that had no substantial history of such acts prior to that.

This is an important context that has informed the development of media in Bulgaria. David Harvey defines neoliberalism as "a class project" that "legitimized draconian policies

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<sup>82</sup> Leigh Phillips, "Corporate Tax Rates Fall Again in Europe," *Businessweek*, June 19, 2010, accessed August 20, 2014, [http://www.businessweek.com/globalbiz/content/jun2010/gb2010\\_0629\\_855797.htm](http://www.businessweek.com/globalbiz/content/jun2010/gb2010_0629_855797.htm).

<sup>83</sup> Dinkov-jr, Ivan, "Sravnitelnen Analiz na 'Ataka' i 'GERB'" / "Comparative Analysis of Ataka and CEDB," *Ponedelnik* 1-2: 121.

<sup>84</sup> Tom Esslemont, "Poverty in Bulgaria Drives More to Make Ultimate Sacrifice," *BBC News*. May 7, 2013, accessed August 15, 2014, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-22439961>.

designed to restore and consolidate capitalist class power.”<sup>85</sup> Under this definition, post-socialist Bulgaria is a paradigm of the neoliberal state. Bulgaria carried out radical privatization of its state assets and deregulated its economy to the extreme. Through radical austerity measures it produced one of the lowest budget deficits in the EU. With its flat tax and with its miniscule corporate tax policies, Bulgaria figures as one of the most business-friendly countries in Europe. Thus, it comes as no surprise that the radically conservative overhaul of the tax code prompted the neoconservative “Heritage Foundation” to rank Bulgaria thirteenth in the world in “fiscal freedom” in 2014.<sup>86</sup> But while the extreme neoliberalization of the economy benefited local and foreign corporations and the wealthiest section of Bulgarian society, without any exaggeration, the outcomes for the majority of the people had been devastating.

Bulgaria remains the poorest country among the twenty-eight members of the EU. While the average EU wage is 25 Euros per hour, in Bulgaria it is only 4 Euros per hour.<sup>87</sup> According to an EU-wide survey, 48 percent of Bulgaria's 7.2 million people live in “material deprivation,” defined as being unable to afford things like adequate heating or meat every second day.<sup>88</sup>

This unfortunate situation turns Bulgaria into an ideal case for the study of the relationship between media and neoliberal economics. How did media report this dire situation? Did they criticize the neoliberalization of the economy? Did they try to invigorate and assist in the construction of a vibrant civil society that could mobilize in order to find solutions of these

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<sup>85</sup> David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital and the Crisis of Capitalism* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2010), 10.

<sup>86</sup> Heritage Foundation, “Bulgaria: 2013 Index of Economic Freedom,” 2014, accessed August 17, 2014 <http://www.heritage.org/index/country/bulgaria#limited-government>.

<sup>87</sup> “Wages are the Lowest in Bulgaria and the Highest in Bulgari,” *Economy.bg*, April 4, 2016, accessed April 6, 2016, <http://www.economy.bg/economy/view/22932/Prez-2015-cenata-na-truda-e-naj-niska-v-Bylgariya-i-naj-visoka-v-Daniya>.

<sup>88</sup> Diana Simeonova, “Bulgaria's working poor struggle to make ends meet,” *Business Insider*, May 3, 2015, accessed April 2, 2016, <http://www.businessinsider.com/afp-bulgarias-working-poor-struggle-to-make-ends-meet-2015-5>.

social problems? What business model did media adopt in this situation? These are some of the questions that this dissertation tries to answer through a multi-year archival research and an original field study.

### 1.3 RESEARCH METHOD

The question of media and especially the political economy of media in post-socialist societies has received surprisingly little scholarly attention. Although media lies at the heart of the themes of freedom of expression under socialism and civil society during post-socialism, in most studies on these topics mass communications is either explored superficially or not all. There are several reasons for this oversight.

One major part of the leading academic journals on Eastern Europe in the US serve primarily as a platform for political scientists and economists who focus on issues such as “security,” “international relations,” “ideology,” “markets,” “corruption,” and “institutional change.”<sup>89</sup> Because of this focus, articles on Eastern European media are scarce in these publications. Another substantial section of the area journals is more open to the topic of media. But their focus is primarily on art, cinema and literature.<sup>90</sup> Thus, the task of explaining the politics of media in Eastern Europe has been left to a relatively small loosely affiliated group of communication scholars.

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<sup>89</sup> Some of these journals are *Problems of Post-Communism*, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, *East European Politics and Societies*, *Europe-Asia Studies*, *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, *Journal of Democracy*

<sup>90</sup> Examples include *Studies in Eastern European Cinema*, *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema*, *Slavonica* and to some extent *Slavic Review*.



The available studies on Eastern European media have shed light on important questions related to the development of civil society in the region. At the same time, a substantial part of these works advance a macro-sociological, social scientific, and sometimes quantitative approach to media that oftentimes leaves important details unexplored. It is not uncommon for the reader to encounter charts, diagrams and tables. For instance, the landmark book *Rude Awakening: Social and Media Change in Central and Eastern Europe*, by one of the leading scholars in the field, Karol Jakubowicz, includes more than eighty tables, graphs and charts. This type of approach, although informative, leaves questions of theory as well as the narrative of media producers unexplored. But more importantly, as Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini note, “the research literatures on Eastern European media are still in the process of emergence,” with a notable lack of “autochthonous” studies since most of the scholarship on the topic is produced by Western scholars. The authors add that “the scarcity of research in and about Eastern Europe is evidenced by the fact that so many of the works on these countries are edited volumes and, as everybody knows, edited volumes rarely contain sustained original research, full documentation about particular cases, or unifying theoretical frameworks.” In addition, the authors add that these writings are rarely supported by field studies.<sup>91</sup>

This dissertation offers a comprehensive analysis that uses Bulgaria as a specific case study in order to explain two overlooked media transformations that changed the political landscape of socialist and post-socialist societies: the transition to socialist humanist television in the late 1950s and the evolution from early capitalist to corporate monopoly media in the 1990s. The depth of the study consists in a research method that includes textual analysis of the works of local scholars and ethnographic interviews with journalists and media workers. As such, this

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<sup>91</sup> Hallin and Mancini, 16-17.

study addresses both the lack of visibility of research done by “autochthonous” scholars while it offers one of the most extensive and original field studies on Eastern European media to date.

In 2013-2014, as a pre-doctoral fellow at the American Research Center in Sofia, I spent a full year researching the literature of mass communications published in Bulgaria before and after 1989. As part of this processes I examined more than fifty books by local scholars, none of them translated in English. The majority of these works were published after 1989 as the post-socialist media scholarship is very rich. At least ten of the books I obtained were edited volumes that contained the works of the major media scholars in Bulgaria. Two of the books cited in this study were a two part encyclopedia, *Bulgarian Media Studies*, which totaled 4,000 pages and included several hundred short pieces and articles on media topics that spanned from antiquity to the present. Media histories of Bulgarian newspapers, television and radio were a part of this literature review. Several books cited at length in this dissertation were written by socialist media producers who held positions of power in state media before 1989.

Because this rich material is unknown in the West, this project is not only an attempt to construct a media history; it is also an act of translation. I have tried as best as I can to approach the writings of these local scholars with an open mind, to understand their message and to convey it to the reader in English. What did socialist media producers find to be the major function of mass communications? What did they think were the differences between socialist and capitalist media? What was the role of the market in post-socialist media thinkers’ analyses of Bulgaria’s post-1989 media sphere? What did “free media” mean to them? These are some of the questions I sought to answer by relying on this local knowledge. This is important because it offers original and extensive research that produces something very different than the usual “bird-eye” view, normative approaches of Western scholars of Eastern European media.

Another reason why this approach matters is the fact that in contrast to their Western counterparts, Bulgarian post-socialist media scholars were also active in the sphere of official politics. Ivaylo Znepolski, who in 1997 wrote the first book on Bulgaria's post-socialist commercial press, was also the Minister of Culture of Bulgaria from 1993 to 1995. Georgi Lozanov, who wrote numerous articles and edited several landmark volumes on media, has been a member of the media regulatory body of Bulgaria since its creation in 1997 and has served as its chair several times. Several other media scholars cited in this dissertation served as MPs and a number of them headed influential non-governmental organizations. In other words, the analysis of their thought offers not only a view of how local knowledge framed the changes in Bulgarian media, but it also provides the view of people who influenced politics.

The second crucial component of this project are forty-seven, face-to-face, ethnographic interviews totaling 2,951 minutes or almost fifty hours of tape recorded conversations with Bulgarian journalists, media directors and politicians. This sample includes a member of parliament who wrote the first media legislation after 1989, the first non-communist director of Bulgarian Television, a popular television anchor, the editor of the first post-1989 commercial newspaper and the director of news of one of the two major commercial television stations. I was fortunate to gain this unprecedented access, which would be unimaginable for a media studies graduate student in the US. After all, television anchors of the stature of Larry King or any US Senator would be very hard to reach, let alone meet and interview for an hour. This is another reason why a small country like Bulgaria, in which personal connections work miracles, is an ideal venue for a study of the political economy of mass media. Besides the more well-known media personalities and high-level administration figures, there were also numerous regular journalists, reporters and technical workers who agreed to participate in this study.

My goal in the interview process was to select a diverse group of media workers representative of the entire Bulgarian media sphere. In my sample there are journalists who at the time of my interviews were still completing their university studies as well as those who were months away from retirement. Thus, I spoke to both people who had experience with socialist journalism and those who did not. While I made an extra effort to reach interviewees in positions of power—television anchors, media directors, politicians—I also made sure that I spoke to ordinary media workers—make-up artists, light technicians and reporters. Finally, I made sure that I interviewed people from multiple media outlets. In this respect, the study offers a more comprehensive picture of the situation of Bulgarian media than the one presented by recent Western scholarship. In 2013 the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (RISJ) released a study that supposedly offered an exhaustive account of media in Bulgaria.<sup>92</sup> However, its author is a former business journalist for the liberal, business-friendly Economedia media company and the research’s perspective is fully in line with the viewpoint of neoliberals in Bulgaria. Another recent study published by the *International Journal of Press/Politics* included interviews with Bulgarian journalists, but it also privileged the perspective of liberal spokespeople and members of the Economedia company.<sup>93</sup>

This dissertation also features the stories of journalists who work for Economedia publications such as *Capital* and *Dnevnik*. But it also includes the voices of media workers employed by a broad array of other Bulgarian media outlets. The study contains numerous interviews with journalists who worked for, and some of whom continue to work for, newspapers such as *Trud*, *24 Chasa*, *168 Chasa*, *Standart*, *Kontinent*, the socialist *Duma*, the anti-communist

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<sup>92</sup> Stefan Antonov, *The Age of the Oligarchs: How a Group of Political and Economic Magnates Have Taken Control of Bulgaria* (Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2013).

<sup>93</sup> Vaclav Stetka, “From Multinationals to Business Tycoons: Media Ownership and Journalistic Autonomy in Central and Eastern Europe,” *International Journal of Press/Politics* 17, no. 4 (2012).

*Demokratzia*, the agricultural *Zemia*, and the left-leaning magazine *Tema*, as well as the contemporary yellow press that dominates almost the entire newspaper market today. The sample also includes interviews with media workers and directors from all of Bulgaria's national television channels—the state owned BNT and the corporate channels of bTV, Nova Televizia and TV 7. People employed by the Bulgarian National Radio, private radio stations, as well as several journalists who work for online media outlets also feature in this dissertation. Last, but certainly not least, the sample includes three interviews with journalists who work for nationalist television stations, Alfa and SKAT as well as for the far-right newspaper Ataka. For various reasons, the voices of the latter are rarely, if ever, included in academic research. As such, the study offers an in-depth, comprehensive analysis of the Bulgarian media sphere that is unavailable in studies that speak primarily from the perspective of the pro-American, pro-business, liberal media.

The process of arranging the interviews was itself informative of the importance of including the voices of media producers. Usually I would ask a journalist whom I had just interviewed to connect me with a colleague. Interestingly, out of the forty-seven interviews just two or three were organized via email. All of the rest were arranged via cell phone calls. Although this was somewhat intimidating, especially when I had to call the cell phone of a media personality I have been watching on TV since I was a little boy, it also highlighted the importance of this part of the research. Despite the economic difficulties and the difficult work conditions, Bulgarian journalists are still collective-minded people that value conversations. The reluctance to communicate via email and the preference to talk over the phone was also proof of the importance of oral communication in this field. Only one interviewee asked me to talk over skype while everybody else was happy to meet at their work place, in the park, or in cafes and

restaurants. Not only did they open up to me with their professional stories, but several of them invited me to their workplace to observe the media process from inside. All of these contacts and experiences were an invaluable experience for which I am grateful.

It is hard to overstate the importance of these interviews. They provided me with a unique look from inside media institutions and revealed the viewpoint of media producers that is rarely encountered in communication studies. Journalists work with words and what they say is not unimportant. Their stories provide a view of media unavailable in media journals and books. Because I wanted them to feel comfortable with what they related, I promised to keep these interviews anonymous. The down side of this decision was that I could not quote well-known figures that could add weight to the project simply with their name. At the same time, this anonymity allowed them to talk about situations they might not have otherwise discussed. Several of them shared with me instances of direct censorship and at least three of them asked me to be very careful with preserving their anonymity. Anonymity made others much more comfortable to share their ideological views and political commitments. In the end, this seemed more important to me than the name recognition of the person, because the major goal of this study is to understand the role of media during socialism and post-socialism.

While there is a small but growing literature exploring how producers of American commercial media think about and experience the processes of this production, we have far less knowledge about non-Western media producers, such as those of Eastern Europe, who navigate distinct political, cultural, and economic environments even as they experience a variety of pressures from the West. In combining media production studies with studies of political economy in non-Western contexts, my project contributes an international focus to US-centered critical scholarship on media, such as the work of Todd Gitlin (1983) and John Caldwell (2009),

as well as those of the political economists of media, such as Robert McChesney (2008), Vincent Mosco (2009) and Ben Bagdikian (2004). Besides opening up this type of scholarship to non-Western contexts, this political economic side of the dissertation broadens the scope of recent production studies scholarship, which tends to focus on entertainment media while marginalizing larger questions of the political and economic implications of neoliberal media business models.

## **2.0 HISTORY, SOCIALISM(S) AND THE QUESTIONS OF CONSUMPTION AND SOCIAL JUSTICE JOURNALISM**

### **2.1 INTRODUCTION**

The widely accepted representation of Eastern European socialist media as purveyors of propaganda assigns to them a static, atemporal and uniform existence. As a result, crucial historical nuances and experiences remain unexplored and buried under the implicit and oftentimes explicit celebration of “our own,” “democratic” and “free” Western media. The first two chapters of this dissertation revisit the history of socialism and its media in order to offer a very different narrative that complicates the normative, negative assessments that dominate the scholarship on mass communications in the former Eastern bloc. The goal of this part of the project is to present a historical, economic and ideological analysis that explains the significant shift in socialist media that began in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Prompted by de-Stalinization, as well as by economic and demographic transformations, media shifted their goal from mobilization of the masses to build socialism to education and acculturation of the “socialist personality” of developed socialism. Because this profound change occurred in a tight relationship with socialist humanism, the ideological pillar of post-Stalinist liberalization, I refer to this type of media as “socialist humanist media.” This is a crucial part of the history of socialism that offers a very different media model than the seemingly irreplaceable neoliberal



media sphere of today. As such, it provides an interesting counterpoint that could be useful for thinking about alternative media futures. Finally, this part of the dissertation serves as a historical revision that unsettles the entrenched and simplistic accounts of socialist media that fail to distinguish between early socialist and post-Stalinist mass communications.

Chapter two focuses exclusively on socialist humanist media, while this chapter provides the context of their emergence. The first section shows that the totalitarian paradigm of socialist media disregards historical continuities, long traditions, and technological developments that preceded socialism. The revolutions in the region laid the foundations of unprecedented socio-cultural and political transformations. However, the socialist regimes did not invent everything from scratch and the “bracketing of the communist period” conceals the “powerful continuities over the *longue duree*.”<sup>1</sup> This is certainly the case with mass communications in Central Europe and the Balkans. Radio, high-circulation newspapers, and media campaigns for cultural enlightenment predated real socialism. Additionally, local historiography situates the legacy of socialist media within a massive time frame that reduces the four decades of socialism to a mere footnote of history. For these reasons, the initial section of this chapter provides a brief historical overview of the development of Bulgarian media before the socialist revolution of September 9<sup>th</sup>, 1944.

The second part of the chapter highlights the historical, ideological and economic differences between early and late socialism. Historian Paulina Bren notes the failure of Eastern European historiography to distinguish the two periods and comments that “it is astonishing that twenty years after the end of communism in Eastern Europe, almost all the literature is preoccupied with Stalinism, with an occasional venture into the territory of the Khrushchev era.

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<sup>1</sup> Todorova, *Bones of Contention*, 503.

Historians write about postwar communism in Europe as if it had ended in the 1960s.”<sup>2</sup> Based on an analysis of recent debates in Western journals along with an examination of current Bulgarian scholarship, key resolutions of the Bulgarian Communist Party, speeches of its General Secretary and the texts of the Bulgarian dissident Georgi Markov, this chapter explains the transition from early to late socialism.

During the first years of socialist governance mass communications appealed to the population to partake in the rapid socialist industrialization of the country. Through a discussion of newsreels from early socialism this section describes the role of media during the first decade of socialism. The demographic, economic and ideological changes of the late 1950s and 1960s precipitated the transition to late socialism. Unlike early socialism, with its astounding pace of industrialization, the last three decades of the Eastern bloc brought the promise of consumption, leisure and pleasure. The Hungarian dissident Gáspár Miklós Tamás, framed the change in the following way: “After a first, brutal ‘modernising’ period of accumulation backed by large amounts of forced labour, the second post-Stalinist period tried to create an Eastern version of the welfare state, bolstering individual consumption, cheap housing, mass entertainment and the like.”<sup>3</sup> The chapter examines this shift through a focus on the most recent scholarship of socialist consumption.

The growth of consumption was one of the most important features of late socialism. Many viewed it as a positive development that suggested an improvement in the living standards of the population. However, as the literature review on this subject shows, consumption carried risks for socialism and its ideals. After all, the goal of Marxism was not the possession of cheap

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<sup>2</sup> Paulina Bren, *The Greengrocer and His TV: The Culture of Communism after the 1968 Prague Spring* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2010), 3.

<sup>3</sup> Gáspár M. Tamás, “Marx on 1989,” *Angelaki* 15, no.3 (2010): 126.

consumer goods. Media and especially the new medium of television were mobilized to respond to the challenge posed by consumption. As main vehicles of socialist humanism media had to participate in the creation of a unique type of consumption that differed from bourgeois Western consumerism. Socialist humanism turned to the texts of the young Marx in order to shift the attention from masses and classes to “man” and subjectivity. With its central concept of “holistically developed personality” the turn to socialist humanism in Bulgaria not only confronted the legacy of Stalin’s cult of personality, the leveling of human differences and the ossified bureaucracy of Eastern European socialism, but it also strived to engender highly intelligent, artistic and aesthetically rich socialist subjects. Unlike the Western consumer, who could acquire material goods but lacked aesthetic and cultural values, the socialist humanist subject was supposed to be both materially satisfied and intellectually rich. This part theorizes socialist humanism while the final part of the chapter traces the Leninist theory of journalism in order to show that a certain form of civil society emerged during post-Stalinist liberalization.

## **2.2 PRE-SOCIALIST MEDIA HISTORY**

The socialist system of media was unique. Yet, not everything “old” succumbed to the “new.” When communist parties took power across Eastern Europe, they encountered existing traditions and media structures. In spite of the radical changes they implemented, there were also continuities. During socialism, in Central Europe the media system was not simply viewed as a

propaganda machine but also “as a social institution with strong educational and cultural functions, formed during the nineteenth and in the first half of the twentieth century.”<sup>4</sup>

Bulgaria evolved differently than Central Europe, but even this agrarian country had a long pre-socialist media tradition. The history of the Bulgarian press begins at least one century before the socialist revolution. Some argue that the media tradition goes much further back in time and trace its beginning to the work of the Saints Cyril and Methodius—the two monks who invented the Glagolitic alphabet in the mid-ninth century.<sup>5</sup> Adopted by the Slavic people in the region, this alphabet ended the dominance of the Byzantine script and later evolved into Cyrillic. Bulgarian media historian Rossen Milev suggests that the origin of Bulgarian media might be even older than the creation of the first Bulgarian state in 681 AD.<sup>6</sup> According to him, one can search “the roots of a specific communicative tradition in the Balkans, and more precisely on our lands, that is linked to Orpheus—one of the first figures of the contemporary ‘communicator.’”<sup>7</sup> Surprisingly, the book *Vestnici i Vestnikari: Kniga za Balgarskia Pechat (Newspapers and Newspaper Owners: A Book about the Bulgarian Press)* by Philip Panayotov also begins with a discussion of Orpheus and the Thracians. In this work, the newspaper’s history flows through the millennia alongside long discussions on the Cyrillic alphabet, the conversion of the Bulgarians to Christianity (864 AD), the fall of the First Bulgarian Kingdom to Byzantium (1018 AD), and the foundations of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom (1185 AD – 1396 AD). The ancient and medieval history of the newspaper ends with the “Bulgarian apocalypse,” precipitated by the “Turkish

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<sup>4</sup> Jan Jiráček and Barbara Köpplová, “Two Decades of Free Media in the Czech Republic: So What? Remarks on the Discourse of Post-1989 Media Transformation,” in *Media Transformations in the Post-communist World: Eastern Europe’s Tortured Path to Change*, ed. Peter Gross et al. (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013): 188.

<sup>5</sup> Rossen Milev, “Shtrihi kam Istoriata na Mediite I Komunikaciite v Balgaria” / “Outlines of the History of Media and Communications in Bulgaria,” in *Balgarsko Mediaznanie I / Bulgarian Media Studies I*, ed. Rossen Milev (Sofia, Bulgaria: Balkanmedia, 1996), 59

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

invasion” at the end of the fourteenth century that “forced on the Bulgarian people the primitive Ottoman socio-economic relations.”<sup>8</sup> Only at this point, a hundred pages into the book and past one-third of its length, does Panayotov’s discussion of actual newspapers commence.

This style of historical narrative vexes Western journalists and politicians. The last US ambassador to Yugoslavia, Warren Zimmerman, often complained about the “obsession with history” in the region.<sup>9</sup> During the 1990s civil war in Bosnia, the renowned British journalist Ed Vulliamy lamented that “with what becomes either an irksome or terrifying tedium, history dominates every interview in the Bosnian war. The answer to a question of a Serb about a Serbian artillery attack yesterday will begin in the year 925 and is invariably illustrated with maps.”<sup>10</sup> However, this “from Plato to NATO” type of historiography is not peculiar to the Balkans. After all, in terms of historical scope the works of Western media historians, such as Walter Ong and Harold Innis, is not very different, although they lack the nationalism of authors such as Panayotov.<sup>11</sup> One value of these narratives is that they provide a “perspective by incongruity,” which Kenneth Burke defined as “the methodic merger of particles that had been considered mutually exclusive”<sup>12</sup> The image of Orpheus reading a newspaper reinforces the fact that modern media history and its socialist chapter are a part of a very long story. Although, a *longue duree* analysis that traces the traditions, continuities and historical structures that influenced the forty-five years of socialist media in Bulgaria is beyond the scope of this study, works such as Milev’s and Panayotov’s demonstrate that ancient and medieval discourse was not

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<sup>8</sup> Philip Panayotov, *Vestnici i Vestnikari: Kniga za Balgarskia Pechat / Newspapers and Newspaper Owners: A Book of the Bulgarian Press* (Sofia, Bulgaria: Zahari Stoianov, 2007), 71.

<sup>9</sup> Wolfgang Hoepken, “War, Memory, and Education in a Fragmented Society: The Case of Yugoslavia,” *East European Politics & Societies* 13, no. 1 (December, 1998): 206.

<sup>10</sup> Ed Vulliamy, *Seasons in Hell: Understanding Bosnia’s War* (London: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 5.

<sup>11</sup> See Harold Innis and Mary Innis, *Empire and Communications* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972); Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>12</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and change: An Anatomy of Purpose* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1984), 54.

inconsequential to the later media history explored here. Eastern European media scholarship preoccupied with unmasking the unique, “totalitarian” model of socialist media, has almost completely ignored any discussion of these continuities or pre-socialist influences. But accepting that Eastern Europe has a rich literary, educational and journalistic tradition, does not require a return to Orpheus. Modern media history itself offers a rich historical narrative that situates socialist media in a broad historical span with radical breaks, but also powerful continuities.

The pre-history of newspapers notwithstanding, the first Bulgarian language periodicals were contemporaneous with the construction of railways and the telegraph in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>13</sup> In 1838, the first Bulgarian printing press opened in Thessaloniki (Greece). In 1844, the magazine *Ljuboslovie* (“Love for the Word” in English) became the pioneer of Bulgarian magazines and newspapers.<sup>14</sup> The first Bulgarian photographers appeared in the 1850s. 1824 was the year of publication of the first Bulgarian primer and in the 1850s the popular education-focused *chitalishte*<sup>15</sup> network emerged.<sup>16</sup> Altogether, from 1830 to 1878 over 2,000 schools opened their doors.<sup>17</sup> All of these phenomena were a central part to the “Bulgarian National Revival.” During this period, which began roughly at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, intellectuals and teachers saw the cultural enlightenment of the population as a prerequisite for the emergence of national consciousness. As a result, there was an explosion of literature. However, the genuine development of media, and especially journalism, began only after independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1878.

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<sup>13</sup> Milev, 62.

<sup>14</sup> Ekaterina Ognianova, “The Transitional Media System of Post-Communist Bulgaria,” *Journalism and Mass Communication Monographs* 162 (1997): 1.

<sup>15</sup> “chitalishte” (читалище) derives from the verb “to read” and was the name of cultural and educational centers of learning.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Crampton, *A Concise History of Bulgaria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 42 and 64.

<sup>17</sup> Todorova, *Bones of Contention*, 222.

Telephones appeared in 1886 and the first film screening took place in 1897. The Bulgarian Telegraph Agency (BTA), Bulgaria's news agency to this day, was established in 1898. In 1894, the first congress of Bulgarian journalists met and the first professional association was formed in 1905.<sup>18</sup> As ethnic, religious and class cleavages deepened, the partisan press gained ground. The first large newspaper companies emerged in the 1910s, bringing to life the phenomenon of high-circulation newspapers. Two of the most popular Bulgarian newspapers at the time, "Utro" (1911-1944) and "Zora" (1919-1944), had a circulation that ranged from 50,000 to 160,000 copies and from 10,000 to 130,000 copies respectively.<sup>19</sup> Anarchist, socialist and, in the 1920s, fascist presses also published papers. But the increasingly bitter ideological confrontation found a new venue as well.

In 1921 radio was heard for the first time on Bulgarian territory and on May 24, 1925, Georgi Dimitrov's political speech, "Against Terror," became the first political radio broadcast.<sup>20</sup> Only eight years later, Dimitrov (1882-1949) would become a communist celebrity after his arrest in Nazi Germany. Accused of setting the Reichstag on fire, Dimitrov defended himself successfully in the famous "Leipzig Trial." Subsequently, he immigrated to the Soviet Union where he developed a close relationship with Stalin and became the leader of the Third Communist International.<sup>21</sup> It is not a coincidence that a political speech by a figure such as Dimitrov was the first one transmitted on Bulgarian territory. It reflected the early stages of a clash that would play out on the radio waves as well as on the front lines for the next two

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<sup>18</sup> Ognianova, 7.

<sup>19</sup> Vasil Penev, "Obshtestvenoto Mnenie Mezhduraznitsite i Vlastta" / "The Public Opinion Between Media and Power" in *Bulgarian Media Studies I*, 99.

<sup>20</sup> Margarita Pesheva, Liliya Raicheva and Mitko Petrov, *Radiosredata 2001-2010 / The Radio Sphere 2001-2010*, (Sofia, Bulgaria: Faber, 2011), 17.

<sup>21</sup> Roumen Daskalov, *Ot Stambolov do Zhivkov: Golemite Sprove za Balgarskata Istoria / From Stambolov to Zhivkov: The Biggest Debates Over Bulgarian History* (Sofia, Bulgaria: Gutenberg, 2009), 188. Dimitrov's 1935 description of fascism as "the open terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary, most chauvinistic and most imperialist elements of finance capital" became the standard definition of fascism for years to come.

decades. Broadcasted from Moscow, where Dimitrov was in exile, the speech criticized the authoritarian, right-wing government. Less than two years earlier the rightist regime had overthrown the Bulgarian Agrarian National Union (BANU).<sup>22</sup> BANU was an agrarian, mass-based, peasant party whose leader, Alexander Stamboliiski, advocated “agrarianism,” a unique ideology, neither liberal, nor Marxist. He was deposed and brutally murdered during a coup d’etat in 1923, four years after BANU won the elections. The government had also violently suppressed a communist-led uprising in September 1923 killing at least 2,000 people during the anti-insurgency operations. The repression of leftists only intensified after 1925 when an explosion nearly destroyed the St. Nedelya Orthodox Church in downtown Sofia. The bomb targeted the funeral service of an army general assassinated a few days earlier by the communists. One-hundred and fifty people, mostly members of the military and political elite of the country died while the terrorist act was attributed to the outlawed communist party.<sup>23</sup>

After an army coup in 1934, the monarchical, right-wing regime of King Boris III identified itself closely with Nazi Germany and naturally the persecution of leftists intensified. The radio waves became an arena for both pro-government, pro-Nazi propaganda and underground, pro-Soviet, anti-fascist broadcasts. By the 1930s radio was already a regular feature of urban homes and even the first automobile with a built-in radio had appeared in the capital by 1931.<sup>24</sup> Besides the Bulgarian official radio, in May 1940, Nazi Germany gained

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<sup>22</sup> The attention to BANU and Stamboliiski is not limited to Bulgarian scholarship. In his book “On Populist Reason,” Ernesto Laclau writes that “populist signifiers can equally be associated with a left-wing orientation: it is enough to remember the attempts at agrarian reform of the governments of Alexander Stamboliiski in 1920s Bulgaria.” Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2007), 196. For a thorough analysis on BANU in English language see John Bell, *Peasants in Power: Alexander Stamboliiski and the Bulgarian Agrarian National Union 1899-1923* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).

<sup>23</sup> Crampton, 120.

<sup>24</sup> Raina Nikolova, *Vznikvane i Razvitie na Raditio i Televiziata v Balgaria / The Emergence and Development of Radio and Television in Bulgaria* (Sofia, Bulgaria: Ciela, 2006), 33. Radio was tested in the Bulgarian parliament for the first time in 1926.



access to Bulgarian audiences through its Vienna-based “Radio Donau,” established by Goebbels himself.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, on July 23, 1941 the Bulgarian communist radio station “Hristo Botev,” based in Moscow, started regular broadcasts to Bulgaria. Another communist radio station called “The People’s Voice” broadcasted radio programming as well, but it also engaged in interfering with the official broadcasts. On these occasions, while a reporter read the official news, the listeners would hear a second voice, which contradicted the pro-government news: “Bulgarians do not listen! Our radio is lying to you! Bulgaria is sold to Hitler! The fascist government wants to throw us into a fratricidal war with the Soviet Union!”<sup>26</sup> Similar “ghosts” as some called them, infiltrated the broadcasts of Radio Berlin and Radio Rome as well.<sup>27</sup>

After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Bulgaria declared war on the United States and Britain. Given the fascist tendencies of the airwaves at the time, it was not an accident that a major target of the massive Allied bombings of Sofia was the Bulgarian radio, which was bombed twice.<sup>28</sup> It was also not a coincidence that one of the first acts of the leftist Fatherland Front, after it took power on September 9<sup>th</sup>, 1944, was to shut down the Nazi-styled Ministry of National Propaganda, which had operated since September 1941.

Although, this is a rather schematic and in many ways limited history of the trajectory of Bulgarian media before the socialist era, it suffices to show that media were already participants and protagonists in processes that were evident across Europe and North America: cultural enlightenment, nationalism, high-circulation press publications, radio propaganda, mass leaders, censorship, war-time propaganda and others. The early socialist media system was influenced in

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<sup>25</sup> Nikolova, 59.

<sup>26</sup> Valentin Stamov, “Balgarskite Predavanja na Chuzdestrannite Radiostancii” / “The Bulgarian Programs on Foreign Radio Stations,” in *Balgarsko Mediaznanie II / Bulgarian Media Studies II*, ed. Rossen Milev (Sofia, Bulgaria: Balkanmedia, 1998), 469.

<sup>27</sup> Stamov, 470.

<sup>28</sup> Nikolova, 143. The first bombing occurred on the 10<sup>th</sup> of January 1944 and the second, much more destructive one, hit the radio on March 30, 1944.

various ways by these pre-existing phenomena. It sought to curtail some of them while it accelerated and modified others. Especially important was the clash between communist and right-wing forces because it dominated the landscape for more than two decades. After the communist takeover on the 9<sup>th</sup> of September, 1944, the nationalist, pro-German nature of the previous government and its media and the fresh memory of the anti-fascist struggle, affected the construction of the new socialist media sphere. In addition, major socialist figures had experienced the struggle of the previous decades as media workers. In his memoirs, Bulgaria's long-term communist leader, Todor Zhivkov recounts the intimate connection between the state-owned printing plant and the emergence of socialism:

There emerged the pioneers of home-grown socialist ideas; there appeared the first workers' organization and the first workers' newspaper; the first international contacts with workers from abroad took place there; May Day was celebrated there for the first time...Finally, the state printing plant gave Bulgaria and the world Georgi Dimitrov. There rose fierce anti-fascists, many of whom fell in the battles for social justice. The state printing plant produced prominent economic leaders, statesmen, and builders of workers' Bulgaria...Should I mention that I am glad that my youth was tightly linked to it and I feel as its son. And I owe it!<sup>29</sup>

Indeed, Georgi Dimitrov, who returned to Bulgaria in 1946 as its first communist Prime Minister, was a worker and a union activist at the state-owned printing plant. Valko Chervenkov, who headed the government between 1950 and 1956 was also involved with media. During the war, Chervenkov served as the Editor-in-Chief of the outlawed "Hristo Botev" radio station that broadcasted from Moscow. Since Todor Zhivkov, who headed Bulgaria throughout the late socialist period, was also a printing plant worker, it appears that almost all of the leadership of socialist Bulgaria participated in media production before and during World War II. Inevitably this detail played a crucial role in their vision for the construction of the socialist media sphere. But besides the historical conjuncture of World War II and the history of media technologies in

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<sup>29</sup> Todor Zhivkov, *Memoari / Memoirs* (Sofia, Bulgaria: Abagar, 1997), 54.

Bulgaria, there were also powerful traditions that influenced the idea about socialist mass communications. One of the most powerful continuities was the high esteem in which culture and literacy were held. Thus the socialist government retained the decades old public holiday, Day of Culture and the Slavic script held on the 24<sup>th</sup> of May each year.

In sum, local history shows that prior to socialism, there were developments that greatly influenced the construction of the socialist media sphere. Mass media's active role in daily life and especially the growing popularity of radio along with the rich experiences of socialist activists with media shaped the vision of a socialist mass communications. But so did the traditional emphasis on culture, education and literacy. These issues are important because they illustrate that, although unique, the socialist media system was influenced by the historical conjuncture from which it emerged and the powerful continuities in culture and communications.

### **2.3 A TALE OF TWO SOCIALISMS**

The lack of “freedom of expression” under socialism is one of the most frequently encountered narratives in the scholarship on Eastern Europe. The widespread use and rarely questioned validity of this truism have rendered it with a metonymical quality. This overemphasized feature of socialism functions as an ahistorical snapshot of the entire communication system in the former Eastern bloc. Since 1989, it also operates as a point of departure for post-socialist media against which one can measure their “progress:” “From Communist state-owned media to private and/or independent media, from censored and governmentally controlled to pluralistic and open

to civic dialogues, from rigid to flexible, deregulated media markets.”<sup>30</sup> The media literature in the West and especially in the US is replete with this type of worn-out binary that more often than not stops short of providing a theoretically rich or empirically substantiated overview of the media sphere during socialism.

Bulgarian mass communication scholars also tend to portray the pre-1989 era in simplistic narratives. Georgi Lozanov, the current long-term member and chair of the Council of Electronic Media (CEM), Bulgaria’s media regulatory body, and a professor of communication and journalism at Sofia University, summarizes the forty-five years of socialist media as follows:

Party decrees and party faces, congresses and parades, authorized entertainment that permeated everyday life, estrada [a type of music that emerged in the 1950s and flourished during socialism] and New Year’s Eve television specials, “Uncle Filipov” [Nikola Filipov, Bulgaria’s first newscaster], Lili Ivanova [a famous Bulgarian singer] and Kevork Kevorkian [one of the most popular Bulgarian television anchors], Stoyanka Mutafova and Georgi Kaloyanchev [Bulgarian actors], people’s power and people’s favorites.”<sup>31</sup>

These descriptions of media under socialism as solely committed to control and communist propaganda are as misleading as they are entrenched. In particular, these portrayals fail to account for a major component of socialist media, namely their goal to educate and promote cultural enlightenment. Unlike authoritarian Spain or Portugal, where the governments simply “sought to control the media, but did not assign them a positive role,” Eastern European media were expected to play a role in social transformation.<sup>32</sup> In addition, the failure to recognize the intellectual and educational role various media played during socialism hinders our capacity

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<sup>30</sup> Noemi Marin and Laura Lengel, “Emerging Media Transformations in the New Europe: Past and Future Challenges,” in *Negotiating Democracy: Media Transformations in Emerging Democracies*, eds. Isaac Blannkson et al. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 51-52.

<sup>31</sup> Georgi Lozanov, “Kraiat na Edin ‘Efiren’ MnoPol” / “The End of a Broadcasting Monopoly,” in *bTV: Novata Vizia / bTV New Vision*, eds. Georgi Lozanov et al. (Sofia, Bulgaria: Fondatzia “Mediina Demokratzia, 2008), 124.

<sup>32</sup> Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini, “‘Comparing Media System’ between Eastern and Western Europe,” in *Media Transformations in the Post-communist World: Eastern Europe’s Tortured Path to Change*, eds. Peter Gross et al. (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013), 23.

to fully “appreciate” their transformation into commercially driven, entertainment industries. But behind this omission stands a much more serious scholarly deficiency.

The impetus of socialist media to educate and enlighten is intimately linked to a major transformation in the socialist economy and ideology that began in the late 1950s and 1960s. Although the educational and cultural features of socialist media existed prior to that, the emphasis on them increased after the historical transition from early to late socialism. The death of Stalin followed by a wave of political liberalization, the economic shift from heavy to light industry and consumption, the remarkable migrations from rural to urban areas and the coming of age of a new young generation growing up under socialism precipitated a shift to a complex ideological change broadly referred to as “socialist humanism.” But historians have only recently begun to grapple with the complexity and variations of the shift to socialist humanism in the former Eastern bloc. In the scholarship on mass communications, the distinction between early and late socialist media is virtually non-existent. Instead, scholars represent media as static throughout the entire socialist period. Thus, in order to fully grasp the role of media in the socialist humanist project it is important to historicize the socio-economic and cultural differences between early and late socialism and the different roles media played in them.

## **2.4 EARLY SOCIALISM AND MEDIA IN SUPPORT OF INDUSTRIALIZATION**

When the leftist Fatherland Front (FF) overthrew the monarchy on the 9<sup>th</sup> of September, 1944, the war in Europe was not over. Bulgaria shifted its allegiance from Nazi Germany to the Soviet Union and Bulgarian troops took part in the liberation of Macedonia and Southern Serbia and later participated in the march to Austria through Yugoslavia and Hungary. Forty-thousand

Bulgarian soldiers were killed, injured or disappeared from September 1944 to May 1945.<sup>33</sup> The FF also sought to consolidate power at home, which often took the form of retributions and revolutionary violence. In December 1944, the newly established “People’s Court,” one of the most controversial and debated chapters in Bulgarian historiography, provided this process with a legal framework. Between December 1944 and April 1945, the court tried 11,122 people and convicted a total of 9,155 of them. It executed 2,730 while it sentenced 1,305 to life in prison. Three of the king’s regents, 22 former ministers, 66 former Member of Parliament and 47 army generals faced the firing squad.<sup>34</sup> The court accused one-hundred and five journalists of spreading “fascist propaganda.” Only seven of them were found innocent while sixteen were shot.<sup>35</sup> Additionally, the Nazi-style Ministry of Propaganda was closed and renamed the Ministry of Information and the Arts. Along with the work of the “People’s Court” the campaign to eradicate the former regime included the political screening of libraries, theatre programs, and the catalogues of publishing houses, as well as films imported after 1938.<sup>36</sup>

Part of the reason why the “People’s Court” is one of the most contentious subjects in Bulgarian historiography is its inseparability from another equally controversial question: Was there fascism in Bulgaria? In fact, in his opus on modern Bulgarian historiography, Roumen Daskalov identifies these subjects as two of the four most debated themes in Bulgarian modern history, the other two being the peasant government of BANU and the Russophiles versus Russophobes debate.

One of the main experts on Bulgarian fascism and nationalism, Nikolay Poppetrov, along with a number of Western historians, describes the regime of King Boris III as an “authoritarian

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<sup>33</sup> Kalinova and Baeva, 48.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 59.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 91.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

dictatorship of the King,” (“Royal Dictatorship”) which after 1939 adopted more and more fascist’ elements (*fashizira se*—or “it becomes more fascistic”).<sup>37</sup> Somewhat similarly, Mark Mazower concludes that in the Balkans, regimes such as the Bulgarian one were not fascist but “right-wing dictatorships” in which Kings ruled with their handpicked ministers.<sup>38</sup> At the same time, after 1989 liberal anti-communist historiography began to question and oftentimes outright deny, the existence of any forms of fascism in Bulgaria before 1944 in order to contradict the anti-fascist claims of the BCP. But this line of argument does not hold on at least two critical levels: the violent persecution of leftists and the treatment of the Bulgarian Jewry.

The Fatherland Front government’s official estimate is that 29,480 partisans were killed as of the 9<sup>th</sup> of September 1944.<sup>39</sup> Daskalov finds this figure to be an “exaggeration” and concludes that from 1941 to 1944, 2,740 partisans died while an additional 3,000 were killed from the “September Uprising” in 1923 to 1941.<sup>40</sup> In addition to the killings, in 1941 the regime started to build prison camps and in 1943 youth with leftist views were interned in “specialized labor brigades.”<sup>41</sup> In other words, regardless of whether 5,000 or 30,000 communists died in the fight against the regime, like the rest of the fascist regimes in Europe, the monarchy of King Boris III violently repressed the Left. The story about its anti-Semitism is less straightforward, but also bore the signs of fascism.

In February 1940, Petar Gabrovski, one of the most outspoken anti-Semites in Bulgaria, was appointed Minister of the Interior.<sup>42</sup> In December of that year Bulgaria passed the anti-Semitic “Law for the Defense of the Nation,” which, among other things, required Jews to wear

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 267.

<sup>38</sup> Mazower, 129.

<sup>39</sup> Kalinova and Baeva, 56.

<sup>40</sup> Daskalov, 255-256.

<sup>41</sup> Kalinova and Baeva, 58.

<sup>42</sup> Crampton, 170. Gabrovski was executed by the “People’s Court” in 1945.

the Star of David, introduced a levy on Jewish property and instituted numerous degrading restrictions on the Bulgarian Jewry.<sup>43</sup> On October 1, 1940 Sofia's mayor renamed three central streets in the capital to bear the names of Italy's King Victor Emanuel II, Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler.<sup>44</sup> Additionally, a number of non-government organizations advocated anti-Semitism as well. One of them was the powerful paramilitary Union of Bulgarian National Legions (UBNL). The paramilitary insisted on harsher treatment of the Jewish population than the one pursued by the King. Thus when the monarchy resettled Bulgarian Jews from the capital to the countryside, the UBNL called for their interment in concentration camps and subsequent deportation from Bulgaria altogether. It referred to the Bulgarian Jews as "soldiers of our enemies" and asked for Bulgarians who had converted to Judaism to be arrested as traitors and subjected to "bloody forced labor."<sup>45</sup> At the same time, Bulgaria was one of the very few countries in Europe that did not deport its Jewish citizens in Bulgaria proper. Although they faced discrimination, Bulgaria's 48,000 Jews survived the war. However, with the assistance of the Bulgarian army, the 11,343 Jews in the lands occupied by the Bulgarian army in Western Thrace and Macedonia were deported to Treblinka in March 1943 where they all perished.<sup>46</sup> In this way, Bulgaria's relationship to the Jewish question has engendered radically different interpretations that spill outside of Bulgarian historiography. In 1996, a group of Jews erected monuments of King Boris III, his wife and the wartime Speaker of the Bulgarian Parliament, in an Israeli park named "the Bulgarian Forest," as a gesture of appreciation to Bulgaria. But in the

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<sup>43</sup> Kalinova and Baeva, 22.

<sup>44</sup> Todorova, *Bones of Contention*, 248.

<sup>45</sup> Leah Coen, "Kogato Faktite Govoriat Balgarskite Antisemiti Triabva da Malchat" / "When the Facts Speak, the Bulgarian Anti-Semites Must Remain Silent," *Marginalia*, January 18, 2016, accessed February 10, 2016, <http://www.marginalia.bg/analizi/kogato-faktite-govoryat/>.

<sup>46</sup> Crampton, 176.



year 2000, an Israeli court ordered the removal of all the monuments from the site because of the darker side of the country's World War II history.

In sum, despite the post-1989 attempts to minimize and outright deny the fascist elements of Bulgaria's monarchy, as well as the role of the anti-fascist forces that sought to counter them, it is undisputable that the leftist Fatherland Front's government that took power on the 9<sup>th</sup> of September, 1944 was born *in* the struggle against fascism. Hence, to a great extent early socialism was propelled by the feelings and sensibilities engendered by the fight against fascism. The rhetoric that accompanied this struggle was the most powerful mobilizing force in the years of "People's Democracy" (1944-1947). The concept of "People's Democracy" was theorized by Georgi Dimitrov in 1936, when he was already the leader of the Third Communist International. At the time, Dimitrov argued that the best approach to fight fascism was the creation of anti-fascist "popular fronts." Under this proposition, European communist parties had to build alliances not only with leftist forces but also with centrists and liberals.<sup>47</sup> Dimitrov claimed that the concept of "People's Democracy" was a natural continuation of the "popular fronts." Hence, in 1936, in regards to the Spanish Civil War he portrayed the future republic as "a unique state with a real people's democracy. It won't be a Soviet state yet, but anti-fascist, leftist state with the participation of the leftist part of the bourgeoisie."<sup>48</sup> In other words, the idea of "People's Democracy" was that of a transitional state, which would eventually transform into a socialist state of Soviet type.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, private property was not nationalized during this period and non-communist parties and newspapers were still tolerated.

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<sup>47</sup> Daskalov, 188.

<sup>48</sup> Baeva, 38.

<sup>49</sup> Daskalov, 303.

But a new constitution proclaimed Bulgaria a “People’s Republic” on December 4<sup>th</sup> 1947. This signaled the end of the “People’s Democracy.” The communist party crushed the opposition and in September 1947, the most prominent figure of the non-communist political forces, the agrarian Nikola Petkov, was executed. By 1949 a record number of prisoners (4,900) were interned in prison camps.<sup>50</sup> But in addition to the repression against opponents, Stalinist-style purges of the Communist party began as well. By 1951, one out of every five communists in Bulgaria, or more than 100,000 members of the party were purged from its lines.<sup>51</sup> Prominent figures among them were executed.

Although it is the most well-publicized and researched historical legacy of early socialism, political repression was only one component of the transformation of Bulgaria into a Soviet-style, socialist state. The economy was centralized, agriculture collectivized and economic life organized on the basis of five-year plans, during the first three of which (1947-1952, 1953-1957, and 1958-1960) Bulgaria’s “crash industrialization” was accomplished.<sup>52</sup> As Cristofer Scarboro notes, similarly to the Soviet Union, the revolution was made in the name of industrial workers, who were a small percentage of the population and therefore had to be manufactured through the construction of huge industrial plants. As a result, in a little over a decade, heavy industry’s net material product rose from 23 percent to 49 percent and a total of 678,000 peasants moved to the cities to work in the heavy industry.<sup>53</sup> Thus, by 1965, 50 percent

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<sup>50</sup> Kalinova and Baeva 99. The anti-communist “Black Book of Communism,” claims that during the communist period in Bulgaria between 18,000 and 25,000 people were killed by the regime. But the historian Rumen Daskalov, argues that this figure is reached through “unsubstantiated extrapolations.” Most likely lower than the highest estimates, the bulk of the violence took place during the first decade of socialism. See Daskalov, *From Stambolov to Zhivkov*, 365.

<sup>51</sup> Kalinova and Baeva 100.

<sup>52</sup> Cristofer Scarboro, *The Late Socialist Good Life in Bulgaria: Meaning and Living in a Permanent Present Tense* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011), 9.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

of the population lived in urban centers while in 1920 fewer than 20 percent of Bulgarians lived in the cities.<sup>54</sup>

During this period industrial work acquired a heroic aura. Following the example of the Soviet Union, “shock work” (*udaren trud*) became a major trope. Derived from the Russian (and Bulgarian) word for a “blow” or a “strike,” it described the process of accomplishing labor intensive tasks as “rushes” or “storms” executed by groups of workers. According to Susan Buck-Morss, beginning in 1929, the Soviet authorities promoted it as a means of “‘socialist competition,’ whereby one factory, shop or brigade was ‘challenged’ by another in order to accomplish more in less time.”<sup>55</sup> “This was,” she continues “a passionately emotional affair involving team spirit, daily drama, and heroic achievement” during which “the collective thrust of the shock workers gave a shock as the agents of historical change, ‘bringing the time of socialism closer.’”<sup>56</sup> The early years of socialism in Bulgaria copied the Soviet experience. The Brigadier Movement attracted young volunteers at the rate of 500,000 (out of a population of 7,300 000) a year to build the foundations of socialism in difficult conditions. The volunteers built dams, railways, cut mountain passes, and even created the first Bulgaria socialist city, Dimitrovgrad.<sup>57</sup> In the Soviet Union this type of work gave birth to its own heroes, most notably, Alexei Stakhanov, a Donbass coal miner, who “overshot the scientifically established work pace by hewing 102 tons in a single shift, fourteen times the quota” prompting him to become “the symbol of the shock brigades of Stalin’s Five Year Plans.”<sup>58</sup> In Bulgaria too, “Stefan Naidenov, who, digging soil in Dimitrovgrad, over-fulfilled his norm by 1,800 percent” and “Emil Morozov

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>55</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2000), 110-111.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Scarboro, 13.

<sup>58</sup> Buck-Morss, 183.

who over-fulfilled his norm by more than 2,000 percent” became instant heroes of the Brigadier Movement.<sup>59</sup> The press, radio and newsreels actively promoted their sacrifice, deprivation and selflessness in the name of building socialism.

In Bulgaria newsreels remain the only audiovisual records that document the first post-World War II decade. As such, they present a rare glimpse at this bygone era. In her analysis of the newsreels from 1948, the Bulgarian sociologist Liliana Deyanova concludes that the footage is “*from and about* a mobilization. A mobilization of the masses (the masses—this fundamental productive force of early socialist modernization).”<sup>60</sup> She lists the most frequently used words and phrases by the narrators: “action,” “agitator,” “campaign,” “heating up the competition,” “shock-work” (udarnichestvo), “active struggle against saboteurs and slackers,” “nationwide actions,” “fierce,” “to accelerate,” “to over-fulfil,” and “let’s exert all of our strength to.” Verbs such as “approaching,” “passed,” and “accomplished ahead of schedule,” according to Deyanova, “instilled the idea of movement, upswing and ‘incessant progress.’”<sup>61</sup> “The images of factories, machines, mines and huge construction sites prevail (and overshadow) the natural beauties or rural products...”<sup>62</sup> The newsreels are full of calls to action in the name of industrialization, and contain “symbolically efficient forms” such as “we build the railway, the railway builds us.”<sup>63</sup> Thus Deyanova sums up this footage from early socialism as representative of “masses full of optimism...rallies, assemblies, delegations, receptions, and brigadier bodies.”<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Scarboro, 21.

<sup>60</sup> Liliana Deyanova, *Ochertania na Malchanieto: Istoricheska Sotziologia na Kolektivnata Pamet / Outline of Silence: Historical Sociology of Collective Memory* (Sofia Bulgaria: Kritika i Humanizam, 2009), 306.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 307.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 308.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 310.

Deyanova's analysis captures the desire of early socialist media to mobilize the population in the struggle to industrialize and build socialism. In fact, at times their pathos reached levels that resembled the mobilization for war rather than industrial work. Prompted also by the fresh memories of the heroic days of the anti-fascist struggle, the newsreels exerted the values of self-sacrifice, deprivation and struggle for the collective good. These values continued to dominate well beyond the 1940s into the late 1950s. A newsreel from 1956 exhibits similar themes as the ones Deyanova discusses. The first item it depicts is an award ceremony at the People's Assembly, which recognized elderly party activists for their dedication to the communist party and the guerrilla fighters during the "difficult years of the struggle against fascism." The second bit of footage on this newsreel is from the mining city of Dimitrovo, where miners over-fulfill the norm through the use of an innovative method. The third item shows the benefits of using coal dust to power train locomotives. The fourth piece presents the building of a hydroelectric power station while the fifth is dedicated to a winter scientific expedition to one of Bulgaria's mountaintops. The newsreel concludes with footage from the 1956 May Day parade, which the narrator describes as the "twelfth free May Day for our working people who have confidently embarked on the wide road to socialism."<sup>65</sup> Similar to the newsreels described by Deyanova, although filmed twelve years after the communist revolution of 1944, it also depicts masses of people, sweating bodies, and marching crowds. "Record quantities of concrete," "over-fulfilled norms," "preserving time and valuable wood" and other routine phrases continue to dominate the dictionary of the narrator. Alongside this imagery and rhetoric, up until his death (1953) and denunciation (1956), Joseph Stalin's name is always mentioned in Eastern Bloc media. At times the "cult of personality," as this phenomenon was called, took astonishing

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<sup>65</sup> "May Day Celebrated in Sofia 1956" British Pathé Archive, 10:33, <http://www.britishpathe.com/video/may-day-celebrated-in-sofia/query/bulgaria>.

proportions. Bulgarian dissident writer Georgi Markov claimed that in its 21<sup>st</sup> of December 1949 issue alone, Bulgaria's major newspaper "Workers' Deed" mentioned Stalin's name more than three-hundred times.<sup>66</sup> Newsreels were also replete with references to him.

Regularly screened in public spaces, newsreels remained a powerful tool of propaganda and information not only in Bulgaria and the Eastern bloc, but also in the West. This changed in the 1950s, when the new medium of television challenged their dominant position. Up until the launch of regular television broadcasts in 1959 and its establishment as the new popular medium in the 1960s, newsreels retained a prestigious place in the Bulgaria mediascape. As such, they are unique illustrations of what media producers and party propagandists saw as the spirit and priorities of the first fifteen years of socialism. Scholars of Eastern Europe are familiar with the values of early socialism captured by the newsreels. The political repression of the first decade after World War Two is also well-known and publicized. The problem is that scholars tend to ascribe a dominant role to these features and values for late socialism as well. According to the historian Paulina Bren, "this has contributed to a continued lack of serious differentiation between early and late communism, thereby unwittingly feeding into a discredited cold war narrative that insisted on the 'totality' of the communist experience."<sup>67</sup>

There are a number of motives for this lack of differentiation. Besides the usual Cold War ideological commitment to the "totalitarian" paradigm, this scholarly failure is also due to the subtlety of the shift in socialist societies and the complexity of late socialism. In Bulgaria, the 9<sup>th</sup> of September, 1944 is unanimously regarded as the beginning of the socialist era and the 10<sup>th</sup> of November, 1989 as its end. But, there is no widely accepted date or even year that marks the

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<sup>66</sup> Georgi Markov, *Zadochi Reportazi za Balgaria tom. 1 / In Absentia Reports vol. 1*, (Sofia, Bulgaria: Ciela, 2008): 26.

<sup>67</sup> Bren, 3.

beginning of late socialism. In addition, there are numerous continuities between the two stages and as long-term Bulgarian socialist leader Todor Zhivkov points out in his memoirs, both periods strived to achieve the “socialist ideal.”<sup>68</sup> Yet, there is little doubt that socialism experienced significant economic, demographic and cultural transformations in the late 1950s and 1960s that precipitated the engagement with socialist humanism across the region. The next section explores this socio-economic and ideological shift that called for a new type of media.

## 2.5 LATE SOCIALISM

The death of Stalin in 1953 and Khurshev’s 1956 “secret speech” in which he denounced him, had a ripple effect not only in the Eastern bloc, but across the world. What followed was, broadly speaking, a “liberalization” of the socialist regimes that is widely acknowledged. Georgi Markov recounts that in 1956 one experienced “a palpable feeling of a softening atmosphere” and adds that the signs of change were clearly visible.<sup>69</sup> Bulgarians entered the 1960s with the sense that “reason was finally able to pass through the entrance of the party headquarters.”<sup>70</sup> The first signal of change in Bulgaria was the appointment of Todor Zhivkov as the General Secretary of the BCP in 1954. In early May, 1956, in response to the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in which Khrushchev denounced Stalin’s personality cult, Zhivkov affirmed that the BCP would follow the Soviet example of “full restoration and strict observance of the Leninist standards of Party life, the establishment of inner Party democracy and relentless

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<sup>68</sup> Zhivkov, *Memoirs*, 163

<sup>69</sup> Markov, *In Absentia Reports vol. 1*, 225.

<sup>70</sup> Markov, *In Absentia Reports vol. 2*, 224.

struggle against the personality cult.”<sup>71</sup> He singled out his comrade Vulko Chervenkov as the figure around which the Bulgarian equivalent of the personality cult developed and gradually ousted him from all party and state positions. The Soviet leadership recognized Zhivkov as a reformist communist who was the Bulgarian representative of the shift in Soviet-style socialism. Known as the “April line,” due to the mythologized BCP plenum of April 1956, the shift towards socio-economic and political liberalization became the rule of the day. Gradually, all opposition to the “April line” was interpreted as a remnant of retrograde Stalinist orthodoxy and Zhivkov managed to stay at the helm of the Bulgarian state until his ouster in 1989. With his thirty-three years as a head of state, Zhivkov became the longest-serving communist leader in Eastern Europe.

Political liberalization was not limited to the reshuffling at the top of the communist leadership. By 1962 all of the forced labor prison camps, in which a total of 23,531 mostly political prisoners served sentences between 1944 and 1962, were shut down.<sup>72</sup> What is more, in regards to the forced labor camp near the city of Lovech, Zhivkov famously exclaimed: “This is Fascism. Pure Fascism! This disgrace should be immediately liquidated. And harshly punished!”<sup>73</sup> The extent of the political liberalization during late socialism is a question for debate. The historian Maria Todorova argues that “citizens in East European socialist countries after Stalinism fared incomparably better than blacks in segregationist America.”<sup>74</sup> But even liberal, anti-communist scholars readily acknowledge that after the death of Stalin and

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<sup>71</sup> Todor Zhivkov, “The People, Real Builders of the New Life,” in *Bulgaria: Ancient and Socialist* (Toronto, Progress Books, 1975), 15.

<sup>72</sup> Kalinova and Baeva, 143.

<sup>73</sup> As quoted in Kalinova and Baeva, 143.

<sup>74</sup> Todorova, *Bones of Contention*, 105.



Khrushchev's speech of 1956, Bulgaria embarked on "a timid process of liberalization."<sup>75</sup> After all, in the *Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt herself noted that the death of Stalin "was not merely followed by a successor crisis and a temporary 'thaw' until a new leader had asserted himself, but by an authentic, though never unequivocal, process of detotalitarianization."<sup>76</sup>

Post-Stalinist political liberalization, however, was only one aspect of the change in Eastern European societies. The transformation was much deeper. Throughout his speeches during the 1960s Bulgaria's leader Todor Zhivkov noted that "[s]ome of the laws acting during the first stage of our socialist revolution are no longer in force; new laws of social development have emerged."<sup>77</sup> For the most part, these "new laws of social development" emerged as a result of the intense industrialization of the economy that led to both demographic changes and profound shifts in the socialist everyday life.

In 1946 less than 25 percent of the population lived in the cities, but by 1987, 66.4 percent of Bulgarians resided in urban centers. In the mid-1940s, the capital Sofia had a population of 300,000 but by the 1980s it reached 1,100,000.<sup>78</sup> Along with this tremendous demographic change that accompanied industrialization, there was another significant shift in the Bulgarian population. During the 1950s and 1960s a new generation of young people appeared who were born *during* socialism and had no experience with pre-socialist realities. The BCP understood that these young people faced a very different context than their parents. In turn, this required a new approach to their socialization under already constructed socialism. Failing to engage these youth was viewed as a danger to socialism since there were already signs that some

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<sup>75</sup> Martin Ivanov, "Sotzialisticheskoto Blagodenstvie I Konsensusat na Licemerieto" / "Socialist Welfare State and the 'Consensus of Hypocrisy,'" *Sotziologicheski Problemi* 1-2 (2011): 235.

<sup>76</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1973), xxv.

<sup>77</sup> Todor Zhivkov, "People's Culture, Socialist Culture," in *Bulgaria: Ancient and Socialist* (Toronto: Progress Books, 1975), 36.

<sup>78</sup> Karin Taylor, *Let's Twist Again: Youth and Leisure in Socialist Bulgaria* (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2006), 45-46.

young people participated in Western, bourgeois activities. Punks, rockers and other subcultural groups subsumed by the authorities under the expression “tape recorder youth” (*magentofonna mladesh*) proved that young people were prone to Western influences—and Western media influences in particular.<sup>79</sup> In sum, the emergence of urbanizing peasant masses and youth growing up in advanced socialism became of increasing concern to socialist thinkers because these new demographic groups were supposed to lay the foundations of the future communist society.

The demographic changes of late socialism were an outcome of the transformation of the socialist economy. In its final report to the Seventh Congress of the BCP (1958), the Central Committee of the party highlighted some of the economic changes in Bulgaria since the communist takeover in 1944. The rate of industrial production was seven times higher than in 1939. Industrial production worked at full capacity because shortages of coal and electric energy were eliminated. Ferrous metallurgy and heavy chemical industry grew at full speed. The collectivization of land and the creation of agricultural cooperatives dealt the final blow to the “capitalist elements in the village—the final remnants of the class of exploiters in the country.”<sup>80</sup> The report concluded that “these deep changes in the economy and the class structure of our society indicate that in our country socialism has won.”<sup>81</sup> In essence, the seventh congress of BCP marked the end of the first stage of socialism. The nationalized economy, developed industry and the elimination of antagonistic classes had set the stage for developed socialism. Industrialization had created the conditions to produce new commodities, as well as the means to

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<sup>79</sup> Deyanova, 354.

<sup>80</sup> *Direktivi na VII Knogres na BKP za Razvitie na NRB prez 1958-1962 / Directives of the VII Congress of the Communist Parti for the Development of Bulgaria during 1958-1962* (Sofia, Bulgaria: Bulgarian Communist Party Publishing, 1958), 7.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

acquire them. Because of this, the 1960s and 1970s are widely seen as a period of relative affluence in Bulgaria and across the Eastern bloc. They are often contrasted to the stagnation of the 1980s and the shortages of the first post-World War II years. Thus, Oxford historian of Bulgaria, Richard Crampton claims that in the 1960s and 1970s “for most of the population life was gradually becoming better.”<sup>82</sup>

In 1958, Zhivkov and the Central Committee had set the goal for “the rapid increase in the production of goods for people’s consumption, significant improvement of their quality and appearance, lowering of their prices and broadening of the choice of commodities.”<sup>83</sup> In 1962, the eight congress of the communist party concluded that in 1961 the production of commodities grew 61,4 percent since 1957 and it was nine times higher than in 1939.<sup>84</sup> Although the socialist economy satisfied the growing needs of the population better than previous governments, the fact that well-being was measured in material commodities was problematic in two ways. In 1970, while noting the improvements in the lives of Bulgarians, Zhivkov stated that after the April Plenum of 1956 the party had constantly aimed at “an optimal balance between the fund of ‘accumulation’ and the fund of ‘consumption.’”<sup>85</sup> “Optimal balance” was a key phrase, because the increased capacity to purchase could not always correspond to the availability and quality of products. In Zhivkov’s own words “[t]he constant improvement of the well-being of the people requires that consumer goods sufficient in amount and pleasing in variety and quality, should be

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<sup>82</sup> Crampton, 200.

<sup>83</sup> *Direktivi na VII Knogres*, 23.

<sup>84</sup> *Rezolucia na VIII Kongress na BKP / Resolution of the 8<sup>th</sup> Congress of the BCP* (Sofia, Bulgaria: Bulgarian Communist Party Publishing, 1962), 15.

<sup>85</sup> Todor Zhivkov, “From the Report of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party to the Tenth Party Congress,” in *Bulgaria: Ancient and Socialist* (Toronto: Progress Books, 1975), 78.

available for the growing incomes. We must frankly admit that we have not solved this problem.”<sup>86</sup> But this was not the only problem with increased rates of consumption.

The shift of the economy from industrialization to consumption also signaled a fundamental change in worldviews. Some socialist thinkers and politicians worried that the values of self-sacrifice and selflessness would lose ground to the new priorities of the modern citizen engaged in mass consumption. Georgi Markov had already noticed this shift in the 1960s. The communist beliefs of loyalty to the Marxist ideal began to “float like large bubbles” in the increasingly “dirtier social waters,” while the “building of socialism” translated into a fortune whose agents were “wardrobes, refrigerators, washing machines and automobiles.”<sup>87</sup> Besides this shift that suggested the problematic rise of the socialist version of Western consumerism, there were other economic developments that were a cause of concern as well. When the nauseating pace of industrialization slowed down, the eight-hour workday and the five-day work week became a reality. As a result, leisure time increased to become a major challenge for socialist thinkers as well. If the worker did not spend as much time working and if the emphasis on production had subsided, could one cultivate socialist values in the processes of consumption and leisure?

## **2.6 SOCIALIST CONSUMPTION DEFINED**

Only in the last ten years has Eastern European socialist consumption attracted scholarly attention that complicates existing representations of socialism as dearth, scarcity and constant

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>87</sup> Markov, *Zadochni Reportazi* vol. 1, 410.

shortages of basic necessities. The depiction of socialism as “drab” and “grey” as Margaret Thatcher famously described it, is well entrenched not only because of its rhetorical appeal in Cold War political discourse, but also because of its popularity among scholars and affirmation among regular people. In 1980, Hungarian economist János Kornai’s emblematic description of socialism as “economics of shortage” gained instant popularity and to this day is regarded as one of the best works on Eastern European socialist economies.<sup>88</sup> But this view of socialism also features in collective memory and socialist era folklore, such as popular Eastern European anecdotes:

Question: What would happen if they started building communism in the Sahara?

Answer: There would soon be shortages of sand.<sup>89</sup>

Not as widespread as the economics of shortage argument, although it is sometimes tied to it, there is another popular representation of Eastern European economics which claims that fine consumption goods were available, but only to the communist elite. Perhaps the best example of this line of criticism is Milovan Djilas’ *The New Class: An Analysis of the Communist System*, in which the Yugoslav author critiques the anti-socialist ideals of establishing a ruling class that, among other things, enjoyed material comfort inaccessible to regular people in the Eastern bloc.<sup>90</sup>

Both the “economics of shortage” and the “red bourgeoisie,” as some critics have called the presumed elite consumers of Eastern Europe, lines of criticism of socialist economics contain invaluable insights into certain tendencies in socialist consumption. Yet, their unquestioned acceptance and zealous deployment by anti-communist ideologues obscures a crucial

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<sup>88</sup> János Kornai, *Economics of Shortage* (Amsterdam: North Holland Press, 1980).

<sup>89</sup> Yurchak, 280.

<sup>90</sup> Milovan Djilas, *The New Class: An Analysis of the Communist System* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1957).

development in socialist consumption that only in the last decade has received its long overdue attention. The problem of Eastern European socialism in the 1960s and 1970s was not that it was too “drab” and “grey.” Even Zhvkov admitted that the authorities struggled to satisfy the proliferation of demands for consumer goods. At the same time, however, the socialist modernization of the 1960s and 1970s was able to reach levels of production of mass commodities that no other previous regime had even dreamt of. What is more, oftentimes the socialist government itself stimulated and produced these demands. In Bulgaria, material goods, such as toilet paper and coffee became a consumer standard during communist urbanization.<sup>91</sup>

In other words, in the 1960s and 1970s socialist consumption did not just raise the questions of who had better access to commodities or whether or not these commodities were available, but more importantly, their proliferation and popularity raised the issue of their effect on the relationship that people had to work, leisure and Marxist-Leninist ideology. It must be noted that the new scholarship that interrogates the latter issue is not the product of Marxist revisionism that distinguishes between the scarcity of Stalinism and the opulence of post-Stalinist socialism. After all, Vaclav Havel himself spoke of this distinction in *The Power of the Powerless*. In respect to late socialism he argued that:

[T]he hierarchy of values existing in the developed countries of the West has, in essence appeared in our society (the long period of coexistence with the West has only hastened this process). In other words, what we have here is simply another form of the consumer and industrial society, with all its concomitant social, intellectual, and psychological consequences.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Iwaylo Ditchev, “Spaces of Desire: Consumer Bound and Unbound,” *boundary 2* 41, no.1 (2014): 109-110.

<sup>92</sup> Vaclav Havel, *Power of the Powerless* quoted in Nadia Kaneva and Elza Ibroscheva, “Media and the Birth of the Post-communist Consumer,” in *Media Transformations in the Post-communist World: Eastern Europe’s Tortured Path to Change*, ed. Peter Gross et al. (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013), 68.

In raising the question of consumption and industrialization, Havel pointed to the economic correlations between the East and the West following the 1950s and 1960s. But the economic parallels date back to the 1920s and 1930s, when the Soviet Union warmly embraced the Fordist model of production. Hence, the subsequent economic developments and crises were to be experienced in the West and the East alike.<sup>93</sup> In other words, it was only logical that the processes of deindustrialization and the rise of consumerism in the West would emerge in some form in the Eastern bloc as well. Critics of consumerism emerged on both sides of the “Iron Curtain.” But in the Eastern bloc socialist thinkers did not have to only theorize the problem; if they were to retain elements of socialism within consumerism, they had to also discover practical solutions. How socialism responded to the challenge of rising consumption levels is the major question that has attracted the new scholarship on this topic. Although most scholars agree that consumption precipitated an ideological challenge to the socialist regimes, they differ on whether Eastern European consumption and Western consumerism were two sides of the same coin.

On one end of the spectrum are those who do not differentiate between Western and Eastern models of consumption. In these works, the term “consumerism” is used both in respect to socialism and capitalism, even though it emerges within Western historical contexts and theoretical approaches. For example, Iyaylo Ditchchev refers to late socialism in Bulgaria as “communist capitalism” and claims that “the paradox of communist modernization is that despite all the efforts invested in collectivist productivism, it succeeded best in something rather different: the creation of selfish consumers, indifferent to social matters.”<sup>94</sup> Ditchchev believes that socialist regimes were not unaware of this process and felt a certain guilt about it. Hence he claims that regardless of their differences, all of the socialist regimes from “Beijing to Havana”

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<sup>93</sup> Buck-Morss, 264.

<sup>94</sup> Ditchchev, “Spaces of Desire,” 101.

shared an “ambivalent relationship towards consumption.”<sup>95</sup> On one hand, they promoted it as a tool of legitimation. On the other hand, they morally stigmatized it. Ditchev concludes that socialist regimes’ attempts to distinguish between two modes of consumption: “our” progressive, rational consumption and “western,” reactionary, bourgeois consumerism, were futile.<sup>96</sup>

Cristofer Scarboro advances a similar argument and is even more comfortable than Ditchev in deploying Western terminology to describe consumption. “At its root, ironically, socialist humanism in Bulgaria during the 1960s and 1970s was driven by a move towards *embourgeoisement* and the creation of middle-class socialists.”<sup>97</sup> He explains that while in the first two decades work was given primacy as the most important value of socialism, during the socialist humanist period, “beauty, leisure, and pleasure gained more importance.”<sup>98</sup> Toil and deprivation were the markers of accomplishment for early socialists, refrigerators and television sets for late socialists.<sup>99</sup> Thus like Ditchev, Scarboro views the “inadequate fulfilment of the promises of modernity measured in consumer goods” as a major reason for the collapse of socialism.”<sup>100</sup> But, his argument also differs from Ditchev’s in one significant way.

For Ditchev, after 1989 consumerist desires were freed from “communist moralism” and surfaced in the form of “wild consumption and ostentatious selfishness.”<sup>101</sup> He illustrates this with a description of first reactions of the East Germans crossing into the West after the fall of the Berlin wall. “After decades of contact with dissidents and intellectuals, fleeing the regime for

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<sup>95</sup> Iwaylo Ditchev, “Komunisticheskata Shkola na Konsumatora” / “The Communist School of the Consumer,” *Kultura* 7, (2446) February 23, 2007, accessed February 15, 2016, <http://www.kultura.bg/bg/article/view/12651>.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Scarboro, *The Late Socialist Good Life in Bulgaria*, 1.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Cristofer Scarboro, “Sisyphus Revisited: Consumption and Collapse in Late Socialist Bulgaria,” *Anthropologiya* 1 (2014): 9.

<sup>101</sup> Ditchev, “Komunisticheskata Shkola na Konsumatora.”



noble reasons, West Germans were all too shocked by the masses of new fellow countrymen passing through the fallen Berlin Wall, who rushed into the supermarkets: they called them Bananenfresser (Banana gobblers).”<sup>102</sup> Although Scarboro agrees with Ditcher’s claim that communism failed to satisfy consumerist desires, he also adds that by itself this explanation is “too simple and neat” and “too comforting and dangerous” because “this displeasure also carried within it the current of dissatisfaction with those very promises.”<sup>103</sup> In other words, unlike Ditcher, who sees the desire to consume as the predominant driving force of the revolutions of 1989, Scarboro argues that the fact that people’s lives were ordered on the basis of consumer agendas during late socialism was itself a source of great disappointment with the system.

Some scholars do not agree with the arguments that Ditcher and Scarboro advance. Although acknowledging that in the 1950s Eastern bloc countries engaged with the material culture of capitalist modernity, Susan Reid and David Crowley also claim that this “did not amount to an unequivocal surrender of socialist principles, contrary to the hopes and expectations of cold warriors that the popular appetite for consumer goods once unleashed, would destabilize the socialist order.”<sup>104</sup> Instead, they argue that socialist regimes engaged in “a careful, if ultimately unsuccessful, balancing act” by seeking ideologically legitimate ways to raise living standards “without triggering the unending process of demand generation and insatiable desire that was the original sin of consumerism in the capitalist West.”<sup>105</sup> Across the region the emphasis on “rational consumption norms,” coupled with the active promotion of

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<sup>102</sup> Ditcher, “Spaces of Desire,” 106.

<sup>103</sup> Scarboro, “Sisyphus Revisited,” 8.

<sup>104</sup> David Crowley and Susan Reid, “Introduction: Pleasures in Socialism?,” in *Pleasures in Socialism: Leisure and Luxury in the Eastern Bloc*, ed. David Crowley et al. (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2010): 21.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

collective consumption in forms such as public canteens and laundries attempted to counter modern consumerism.<sup>106</sup>

Perhaps the most convincing arguments that socialist consumption was unique belongs to Bulgarian sociologist Liliana Deyanova. In her analysis of Bulgarian social science and humanities journals from the 1960s and 1970s she discovered that “socialist consumption” was intertwined with a number of other terms, such as “living standards,” “the formation of socialist way of life,” “the movement for socialist way of life,” “culture of consumption,” “quality of life,” “culture of leisure time and everyday life.” The term “socialist consumption” figured as a platform for the struggle against negative consumption patterns of the youth.<sup>107</sup> In this way, Deyanova’s analysis demonstrates that in Bulgaria, “socialist consumption” functioned in a complex local and cultural context that should caution scholars from deploying Western concepts of consumerism as freely as Ditcher and especially Scarborough do.

Deyanova argues that in official texts “socialist consumption” was defined as “a new structure of consumption, which organically combines the material and the intellectual bases in man.”<sup>108</sup> “Harmonious consumption” is another frequently encountered term in the 1960s and 1970s. The expression designates a combination of material and intellectual needs. Under this definition, “man itself” is the goal of consumption rather than material being by itself. Along these lines, in a direct criticism to Ditcher, Deyanova concludes that the official viewpoint was “consistent,” rather than “ambivalent” because it promised a “different” kind of consumption. In her view, socialist thinkers were not ambivalent at all about this type of consumption—stigmatizing and encouraging it at the same time. Rather, they were promoting a unique type of

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>107</sup> Deyanova, 242.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 349.

consumption—a consumption that is not an end in itself, a “non-mercantile” “harmonious consumption.”<sup>109</sup> For them, the only dangerous consumption was “bourgeois consumption,” in which man is simply a modified version of *homo economicus*. In contrast, socialism strived to emancipate man from alienation, including from its newest manifestation in the sphere of leisure time, where one’s time was appropriated by the entertainment industry.<sup>110</sup> The goal of socialist consumption was the development of the personality. This should not be confused with “bourgeois individualism,” because the personality was tied to a “moral community,” which plans and controls one’s free time.<sup>111</sup>

Liliana Deyanova’s argument is crucial for the understanding of the distinction between early and late socialism. The dual framing of socialist consumption as material and cultural at the same time was a central feature of the ideological shift to socialist humanism. In the developed and industrialized socialist society, the basic needs of the citizen, such as clothing, nutritious food and comfortable home were met. But, what distinguished the socialist citizen from the capitalist one was that he or she developed intellectual needs and besides the possession of basic consumer goods, he or she also visited the opera, went to the theatre and attended art exhibitions a specific amount of times each week. It was this component of consumption that socialist thinkers wanted to elevate in order to balance the material desires of people and create a style of consumption that differs from the one in the west. The following chapter explains how mass communications and especially the new medium of television, came to play a crucial role in this endeavor so central to emergence of socialist humanism in the Eastern bloc.

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 362.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

## 2.7 SOCIALIST HUMANISM DEFINED

Stalin's death and the subsequent liberalization, the radical demographic changes and the economic shift from industrial production to consumption precipitated a change in ideology as well. The change came under the banner of "socialist humanism" or "Marxist humanism" and it was a global phenomenon reflective of broad political and economic forces affecting the East, the West as well as the global South. The ideological shift and the social movements that it gave birth to are in many ways what allows us to speak of the "global 1960s."

In Bulgaria, the term "socialist humanism" appeared for the first time in newspapers at the end of the 1950s and early 1960s.<sup>112</sup> At its core, the term reflected a form of liberalization that focused on the development of the socialist personality. "The ideal of socialist humanism is the dialectical wholeness of the working, political, relaxed, physically healthy and harmoniously developed personality, a personality creatively active in all spheres of human activity: work, public duties, science, culture, entertainment."<sup>113</sup> While it did not abandon notions of collective action or collective good, socialist humanism, influenced by the early works of Marx, shifted the attention from the traditional Marxist-Leninist emphasis on masses and classes to "man." The goal of this change was to theorize the development of each individual's capacities in the conditions of already existing socialism. For this reason, the concept of "holistically developed personality," (also translated as "multi-developed personalities," "harmoniously developed personality" or "well-rounded personality") was *the major* trope of socialist humanist discourse.

Linked to the question of subjectivity, the concept of "holistically developed personality" "simultaneously evoked the Marxian promise of communism in which material plenty would

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<sup>112</sup> Scarboro, *The Late Socialist Good Life in Bulgaria*, 3.

<sup>113</sup> Taylor, 77.

allow future communists to fully pursue their interests and conjured up images of the Renaissance in which artists/scientists were able to pursue both knowledge and beauty.”<sup>114</sup> The goal of developing the personality, or the individual, as opposed to the traditional focus on masses and classes, was given legitimacy through the texts of early Marx and especially his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*. These early works, with their focus on “man” and the concepts of alienation, objectification and human freedom, provided the necessary “alibi” for socialist humanists. By extending these ideas, its proponents reinterpreted “the entire body of Marx’s thought in light of its relationship to Hegel and the first generation of radical Hegelian philosophers such as Feuerbach.”<sup>115</sup> Hence, they saw themselves as “revisionists” opposed to Stalin’s “dogmatists.”<sup>116</sup> In addition, Zhivka Valiavicharska explains that although right-wing and liberal texts were not widely available during socialism, by the end of the 1960s “the Kantian, Romanticist, and German Idealist philosophical traditions were ‘rehabilitated’ and helped reconfigure concepts of human freedom, personhood, and the individual.”<sup>117</sup> These ideological shifts allowed for the emergence of the idea of the “holistically developed person,” which became the “post-Stalinist humanist concept” embraced by both Marxist and non-Marxist humanists.<sup>118</sup>

The widespread disillusionment with Stalinism made socialist humanism appealing to reformers across the Eastern bloc. During the Prague Spring the concept of a “socialism with a human face,” coined by the reformist sociologist Radovan Richta, became a rallying cry.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Scarboro, *The Late Socialist Good Life in Bulgaria*, 3.

<sup>115</sup> Zhivka Valiavicharska, “How the Concept of Totalitarianism Appeared in Late Socialist Bulgaria: The Birth and Life of Zheliu Zhelev’s Book *Fascism*,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 15, no. 2 (Spring 2014): 320.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 321.

<sup>119</sup> Bren, 59.

Marxist humanists, such as the Czech thinker Karel Kosik, were chief voices of the movement.<sup>120</sup> In Yugoslavia, the famous dissident group that coalesced around the Marxist humanist journal *Praxis* (1964-1975) was a thorn in the foot of the Yugoslav leadership, not only with its critique of authoritarianism, but also with their attacks on Yugoslav consumerism. The members of the *Praxis* collective organized annual international conferences on the Croatian island of Korcula where they were joined by a veritable “Who’s Who” of Marxism: Bloch, Marcuse, Mandel, Habermas, Goldman and Lefebvre.<sup>121</sup> Erich Fromm’s anthology on *Socialist Humanism* was one of the products of this conference. In Hungary, “the Budapest School” formed by students and colleagues of Georg Lukacs, such as Agnes Heller, Ferenc Feher, Istvan Meszaros and Mihaly Vajda also advanced Marxist humanism.

But socialist humanism was not embraced only by Marxist humanists with an uneasy relationship to the state (*Praxis* was banned in 1975, to reemerge later as the journal *Constellations*), but also by the communist party leadership. In fact, the influence of socialist humanism reached all the way to the top of the Soviet leadership. Not just anybody, but Louis Althusser himself, the leading European anti-humanist at the time, was the one to notice this first. He went as far as to declare that Eastern European socialist humanism was the reason why he wrote what he wrote:

I would never have written anything were it not for the Twentieth Congress and Khrushchev’s critique of Stalinism and the subsequent liberalization. But I would never have written these books if I had not seen this affair as a bungled de-Stalinization, a right-wing de-Stalinization which instead of analyses offered us only incantations; which instead of Marxist concepts had available only the poverty of bourgeois ideology. My target was therefore clear: these humanist ravings, these feeble dissertations on liberty, labor or alienation, which were the effects of all this among the French Party

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<sup>120</sup> See Karel Kosik, *Dialectics of the Concrete: A Study of Problem of Man and World* (Boston: D. Riedel Publishing Company, 1976).

<sup>121</sup> Nikolay Karkov, “Decolonizing Praxis in Eastern Europe: Toward a South-to-South Dialogue,” *Comparative and Continental Philosophy* 7, no.2 (2015): 189.

intellectuals. And my aim was equally clear: to make a start on the first left-wing critique of Stalinism, a critique that would make it possible to reflect not only on Khrushchev and Stalin but also on Prague and Lin Piao: that would above all help put some substance back into the revolutionary project here in the West.<sup>122</sup>

Whether the young Marx played “the role of a Trojan horse in the citadel of official Marxism”<sup>123</sup> is a complex question. In Bulgaria socialist thinkers not only did not view the engagement with socialist humanism as a restoration of capitalism, but they saw it as a stepping stone to the final Marxist utopia—communism. Mass communications were assigned a key role in the formation of the “holistically developed personality,” socialist humanism’s main goal. Television, as a new mass medium that was coterminous with the transition to de-Stalinization and late socialism was of particular importance. It had to develop the intellectual, cultural and non-material component of the unique socialist consumption of developed socialism. In it, media and television in particular, had a central role to play. Yet mass communications and television in particular are rarely mentioned in the new scholarship on consumption in Eastern Europe. Addressing this omission is not only an important step in understanding the media transformations of late socialist Eastern Europe, but it also provides communications scholars with an actually existing, practical model of a media system alternative to the globally hegemonic capitalist corporate media system of today.

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<sup>122</sup> Quoted in Miglena Nikolchina, “Inverted Forms and Heterotopian Homonymy: Althusser, Mamardashvili, and the Problem of ‘Man,’” *boundary 2* 41, no.1 (2014): 80.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

## **2.8 SOCIALIST HUMANIST JOURNALISM, THE “SMALL JUSTICE,” AND THE RETURN TO LENIN**

What was the role of the journalist during socialism? There is a good reason why this question sounds redundant. According to the “transmission belt” theory of socialist mass communications, journalists’ function boiled down to the transfer of information from the Communist Party to the public. This had led to the image of the socialist journalist as a mere messenger of the authorities. But this one-dimensional representation hinders a thorough understanding of what it meant to be a journalist under socialism and as a result, according to Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini, “there is still little empirical research about mass media professionalization in the Communist era, about reporters’ working routines and self-perceptions, about how journalists interacted with officials and citizens, and so on.”<sup>124</sup> Eastern European media scholars trace the journalist’s mission as a popularizer of party policy to Lenin’s theory of the press as “a collective agitator, propagandist, and organizer.” The problem of this conceptualization, rooted in the early stages of the Cold War, is that it fails to account for the strong populist strain in Lenin’s theory that portrayed journalists as agents of social justice. Their representation as servants of the people created a potential for journalists to engage in criticism against the authorities, regardless of whether they are communists or not. In fact, Lenin discussed the importance of criticizing trade union representatives and other public figures who are supposedly on the side of the people.

The death of Stalin triggered a wave of liberalization that was framed as a “return to Lenin.” This liberalization sought to counter Stalin’s cult of personality through the restoration

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<sup>124</sup> Hallin and Mancini, 16.



of “inner-party” democracy. The extent of the effects of this liberalization is a question of debate, but in journalism some tangible changes occurred. In an effort to counter the image of Soviet socialism as “bureaucratic” and “intransigent” a certain level of journalistic agency was permitted. Criticism referred to as “the small justice,” under which journalists could engage in an investigation of the work of low and mid-level party officials, factory directors and trade union representatives, was not only allowed but encouraged. Although this excluded criticism of communism (“the big justice”) and the leadership of the party, this was by far not a negligible part of Eastern European post-Stalinist socialism that has been largely ignored in scholarship on the late socialist public sphere. This component of socialist journalism created a certain form of civil society in which citizens communicated via letters and phone calls with their media in order to complain about social problems or share opinions. This was actually a very developed and widespread practice that has been sidelined by the “totalitarian” interpretations of socialist mass communications. The rest of this chapter revisits this practice and its relationship to the Leninist theory of the press.

For decades F. Siebert, T. Peterson and W. Schramm’s *Four Theories of the Press* served as a foundation for scholars of Eastern European media. Published only three years after Stalin’s death, the book reflects the binary world of the Cold War:

Our press tries to contribute to the search for truth; the Soviet press tries to convey pre-established Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist truth...We bend over backward to make sure that information and ideas will compete. They bend over backward to make sure that only the line decided upon will flow through the Soviet channels. We say that their press is not free; they say that our press is not responsible.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Fredrick S. Siebert, Theodore Peterson, and Wilbur Schramm, *Four Theories of the Press: The Authoritarian, Libertarian, Social Responsibility, and Soviet Communist Concepts of What the Press Should Be and Do* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1963), 6.

Although critical of the propagandistic nature of the Soviet model, the content and the tone of the book is propagandistic as well. The liberal press in the West is represented as an “integral part of the great march of democracy which has resulted in the stupendous advancement of well-being of humanity.” According to these authors, the liberal press “has been the guiding principle of western civilization for more than two hundred years.”<sup>126</sup> The authors extol liberalism as the model that “struck off the manacles from the mind of man, and it has opened up new vistas for humanity.”<sup>127</sup> This ideological and conservative book supported by the Department of the Church and Economic Life of the National Council of Churches, was successful in setting the tone for the study of the Soviet model of media primarily as the most “tightly controlled” press in history, operating only to the benefit of the Communist party, which according to the authors, represented “less than ten percent” of the people in the Soviet Union.<sup>128</sup> Although nowadays most scholars criticize the book, some still find value in it.<sup>129</sup> But more importantly, “over time, a considerable number of normative theories have been developed, building on the *Four Theories of the Press* by Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm.”<sup>130</sup>

*The Four Theories of the Press* and the tradition it established are of no use in understanding Eastern European media. But acknowledging this should not be translated as a denial of the existence of censorship. Like every political system, restrictions of journalism during socialism existed in several forms. Direct involvement by government officials could target the content of a text. For instance, a newspaper reporter interviewed as a part of this study recalled how a critical text he sent to his editor was abridged, heavily redacted and its title

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>129</sup> Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, “Freedom without Impartiality. The Vicious Circle of Media Capture,” in *Media Transformations in the Post-communist World: Eastern Europe’s Tortured Path to Change*, 36.

<sup>130</sup> Karol Jakubowicz, *Rude Awakening Social and Media Change in Central and Eastern Europe* (New York: Hampton Press, 2006), 16.

changed per the recommendation of a state censor. Angered, the journalist convinced his editor to put a fake name as the author of the text instead of his own, because he found the final material embarrassing.<sup>131</sup> Another form of censorship targeted not the content, but the order of news. A television journalist who worked in BTs prime-time news program “Around the World and at Home,” described an example of this practice:

One night before the 10<sup>th</sup> of November, I was on duty in the news program. On this day the Chinese Foreign Minister had arrived on a state visit to Bulgaria and was greeted by the Bulgarian Foreign Minister, at that time Petar Mladenov, who would later become the President. I don’t remember why, probably because something else seemed more important to me, but consciously I did not place this piece of news as the opening story of the prime-time evening news. Instead it came second or third. Immediately, while the evening news were still flowing, a phone call came from the Foreign Ministry. They protested that I did not place this as the top news. I had to write an official explanation letter why I did this and I was disciplined as well.<sup>132</sup>

These examples illustrate that censorship during socialism was a lived reality for many Bulgarian journalists. However, the overemphasis on this feature, as if it was the all-encompassing essence of the entire socialist communication system, has led to a serious oversight of a multiplicity of other components of socialist media. Or as Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini put it: “the one-dimensional analysis of the Communist media in terms of the suppression of press freedom by Party control is surely too simplistic a basis to understand the historical legacy of that era.”<sup>133</sup> Furthermore, pointing to Lenin’s writing as the theoretical legitimization of socialist censorship is also misleading. It is true that his theory of the press was held in high esteem across the Eastern bloc. In socialist-era Bulgarian journalism and mass communication journals, such as *Contemporary Journalism*, Lenin’s work is cited more frequently than the writings of Marx and Engels. Even more importantly, Lenin’s view of the

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<sup>131</sup> Personal Interview # 47.

<sup>132</sup> Personal Interview # 24.

<sup>133</sup> Hallin and Mancini, 16 and 23.

press as “a collective organizer, agitator and propagandist” became institutionalized in 1948 during the 5<sup>th</sup> Congress of the BCP. Some point to this congress as “the beginning of the real communist period in Bulgaria’s media development and the end of tolerating the opposition.”<sup>134</sup> However, like other powerful theoretical texts, Lenin’s theory of the press contains a multiplicity of arguments that precipitate a variety of readings. In short, Lenin’s theory does not simply teach journalists to be obedient, as scholars of Eastern Europe seem to suggest. His work, and in particular, his text “What is to be Done?” calls for a closer reading that does not stop at the oft cited quote that “a newspaper is not only a collective propagandist and a collective agitator, it is also a collective organizer.”<sup>135</sup>

The question of agitation and propaganda appears throughout Lenin’s work, but his view of the revolutionary press is most thoroughly addressed in his essay “*Where to Begin?*” (May, 1901), which later expanded into his famous book “*What is to be Done?*” (1902). There, Lenin formulates the role of the journalist in a revolutionary, socialist society as follows:

A newspaper is not only a collective propagandist and a collective agitator, it is also a collective organiser. In this last respect it may be likened to the scaffolding round a building under construction, which marks the contours of the structure and facilitates communication between the builders, enabling them to distribute the work and to view the common results achieved by their organised labour. With the aid of the newspaper, and through it, a permanent organisation will naturally take shape that will engage, not only in local activities, but in regular general work, and it will train its members to follow political events carefully, appraise their significance and their effect on various strata of the population, and develop effective means for the revolutionary party to influence these events (my italics).<sup>136</sup>

In this text it is crucial to note not only Lenin’s perception of journalists as central figures in the victory of socialism. Both for the context that Lenin writes in, but also for scholars on

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<sup>134</sup> Milev, “Shtrihi kam Istoriata na Mediite I Komunikaciite v Balgaria,” 70.

<sup>135</sup> Vladimir Lenin, “Where to Begin?,” *Marxist Internet Archive*, May 1901, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/may/04.htm>.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

Soviet media today, it is essential to highlight his emphasis on “common results,” the effect on “various strata” and the focus “not only” on local activities. Lenin writes at a time when a heated debate had split the Social-Democrats. He attacks writers such as Bernstein and their publication *Rabocheye Deyelo*, a newspaper with “Economist” views. According to Lenin, this section of the Social-Democrats, labeled as “Economists” because of their exclusive focus on the relationship between workers and employers, was wrong in believing that the fight for unions and labor rights would automatically lead to socialism. Instead Lenin, argued that this can only produce “trade union consciousness” because rendering the “economic struggle political character” was insufficient.<sup>137</sup> Instead he believed that the political consciousness required for the creation of socialism necessitated “comprehensive political exposures.”

In *What is to be Done?* Lenin placed significant emphasis on “exposures,” by which he meant the systematic revelations of injustices committed by the autocratic Tsarist regime: “In no way except by means of such exposures can the masses be trained in political consciousness and revolutionary activity.”<sup>138</sup> But what is fascinating in Lenin’s theory of the press is its populist approach. In his criticism of the “extremely harmful and reactionary” narrow views of the Economists who did not recognize any other struggle but the struggle between workers and employers, Lenin launched a passionate argument that “working-class consciousness cannot be genuine political consciousness unless the workers are trained to respond to *all* cases of tyranny, oppression, violence, and abuse, no matter *what class* is affected” [Lenin’s italics].<sup>139</sup> Thus, he views the revolutionary reporter and writer as somebody who will help even “the most backward worker” understand “that the students and religious sects, the peasants and the authors are being

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<sup>137</sup> Vladimir Lenin, *What is to be Done?* (New York, International Publishers, 1969), 17 and 45.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

abused and outraged by those same dark forces that are oppressed and crushing him at every step of his life.”<sup>140</sup> The emphasis on all groups of people in society such as “the aroused students, the discontented Zemstvo people, the incensed religious sects, the offended elementary school teachers, etc.” is an overlooked, but very important part of Lenin’s theory of the press. This emphasis creates an image of the Social-Democratic journalist as a servant of all oppressed people whose “ideal should not be the trade union secretary, but *the tribune of the people*, who is able to react to every manifestation of tyranny and oppression, no matter where it appears, no matter what stratum or class of the people it affects” [Lenin’s italics].<sup>141</sup> This is why Lenin advances the argument for an “All-Russia Political Newspaper” that through the “exposures” of the reporters can bring to the fore all injustices and link them into one common struggle in which a new political consciousness capable of engendering socialism will emerge.

This theoretical framework of journalists as “builders” and the newspaper as a “scaffold” in the service of all the people is not as easily integrated into the widely accepted argument that the press during socialism is simply a mouthpiece of the Communist party. In fact, journalists who read Lenin could interpret the dichotomy between “the people” and “authority” in a way not always beneficial to the Communist party. After all, during socialism popular anger was often directed precisely at the trade union secretaries that Lenin criticized. With only a few exceptions, this “opening” in Lenin’s theory has been vastly overlooked.

One of the first post-1989 works on Bulgarian media to be published in a North American journal was a piece in *Journalism and Mass Communication Monographs*. “The Transitional Media System of Post-Communist Bulgaria” (1994) by Ekaterina Ognianova remains one of the most empirically substantial and exhaustive studies on Bulgarian media,

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 43

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 49

despite the fact that it is dated. The author finds almost no merit in journalism before 1989 except for one place in the monograph, which makes it all the more significant. This deviation addresses precisely the Leninist concept of the role of the journalist:

Despite the ideological structure, there was a great deal of idealism and faith in journalism's mission to serve the people in the forty-five years of communism in Bulgaria. The main functions and principles outlined by Lenin, included not only loyalty to the Party but also service to the people. Bulgarian journalists translated this commitment to the people into an idealistic version of press responsibility, equivalent to the social responsibility press concept. Journalism was a prestigious profession, attracting many ambitious young Bulgarians. The audience also treated journalists as agents of social justice. Many letters to newspapers, radio, and television were requests for help in solving personal problems, from inadequate housing to unjust treatment by authorities. With their mere presence in a region and intention to dig into a problem brought by audience members, journalists from national media could put pressure on local authorities.<sup>142</sup>

In my interviews with journalists who worked before 1989, the stature of the journalist as a carrier of social justice and servant of the people was also acknowledged. A journalist who worked for more than thirty years in the Bulgarian press and continues to write for a newspaper today, argued that in some respects the media environment “was more democratic before 1989.” This was a surprising statement because from the very beginning of the interview she identified herself as a “right-winger” and a “former supporter of the Union of Democratic Forces” during the 1990s. She recalled that before 1989 editors received letters from readers detailing certain problems or injustices in society. In turn journalists sought to investigate further. According to her when you approached the authorities responsible for this problem:

From the moment you grab the phone and introduce yourself...just saying ‘My name is this and I am from that newspaper,’ on the other end of the line you hear ‘Please! We will resolve the problem! Do not be concerned.’ In this way, I have lost so many already well developed stories because by the time it is ready for publication, the problem had been resolved.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Ognianova, 27.

<sup>143</sup> Personal Interview # 19.

Another journalist and an anchor of one of the most watched political shows on Bulgaria television who is known for his right-wing views described this practice under socialism in the following way:

The journalism of the socialist or communist era, if you wish, was fundamentally different from today. In Bulgaria you could fight for the “small justice.” Under communism there was such a thing as “small justice” and “big justice.” Communism had very interesting policy towards critical materials. Communism had the so called “social vents.” Their purpose was to help people bear the injustices of the system. Let’s say you produce a critical material about the shoe factory which claims that the director or the trade union representative is to blame for a certain problem in the factory. The factory’s administration was responsible to respond to you. Nowadays they would do this to defend their position, but back then it was, I believe, required by law. The factory’s administration had to respond to the complaint and explain its actions. In other words, journalism was a tool of the authorities, but it was also a social vent. It was an instrument of control, but it was also a social vent. People could see some mid-level official being criticized in public and they feel justice is being done. This justice was referred to as the “small justice.” The “big justice” was the justice of Communism and this one you could not criticize. Actually, this system was functioning very well. People were writing a lot of letters to the media and reported many abuses.<sup>144</sup>

While one should not idealize this aspect of journalism under socialism, this is a story that complicates the totalitarian narrative of total control and complete lack of interaction between media and regular people. As Ognianova points out people expected journalists to serve their interest, leading her to compare this model to the social responsibility press in the West. That people treated journalists as “agents of social justice” became apparent in the interviews with people who worked at the time. Even people on the right acknowledged that media audiences believed in the “small justice” and coalesced around media for the resolution of social problems. In fact, as chapter five explains, post-socialist commercial media took advantage of this socialist practiced and incorporated it into their business model. This is yet another reason why scholars of Eastern European socialist journalism must revisit the media model of developed socialism.

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<sup>144</sup> Personal Interview # 43.



### 3.0 SOCIALIST HUMANISM AND ITS TELEVISION

The previous chapter focused on some of the economic, demographic and ideological transformations that underpinned late socialism. The distinction between the first decade of socialism and the socialism that emerged in the 1960s has become the subject of research only recently. This chapter enters the discussion with a focus on mass communications arguing that media and especially the new medium of television enabled the ideological shift to socialist humanism. As such, the investigation of media during late socialism provides an illuminating account of the transformations that occurred in socialist societies after the death of Stalin. This type of research poses a challenge because the lack of studies on socialist humanism in the Eastern bloc is compounded by an even more severe lack of studies on socialist mass media and especially television. While Eastern European literature and cinema attract significant scholarly attention, “television has been and continues to be subjected to systematic exclusion in postcolonial and postsocialist studies alike.”<sup>1</sup> According to Anikó Imre, this exclusion is due to linguistic and institutional barriers, but she also adds that the “main culprit is a widespread assumption about the medium’s low cultural value.”<sup>2</sup> Paradoxically, late socialist television strived, and in more than one way succeeded, to be precisely the opposite—a vehicle for high culture.

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<sup>1</sup> Anikó Imre, “Postcolonial Studies in Postsocialist Europe,” *boundary 2* 41, no.2 (2014): 123.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

With its appearance in 1959, Bulgarian Television (BT) presented itself as a new medium that would deliver cultural values directly to the homes of workers. It must be noted that in the Bulgarian language and other Slavic languages, the word for “culture” (*kultura*) designates what in English-speaking countries is usually described as “high culture”: high educational levels, polite manners, and high appreciation of arts, opera, theatre, poetry, cinema and other venues usually regarded as “elitist” in the West. The idea behind socialist television was that it would “democratize” high culture, enable workers to acquire it, and stimulate their aesthetic tastes. This notion was part and parcel of the central socialist humanist concept of a “holistically developed personality.” Thus in the 1970s mass communications were defined by socialist producers as a “cultural border area” that allowed the dialectical interaction between an audience member and the medium. With the emergence of a better educated, younger public, which worked less and lived predominantly in the cities, media producers set the goal to increase the variety, quality and sophistication of cultural products in order to develop the aesthetic appreciation of the people.

But the goal of this process was not simply a didactic attempt to increase the general intellect of the population, which many western thinkers would agree is a precondition for a healthy society in the capitalist world as well. Socialist television aimed at the creation of cultural needs in each individual that would counter and balance the unleashed desire for material consumer goods. With television’s capacity to enter the homes of workers and occupy their increased leisure time, socialist television producers strived to simultaneously offer high cultural products and develop people’s desire for intellectual and artistic artefacts. The utopian goal was that in the future communist society of plenty, the yearning for material goods would disappear and people would live entirely by aesthetics with the mass communications system

functioning as *the* cultural system of communism by engendering new artistic forms, stimulating new cultural needs and providing a space for personal expression.

This chapter explains how key Bulgarian socialist producers of media and culture tried to lay the foundation of the communist system of media through their attempt to assist in the construction of the holistically developed personality. Late socialist media and especially the new medium of television exhibited a clear break with early socialism. While the socialist ethos of industrial workers collectively marching towards communism remained present, the newsreel images of sweating bodies of miners and builders of dams took a back seat. Late socialist audiovisual media showed classical concerts, poetry recitals, theatre, opera and other high cultural products while it openly and unapologetically declared that it would focus on the “person” and the individual, rather than on masses and classes. Because of its stated focus on the personality, its goal to develop aesthetic appreciation in every person and since this medium emerged amidst post-Stalinist liberalization, I describe it as “socialist humanist television.”

The contribution of this chapter is threefold. First it is a critical intervention in the history of Eastern European socialism that breaks away from the tired Cold War binary. Second, it offers a unique view of the workings of a mass communication system different than the globally hegemonic corporate system of today. As such it provides a productive contrast and opens a possibility for theorizing alternative models of media. Third, the final section of the chapter raises an important question that seems to have escaped many scholars both in the West and East. What is the connection between nationalism and socialist humanism? Across Eastern Europe the 1980s marked a turn to nationalism that had tragic consequences. In Bulgaria, in its final year of existence, the socialist regime engaged in the expulsion of more than 300,000 Bulgarian Turks from the country. How did the humanistic ravings about high culture and the

capacity of each person to acquire it degenerate into patriotism? How did television transition from a medium of high culture and post-Stalinist liberalization to a nationalistic one that inundated the viewer with images of evil Muslims and conniving Turks? While this section of the chapter is only a brief analysis that does not offer a conclusive answer, its hope is to open this issue “from the East” in order to analyze its place in the broader global debate on humanism.

### **3.1 THE EMERGENCE OF SOCIALIST HUMANIST TELEVISION**

The economic transformations of early socialism were a precondition for the emergence of television across Eastern Europe. When regular television appeared in Bulgaria in 1959, there were only 148 television sets in the country. The figure grew rapidly, and by the mid-1960s television added 200,000 people to its audience each year. In 1971, 1,164,365 Bulgarians owned a television set and nearly half of the country’s population had the opportunity to watch television on a regular basis.<sup>3</sup> While in 1962 only 2 out of 100 households owned a television set, by 1974, their number rose to 73.<sup>4</sup> In short, the intense economic, scientific and technological development of Bulgaria in the first two decades of socialism provided the capacity to build a technical base for television, to expand local industries for the manufacture of transmitter equipment and television sets on a mass scale, and finally to educate staff that could

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<sup>3</sup> “Proгноза за Razvitiето na Radioto i Televiziata do 1990“ / “Forecast on the Development of Radio and Television to 1990,” in *Hristomatia po Istoria na Televiziata v Balgaria / A Reader on the History of Television and Bulgaria*, ed. Polya Ivanova (Sofia Bulgaria: Sofia University Press, 2007), 122.

<sup>4</sup> Taylor, 75.

competently manage the television industry.<sup>5</sup> As a result television became a major part of daily life and the productive fulfilment of the population's increased leisure time.

Although Bulgaria was somewhat of a latecomer to the wider adoption of television worldwide, elsewhere in the Eastern bloc regular television broadcasts started in the 1950s as well. Therefore, the appearance of the new medium was coterminous with post-Stalinist liberalization. Even though the Soviet Union experimented with television as early as the 1930s, World War II completely interrupted its development. Engagement with the new medium resumed after the war and during the 1950s and 1960s television “enthusiasts” regarded television as a natural device for de-Stalinization. They believed that as a particular type of technology, television had the capacity to reveal “truth, reality and the contemporary *lichnost* (individual or personality).”<sup>6</sup> Hence they viewed it as an inherently progressive medium capable of supplanting “Stalinist fakery and bombast” simply by showing real, common people.<sup>7</sup> This vision was humanist in its intention to purge people's minds of the *kul't lichnosti* (cult of personality) and replace it with “a culture that celebrated many *lichnosti*—worthy individuals who would serve as models for personal growth and civic activism.”<sup>8</sup>

In a similar vein, when regular television broadcasts began in Bulgaria in 1959, the medium found itself in the midst of de-Stalinization. The producers of this new medium saw it as inherently democratic and culturally enlightening. In November 1959, in his inaugural address, the first director of BT, Borislav Petrov, stated that “[w]ith the founding of Bulgarian television, Sofia's working people will gain a new, big cultural acquisition. Cinema, theatre, opera, and

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<sup>5</sup> Ivan Slavkov and Vlachko Kunchev, *Televizia i Vreme / Television and Time* (Sofia, Bulgaria: Nauka i Izkustvo, 1981), 74.

<sup>6</sup> Kristin Roth-Ey, *Moscow Prime Time: How the Soviet Union Built the Media Empire that Lost the Cultural Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 223.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

concerts will enter their homes. In front of them opens a new bright window to the world, culture and knowledge.”<sup>9</sup> The idea behind this democratic vision of the new medium was that it would not only serve a niche audience of intellectuals but the entire population. Although during early socialism newspapers, newsreels and radio reached every corner of Bulgaria and assisted in the transformation of its landscape, the new economy and people, Petrov’s vision promised something more. He spoke of high culture products and a new window to the “world.” In fact in his statement on the occasion of the launch of regular television programming, Petrov noted that the beginning of BT coincided with the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Friedrich Schiller. In honor of the German poet, philosopher and playwright, BT included a program called “Schiller on the Bulgarian Stage.” Petrov hoped that the program would reveal the “mastery of this great playwright and the acting of some of our best actors.”<sup>10</sup>

Petrov’s statement signaled a change in socialist mass communications in two crucial ways. First, his focus on high culture suggested that the new medium of television would differ from its audiovisual predecessor, the newsreel, in terms of content. It appeared that television would be more than a medium that showed sweating bodies of miners and builders, official ceremonies and anti-fascist recollections. Indeed, in the following decades it became clear that television no longer aimed solely at persuading the individual to join the masses in the process of building socialism. Instead, in the late 1950s media had to simultaneously create and nourish the cultural needs of an individual already living in a developed socialist society. Second, Petrov’s statement hinted that the broadcast tower of BT would not solely face the Soviet Union. BT’s quest for cultural enlightenment meant that it would engage with Western bourgeois thinkers as

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<sup>9</sup> Borislav Petrov, “Otkrivane na BT” / “Launching of BT,” in *Hristomatia po Istoria na Televiziata v Balgaria*, 20.

<sup>10</sup> Borislav Petrov, “Televizionia Centar Raboti!” / “The Television Center Works!” in *Hristomatia po Istoria na Televiziata v Balgaria*, 14.

well, including Weimar Classicists, such as Friedrich Schiller. This was in line with socialist humanism's rehabilitation of Kantian, Romanticist, and German Idealist philosophical traditions. The development of BT in the following thirty years reaffirmed these two novelties of Petrov's statement.

This is not to say that BT was exclusively a purveyor of high cultural values. In the first half of the 1960s television did not abandon themes related to the five-year plans of the socialist economy. "Towards the New: A Wide Road," "The Innovator's Tribune," "Who Will Save More Metal?", "On a Visit to the Factory," "The Obstacles on the Big Road," and "When the Numbers Come Alive," were early programs that focused on the state of industrialization.<sup>11</sup> BT continued to feature this type of program throughout the entire socialist period. For instance, "Seeds in Furrows," a program dedicated to agriculture and the peasantry, remained a permanent feature of socialist television. However, early television already reflected the economic transition within socialism. Most of the programs about economics broadcasted at the time addressed light industry and construction while only "a small section of them dealt with heavy industry, engineering and trade."<sup>12</sup> Additionally, programs such as "A Conversation about the Quality of Clothes" and "A Conversation about the Quality of Shoes" exposed the growing importance of consumption.

In contrast to early socialist media, BT's major goal was no longer to "heat up the competition" between workers' collectives and mobilize the masses on the road to socialism. Its aim was to cultivate cultural needs in common people, especially the recently urbanized peasants and the socialist youth growing up in an already existing socialism. Hence, some of the

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<sup>11</sup> Slavkov and Kunchev, 120.

<sup>12</sup> Poly Ivanova, *Purva Programa Kanal 1 na BNT 1959-2000 / First Program Channel 1 of BNT 1959-2000* (Sofia, Bulgaria: Sofia University Press, 2005), 39.

permanent programs established in the early 1960s, such as “Art,” “New Books,” “With the Pulse of the Time,” “The Poet’s Recital” and “New Poetry” showed “significant events in [Bulgaria’s] and foreign art life—celebrations, visits, exhibits, theatre, opera and ballet performances as well as book reviews.”<sup>13</sup> As early as 1961, television broadcasted live performances from Sofia’s opera and the state’s musical theatre.<sup>14</sup> Even the name of the first brand of television sets produced in Bulgaria (“Opera”) reflected the shift to high culture. Because of its cultural functions, Bulgarian media historian Polya Ivanova refers to early socialist television as “artistic.”<sup>15</sup>

Initially, the efforts of media producers to shape television as a cultural institution was met with some skepticism by the intelligentsia.<sup>16</sup> In order to draw them to it, in 1966 BT appointed Bulgarian poet Leda Mileva as its new director. Mileva authored more than thirty collections of poems for children and wrote a number of theatre and radio plays. To this day, she remains one of Bulgaria’s best translators of American, African, and English poetry. Her reputation among the country’s intellectuals helped BT draw them to it as writers, screenwriters, actors, directors, poets and painters, all of whom apparently felt confident that the new medium was receptive to high culture. In turn, these intellectuals became active producers of television content and the emphasis on cultural enlightenment increased in the second half of the 1960s.

One of the highlights of Mileva’s directorship was the launch of “Television Theatre,” a program that remained a permanent feature of BT throughout the entire socialist period. In addition, “The Stage of the Centuries” appeared in 1967 to show “the best productions of world

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<sup>13</sup> Slavkov and Kunchev, 121.

<sup>14</sup> Ivanova, *Purva Programa*, 43.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.



classics.”<sup>17</sup> “Theatre X” and “Theatrical Meridians” were additional venues for theatre that introduced viewers to plays from around the globe. A great number of programs on literature, poetry, science and art such as “Don Quixote and Hamlet,” “Pages,” “The Universe—Far and Near,” “The Human Being—Myth or a Hero,” “World Poetry,” “Artists and Art,” “Poetical Notebook,” and others appeared under Mileva. In regards to literature, the idea was for viewers not only “to gain knowledge of certain literary forms and phenomena,” but also to “build the habit of understanding the meaning” of these literary forms and techniques.<sup>18</sup> According to Mileva, cultural programming occupied between 30-35% of the entire television broadcast time. She believed that live broadcasts of concerts, plays, opera, and ballet were “especially significant for small towns and villages.”<sup>19</sup> This reflected the socialist belief in democratizing high culture through television and the new medium’s capacity to draw workers and peasants closer to intellectuals.

While programs about art, poetry, opera, ballet and others sought to create new needs through the gradual accumulation of knowledge about high culture, BT also engaged in purely educational activities. As early as 1964, the Central Committee of the BCP stated that the new medium of television should serve as a “popular people’s university” and assist in “raising the culture of the people and the education of the youth.”<sup>20</sup> In the same year, televised courses in math and literature for university applicants began.<sup>21</sup> By the late 1960s the educational programs were a permanent feature of BT with programs every Wednesday and Friday in the morning and every Tuesday and Thursday in the afternoon. Eighteen percent of BT’s entire schedule became

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<sup>17</sup> Slavkov and Kunchev, 154.

<sup>18</sup> Ivanova, *Purva Programa*, 66.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>20</sup> Slavkov and Kunchev, 131.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

dedicated to general education and school programming.<sup>22</sup> In 1969, BT launched school television programs for 5<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> graders that included televised lessons in the Bulgarian language, mathematics, physics, chemistry, history and geography. It also ran programs to assist university applicants with their entry exams.<sup>23</sup> Parents and teachers could also benefit from BT's schedule. Twice a month teachers of Bulgarian language and literature, mathematics, chemistry, physics and biology could view a rubric that explained how they could improve their qualifications through televised lectures on novel pedagogical methods in their disciplines. Once a month parents were offered a program on how to raise children, including how to help them advance in school.<sup>24</sup>

Although socialist media producers viewed television as an “assistant,” rather than as a substitute for the school and the university curricula, their goals were ambitious. At some point, there was even an idea that “school television” could include courses through which people could obtain a degree after an examination at the end of the televised course.<sup>25</sup> Even though this idea did not materialize, BT successfully implemented televised language courses that remained popular throughout the entire socialist period. In 1964, every Friday evening BT offered a course in Russian and on Mondays the audience could watch a course in German. In 1966, English also became part of the televised language curricula. This course continued for two and a half years and BT rebroadcasted it many times throughout the socialist period. Some educational courses had more practical, everyday applications. One example was a nine episode course on “applied electronics,” broadcasted every Wednesday. It taught Bulgarians how to fix small problems with

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>23</sup> “Uchebnite Programi na Malkia Ekran” / “The Educational Programs on TV” in *Hristomatia po Istoria na Televiziata v Balgaria*, 57.

<sup>24</sup> Ivanova, *Purva Programa*, 63.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 64.

their home appliances.<sup>26</sup> Programs that explained road regulations and the rules of safe driving also became part of BT's schedule.<sup>27</sup>

Because they targeted the youth, television games had an educational goal as well. One of the first television game shows (1964) was a drawing contest between children. Perhaps the most famous ones one was "Fast, Brave, and Skillful," which began in 1966 and remained popular throughout the socialist era. It tested the athletic capabilities of the program's participants, but also their knowledge. Frequently, the contestants in the game show were school teams, which competed with each other "in dexterity of the hands, in the construction of models and objects, in graceful performance of a contemporary dance and in artistic, creative presentations."<sup>28</sup> In this way, televised competitions served an "enlightenment-entertainment function" (*prosvetitel'sko-razvlekatel'na*) that "broadened the social role of television."<sup>29</sup> In some game shows the enlightenment impetus was even more obvious. For example, in "With Bulgaria's Name" participants viewed a short fragment from a play and had to guess its author, director, and the name of the main actor.<sup>30</sup>

In sum, high culture and novel pedagogical methods marked the first decade of television in Bulgaria. This was a utopian project in a country, which less than two decades earlier had a predominantly peasant population, high levels of illiteracy and one of the most underdeveloped economies in Europe. Yet, how different was this notion of television from Western ideas of public broadcasting? Jo Bardoel and Kees Brants argue that the Western European social responsibility model of public broadcasting was "grounded in a belief in the makeability of

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>27</sup> Polyana Ivanova, *Vtora Programa Efir 2 na BNT 1975-2000 / Second Channel Program 2 of BNT 1975-2000* (Sofia, Bulgaria: Sofia University Press, 2006), 64.

<sup>28</sup> Slavkov and Kunchev, 140.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 141.

society, the changeability of human nature and the establishment of the ideals of Enlightenment.”<sup>31</sup> The turn to Western high culture and the modernizing attempts of socialist media producers to mold the new socialist citizen based on humanistic ideals resembled the social responsibility model of public media in the West. With its emphasis on radical differences between West and East, Cold War historiography has marginalized these similarities. However, there are also scholars, such as Susan Buck-Morss, who have convincingly argued that “the historical experiment of socialism was so deeply rooted in the Western modernizing tradition that its defeat cannot but place the whole Western narrative into question.”<sup>32</sup> The history of early socialist television illustrates some of these overlooked affinities.

In the softening atmosphere of post-Stalinist liberalization the interaction between the West and Bulgaria in respect to television technologies and program formats deepened. A major testimony to this new permissiveness was that even at the level of media management Western influence was encouraged. In 1970 the poetess Mileva left the directorship of BT to be replaced by Pavel Pisarev who served as a correspondent in Paris prior to that. His “good knowledge of the capabilities of European television...western society, its culture and its mass media” were pointed out as reasons for his appointment.<sup>33</sup> Even more importantly, with time the United States rather than Western Europe drew the attention of Bulgarian media producers. To my great surprise, leading figures in the two most well-known political television shows, *Panorama* (1968) and *Vsiaka Nedelia* (Every Sunday) (1979), both broadcasted to this day, told me that the idea for both of them came from the United States. I asked a journalist who started his career in

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<sup>31</sup> Jo Bardoel and Kees Brants, “From Ritual to Reality: Public Broadcasters and Social Responsibility in the Netherlands,” in *Broadcasting and Convergence: New Articulations of the Public Service Remit*, ed. G. F. Lowe et al. (Göteborg: Nordicom, 2003), 168.

<sup>32</sup> Buck-Morss, xii.

<sup>33</sup> Ivanova, *Purva Programa*, 69.

*Vsiaka Nedelia* from its very inception in 1979, to describe to me the American influence on Bulgaria's most popular political television show:

ER: The idea for this show was born in the United States. This was an American show. Back then there was a similar program, a copy of an American show, in the former Yugoslavia called *Nedeljno Popodne* ["Sunday Afternoon"]. At that time Yancho Takov [the son of a member of Politburo of the Bulgarian Communist Party] went for a business trip in the US and came back with this idea which he shared with Kevork [the long-term television host of the show].

MM: But how come you could have an American-style show in 1979?

ER: It did not have pro-American leaning, but the structure of the show was copied from the American model.<sup>34</sup>

The overlooked connections between socialist television and the West notwithstanding, early socialist television was also unique. For one thing, the emphasis on high culture and education was not only grounded in the belief that an intelligent audience was a precondition for a decent society. The modernizing, humanistic impetus of socialist television was intimately linked to the utopian project of communism. Unlike its Western counterparts, socialist television producers viewed modernization and communism not as contradictory but as the same project. Hence, they understood the focus on high culture, pedagogy and education as building blocks of communism and a communist system of arts, science and communication. It is also worth mentioning that while in the 1960s socialist media instilled high culture values and education, the Enlightenment-driven media project in the West was entering a crisis. Less than two years after BT's first director expressed his happiness that the launching of television coincided with the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Friedrich Schiller, the US's FCC Chairman Newton Minow famously described US broadcast television as a "vast wasteland." According to him, American television had degenerated into:

a procession of game shows, formula comedies about totally unbelievable families, blood and thunder, mayhem, violence, sadism, murder, western bad men, western good men,

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<sup>34</sup> Personal Interview # 40.

private eyes, gangsters, more violence, and cartoons. And endlessly, commercials -- many screaming, cajoling, and offending. And most of all, boredom.<sup>35</sup>

While Minow's description perfectly befits Eastern European post-socialist television, which is inundated by cheap and simplistic American shows, at the time of his speech socialist media with its commitment to culture and education took Enlightenment ideas much more seriously than its US counterparts. Finally, BT's sheer volume of cultural products surpassed Western European broadcasters' allocation for cultural programming. The difference between the Western social responsibility model of media and Eastern European socialist media only deepened in the last two decades of socialism.

### **3.2 CULTURE AS A PRODUCTIVE FORCE OF COMMUNISM**

In his concluding remarks to the eight congress of the Bulgarian Communist Party (1962), Todor Zhivkov declared that in the previous decade and a half, Bulgaria achieved "a complete and final victory for socialism." Zhivkov stated that in the following twenty years, the main goal of the communist party would be "to complete the construction of a socialist society and to begin the gradual transition to communism."<sup>36</sup> In his address to the eleventh congress of the communist party (1976) Zhivkov reiterated this goal and claimed that Bulgaria's entry into communism in 1990 was an "entirely realistic task."<sup>37</sup> Zhivkov's statements in the 1960s and 1970s reflected the Marxist-Leninist teleological vision that societies transitioned from revolution and consolidation

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<sup>35</sup> Newton Minow, "Television and the Public Interest," *AmericanRhetoric*, May 9, 1961, accessed February 13, 2016, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/newtonminow.htm>.

<sup>36</sup> *Rezolucia na VIII Kongress na BKP*, 5.

<sup>37</sup> Todor Zhivkov, *Report of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party for the Period between the Tenth and the Eleventh Congresses and on the Forthcoming Tasks* (Sofia, Bulgaria: Sofia-Press, March 29, 1976), 104.

of working-class power to a developed socialist phase that laid the foundations of the utopian communist society. In the 1970s the Bulgarian mass communications assumed an elevated role in Zhivkov and others' vision of how the final utopia would be constructed.

With their capacity to enter the home of each person and occupy his or her new leisure time, mass communications and especially television became key tools in the construction of the central socialist humanist concept of a holistically developed personality. According to socialist media producers, television intensified each individual's desire to increase their intellectual wealth. In the process, mass communications no longer served simply as a condition and environment, but were "elevated into a direct source of the development of the creative capacities of each person."<sup>38</sup> Under this ideology, the mass communication system would eventually become a "cultural system with a greater capacity to create new cultural values."<sup>39</sup> As a result, this utopian theory envisioned that the role of the institutions of "control and regulation (*kontrolno-regulativnite mehanizmi*) would diminish, while the role of those forms that exert free influence on the personality will increase."<sup>40</sup> This communist paradigm of media provided mass communications with the status of a productive force rather than a mere superstructure that reflects the economic base. The reasoning behind this vision was fully in line with the cultural turn of Bulgarian socialism in the early 1970s.

In the most extensive empirical study of socialist cultural politics in Bulgaria, historian Ivan Elenkov highlights the major change in cultural politics during late socialism. According to him, during the first years after World War II, socialists regarded culture as a superstructure that reflected the revolutionary transformations in the economic base. But during late socialism

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<sup>38</sup> Slavkov and Kunchev, 184.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 192.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

culture became intimately intertwined with consumption. As a result, the traditional Marxist-Leninist formula of base and superstructure was turned upside-down. Freed from its status as a superstructure and related to consumption, culture became a productive base of society.<sup>41</sup> As such, culture figured as a personal possession of the individual measured in how many times one visited cinemas, theaters, operas, art exhibitions and other cultural venues. For example, socialist thinkers calculated that in 1980 on average “each Bulgarian of age seven or older was in contact with artistic values almost thirty-five times...60 percent of Bulgarians own a personal library, 90 percent of the population watches television, listens to the radio and reads newspapers.”<sup>42</sup> This was a complex formulation of culture that is indispensable to the understanding of late socialism.

Mass communications and especially television became vehicles for this shift in cultural politics. Besides the economic and political changes linked to late socialism, a number of structural changes in mass communications themselves allowed for their prominence. After substantial state investment, television infrastructure improved and expanded. For the first time, in 1968 BT began to broadcast every day of the week.<sup>43</sup> In 1973 BT broadcasted color television, which gradually replaced black and white programming; in 1975 it launched its second channel. Most importantly, television occupied more time of the socialist citizen’s day. Statistical data indicate that in 1969, 49.9 percent of the population spent on average 67 minutes in front of the TV each day. By 1980, 80.2 percent of the population watched television 113.5 minutes each day.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Ivan Elenkov, *Kulturnia Front / The Culture Front* (Sofia, Bulgaria: Institut za Izsledvane na Blizkoto Minalo, 2008), 219.

<sup>42</sup> Slavkov and Kunchev, 176.

<sup>43</sup> Ivanova, *Purva Programa*, 45.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.



In short, in the 1970s television developed the material and technological breadth necessary for its role as a dominant cultural institution of late socialism. But infrastructure, investment and growth in popularity were not enough. To carry out large-scale cultural projects, Bulgarian mass communications required better coordination. Created in 1971, the Committee for Radio and Television became the state institution that would not simply regulate media, as in a liberal democracy, but govern them.<sup>45</sup> The Committee reported directly to the Council of Ministers, which permitted an all-encompassing guidance of mass communications and the management of long-term massive media campaigns that would become a major feature of the 1970s and 1980s cultural politics. But perhaps the most important factor for the elevation of the role of culture was the political ascent of Lyudmila Zhivkova, the daughter of Bulgaria's leader Todor Zhivkov.

In 1972, Lyudmila Zhivkova became the Vice Chairperson of the Committee for Arts and Culture and in 1975 she was appointed as its Chairperson. In addition, in 1975 Zhivkova headed the Committee for Radio and Television as well. Both committees had the rank of ministries and directed mass communications and cultural politics.<sup>46</sup> In addition, in the 1970s Zhivkova was also the general secretary of the Council of Artistic Unions. The offices that she held essentially turned Zhivkova into the most powerful person when it came to culture. But this was not all. Her husband, Ivan Slavkov, became the director of Bulgarian Television in 1971. He served there until 1982, which made him the longest-serving television director in Bulgarian history. With Todor Zhivkov as the Head of State, his daughter as the Chairperson of the Committee for Arts and Culture and his son-in-law as the director of BT, the elder Zhivkov was assured a total

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>46</sup> Ivanka Atanasova, "Lyudmila Zhivkova and the Paradox of Ideology and Identity in Communist Bulgaria," *East European Politics & Societies*. 18, no. 2 (2004): 288.

hegemony and a complete grip on Bulgarian culture. For this reason in addition to Zhivkov's leadership, Slavkov and Zhivkova's political careers deeply influenced the role of mass communications during late socialism.

Once she became Vice Chairperson of the powerful Committee for Arts and Culture, Zhivkova's task was to develop Bulgarian culture according to the central socialist humanist concept of "holistically-developed personality" (*vsestranno razvita lichnost*). Zhivkova's major contribution was the creation of "unified long-term programs." According to Elenkov, these programs constituted "an unquestionable form of change of the social practices for the distribution of culture and they can be regarded as the most important mark in the history of the cultural politics of the communist regime in Bulgaria."<sup>47</sup> The idea behind this massive long-term programs was "to encompass the new multiplying social milieus and cultural publics of the changing socialist society."<sup>48</sup> With its increased rates of consumption, more leisure time and higher education levels, the industrialized socialist society was more complex than its predecessor because it engendered more needs, tastes and social practices. The goal of the long-term programs was to guide and govern these new needs, tastes and practices. The idea was no longer to carry out campaigns of political agitation and ideological propaganda but "to manage differentiated social processes."<sup>49</sup>

The programs addressed themes associated with "high culture and even elitist culture" and promised to guarantee all working artists access to the new venues for creative recognition.<sup>50</sup> The first one was the "Nationwide Program for Aesthetic Training of the Working People and the Youth." It was followed by "Long-Term Complex Program for Raising the Role of Art and

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<sup>47</sup> Elenkov, 236.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

Culture for the Harmonious Development of the Personality and Society during the Period of Construction of Developed Socialist Society.” The latter one contained two famous subprograms: “Nikolai Konstantinovich Rerikh” and “Leonardo da Vinci.”<sup>51</sup> The final one was the immense “Program for Celebration of the 1300<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Foundation of the Bulgarian State.”<sup>52</sup> It is important to highlight the sheer enormity of these programs. They constituted an aggregate of “socio-cultural events” connected and realized in “monstrous ‘Gesamtkunstwerk [total works of art].’”<sup>53</sup> Indeed, it is hard to believe that a small state with a population of seven million at the time, could organize a production unseen even by such superpowers as the US and the Soviet Union. For example, the subprogram “Leonardo da Vinci,” which took place between September 1, 1979 and August 31, 1980, included 2,467 events encompassing 72 types of different “artistic-organizational formats.” This included, among other things, 484 lectures, 331 publications, 242 radio shows, 215 photo exhibitions and 132 art exhibitions. 101 different institutions took part in the program “Leonardo da Vinci,” including district and municipal councils for culture, radio stations and local newspapers.<sup>54</sup> Zhivkova’s programs for aesthetic training entered the school and university curricula. In addition, more than 2,400 clubs for aesthetic training that “disseminated artistic values” opened doors across Bulgaria. The long-term programs required serious planning. Thus the preparation for the celebration of the 1300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Bulgarian state in 1981, began in 1971. The program reached epic proportions, including Hollywood levels of film production among which were 70 documentary films about Bulgarian history. The size of these programs alone indicated that indeed, at that point of time, culture was more than a superstructure reflective of the

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 237.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 237.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 344.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 345

economic base. It was quite literally a productive force of the late socialist society and the cultural programs were not alone. As Zhivka Valiavicharska notes, Zhivkova left “an enormous material and cultural legacy—from opening thousands of regional cultural centers, libraries, museums, galleries and local community centers (*chitalishta*) all over the country to launching international annual festivals for culture and the arts, and initiating massive archaeological excavations.”<sup>55</sup>

The goal of Zhivkova and her programs was to engender the need for art, aesthetics and culture necessary for the construction of the holistically developed socialist personality. This chapter explains the crucial role of television in these projects, but it is first important to interrogate the role of Marxism in these programs. After all, they addressed “aesthetic training” not communist morals. They were named after Leonardo da Vinci but not after a Soviet painter. Rather than honoring a prominent Marxist thinker, they celebrated Nikolai Konstantinovich Rerikh (Nicholas Roerich), an occult philosopher interested in hypnosis and spiritual practices. These are only a few of the contradictions of the cultural processes of the 1970s and 1980s that make the task of scholars difficult. In part, the challenge stems from the controversial personality and dubious ideology of Liydmila Zhivkova, the main architect behind these programs.

For many, Zhivkova remains “the most controversial political figure in Communist Bulgaria,” and there is an entire genre of literature that continues to investigate her legacy.<sup>56</sup> She was born in 1942 at a time when her father and future leader of Bulgaria was involved in underground activities supportive of the banned Bulgarian Communist Party. He named her after Liydmila Pavlichenko, a Ukrainian Soviet sniper, regarded as the most successful female sniper

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<sup>55</sup> Zhivka Valiavicharska, “History’s Relentless Ruins: On Socialist Public Monuments in Postsocialist Bulgaria,” *boundary 2* 41, no. 1 (2014): 191.

<sup>56</sup> Atanasova, 278.

in history and credited with 309 kills of Nazi soldiers during World War II. But in spite of her name and the anti-fascist struggle during which she was born, Zhivkova's belief in Marxism appeared weak.

In 1970, Zhivkova spent an academic year in St. Antony's College, Oxford and in June 1977 she met with Jimmy Carter in a high-level meeting. Thus she became the only Bulgarian Communist leader who had been received at the White House.<sup>57</sup> Because of her education and western contacts, many viewed Zhivkova's career as an opening to the West. Yet, Zhivkova's beliefs were much more complex than her portrayal as a pro-Western reformer. According to the Oxford historian Richard Crampton, Zhivkova exhibited "wholly unmarxist interest in mysticism."<sup>58</sup> She became religious and practiced Eastern religious teachings, nonconventional medicine, theosophy and prophecies.<sup>59</sup> Zhivkova did not hide this part of her personality and at some point even wore an Indian turban in public.<sup>60</sup> Fascinated by India, Zhivkova made an official visit to the country where she met with Indira Gandhi. In his memoirs, her father recounts this experience. "She flew over the Himalayas about which she always spoke with adoration. She went to India, the country whose history, culture and religion she was thoroughly interested in."<sup>61</sup> Besides her immersion in Eastern spiritualism, Zhivkova also espoused a certain form of Bulgarian nationalism. Absorbed by "the Thracian roots of the Bulgarian civilization and people" Zhivkova emphasized the ancient origin of Bulgaria.<sup>62</sup> She claimed that "Bulgaria emerged because it absorbed ancient cultures of worldwide value."<sup>63</sup> Although Crampton insists that her nationalism was cultural rather than ethnic, he argues that the celebration of the thirteen

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 308.

<sup>58</sup> Crampton, 204.

<sup>59</sup> Atanasova, 291.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 309.

<sup>61</sup> Zhivkov, *Memoari*, 145.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>63</sup> Atanasova, 298.

hundredth anniversary of the foundation of the Bulgarian state degenerated into an “open and full-blown nationalism.”<sup>64</sup> Because of these features of Zhivkova’s politics, the historian Maria Todorova suggests that the fascination with her in the Western press as a “window to the west” is erroneous. Instead, Todorova claims that Zhivkova exhibited “a rather idiosyncratic mixture of native nationalism and theosophy with Indian mysticism, garnished with fits of anorexia and séances of spiritualism.”<sup>65</sup>

It is hard to tell what exactly Zhivkova believed in because her persona “still awaits a serious treatment of her role as a complex historical figure.”<sup>66</sup> Nevertheless, it seems plausible that she only paid “lip service to Marxist ideology...and emphatically endorsed humanistic values and individualistic ideals.”<sup>67</sup> According to one central committee member, in spite of her beliefs Zhivkova did not oppose Marxism. But, the former secretary for ideology of the Central Committee of the BCP, Stoyan Mihaylov, claimed that “Liyudmila, simply was not a Marxist.”<sup>68</sup> Her father, Todor Zhivkov, admitted that he did not fully understand the sources of her ideas either. “To this day, I cannot tell with sufficient certainty what dominated her work—the party and class principles or universal human principles. Though I am more inclined to believe that it was the latter.”<sup>69</sup>

What was more certain than her lack of commitment to Marxism was her anti-Soviet attitude. At the time, framed in a variety of different historical and political contexts, anti-Soviet nationalism spread across Eastern Europe. Zhivkova’s campaigns and beliefs contained a dose of anti-Russian feelings that worried the Soviet leadership. According to her father, she was

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<sup>64</sup> Crampton, 205.

<sup>65</sup> Todorova, *Bones of Contention*, 48.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Atanasova, 291

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Zhivkov, *Memoari*, 137.

accepted well in some countries in the West, but in the USSR certain circles, “especially the ideologists,” were uncomfortable with her from “the first to the last day of her activities.”<sup>70</sup> The tension with the Soviets grew and during her visit to the Central Committee of Communist party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in 1981 she was criticized twice by the Soviets for her “cultural politics.”<sup>71</sup> One of Zhivkov’s advisers recalled the harsh criticisms of the secretary of the Central Committee of CPSU in respect to the program dedicated to the 1300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of the Bulgarian state. Zhivkova did not remain silent and in a rather scathing remark directed at socialist realism she responded that Bulgaria was covered with too many “monuments of people with guns and bombs, with raised fists, with ugly aggressiveness...With that kind of art we cannot go forward and build harmony in man and society.”<sup>72</sup> Precisely her open confrontation with the Soviet leadership generated a popular conspiracy theory about her sudden death at the age of thirty-nine. In 1973, Zhivkova had suffered a serious car accident and a head injury. In July 1981 she died from a sudden cerebral hemorrhage prompting many to conclude that the Soviets assassinated her because they feared her popularity and the possibility that she would replace of her aging father.<sup>73</sup> In fact, Todor Zhivkov himself expressed doubts about the cause of her death. “It is difficult for me to admit it, but I cannot tell whether her death was a result of natural exhaustion of her life forces or there was some ‘interference’ from outside.”<sup>74</sup>

The signature of Zhivkova was clearly visible on the programs from the 1970s and 1980s. It was not a coincidence that she named a program after Nikolai Konstantinovich Rerikh (Nicholas Roerich). His expeditions to Tibet and Manchuria and theosophical teaching informed

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>72</sup> Atanasova, 304.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 280.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 283.

by Eastern spiritualism were an inspiration to Zhivkova. To this day, some of the architectural remnants from the era of Zhivkova serve as a continued reminder of her penchant for Eastern spiritualism. One prominent example is the National Palace of Culture, the largest exhibition and conference center in Southeastern Europe, which opened in 1981 as part of the celebration of Bulgaria's 1300<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Above its entry one encounters not a hammer and a sickle, but a seven meter diameter bronze symbol of the sun. Yet, despite Zhivkova's bizarre and eclectic beliefs, the early "unified long-term programs" of late socialism also contained an undeniable radical communist element. The aesthetic programs of the 1970s and especially the "Nationwide Program for Aesthetic Training of the Working People and the Youth" had "to draw on the face of the socialist worker the main features of the portrait of the builder of communism."<sup>75</sup> Under this ideological turn of late socialism, living in beauty was synonymous with communism—the final utopian goal of the twentieth century Eastern European socialist revolutions. Precisely for this reason, culture had to play the role not of superstructure but of active producer of the new communist personality living according to the laws of aesthetics. It is for this reason that Elenkov concludes that:

Liydumila Zhivkova's "Nationwide Program for Aesthetic Training of the Working People and the Youth" completely and finally emancipated culture from its status as a "superstructure" and as an independent man-building [*chovekostroitelna*] force, it became the autonomous road to communism; the aesthetically complete contemporary human and the human from the future fused in the impervious to time holistically developed and harmonious personality. This was a radical visionary project with unmistakable totalitarian dimensions.<sup>76</sup>

It must also be noted that Zhivkova was by far not the only person involved in coordinating this shift in socialist thinking. In fact, most scholars point to the tenth congress of BCP (1971) as the moment during which the emphasis on aesthetics for the construction of the

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<sup>75</sup> Elenkov, 249.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 310



holistically-developed personality began in earnest.<sup>77</sup> At that time Zhivkova was yet to begin her political career. But even more importantly, the new role of culture was an ideological response precipitated by the rising levels of consumption. For this reason, the previous chapter paid particular attention to the most recent scholarly interpretations of socialist consumption to argue that the work of Bulgaria sociologist Liliana Deyonva captures in the best way the essence of socialist consumption.

Deyonova points to the “December Program for the Increase of the Living Standards of the People” of 1972 as the event during which the BCP advanced a “comprehensive approach” for a “new structure of consumption which organically combines the material and intellectual bases of man.”<sup>78</sup> The goal of this and other similar initiatives was to construct a cultural and intellectual element of consumption that would balance the desires for material goods. This type of “harmonious consumption” was to differentiate socialist consumption from Western consumerism, which might satisfy people’s material needs but only by denying them cultural and intellectual satisfaction. Under this concept of unique consumption socialist thinkers viewed mass communications as a powerful tool that could directly enter the homes of people and introduce them to non-material cultural and intellectual needs. Television was to serve as a new powerful machine engendering the need for art and beauty. In fact, the unique deployment of mass communications during late socialism is perhaps the strongest proof that the socialist authorities genuinely attempted to construct a new mode of consumption. This was dictated to them by the utopian vision of what a future communist society and communist media system would look like. But it was also a response to the appearance of worrisome signs of the veneration of material consumer goods.

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 283.

<sup>78</sup> Deyanova, 349.

The best description of the emergence of consumption in socialist Bulgaria comes from an intellectual whose anti-consumerist texts are rarely discussed today. Georgi Markov was Bulgaria's most prominent dissident writer who defected from the country in 1969. He settled in London where he worked for the Bulgarian section of the BBC World Service, Deutsche Welle and Radio Free Europe. His criticism of socialism over the airwaves of western radio stations won him the ire of the Bulgarian government. But Markov became known to the world only in 1978 when he fell victim to one of the most discussed Cold War era political assassinations. On September 7, 1978 while he waited for a bus at Waterloo Bridge in London, Markov felt a "sting" in one of his legs. It turned out that a micro-engineered pellet containing the poison ricin was fired at Markov via a modified umbrella. The "umbrella murder," as it became known, was attributed to the Bulgarian secret services. After 1989 Markov was turned into a martyr for the anti-communist cause and in 2014, Bulgarian authorities erected a monument of Markov in "Journalist" square. Virtually the entire right-wing elite of the country attended its official unveiling.

Unfortunately, the anti-communist politicization of Markov's persona had resulted in the marginalization of a number of crucial themes in his opus that are at odds with the Hayekian worldviews of his post-1989 right-wing followers. His discussions of equality and social justice along with his insistence on the importance of a criticism of Eastern European socialism from a communist standpoint have been deliberately ignored. The dissident's scathing criticism of socialist consumption suffered a similar fate precisely because it parallels Marxist discourses of the global 1960s and could easily be applied to the capitalist world as well.

In his essay "The Reverence for King Dollar," Markov argued that the new consumption habits completely transformed Bulgaria's landscape. "Bulgaria in 1966 was very different from

Bulgaria in 1956,” he wrote.<sup>79</sup> He described the new model of economy as “a predatory state capitalism” and explained that “Once again, many purely capitalist methods found place in a country which was described as socialist.”<sup>80</sup> The Bulgarian dissident viewed the shift to consumerism as a reason for the demise of Marxist ideas. In the ten years after Khrushchev’s speech that denounced Stalin, the word “pleasure” replaced the word “struggle.”<sup>81</sup>

A main target of Markov’s criticism was the opening of Bulgaria to tourism. In his essay “The Sting and Honey of Tourism,” Markov paints a beautiful, nostalgic picture of the pristine Black Sea coast and its people from the 1940s and early 1950s. “This old world,” he says “was about to die on the day of the visit of Nikita Khrushchev in 1956 when he saw the beauty of the Black Sea and recommended to the Bulgarian government to open Bulgaria for tourism.”<sup>82</sup> According to Markov, at that point the untouched beauty of Bulgarian nature was replaced by the “plastic civilization of tourism” and the “commercial disease of the new times.”<sup>83</sup> In the 1960s, the Black Sea coast was covered by “lavish advertisements of hotel companies, restaurants and shops.”<sup>84</sup> According to Markov, the “material luster” of the tourists from the West that flooded Bulgaria precipitated a “primitive cult of worshiping consumer goods.”<sup>85</sup> In the span of a few years, “the ownership of pretty imported goods would turn into a widespread disease and a fanatical conviction that one is not equal to others if [he/she] does not wear French underwear, Italian shoes or an English pullover. Not to mention radio sets, tape recorders, refrigerators and

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<sup>79</sup> Markov, *In Absentia Reports* vol. 1, 402.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 403

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 385

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 386.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 408.

cars.”<sup>86</sup> Markov recounts that for men the ultimate happiness derived from the ownership of a Gillette razor and western shaving cream.<sup>87</sup>

According to him, the worship of material goods became even more pronounced when Bulgarians went abroad. He described this side of socialist consumerism in a recollection of his visit to Rome in 1963. At that time, Markov joined a group of Bulgarian journalists to cover the international football game between Bulgaria and Portugal.

As if drunk we walked from one shop window to another and from one market to another. Damn the Coliseum, the monuments of art, the Vatican and the old Rome. Our monuments of art were the beautiful Italian shoes, the magnificent pullovers, the underwear, the tape recorder tapes, the gramophone records, the women’s handbags and the cosmetics.<sup>88</sup>

Markov’s discussion of the “mania for goods” (*veshtomania*) runs throughout his work and as such it constitutes a devastating critique of the Eastern bloc. “After thirty years of building communism the Bulgarian people fell victim to the mania for consumer goods...Thus while in the western world an entire massive movement of hipsters, hippies, leftist intellectuals, all sorts of revolutionaries, fugitives from cozy homes, vagrants and others were driven by the idea of overthrowing the power of consumer goods and the cult of comfort and external luster, in Bulgaria the exact opposite process developed,” leading to the emergence of “the most primitive petty bourgeoisie mentality.”<sup>89</sup>

The post-1989 anti-communist politicization of Markov’s work obscures his anti-consumerism. Yet, his writing clearly reveals that in the 1960s the negative effects of material consumer goods were widespread. Some socialist thinkers were uncomfortable with the direction of late socialism. Markov himself recounts that in one of the Central Committee’s sessions, a

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 412.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 418.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 422-423.

prominent general shouted during a debate on the values of international tourism that “we [the communist party] do not desire a state of good restaurant waiters. With waiters one cannot build communism!”<sup>90</sup> Markov left Bulgaria forever in 1969 and died in 1978 and he could not witness the attempt to formulate the complete development of the idea of socialist consumption. However, the politics of aesthetics and the elevation of the role of high culture in the 1970s and 1980s were for the most part engendered precisely by this very need to create a unique pattern of consumption. Television was to play a crucial function in it.

In the 1970s the socialist humanist ideas that accompanied the central concept of “holistically developed personality” pursued in the “long-term programs” for aesthetic training were an answer to the rising levels of consumption. In documents of the Committee for Art and Culture one finds frequent warnings against the “prestige of material goods.” “If the prestige of consumer goods puts a barrier in front of ideas and art, no beautiful pronouncements can conceal the cultural degeneration of the philistine.”<sup>91</sup> Socialist thinkers responded with the creation of a complex system of ideological sanctions that aimed at instilling in the youth and working people the “correct attitude” towards the wider array of consumer goods.<sup>92</sup> As already mentioned, this response focused on the creation of “a new structure of consumption, in which the material and intellectual bases of the life of the people are organically fused.”<sup>93</sup> There was a particular attention on the common root of the Bulgarian words for “consumption” (*potreblenie*) and “need” (*potrebnost*). “Need” was understood not only as a rational necessity, but its definition was expanded to include the “metaphysical need for culture.” This was a crucial expansion because it was precisely the need for culture that had to “erect a stone wall between consumption

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p.404

<sup>91</sup> Elenkov, 298.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 240.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 273.

in socialist societies and the flagrant consumerism of the capitalist world.”<sup>94</sup> The connection between consumption and culture countered the status of purely material satisfaction deprived of higher ideals.<sup>95</sup>

The importance of aesthetics for Marxist theorists was clear. In the most empirical book on the status of culture during socialism, Ivan Elenkov notes that the Marxist expression “according to the laws of beauty” had a “maddening frequency” in the archival documents from the second half of the 1970s.<sup>96</sup> Yet the inspiration for the long-term programs of the 1970s was not only Marxist. Elenkov explains that Zhivkova’s aesthetic programs drew from the ancient Greeks. They also relied on philosophers from the Middle Ages and the French and especially German enlightenment thinkers “who discovered the interrelationship between aesthetic consciousness and societal contradictions.” Schiller, was especially important because his study of Kant’s revolutionary aesthetics led him to the conclusion that “aesthetic education is an invaluable tool in the construction of a holistic, harmonic personality.”<sup>97</sup> The humanistic base of communism was also linked to Renaissance figures. In one highly interesting document discovered by Elenkov communist thinkers discuss “aesthetic activism” in light of how beauty affected people in Renaissance Florence. There, when Leonardo or Michelangelo completed a painting, “the population of Florence celebrated this as if it was their own holiday.”<sup>98</sup> Similarly, in the future communist society, beauty was supposed to awaken the “creative essence of the human personality.”<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 285.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 289.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 290.

This view of aesthetic activism during developed socialism aimed at building the new socialist personality and the future communist one. While the expression “holistically-developed personality” had already emerged in the 1960s, after the tenth congress of BCP in 1971, it gained an additional importance. The congress concluded that there had been an overemphasis on the rational, technological and scientific component of the process of building communism. This overemphasis had created a gap in the development of the cultural and spiritual basis of communism and for this reason the construction of “the holistic and harmonious personality” became the central social problem. The long-term cultural programs and the broader turn to culture in the communist party was an attempt to bridge the gap between the scientific and rational and the aesthetic and emotional.<sup>100</sup> For this reason, the development of an “aesthetic attitude” and “aesthetic taste” in each person became the major goal. Through their development, the “holistically developed personality” would turn into a creator that shaped the surrounding environment based on the “laws of beauty.” The completion of the “holistically developed personality” was supposed to occur in communism, but during developed socialism its main contours were to have already been laid. The fusion between idea and emotion, thought and practice, will and behavior, dream and reality was to materialize under the “active transformation of reality based on the humanistic communist ideal.”<sup>101</sup> In the documents of the party from 1975 it appeared that socialist thinkers believed that the complete “holistically developed personality” would emerge sometime between 1990 and 2000.<sup>102</sup>

As suggested earlier, with the status of culture as a building force of communism, mass communications became a major tool for the construction of the holistically developed

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 284.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 286.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

personality. With their capacity to stimulate and create cultural needs and enter the homes of the working people, mass communications and especially television turned into the main purveyor of high culture. What is more, television was of particular importance because it was an entity that fused the material and the cultural in a unique way.

Scholars who study socialist consumption in Bulgaria point to Todor Zhivkov's 1962 speech to the VIII Congress of the BCP as a watershed moment.<sup>103</sup> Then, Bulgaria's leader argued that consumption was a right of the socialist citizen and set goals for products that Bulgarian households were supposed to own. According to him, of 100 households, 100 should have a refrigerator, 97 should have a television set, 96 a vacuum cleaner, and so forth. Later, during the tenth congress of the party he exclaimed that "it is significant for instance that in 1970 alone 215,000 TV sets were sold, 188,000 refrigerators, and 264,000 oil stoves among others."<sup>104</sup> Thus, television figured as a domestic "necessity" along with ovens, stoves, vacuum cleaners and refrigerators. In the late 1950s in the Soviet Union, television also featured as a "necessity" connected to everyday life (*byt*).<sup>105</sup> At the same time, television sets, along with radios, tape recorders and record players were defined as "objects with a cultural function." In sum, television acquired a paradoxical status. On one hand, it was a mass product and a "domestic necessity," not much different than a laundry machine, a vacuum cleaner or an oven. On the other hand, it brought home poetry and art. This dual quality of being a basic necessity of the home and a purveyor of culture at the same time made television especially important for the elaboration of a unique socialist "harmonious consumption."

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<sup>103</sup> Scarboro, 11 and Taylor, 47.

<sup>104</sup> Zhivkov, "From the Report of the Central Committee, 81

<sup>105</sup> Roth-Ey, 198.



In 1972 the program for the development of Bulgarian radio and television set as a priority “the elaboration of a plan for the development of the cultural needs of the people in the process of constructing advanced socialism and for the place and role of cultural activities in satisfying these needs.”<sup>106</sup> The document pointed out that “the changes in income and consumption of the population constitute a significant material condition for the increase of spending on the satisfaction of cultural needs and for the consumption of goods with cultural (*kulturno-bitov*) purpose, such as television sets, radios, tape recorders, gramophones, video cassettes, etc.”<sup>107</sup> This 300-page document produced through the collaboration of several ministries clearly illustrates that socialist producers of media thought that cultural and aesthetic needs could be generated through mass communications. Bulgarian scholar Ivaylo Ditchev had argued that material goods, such as toilet paper and coffee, became a consumer standard during communist urbanization.<sup>108</sup> But, besides coffee and toilet paper, socialist thinkers also sought to generate high cultural and intellectual needs. This is an inseparable part to the story of socialist consumption that points to a significant difference from Western consumerism. Television engaged in constructing this new type of harmonious consumption in the name of socialist humanism and its central concept of the holistically-developed personality.

Because of the extraordinary importance of television for the creation of “harmonious consumption,” socialist authorities did their best to make it more accessible to the wider public. In 1971, the Bulgarian government reduced the price of television sets by an average of 13.7%. The cost of the brand “Pirin” fell from 310 to 265 leva, “Sofia” was reduced from 450 to 395

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<sup>106</sup> “Progniza za Razvitiето na Radioto i Televiziata,” 87.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>108</sup> Ditchev, “Spaces of Desire,” 110-111.

leva and “Sredetz” also went from 450 to 395 leva.<sup>109</sup> This was the case not only in Bulgaria. In the Soviet Union “when prices on luxury consumer items were raised in 1959, not only were TVs excluded, but the price of sets was lowered.”<sup>110</sup> The goal was to make television widely available because of its role in constructing the cultural component of the dual form of socialist consumption as material and intellectual.

The precise vision of how television as a medium could assist in the development of the holistically developed personality can be reconstructed from the works of major producers of socialist media. The most important figure in the development of television in the 1970s and early 1980s is, without a doubt, Ivan Slavkov, the husband of Liyudmila Zhivkova, who served as a director of BT for twelve years. He also co-authored the first systematic history of Bulgarian television—*Television and Time* (1981). His co-author, Vlachko Kunchev was also an important figure in the development of television. Kunchev was a long-term director of the scientific research institute for radio and television. Besides his long-term service as a professor of communication, chair of the department of public communication and assistant dean at Sofia University, Kunchev also held a senior position at the Committee for Radio and Television. There he assisted with the television portion of the new long-term programs for aesthetic training. As such, *Television and Time* and the academic scholarship of Kunchev provide a rare glimpse of how television producers envisioned the role of television in the construction of the holistically developed personality and socialist humanism.

In *Television and Time*, Kunchev and Slavkov argue that “all changes and needs related to the material, socio-political and cultural development of advanced socialism revolve around

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<sup>109</sup> Ivanova, *Purva Programa*, 83.

<sup>110</sup> Roth-Ey, 183.

the concept of socialist humanism.”<sup>111</sup> They viewed television as an inextricable part of the socialist humanist project because this new medium had the capacity to create “new needs, interests and values” necessary for the development of socialist humanism’s central concept of “holistically developed person.”<sup>112</sup> To justify the argument that television can create the need for cultural consumption, the authors quote Marx’s *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, where he argues that “without production there is no consumption, but without consumption there is no production either.”<sup>113</sup> Similarly to other socialist humanist thinkers in Eastern Europe and the West, Kunchev and Slavkov turn to early Marx and Engels, often quoting *The German Ideology* and its claim that historical circumstances create the people to the same extent as the people create the historical circumstances.

A recurrent theme in *Television and Time* is that it is important to first study the personality and then the masses. Hence, Kunchev and Slavkov quote Bertolt Brecht, because he asked “what could we say about the individual if we keep trying to find the masses in him. One day we will search for the individual in the masses and that’s how we will construct him.”<sup>114</sup> Thus, they argue that Bulgarian advanced socialism achieved Brecht’s socialist humanist ideal because “the focus had shifted from developing the creative activity of the masses to the development of creative independence and expression of the personality of each human being.”<sup>115</sup> The insistence that “the personality has always been and will always remain, an active

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<sup>111</sup> Slavkov and Kunchev, 164.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 168.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

subject of the social system” along with their quotes of Brecht and early Marx indicate that the producers of socialist television adopted the main tenets of socialist humanism.<sup>116</sup>

Kunchev and Slavkov claim that during late socialism the “all-encompassing cultural needs of man,” sharpen “his creative attitude towards reality.”<sup>117</sup> Hence they argue that each person should have the opportunity to develop an “individual position and manifest his own creative attitude.”<sup>118</sup> Because of this, they conclude that mass communications are “some of the most important venues of expression of the core strengths of man in the concrete stage of socialist development.”<sup>119</sup> While during early socialism the emphasis of media fell on drawing every individual towards “the socialist ideal,” in the period of advanced socialism “the selective algorithm” of mass communications created an “openness” towards the personality and stimulated its capabilities and talents.<sup>120</sup>

Following the definition of media in the programs for aesthetic training, in his book *Mass Communications and Personality*, Vlachko Kunchev portrays socialist media as a “cultural border area” where “the individual encounters a variety of expressions of human culture—politics, science, art, morality, ideology.”<sup>121</sup> Under this definition, the theory of mass communications in late socialism is normatively positive. The socializing effect of mass communications as a cultural border sphere stimulates the formative elements of the holistic development of the personality through the enrichment of the cognitive structure, forms of communication, values and attitudes of the socialist personality.<sup>122</sup> In some ways this reasoning

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>121</sup> Vlachko Kunchev, *Masovi Komunikacii i Lichnost / Mass Communications and Personality* (Sofia, Bulgaria: Nauka i Izkustvo, 1974), 178.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 190.

parallels arguments present in the medium theory of McLuhan and Joshua Meyrowitz. For one thing, socialist producers of media such as Kunchev and Slavkov viewed the unique technological characteristics of television as inherently beneficial for the development of the holistically developed personality. Despite their Marxist leanings, at times Kunchev and Slavkov frame media in terms that share with media ecologists, such as McLuhan, the assignment of questions of political economy and class to a secondary position. For example, in respect to art, Kunchev argued that television increases the capacity of a person to feel the actual reality of an artistic form. If one observed a sculpture of a familiar individual or the portrait of a historical personality in a museum or an exhibition, the argument went, he or she would not feel an experience of “actual reality.” But if these very same portraits and sculptures were shown on a television screen, “the perception that one experiences genuine reality is significantly increased.”<sup>123</sup> Television naturally creates a feeling of a “real development of events,” the argument continued, and inherently reproduces elements of lived reality better than traditional forms of art.<sup>124</sup> Kunchev and Slavkov argued that this was due to television’s unique ways of representing social reality. The combination of imagery, oral speech and music accelerate the communicative capacity of the new medium.<sup>125</sup>

It is clear that Kunchev was not fond of media ecology as he is critical of Marshall McLuhan. The “bourgeoisie theories” of communication are most explicitly defended in the works of McLuhan, Kunchev argued, because he represented social history simply as a result of the development of the means of communication. Instead, Kunchev emphasized the differences between the class societies in the west and the socialist states and highlighted the importance of

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Slavkov and Kunchev, 30.

the productive forces for determining history rather than the means of communication.<sup>126</sup> Thus Kunchev rejects McLuhan's discussion of the "retribalizing effects" of mass communications, which presumably flattened the differences between individuals. Instead, he argued that in the socialist societies of the East, mass communications promoted individuality and originality. "No leveling of the personality, trampling of individuality, or bringing the people under a common denominator. 'Communism is a rejection of bourgeoisie individualism, but not of individuality.'" <sup>127</sup> Yet again, however, Kunchev offered a theoretical line that shares with medium theory an emphasis on the role technology plays in the structuring of societies. "Some scholars from capitalist countries even think that there is no creativity in television, but everything is a fruit of the technological means. Even though we do not agree with this extreme view, we must unconditionally admit that television technology is an irreplaceable partner of journalists, directors, actors and others."<sup>128</sup>

In fact, Kunchev and Slavkov's work appears more at odds with Frankfurt school theorists than with media ecologists.

According to the Bulgarian television producers, Marxist theory rejects "the bourgeoisie sociologists" who claim that "mass communications engender pessimism, a gloomy mood among the youth, and homogenization of man in contemporary societies."<sup>129</sup> Although they do not quote the Frankfurt School explicitly, the reference to the "bourgeoisie sociologists" points in this direction. The Frankfurt School was a target of criticism in Bulgarian mass communication literature because of their criticism of both capitalism and real socialism. For this reason, some Bulgarian scholars argued that Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse and Habermas were embraced by

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>127</sup> Kunchev, 187.

<sup>128</sup> Slavkov and Kunchev, 100.

<sup>129</sup> Kunchev, 38.

“bourgeoisie theoreticians, politicians, and journalists who deny the ideas of scientific communism.”<sup>130</sup> There were other left-wing western scholars critical of capitalist media that also figured as “bourgeoisie thinkers” in the works of Bulgarian mass communications scholar. A prominent example was Herbert Schiller.<sup>131</sup> But Kunchev and Slavkov direct their criticism even at Eastern European Marxist thinkers who advance arguments similar to those of the Frankfurt School and other western left-wing theorists. In particular they single out critics who claim that mass communications “simulate” in people “fake satisfaction” and privilege “feelings and sensations over intellect.”<sup>132</sup> According to Kunchev the belief that there is an “immanent essence” of mass communications that is autonomous from their ideological and political purpose is “an erroneous anti-Marxist thesis.”<sup>133</sup> Instead, according to the author, mass communications in socialist societies draw the personality to the world of art and deny homogenization of the audience.

Kunchev rejects another “bourgeoisie theory” according to which media must give the audiences what they want. He claims that this is a “bogus democracy” and insists on Lenin’s formula that although culture and art must be close to the people, they also should always be one step ahead in order to elevate the aesthetic values, tastes and criteria of the people.<sup>134</sup> Hence, socialist thinkers had to study and know the needs of the people, but at the same time they had to elevate their interests, tastes and stimulate their education.<sup>135</sup> The outcome of this goal was the creation of a television public far different than the one in the capitalist countries. Based on

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<sup>130</sup> Georgi Dimitrov, *Kritika na Burzhoaznite Teorii I Praktika na Zhurnalistikata / A Critique of the Bourgeois Theories and Practice of Journalism* (Sofia, Bulgaria: Sofia University Publishing, 1988), 299-300.

<sup>131</sup> See for example “Dva Podhoda pri Izuchavaneto Na Komunkiatiata” / “Two Approaches to the Study of Communications,” *Savremenna journalistika* 2 (1982).

<sup>132</sup> Kunchev, 143.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 76.

statistical information from 1975, Kunchev and Slavkov concluded that the interaction with television by viewers with university and high school degrees had increased. During that year viewers with university degree spent 98 minutes each day in front of the television screen while those with high school degrees spent 101 minutes. In contrast, those with basic education (8<sup>th</sup> grade) spent 86 minutes and those with primary education (4<sup>th</sup> grade) spent 75 minutes in front of the TV set. The authors conclude that television in Bulgaria drew audiences with higher intellectual levels, unlike in the capitalist countries where the viewers with low levels of education spent more time in front of the TV.<sup>136</sup> In his book, Kunchev adds that television enriches the linguistic capacity of people and claims that scientific studies proved that “first-graders who have had constant contact with television learn the alphabet faster than children who have not.”<sup>137</sup>

In sum, socialist media producers viewed mass communications as positive. They strongly believed that television could participate in the construction of the holistically developed personality in the context of developed socialism because of its capacity to “reach each person and impact society through its effect on the individual.”<sup>138</sup> In fact, Kunchev argued that television exhibits a “structural similarity” with “actual human acts.” The capacity to broadcast “a variety of activities,” and provide “universal all-encompassing information” were shared with human beings.<sup>139</sup> “Thanks to their [electronic media’s] capacity to attract all cultural forces of the personality, activate all of its psychological potentials as they protect the human from unnecessary specialization, they serve as one of the important forms for the harmonious

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<sup>136</sup> Slavkov and Kunchev, 195.

<sup>137</sup> Kunchev, 191.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 9.



and all-encompassing development of the personality.”<sup>140</sup> Slavkov and Kunchev go as far as to claim that in Bulgaria “television was born as a result of the social need to develop the personality and to stimulate the social relationships through the creation of forms and methods of its own.”<sup>141</sup>

### **3.3 1970S TELEVISION PROGRAMS AND THE FOCUS ON THE SOCIALIST PERSONALITY**

In the late 1960s and especially in the 1970s, as part of the long-term programs for the development of the holistically developed personality, television started to create its own artistic forms. While in the first decade of its existence BT already strived to spread high culture humanist values its direct broadcasts from the state opera and theatre merely extended already existing genres to the homes of working people. During the 1970s this was no longer sufficient. According to socialist thinkers, the continuous growth of the population of the cities, the extended leisure time and the better educated audience created in the socialist personality more sophisticated cultural needs. Their satisfaction called for new aesthetic forms. Some of these new original products included television theatre, television film series, television novels, television operettas, television estrada recitals, television musicals and television portraits.

One of the new genres that BT developed was television theatre. The idea behind this program, broadcasted every Monday, was to intertwine the educational and artistic functions of

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<sup>140</sup> Kunchev, 12.

<sup>141</sup> Slavkov and Kunchev, 24.

the medium.<sup>142</sup> BT approached Bulgaria's most prominent writers, such as Georgi Karaslavov, Nikolay Haitov, Lahcezar Strelkov, Pavel Vezhinov, Borislav Rainov, Serafim Severniak and many others, with the request to write original plays suitable for television. When the first studies of audience preferences emerged in the early 1980s, they showed that the program was one of the most popular ones among Bulgarian viewers.<sup>143</sup> In 1968, BT started to organize an international festival of television theatre. In the 1970s, the festival drew the attention of television viewers not only from the Eastern bloc, but also from Western Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America. In addition to the televised performances, it featured numerous workshops in which "theoreticians, television theater directors and other specialists from around the globe" discussed various issues of the field.<sup>144</sup> By 1980, eight such international festivals had taken place. In 1980 alone television theatre showed 35 plays from places around the globe including Nicaragua, Vietnam, Cuba, Nigeria and Mexico.

Television theatre along with other new genres constituted mass produced "new art." For this reason, according to television producers under the new programs for aesthetic training television and other mass communications figured as "creators of values with deep intellectual-aesthetic content."<sup>145</sup> In addition, television content that addressed culture and arts increased in the shape of serial programs of lectures and discussions. The concern with the cultural advancement of youth grew and BT's cultural and artistic departments deepened their work with artists' unions and institutes. Programs geared towards young people, such as the fine arts rubric "Stories about Art" were a direct result of this collaboration. Television content for youth about cinema, theatre and architecture proliferated as well.

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<sup>142</sup> Ivanova, *Purva Programa*, 43

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>144</sup> Slavkov and Kunchev, 155.

<sup>145</sup> Elenkov, 293.

A television department, called “Flame,” focused solely on youth through the creation of “long-term aesthetic programs” for young people. The programs were in the format of “cycles” and created the sense of a process. For example, in 1976 the program “Aesthetic Projections” included twelve shows each of them forty minutes long and during the next year another set of twelve episodes completed the cycle. Another cycle of seven episodes called “The World of Poetry,” introduced the audience to world renowned poets.<sup>146</sup> These and other similar programs targeted primarily the “aesthetic education of the youth.”<sup>147</sup> But, not all of them were in the format of lectures and cycles. A popular example from the 1970s was the game show “I Have an Idea,” in which young people competed through the presentation of “original ideas and suggestions about the resolution of fundamental problems in the economic and social spheres.”<sup>148</sup> In general, in the 1970s BT’s department “LIK,” which dealt with arts and culture programing, focused on one major issue: “the aesthetic training of young people.”<sup>149</sup> The department created numerous programs including some dedicated to exploring models of aesthetic training in USSR and other socialist countries.<sup>150</sup> The creation of a department that managed all of the programs of art allowed for the coordination of multiple programs for a period of one or more years and in this way reaffirmed the sense of television as a process that systematically engendered and stimulated new cultural needs.<sup>151</sup>

The turn to aesthetic television intensified with the introduction of Chanel 2 of BT. Launched in 1975, the new channel began its existence in the same year that Liyudmila Zhivkova became the Chair of the Committee for Arts and Culture. The introduction of Channel

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<sup>146</sup> Ivanova, *Purva Programa*, 129.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

2 was a part of the broader shift in Eastern Europe towards multi-channel television. Precipitated by the multiplying needs of the late socialist societies, the second channel targeted the increased cultural needs of the people.<sup>152</sup> In Bulgaria, too, the goal of the second channel was to “raise the cultural and educational level of the Bulgarian citizens” and to focus “first and foremost” on culture because of its importance for the creation of the “holistically developed personality.”<sup>153</sup> Indeed, in the first decade of its existence Channel 2 focused primarily on cultural programs. Besides four theatre programs, there were also those for painting, writing, poetry and other arts. In addition, classical music played a central role in the content of the new channel. Classical music concerts took the 8-8:30 pm slot and included pieces such as cello and orchestra concerts by Robert Schumann.<sup>154</sup> Programs dedicated to classical music such as “The Opera through the Centuries,” “[Leonard] Bernstein about Music,” and “The Small Gems of Music” took 11.77 percent of Channel 2’s content in the 1970s.<sup>155</sup>

Yet, it is important to note that the sciences were not abandoned in the effort of television to assist in the construction of the holistically developed personality. Programs such as “Technological Innovations,” “Applied Electronics,” “Radio Technologies,” “Technological Progress,” and “Progress” addressed contemporary scientific and technological questions through lectures and films.<sup>156</sup> Popular socialist era programs, such as “Atlas,” educated viewers in geography and introduced them to a variety of locations around the world. Both high culture and humanistic education dictated television content in the 1970s. BT Channel 2 primarily

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<sup>152</sup> Ivannova, *Vtora Programa*, 17.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 23 and 38.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Slavkov and Kunchev, 138.

focused on culture and in 1980 Channel 1 dedicated 38 percent of its total broadcast time to programs for youth and art.<sup>157</sup>

Producers of socialist media experimented with ways in which the aesthetic programs of BT could have a more far-reaching effect on the socialist personality. One of the methods emphasized in the literature was to literally focus on a particular personality. Socialist media producers believed that the undivided attention on a specific author, artist or historical figure, assisted each viewer in the development of his or her own creative and intellectual capacities. This was formulated explicitly in the work of the adviser for electronic media in the Committee for Arts and Culture. Once again relying on Marx's *German Ideology*, Kunchev justified the need for a primary focus on a particular personality in mass communications rather than on the masses and provides the following illuminating example to support his argument:

On New Year's Eve (1974), television reporters met people on the street and asked them "What did 1973 bring to you?" All of them responded: 'I moved to a new apartment,' 'My child was born,' 'I got married,' 'I was accepted in the university,' 'I won an athletic competition,' etc. None of them answered: 'We over-fulfilled the plan in the factory with X percent,' 'We worked very effectively in our agricultural cooperative,' 'We produced X amount of...,' etc. Perhaps some would object that I and my television proponents aren't discovering something new. Of course, man naturally experiences his acquisitions through his personal "I." But if this is the case, then the information we offer, should also find ways to reach man through a focus on the personal and the individual, but not through the social.<sup>158</sup>

Under this novel focus on the personality, the "subjective element" of the actor, director and the editor had to replace the "indifferent hiding behind facts or statements on behalf of the entire television."<sup>159</sup> The shift in this direction surfaced in the flourishing of the new genres of "television portrait" and "television essay." The "television portrait" focused on a particular artist, poet, or an intellectual in an attempt to show in detail his or her development as a creator.

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<sup>157</sup> Ivanova, *Purva Programa*, 161.

<sup>158</sup> Kunchev, 134.

<sup>159</sup> Ivanova, *Vtora Programa*, 39.

The “television essay” also focused on a real person through a descriptive style that fused documentary and artistic features. The goal of these genres was to reveal as “role models” various accomplished personalities from all spheres of social life.<sup>160</sup> They sought to “enter the personal and individual psychology of the human” and not simply capture events with the camera, but to discover the events’ “authors and to show them as holistic personalities.”<sup>161</sup> For example, one television essay focused exclusively on the professional development of a young and successful architect. Oftentimes this genre included a long monologue by a television anchor with the camera completely focused on him or her.<sup>162</sup>

Over the years, the “Literature and Art” department of BT, in particular, prepared numerous “Creators’ Portraits” from Bulgaria and the world.<sup>163</sup> For example, in 1977 several episodes of this program focused on the sculptor Auguste Rodin.<sup>164</sup> Another program on Channel Two, called “One More Word,” focused exclusively on a particular poet and the program “Pages” presented an entire cycle of episodes focused on specific belles lettres authors. Through television portraits, “Moscow Nights” introduced the viewer to famous Soviet artists and authors, such as the prominent writer Sergey Mihalkov. The program aimed to “map the creative path” of the guest and always ended with a song, a recital of poetry or a reading dedicated to the Bulgarian people by the guest of the show.<sup>165</sup>

Televised biographies and memoirs, proliferated during this period. Thus the popular twelve episode long “Kapitan Petko Voivoda [Captain Petko the Warlord]” featured as a “biographical story.” Even the titles of some programs bore a title that directed audiences to the

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>161</sup> Kunchev and Slavkov, 261.

<sup>162</sup> Ivanova, *Vtora Programa*, 40.

<sup>163</sup> “BT Prez Novia Sezon” / “BT during the New Season,” in *Hristomatia po Istoria na Televiziata v Balgaria*, 43.

<sup>164</sup> Ivanova, *Vtora Programa*, 41.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 42.

personal self: “Me and the Others,” “The Person Next to You,” “Me, You and Him,” “Me, You, Him and the Talent,” “Me and My Profession,” and “I am a Personality.” These programs clearly indicated the attempt of television producers to focus on the individual, rather than the early socialist emphasis on masses and classes.<sup>166</sup> “No longer ‘society and man,’ the ‘collective and the personality,’ ‘the drawing of the personality to the collective work of the masses’ were the subject of the images and analyses [of television], but the focus was now on ‘the human in history,’ ‘the human in society,’ ‘the individual in the collective.’ In other words the attention shifted to the personality itself.”<sup>167</sup>

The emphasis on the “subjective element” was not only in respect to art and culture, but also in regards to journalism. Unlike the Anglo-Saxon model in which the journalist seeks objectivity and draws little attention to himself or herself, the socialist journalist had to exhibit a strong “personal element” and “personal experience.” In the journalistic practice an “anchor of a new type” should replace the “spokesperson.”<sup>168</sup> Hence, commentaries were welcome and the journalists were to espouse an artistic and creative dimension. Thus, Ivan Garelov, one of Bulgaria’s most emblematic journalists, was praised for his “oratory,” “live, conversational language” and “personal experience.”<sup>169</sup> The list of requirements for the journalistic profession was very long and even included the knowledge of “at least two foreign languages.”<sup>170</sup> Furthermore, there was also the idea that the journalist must possess the “skills of an actor.”<sup>171</sup> This genre of a journalism with a strong personality became known as “author’s journalism.”<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Slavkov and Kunchev, 220.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

<sup>168</sup> Ivanova, *Vtora Programa*, 39.

<sup>169</sup> Slavkov and Kunchev, 212.

<sup>170</sup> Ivanova, *Purva Programa*, 58.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> Slavkov and Kunchev, 214.

The programs and shows that focused on a particular personality were one part of the formation of the holistically developed personality. But the ultimate goal was not merely to create in people the desire to follow a “role model.” Socialist television producers’ utopian goal was to turn television viewers into active participants of media’s cultural products. According to Kunchev, “the formation of the human is accomplished through active interaction between mass communications and personality, in which the personality stands as an object and subject of the act, creator and artist of information and active agent of communication.”<sup>173</sup> He would add that, every person feels the need to materialize his or her cultural capacities in the form of “a product,” explaining that “mass communications provide the human being with a chance for expression, through contests, telephone discussions, competitions, quizzes, letters, crosswords and others.”<sup>174</sup> The argument that the main goal of the “socialist cultural revolution,” namely the harmonious development of the personality, required the transformation of people from connoisseurs and consumers of cultural values into “active creators” was omnipresent in the discourse of socialist media producers.<sup>175</sup>

Indeed, starting in the 1970s socialist television producers tried to involve the audience. The program “Citizen’s Tribune,” later renamed “100 Questions of the Viewer,” appeared in 1973. “Dialogues” followed in 1974 along with other programs that allowed viewers to discuss with politicians issues that “affect the working man.”<sup>176</sup> When it first appeared in 1973, “Citizen’s Tribune” involved the viewers through live phone calls. Later, citizens were invited into the television studio and sat next to politicians.<sup>177</sup> This type of program strived to transform

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<sup>173</sup> Kunchev, 184.

<sup>174</sup> Kunchev, 185.

<sup>175</sup> Slavkov and Kunchev, 83.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 222



television into a dialectical medium that viewers both learned from and participated in. In “watching” these programs audiences were not only to become culturally enriched; they were to act as creators themselves. This was the utopian idea behind the definition of media as a “cultural border area” and “active artistic zone for creation, distribution and storing of artistic values.”<sup>178</sup>

### 3.4 TELEVISION AND HARMONIOUS CONSUMPTION: A FAILURE?

Did socialist humanist media succeed in their endeavor to assist in the construction of the holistically developed personality of late socialism? Did they help lay the foundations of the future communist society? It seems that the revolutions of 1989 render these questions redundant. Todor Zhivkov’s prediction during the BCP’s eleventh congress (1976) that in 1990 Bulgaria would enter a new historical epoch were correct. But this epoch was not the “entirely realistic” entry into communism. On the contrary, it was the all too real restoration of capitalism. Along with this disappeared the utopian ideas of “living in beauty” and the concept of high culture as a building force of the future communist society. Seven months after 1989, BT put an end to its international television theatre festival after it had existed for a quarter of a century. Within the same short period plays, Bulgarian films, programs about painting, opera and ballet disappeared from the Bulgarian television screen.<sup>179</sup>

Was the failure to create a unique mass communications system due to the collapse of Eastern European socialism altogether or were the seeds of the problem already planted in the very ideas about socialist humanist media? Could television, capitalist or socialist, be a vehicle

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<sup>178</sup> Elenkov, 293.

<sup>179</sup> Margarita Pesheva, *Dvorecat na Dedal: Televizionia Labirint / Daedalus’ Palace: The Television Labyrinth* (Vratza, Bulgaria: Poliprint, 1995), 156.

for high culture? After all, watching opera live and on television are two different experiences regardless of the political and economic system. One could argue that televised opera, theatre, and ballet discourages people from attending these artistic events in person. Not to mention that in capitalism or socialism, television entails a lonely experience very different than a concert hall full of hundreds of people. The promise for active participation of the viewer and a dialectical relationship between the audience and television also seems highly dubious. In Bulgaria, the discourse about the democratizing effect of socialist television was an example of one of the paradoxes of Eastern European societies. In his book *Everything Was Forever until It Was No More*, Alexei Yurchak lays out a major tension that underlines the history of the Soviet Union. Through an extension of Claude Lefort's theory of the paradox of modern ideology to the Soviet context, Yurchak claims that the USSR strived for "total liberation by means of total control."<sup>180</sup> In other words, revolutionary experimentation in art, literature, linguistics and all other socio-cultural areas, was supposed to be achieved under the complete control of the Communist Party. Similarly, in Bulgaria the involvement of more and more people in the creative process of television production was supposed to happen under a more and more centralized system operated essentially by a single family, namely Todor Zhivkov, his daughter and his son-in-law.

One can point to a series of other contradictions that underpin the ideas about mass communications during late socialism. Yet, the binary framing of late socialist mass communications as a "success" or a "failure" is misleading. The question of mass communications' response to socialist consumption reveals a more complicated story. Did late socialist media manage to construct the dual, material and cultural, model of consumption that would distinguish it from bourgeoisie consumerism in the West? The answer to this question also

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<sup>180</sup> Yurchak, 284.

contains a number of contradictions. In spite of the rhetoric of socialist media producers, television's content did not always confront what Markov described as the "worship of commodities." For instance, despite its establishment as a cultural and educational institution, the programming of BT's channel two featured advertisements from 8:20 to 8:30 pm every night.<sup>181</sup> Indeed, in the 1960s advertisements became a permanent feature throughout Eastern Europe that undermined the quest for unique consumption.

BT included programs that seemed to stimulate the consumption of material commodities, such as the show "For One Billion," which began in the early 1980s. In this show ten commodities just released on the market competed in a trial-like format during which experts judged which one was the best. The program included a follow-up that affirmed whether the selected commodity really sold well on the market.<sup>182</sup> It is impossible to frame this program as critical of material consumption. Finally, in general television transmitted images of an ideal way of life in which material goods were a main component. In her study on visual consumption culture in Bulgarian print advertisements and fashion magazines from the 1960s, Mila Mineva reveals how when faced with images, the socialist ideology of consumption started to "crack." In response, socialist thinkers engaged in interpretative work that tried to dictate the meaning behind certain visual forms that were not inherently socialist. In this process, an image of a vase of flowers could be interpreted either as an example of "bourgeois depravity" or "socialist comfort."<sup>183</sup> Needless to say, the interpretive work added to images in the form of written text outside of the image did not guarantee success. The images of carpets, kitchen tables and

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<sup>181</sup> "Proekt za Vtora Programa na BT" / "Project for Second Channel of BT," in *Hristomatia po Istoria na Televiziata v Balgaria*, 154-164.

<sup>182</sup> Ivanova, *Purva Programa*, 176.

<sup>183</sup> Mila Mineva, "Razkazi za Obrazi na Sotzialisticheskoto Potreblenie" / "Stories and Images of Socialist Consumption," *Sotziologicheski problemi* 1-2 (2003): 147

television sets retained an autonomy that allowed them to engender thoughts of “consumption culture without socialist style.”<sup>184</sup> One could say the same for television images, which also spread visions of ideal life that were not “inherently” socialist.

Nevertheless, BT also attempted to counter “the worship of commodities” and to create cultural needs that balanced the desire for material objects. There were television products that directly confronted the urge for more goods by socialist citizens. A prominent example is the film “Vilna Zona” (“Summerhouse Zone” in English) produced in 1975 and broadcasted throughout the socialist period. The plot revolves around a family celebration during which the invited guests gorge on a great variety of foods. “Vilna Zona” is replete with intentionally mindless conversations and explicit manifestations of greed that reveal the alienation in Bulgarian society engendered precisely because of the desires for material goods and property. In one scene, the awkward silence of the party is interrupted by a guest who brags that a new automatic coffee machine had been installed at her job. Another guest responds that he has seen several such machines already. The film ends with a brawl for a plot of land.

These types of critical media products were only one part of the story of media and socialist consumption. The major approach was the creation of cultural needs to balance the desires for material goods. Regardless of one’s opinion of television, it is a fact that even prior to the aesthetic programs of Liyudmila Zhvkova, BT was replete with programs that were unapologetically high culture and elitist, yet geared for the masses. Despite the contradictions that accompanied television’s response to the growing importance of consumer goods, its attempt to construct an alternative cultural consumption was uncontested.

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<sup>184</sup> Ibid., 164.

Television was not the only medium to pursue educational and cultural goals. Radio and the press, and in particular the multitude of literary and artistic magazines pursued similar outcomes. Already in the 1960s Bulgarian radio broadcasted radio plays for adults as well as for children four times a week. Once a week, some of the national newspapers included an attachment for literature, art and art criticism. With time some of these attachments developed into separate publications.<sup>185</sup> The process of education and cultural advancement was especially visible in regards to cinema. Following Lenin's famous definition of communism as "Soviet power plus electrification," one author described the proliferation of cinemas in Bulgaria during socialism as "cinemafication." During socialism Bulgaria built more than 3,000 cinemas. Notably, many of them were in villages and small towns.<sup>186</sup> According to one scholar of the Bulgarian film industry, the number of cinemas in Bulgaria fell from 3,500 in 1989 to 68 in 1995. All of the cinemas in Bulgarian villages and small towns shut down.<sup>187</sup> To add insult to injury their new private owners converted them to casinos and bingo rooms.<sup>188</sup>

Examined from this angle, and in light of the destruction that followed after 1989, the enlightenment-driven socialist humanist media present a more complicated story than the instant rush to judge them as a failure suggests. They were a part of an incredibly ambitious utopian project, which envisioned that at the end all state regulatory and control functions would be abandoned and people's existence would be led entirely by aesthetics and cultural values. Obviously this did not occur, but to some extent media did succeed in the construction of a peculiar type of socialist consumption because they engendered cultural needs in the population.

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<sup>185</sup> Slavkov and Kunchev, 87.

<sup>186</sup> Milev, 75.

<sup>187</sup> Dimitrina Ivanova, "Balgarskoto Kino Dnes" / "Bulgarian Cinema Today," in *Balgarsko Mediaznanie I*, 369.

<sup>188</sup> The city of Pernik had more than five cinemas during socialism. Close to three decades after 1989, Pernik does not have a cinema anymore. The major cinema, "Krakra" in downtown Pernik was converted into a "Golden Ducky" store that sells children's toys and clothing.

One cannot discard the role of late socialist mass communications across the former Eastern bloc in the creation of a highly educated and cultured public. Hungarian dissident Gaspar Miklos Tamas captures this important historical detail brilliantly:

Everywhere in the Soviet bloc there existed a strange combination of high modernism and – looked at from today, or from the West – an incredible and tradition-laden cult of Letters, of the Arts, of Science and Philosophy. ‘Socialist’ modernization, apart from putting an end to illiteracy, epidemics and abject poverty, by introducing hygiene and indoor plumbing, heating, old-age pensions, paid holidays, free health care and education, cheap public transport, numeracy and so on, also opened lending libraries in every district and all the larger firms. It introduced—for the first time—scholarly critical editions, an enormous volume of high-quality mass publishing, social sciences, serious literary and art criticism; dozens of new theatres and museums opened, hundreds of new cinemas—art film flourished; all extremely high-minded. Millions of people learned to read music and sang in choirs. Philosophy had never been regarded as part of national culture before 1945. National classics were properly edited and published for the first time. Hundreds of scholars worked on translations. These were extremely bookish nations.<sup>189</sup>

Visitors to Eastern Europe noticed this as well. In the recollections of her visit to the Soviet Union, American feminist poet and writer Audre Lorde notes the existence of censorship there, but also highlights the “bookishness” that Tamas speaks of.

But you do have a country there that has the largest reading population in the world, that prints books of poetry in editions of 250,000 copies and those copies sell out in three months. Everywhere you go, even among those miles of cotton being harvested in the Uzbekhi sun, people are reading, and no matter what you say about censorship, they are still reading, and they’re reading an awful lot. Some books are pirated from the West because Russia does not recognize International Copyright. In Samarkhand, Ernst Gaines’ *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* was the latest best seller. Now, how many Russian novels in translation have you read this past year?<sup>190</sup>

Tamas and Lorde are not alone in this assessment of the high esteem of arts and literature in the former socialist societies of Eastern Europe. Ironically, it was precisely the popular celebration of high culture that allowed for playwrights, philosophers, poets, actors, screenwriters, and directors, rather than economists and lawyers, to become the leaders of the

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<sup>189</sup> Gáspár Miklós Tamás, “Words from Budapest,” *New Left Review* 80 (March/April 2013): 12.

<sup>190</sup> Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Berkley: Crossing Press, 2007), 35.

new anti-communist movements in the late 1980s. The extent to which mass communications and television in particular stimulated this intellectualism is a question of debate and speculation since this type of influence is hard to quantify and measure. Yet, their role can hardly be underestimated. Available studies show that by 1975 Bulgarians spent three hours and a half watching television per day, going to the cinema, reading newspapers or listening to the radio.<sup>191</sup> By that time, electronic media were the fourth major activity of the Bulgarian citizen after labor, sleep and housework.<sup>192</sup> Besides the expansion of mass communications in social life, one has to bear in mind the fact that they did not have competition. If television influenced society in some way, it was BT that was doing the influencing, because with the exception of some border regions, in the pre-Internet era, the vast majority of people in Bulgaria had only one option.

There was also the argument that television did not only offer culturally enriching content, but that it stimulated other intellectual activities. Slavkov and Kunchev argued that mass communications took some “tasks” from other arts and in this way “freed them to satisfy more specialized aesthetic demands.”<sup>193</sup> Thus, traditional theatre and film became bolder and more experimental because television broadcasted products for broader audiences while they could focus on niche ones. In addition, sociological research in the USSR and Bulgaria proved that television occupied the spot of “recreational reading” while it freed space for “serious literature.”<sup>194</sup> Regardless of the manner and exact amount of influence mass communications and television exerted, it is impossible to dismiss their role in the formation of cultural needs.

Of course there were other factors that played a part in the stimulation of culture. The social relationships that people had with each other were one component. Even more

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<sup>191</sup> Kunchev, 5.

<sup>192</sup> Ivanova, *Purva Programa*, 123.

<sup>193</sup> Slavkov and Kunchev, 179.

<sup>194</sup> Slavkov and Kunchev, 180.

importantly, the rigorous educational system of socialist societies was another major motor behind the features of socialism that Lorde and Tamas talked about. But in spite of the importance of education there was an explicit state policy that not only institutes and universities but mass communications must spread knowledge and culture as well.<sup>195</sup>

Compared with today, when television indeed appears as a “vast wasteland” with endless game shows and reality formats this history is worth revisiting. Less than half a century after Petrov spoke of Schiller, Vicki Politova, the CEO of Bulgaria’s former cultural channel two, privatized in 2000 by News Corporation, made a statement that illustrated the change of perceptions about media after 1989. Unlike Petrov and the socialist idea of enlightenment through media, Politova argued that television “has always been and will always be a commercial enterprise...that generates money” and it “should be looked at only as such.”<sup>196</sup> However, during socialism the development of Bulgarian television proceeded differently than Politova’s vision and the results were clear. During socialism, not only had Bulgaria eliminated illiteracy, but the country ranked fifth in the world for the ratio of university students to the population.<sup>197</sup> Three decades after the restoration of capitalism the situation has changed dramatically. The 2016 European Commission report on education found out that Bulgarian pupils ranked last in the EU in respect to reading, math and natural sciences with 40 percent of the fifteen year-olds classified as functionally illiterate.<sup>198</sup> In contrast, the country ranked 26<sup>th</sup> on the comprehensive UN Human Development Index (HDI) in 1990 that took into account not

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 174.

<sup>196</sup> Vicki Politova, “Izgrazdaneto na Pravilen i Stabilen Biznes Model e v Osnovata na Uspehite na BTV” / “The Building of a Correct and Stable Business Model is the Basis for bTV’s Successes,” in *bTV: Novata Vizia*, 12-13.

<sup>197</sup> Ognianova, 7.

<sup>198</sup> “Bylgarskite Uchenitzi s Nai-niski Poztizhenia v ES” / “The Bulgarian Students with the Lowest Performance in the EU,” *Dnevnik*, March 11, 2016, accessed March 15, 2016.  
[http://www.dnevnik.bg/detski\\_dnevnik/2016/03/11/2721152\\_bulgarskite\\_uchenici\\_sa\\_s\\_nai-niski\\_postijeniia\\_v\\_es/](http://www.dnevnik.bg/detski_dnevnik/2016/03/11/2721152_bulgarskite_uchenici_sa_s_nai-niski_postijeniia_v_es/)



only health and economic indicators but also education and literacy levels.<sup>199</sup> This was a remarkable achievement because in the 1880s “most inhabitants of Sofia still had a cow or two grazing on nearby meadows.”<sup>200</sup> When the communist party took the government in 1944, Bulgaria was predominantly rural, illiterate and poor. From this historical angle communist modernization and the enlightenment campaigns of socialist humanist media from the 1960s until 1989 constitute an achievement worth revisiting.

Finally, it is important to note that socialist humanism was internalized as an ideology by people, including journalists. In an interview with a television journalist who worked during socialism, it became clear to me that some media workers took the educational and cultural legacies of socialist humanism seriously.

MM: How did you become a journalist? Did you study for it?

KM: I am from the generation that had the goal to be holistically developed. Because of this I graduated from a mathematics high school. Then I studied radio technologies in the Institutes for Mechanical and Electronic Technologies. I started to work at Bulgarian Television as a video operator. Then I studied journalism and afterwards I began to work as a journalist specializing in international politics. After 1989, the circumstances forced me to become a Member of Parliament and I served there for three mandates.<sup>201</sup>

Almost three decades after the collapse of socialism, this journalist explained to me her career path through the socialist humanist concept of holistically developed personality. This is a testimony that indeed the ideological shift during post-Stalinist liberalization was internalized by media workers and the one I interviewed was proud to admit it.

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<sup>199</sup> United Nations Development Programme, “Summary Human Development Report 2013,” (2013), accessed August 17, 2014. [http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/HDR2013\\_EN\\_Summary.pdf](http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/HDR2013_EN_Summary.pdf)

<sup>200</sup> Crampton, 113.

<sup>201</sup> Personal Interview # 28.

### 3.5 THE UGLY END OF SOCIALIST HUMANIST TELEVISION

In 1990, Polish dissident Adam Michnik famously characterized nationalism as the last stage of communism. This was a problematic simplification and a merging of two complex phenomena with long histories in diverse contexts. Nevertheless, this claim resonated with academics, intellectuals and commentators for good reason. In the 1980s, many socialist governments across the Eastern bloc turned to nationalism. Yet, the equation of “communism” and “nationalism” does not explain why nationalism was the last stage of communism and not its first one. The paradox is that Stalinism had the most progressive policies when it came to minorities. It recognized their differences, tolerated their languages and provided them with significant autonomy in the governance of their societies. During late socialism, in parallel with the development of socialist humanism and de-Stalinization, the discourse on ethnicity also changed and nationalistic rhetoric emerged. The Bulgarian case shows that nationalism was not just “the last stage of communism,” but that it was one of the tenets in socialist discourse since the 1960s.

In 1948, Bulgaria’s communist leader Vulko Chervekov declared that “the biggest enemy of socialism is nationalism.”<sup>202</sup> During the first post-World War II decade the socialist discourse attributed nationalism to Bulgaria’s fascistic monarchy and anti-nationalist rhetoric critical of “Greater Bulgarian chauvinism” proliferated. This discourse had practical implications for Bulgaria’s ethnic Turkish minority. In the very first days after the socialist revolution of the 9<sup>th</sup> of September 1944, the Bulgarian Turks gained rights denied to them by the previous regime. The new government administratively returned to them their Turkish and Arabic names, which the monarchy had changed to Bulgarian Christian ones. It also permitted the wearing of

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<sup>202</sup> Quoted in Maria Todorova, *Bones of Contention*, 166.

traditional clothing and Friday prayers in Arabic became legal again.<sup>203</sup> In 1947, for the first time in Bulgarian history, Sofia University accepted Turkish students. In that year their number was 25 but their numbers grew in the following years reaching 180 in 1954 and 22 more were sent to study in the USSR in the same year.<sup>204</sup> Ironically, the plight of the Bulgarian Turks deteriorated with post-Stalinist liberalization.

In his memoirs, Zhivkov himself distinguishes his rule from the early socialist period in terms of national politics. According to him, Dimitrov and Chervenkov's idea of "multinational Bulgaria" was "absolutely groundless."<sup>205</sup> He claimed that Macedonia was a nation "created via in vitro on the recipes of Stalin and Tito."<sup>206</sup> Throughout his memoirs the use of "Macedonian" is in quotation marks, because Zhivkov believed that people with "pure Bulgarian blood" who spoke Bulgarian language lived there. He was never fond of the anti-nationalist streak of Stalinism and there were noticeable changes after his appointment as a General Secretary of the BCP. The dissident Georgi Markov was once again among the first to note these changes.

In the following several years [after 1956], the debunking of the cult of personality coincided with the rising wave of national consciousness. On the fence of the school in the "Ivan Vazov" neighbourhood one could see written in lime 'Long Live Bulgaria.' Instead of the partisan song "Make Noise You Mountains and Thickets," pupils and students sang "Quiet White Danube."<sup>207</sup>

Markov portrayed this early nationalistic turn as the "infusion of fresh and natural blood in the agonizing body of the party's ideology" and claimed that many powerful party functionaries embraced "the patriotic line with zest and passion."<sup>208</sup> However, the content of this

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<sup>203</sup> Mihail Gruev and Alexei Kalionski, *Vazroditelnia: Musulmanskite Obshtnosti I Komunisticheskiat Regim / The Revival Period: The Muslim Communities and the Communist Regime* (Sofia, Bulgaria: Ciela, 2008), 20.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>205</sup> Zhivkov, *Memoari*, 452.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid., p.455.

<sup>207</sup> Markov, *In Absentia Reports* vol. 2, 240.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid., 244-245.

nationalism was contradictory due to the internationalist line of Marxism-Leninism. Thus, in his *Theses on the Komsomol and the Youth* (1967), Zhivkov claimed that “socialist patriotism and internationalism are dialectically united.”<sup>209</sup> But this alleged unity of nationalism and internationalism remained poorly theorized. More importantly, the “Theses” contained overtly nationalistic elements. Besides Zhivkov’s appeal to ancient Bulgarian khans and medieval kings and his claim that “Thracian blood flows in our veins” he also called for school textbooks “to be rewritten and everything that insults our people and its eminent figures thrown out while their [the textbooks’] emotional and ideological impact is strengthened through the skilful linking of the present to the past.”<sup>210</sup> Zhivkov condemned “the nihilism” towards “the thirteen hundred years of Bulgarian statehood” and claimed that the “red flag embodies the continuity between the old struggles and the new one—the building of socialism and communism.”<sup>211</sup> His address contained warnings that the exposition and rethinking of historical facts must remain committed to Marxist-Leninist principles if it is not to degenerate into chauvinism.<sup>212</sup> Yet, it is clear that the emphasis on nationalism contained serious contradictions: “we won’t create chauvinists, but patriotic-internationalists and holistically developed communist personalities.”<sup>213</sup>

The attempts to reconcile nationalism and Marxism continued into the 1970s, but the contradictions deepened until they degenerated into full-blown nationalism in the 1980s. Zhivkova’s cultural programs exhibited a duality that hovered between nationalism and universalism. As explained earlier, her massive programs for aesthetic training and the humanistic advancement of the holistically developed personality drew inspiration from a variety

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<sup>209</sup> Todor Zhivkov, *Tezisi za Komsomola i Mladezhata / Theses on the Komsomol and Youth* (Sofia, Bulgaria: Narodna Mladezh 1971), 75.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid., 68

<sup>211</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid., 78.

of sources in the Western enlightenment and Eastern mysticism and spirituality. In the programs of the Committee for Arts and Culture, these features from the West and the East merged with local cultural history. For example, a mass symposium addressed the “Humanism in Eastern Orthodox Christian culture and the Italian Renaissance.”<sup>214</sup> The preparation for the celebration of the 1300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Bulgarian state included an investigation of how the Iranians marked the 2500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Iranian empire, the Poles the 1000<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Polish state and the Americans the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the USA.<sup>215</sup> Programs for aesthetic training were named after Leonardo da Vinci, but also after the philosopher of Eastern spiritualism Nicolas Roerich. But the global, universalistic inspirations of the programs for culture had a strong local, nationalistic counterpart as well.

Zhivkova and her circle sought to elevate the pride of Bulgarians and confront their feelings of smallness, backwardness and inconsequentiality. “To counter the image of ‘the shameful identity,’ they fervently elaborated the thesis that in the sphere of culture there are no small and big nations, that every nation is capable of having its own share and contribution to the universal humanistic cultural values and achievements.”<sup>216</sup> Zhivkova campaigned internationally, arguing that “in the early Middle Ages, Bulgaria was one of Europe’s most powerful empires and became the cradle of Slavic literacy, culture, and civilization.”<sup>217</sup> Thus the search for national pride included research on the ancient roots of the Bulgarian people. The focus fell on the Thracians. This not only resulted in numerous cultural events, book publications and exhibitions at home, but Zhivkova embarked on “widely publicized campaigns for exhibiting

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<sup>214</sup> Elenkov, 337.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 515.

<sup>216</sup> Atanasova, 298.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid., 300.

abroad the ancient Thracian golden objects.”<sup>218</sup> The Thracian exhibition visited thirty countries including France, Austria, the United Kingdom, Mexico, Japan, Germany, India, and the United States (including Pittsburgh).<sup>219</sup> Besides the Thracian artefacts, Zhivkova also organized international exhibitions of Bulgarian Christian Orthodox icons. Although, these programs did not have a component that denigrated other ethnic groups in Bulgaria or that laid territorial claims to Bulgaria’s Balkan neighbours, the thin line between nationalism and cultural patriotism seemed to have been crossed.

Liyudmila Zhivkova’s passing in July 1981, amidst the celebrations of the 1300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Bulgarian state, complicates the story of the emergence of fervent nationalism in the 1980s. Specifically, her death leaves open the question of whether her absence precipitated this nationalism or whether the cultural politics from the 1970s were bound to degenerate into nationalism with or without her guidance. What is clear though is that in the 1980s the universal side of Bulgarian cultural politics disappeared and the national became the only element of the humanist and cultural turn of late socialism. The “pluralist formula for culture” of the 1970s gave way to programs whose “language focused exclusively on the Bulgarian ethnogenesis.”<sup>220</sup>

The historicizing of culture at the end of 1970s and in the 1980s sought to commemorate the past and legitimize the present through a new official language and new propaganda and ideological messages—the mobilizing and mythicizing of the discourse on national culture and the reformulation of the communist symbols and mythology into a national cult, articulated as open and inclusive of everything valuable and honourable in the thousand years of Bulgarian cultural tradition (“Second golden age”).<sup>221</sup>

Stripped of the double meaning engendered by the presence of Western and Eastern ideologies, eventually, the fusion of local ancient cultural traditions with contemporary

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<sup>218</sup> Ibid., 299.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

<sup>220</sup> Elenkov, 464.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid., 516.

Bulgarian culture crystalized in the concept of “unitary socialist national culture.”<sup>222</sup> The new cultural mass programs illustrated the exclusive focus on ancient and more recent history. In 1985 Bulgaria commemorated the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the unification of the country and in 1987 a massive state campaign commemorated the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Bulgarian kingdom’s defeat of Byzantium. This was followed by a program that marked 1100 years since the arrival of the students of St. Cyril and St. Methodius (the creators of the Cyrillic alphabet) in Bulgaria while another program commemorated the 1100<sup>th</sup> anniversary since the acceptance of Christianity. There were also events on the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Balkan War and 110<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of Bulgaria.<sup>223</sup>

At the same time, the attempt to merge the socialist present and the past was visible in the alteration of commemorations from Bulgaria’s post-World War II history with events from the distant past. In 1983, the authorities marked the 1120<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the creation of the Slavic alphabet and the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Georgi Dimitrov’s successful defence at the Leipzig trial. In 1987 the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the October revolution and the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Vasil Levski (a Bulgarian national hero hanged in 1873) were marked.<sup>224</sup> But the most massive campaign was the celebration of the 1300<sup>th</sup> anniversary since the foundation of the Bulgarian state in 1981, which signalled the turn to nationalism. Media became the major vehicles of this program and television in particular played a crucial role in the detrimental events of the 1980s. In fact, television’s involvement was so considerable in the commemorations of 1981 that this remains the most massive media campaign in Bulgarian history to date.

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<sup>222</sup> Ibid., 515.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid., 459.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid., 365.

The participation of BT in honouring the 1300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of the Bulgarian state was so extensive that it is impossible to list all the programs it prepared. There were a multitude of programs about archaeological objects found on the Bulgarian lands; the Thracians; the Bulgarian kings, khans and rulers; Bulgarian monasteries and nationalist authors; Bulgarian cities, Bulgarian wedding rituals, traditional folklore and music and there was even a television program about Bulgarians' relationship to the Black sea. The major initiative in relation to the 1300<sup>th</sup> anniversary since the founding of the Bulgarian state was the production of a seventy episode long television series about the history of Bulgaria "from the Thracians to the Fifth Congress of the Bulgarian Communist Party."<sup>225</sup> The series addressed "Antiquity and Middle Ages," Ottoman Slavery," "National Revival," "Bulgaria on the Road to Bourgeois Development" and "Socialist Bulgaria."<sup>226</sup> In addition, BT created a forty-two episode long documentary film about the history of Bulgaria from "Khan Asparuh [681] until today [1981]."<sup>227</sup> There were numerous other documentaries and television series that dealt with particular historical personalities and events. The goal was to visualize different periods of Bulgarian history in a way that was memorable to a mass audience.<sup>228</sup> Special attention was placed on "authentic" Bulgarian rituals, dances and songs. In general folklore became an important televised feature of the 1980s. Television theatre also broadcasted plays centred on Bulgarian national history.

The preparation for this massive campaign started in the mid-1970s and included not only media, but also intense building of bronze and concrete statues and monuments. One of the most

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<sup>225</sup> "Spravka za Uchastie na BT v Oznamenuvaneto na 1300-godishninata ot Osnovavaneto na Balgarskata Darzhava" / "A Reference to the Participation of BT in the Commemoration of 1300<sup>th</sup> Anniversary since the Creation of the Bulgarian State," in *Hristomatia po Istoria na Televiziata v Balgaria*, 271.

<sup>226</sup> Ivanova, *Purva Programa*, 152.

<sup>227</sup> "Spravka za Uchastie na BT," 272.

<sup>228</sup> Ivanova, *Purva Programa*, 136.



impressive monuments was the “Founders of the Bulgarian State” in Shumen situated on the highest mountaintop of the Danube river plateau. The monument complex consists of more than twenty gigantic sculptures of ancient Bulgarian rulers and it required 50,000 cubic meters of concrete and 2400 tons of iron. Just the statue of the granite lion at the top of the monument complex weighs 1000 tons. From a distance of several miles the monument appears as a giant spaceship that had landed on the top of the mountain. To get to it from the bottom of the mountain visitors must climb 1300 stairs which lead them right into this remarkable monument complex.

All of the television programs and monuments pursued “unity.” Television sought to “strengthen the moral and political unity of the people” and it reflected the broader ideological transformation of socialism.<sup>229</sup> The “unitary socialist nation” displaced the utopian rhetoric of future entry into communism and the “social-class” discourses increasingly receded in the background while “the national” took central stage.<sup>230</sup> In essence, this nationalism reversed the multi-ethnic discourse of early socialism and constituted a turn to traditional Balkan nationalism. The historian Maria Todorova has argued that the Balkans are an Ottoman legacy. Since gaining independence from the Ottoman Empire (in 1878 in the case of Bulgaria), the Balkan countries sought to relinquish every claim of Ottomanness and saw Turkey as the heir of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>231</sup> For this reason, Balkan nationalism is firmly embedded in the anti-Muslim sentiment that has led to the continuous eradication of ethnic multiplicity in the region. Unsurprisingly, the socialist turn to nationalism and a homogenous “unitary socialist nation” affected Bulgaria’s ethnic Turkish minority the most.

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<sup>229</sup> Ivanova, *Vtora Programa*, 55.

<sup>230</sup> Gruev and Kalionski, 11.

<sup>231</sup> Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 199.

Gradually, in the 1980s the new priority of mass communications was no longer aesthetic training, beauty and cultural enlightenment, but pure reinforcement of nationalism and open confrontation with the obstacles on the road to a homogenous socialist nation. The push for media to actively participate in the affirmation of a “unitary socialist nation” accelerated until the very end of socialism. In 1988, Politburo of BCP recommended the creation of documentaries and fiction films that show “the struggle of the Bulgarian people against the assimilatory pressure of the Ottoman conqueror, the preservation of Bulgarianess for centuries, and the Islamized and subjected to assimilation Bulgarians and their struggle for national awareness and shaking off the nightmarish scars of the Turkish slavery.”<sup>232</sup> But documentary films and television series that addressed Bulgaria’s national revival and struggle for independence had already appeared during Zhivkova’s era. A number of television series televised literary works from the national revival period. “Under the Yoke” by Ivan Vazov was televised and so was the “Notes on the Bulgarian Rebellions” by Zahari Stoyanov. The popular twelve episode long television series “Kapitan Petko Voivoda” was also broadcasted in honour of the 1300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of the Bulgarian state.

All of these films, series and programs began with the title “1300 Years of the Bulgarian State” and all of them, including the ones based on novels and fiction literature claimed to be accurate representations of “real” historical events. “Kapitan Petko Voivoda,” which traces the life of a Bulgarian warlord who led a guerrilla band into war against the Ottoman Empire, was a good example of this attempt by television producers to do “historical justice” to prominent Bulgarian personalities. Each episode of the film began with a five to ten minute conversational lecture by its screenwriter Nikolay Haitov in which he “historicized” the events portrayed in the

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<sup>232</sup> Gruev and Kalionski, 169.

film. This created the feeling that the “autobiographical film,” was an accurate representation of real historical events, even though Haitov was not a historian, but a nationalistic fiction writer and a playwright. Indeed, the series contained elements of popular national mythology and even fairy tales. At this point, televised socialist humanism was turning away from the socialist to the nationalist personality.

As the regime’s nationalist rhetoric hardened, Islam and the forced Islamization of ethnic Bulgarians during the five-hundred years of Ottoman rule on the Balkans became the dominant theme. This crystalized in what is without a doubt the most emblematic film from this era—*Time of Parting*. The film consists of two parts—*Time of Parting* and *Time of Violence*—that total 288 minutes. Completed in 1987 and shown on BT in six episode instalments, the film remains one of the most cherished media products by all Bulgarians regardless of political belonging. In 2015, during the celebration of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Bulgarian cinema, a national survey found out that *Time of Parting*, was the most favoured film by Bulgarians.

The film was based on a novel written by Anton Donchev in 1964. As with all of the other films from this era, despite the fact that it was based on a work of fiction, *Time of Parting* begins with a subtitle that states that the events shown in the film “took place” in 1668. The plot revolves around Kara Ibrahim, a devshirme who is dispatched with his army to an area in the Rhodopa Mountains in the Balkan provinces of the Ottoman Empire to convert the local Christian population to Islam. Devshirme were Christian children taken as a levy who filled administrative posts, especially as part of the Janissary corps (elite infantry units), of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>233</sup> Thus the twist in *Time of Parting* was that Kara Ibrahim, who was abducted as a teenaged boy from his Bulgarian parents to become a Janissary soldier, returns to his

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<sup>233</sup> Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, 164.

birthplace village to carry out forced conversion to Islam of his native community. There he confronts his brother, meets his father and learns about the death of his mother who fell sick after his abduction. Throughout the film Kara Ibrahim experiences flashbacks of his childhood in the form of long nostalgic shots of lush meadows, happy children and smiling faces. However, he is absolutely committed to the violent conversion of his former fellow Christians because, as the introductory subtitle of the film explains, when they reached the Ottoman Empire the Christian children went through “unprecedented, insidious training that turned them into fanatically faithful soldiers of the Sultan.”<sup>234</sup> And indeed in the second part of the film, *Time of Violence*, fanaticism dominates the plot.

After the Christian population of the village refuses to voluntarily convert to Islam, Kara Ibrahim resorts to ferocious acts of violence. There are several rape scenes in the film, one of which includes a long mass rape footage in which Ottoman soldiers assault Bulgarian women in chaotic scenes of naked female bodies, blood, screams and the sound of clothes being torn. As the village leaders refuse to accept Islam each day one of them dies a violent death. One is slowly impaled through the anus until the penetrating stick comes out of his mouth. Another one is lifted in the air with ropes and then pierced with a giant hook on which he remains hanging. A third one is split into two after his limbs are tied. The remaining village leaders are murdered in a scene of mass slaughter. Kara Ibrahim does not even spare his father, whom he throws into a bottomless cave. Perhaps only luck spares the viewer from witnessing a child rape as a scary, one-eyed Turkish soldier tries to drag a Bulgarian boy into his room, only to have the boy escape the act.

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<sup>234</sup> The film can be viewed here (w/ English subtitles) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PJMIB4kE998>.

*Time of Parting* was the culmination of the media turn to extreme nationalism that presented the experiences of Bulgarians under the Ottoman Empire primarily through violence and repression. Indeed, as every subjected people, the Christians in the Balkans experienced the Ottoman Empire as an oppressive political force and they were never treated equally with the Muslims. But the Ottoman Empire had characteristics that never found a place in films such as *Time of Parting*. Each separate non-Muslim community, referred to as a “millet,” regulated its own affairs such as education, property and family law. Forced religious conversion was actually controversial and dubious under Koranic law. Because of this, Richard Crampton concludes that there was never as much forced religious conversion in the Ottoman Empire as in Europe during the reformation and counterreformation.<sup>235</sup> The historian of the Balkans, Mark Mazower concurs, arguing that Islamization on a large scale took place only in a few areas while the first provinces (Thrace and Macedonia) conquered by the Ottomans were settled with Muslims from Anatolia. There was also impetus to convert to Islam for political and economic reasons as it was a precondition for a government position and social advancement. Not to mention that Islam was considered a progressive religion attractive for its permission of polygamy and relaxed divorce requirements.<sup>236</sup> Finally, Mazower reiterates that intermarriage between Christians and Muslims were common. In her classic *Imagining the Balkans* Maria Todorova also argues that “although there were obvious cases of enforced conversions, the majority fell in the category of nonenforced ones, euphemistically called voluntary, the result of indirect economic and social,

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<sup>235</sup> Crampton, 31.

<sup>236</sup> Mazower, 60.

but not administrative, pressure.”<sup>237</sup> Besides the forced Islamization represented in *Time of Parting*, the devshirme was also controversial and it was levied for the last time in 1685.<sup>238</sup>

All of these nuances, however, were discarded in Bulgarian mass media in the 1980s and especially in films such as *Time of Parting*. This well-orchestrated media campaign and the new rhetoric of a “unitary socialist nation” did not stay at the level of discourse and soon a very real “time of parting” between ethnic Bulgarians and Muslims took place. Starting in the mid-1980s it became clear that the Bulgarian Turkish population would be assimilated. In the first half of 1984 the use of the Turkish language in public spaces was considered a violation punishable with hefty fines. More and more Turks were driven to change their names from Turkish and Arabic to Bulgarian ones. The emphasis on the strict following of “socialist civil rituals and traditions” also hardened.<sup>239</sup> In essence this was an assault on Islamic religious rituals such as circumcision, which the authorities required to be performed only by a doctor rather than a religious figure thus rendering the ritual meaningless. But the total shift to assimilationist policies escalated around Christmas Day in 1984.

Known as the “Process of Rebirth” or the “Revival Process” the forced assimilation of Bulgarian Muslims included the forced change of names of nearly 800,000 people (10 percent of Bulgaria’s total population). Between December 1984 and February 1985 all of these people were administratively processed and issued passports with their new names.<sup>240</sup> There was a particular emphasis on renaming intellectuals, imams and well-known athletes to set them as an example. Perhaps the most famous case was Naim Suleimanov—the world and Olympic

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<sup>237</sup> Todorova, *Imaginig the Balkans*, 165.

<sup>238</sup> Crampton, 34.

<sup>239</sup> Gruev and Kalionski, 129.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

weightlifting champion whose records remain unbeaten to this day.<sup>241</sup> The authorities changed his name to Naum Shalamanov and once he defected to Turkey in 1986, he himself changed his name again to Naim Süleymanoğlu. In some areas, such as Pavel Bania, there were even “special detachments” that erased the Muslim names on gravestones in “Turkish graveyards.”<sup>242</sup> Intellectuals, imams, students and people who resisted the renaming campaign were arrested and placed in special prisons and camps.

As expected, the “revival process” provoked a strong reaction from the Bulgarian Turks. In 1984, terrorist bombings took place in the Varna airport and in a Plovdiv bus station. One woman died and scores were injured. After the completion of the revival process, on March 9 1985, a bomb exploded in a train car for women and children near the station of Bunovo. Seven people died in the incident. There were several other terrorist attacks and in total eight people died, two of them children, and more than one hundred were injured.<sup>243</sup> Tanks and heavy armoured machinery occupied Bulgarian villages and towns with Turkish people. Peaceful protests erupted around the country and in some places tear gas and live ammunition were used against demonstrators. As a result, according to the most conservative estimates, seven protestors died; some people claim that the figure was as high as twenty-four.<sup>244</sup>

Meanwhile, all of these tragic events were accompanied by a continuous mobilization of the film industry, BT and Bulgarian theatre. In addition to *Time of Parting* a number of other novels and plays dealt with the “Turkish yoke” and Islamization. At least twenty documentaries were created in the short period around the “revival process.”<sup>245</sup> According to one of the best

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<sup>241</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid., 169

historical investigations of the revival process, Todor Zhivkov personally instructed the authorities to screen *Time of Parting* in regions with a majority Turkish population.<sup>246</sup> In addition, foreign films that expressed anti-Turkish sentiments were also broadcasted in BT. Alan Parker's *Midnight Express* with its highly problematic, if not outright racist, portrayals of the Turkish people was one of them. *The Road* (1982) and *The Herd* (1978) by the Kurdish director and political exile Yılmaz Güney were also screened on BT because of their representation of the violation of the human rights of the Kurdish minority in Turkey.<sup>247</sup>

The revival process, defined by party functionaries as “the extinction of the Turkish yoke’s last scar on the body of the Bulgarian people” continued into the late 1980s.<sup>248</sup> Its culmination occurred in May of 1989 with what was cynically called “The Great Excursion.” Amidst the growing economic and social crisis of the country accompanied by the seriously strained relations between Mikhail Gorbachov and Todor Zhivkov, Bulgaria passed a sweeping liberalization law in January 1989. One of its features was the removal of the restrictions on Bulgarian citizens to travel abroad. On May 29<sup>th</sup>, 1989, Todor Zhivkov gave a speech broadcasted on BT and the radio and published as a separate pamphlet and in all newspapers on the next day. Referring to the new freedom for “tourist” travel, Zhivkov asked the Turkish state to open its borders to Bulgarian Turks who wanted to leave Bulgaria. Turkey opened the border on June 3 triggering “a mass emigration wave, lines for passports, loading of belongings, sale of property including cars and apartments oftentimes at nominal prices.”<sup>249</sup> On the roads leading to the Bulgarian-Turkish border long lines of thousands of emigrants streamed to exit Bulgaria. Entire regions emptied out of people precipitating an economic crisis as industrial plants

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<sup>246</sup> Ibid.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid., 168.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid , 187.



struggled without personnel and as farm produce rotted in the fields due to the lack of people to collect it. In sum, between June 3 and August 21 of 1989, when Turkey closed its border again, a total of 360,000 ethnic Turks left Bulgaria. 400,000 more had applied for passports meaning that close to 80 percent of the Bulgarian Muslims left or intended to leave Bulgaria in 1989.<sup>250</sup>

Although authorities argued that this was a voluntary emigration and referred to it as the “Great Excursion” there were clear pressures for the Bulgarian Turks to leave. The forced change of names, violence, and repression of the second half of the 1980s were intended to create this pressure. Gruev and Kalionski quote a statement of Zhivkov from June 1989 when he openly stated that “if we don’t bring outside of Bulgaria 200-300 thousands people from this population in fifteen years there will be no Bulgaria. It will be like Cyprus or something like that.”<sup>251</sup> The “revival process” ended with the toppling of Zhivkov on November 10<sup>th</sup> 1989. The formal date of its interruption was December 29, 1989 when the BCP announced to the ethnic Turks that the “party is giving back your names.” By the end of 1989, 150,000 Bulgarian Turks (around 40 percent of those who emigrated) returned to Bulgaria.<sup>252</sup>

The “revival process” along with the forced change of names in 1985 constitute the biggest ethnic cleansing in Bulgarian history. Among other things, it contributed to the end of Bulgarian socialism and remains a sore spot of Bulgarian collective memory. As in other similar cases the question of why this happened is contested. According to the most systematic investigation of this process it remains unknown whether Zhivkov and his circle rationally

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<sup>250</sup> Ibid., 193.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid., 193.

discussed this decision or this development was predetermined by the inertia of previous years.<sup>253</sup>

As mentioned earlier, the Bulgarian experience of the 1980s was only one example of the broader spread of nationalism across Eastern Europe. A number of scholars have argued that this phenomenon was precipitated by the acute economic crisis which began in the late 1970s and continued until the implosion of the Eastern bloc. In the 1970s socialist countries borrowed heavily from Western banks, but in 1979-1980 the banks refused to lend more money to Eastern bloc states.<sup>254</sup> In Romania, Nicolae Ceaușescu responded to the increased pressure of western banks by repaying the debt ahead of time in order to assert his country's sovereignty. But this required the imposition of severe austerity measures on the population. Romania exported foodstuffs needed by its population in order to gain hard currency. At the same time it limited the importation of foreign goods and oil in order to preserve hard currency needed for debt repayment. Shortages and food rationing emerged as a result and the economic situation of the people deteriorated severely. Nationalism was one way for the authorities to earn legitimacy in such dire economic situation. "National heroes were exalted" and "national enemies were build up in more or less veiled ways to mobilize the Romanian populace behind its Party's protective front."<sup>255</sup> To put it crudely, the Romanian state fed people with nationalism instead of food.

Bulgaria's other socialist neighbor, Yugoslavia, pursued a different type of socialist model than the Soviet one, but by the 1980s, the federation also became indebted to Western banks. IMF-sponsored, liberal macro-economic reforms led to austerity and deterioration in living standards. Subsequently, the wealthier republics of Croatia and Slovenia felt shortchanged

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<sup>253</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>254</sup> Katherine Verdery, *What was Socialism and What Comes Next* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 32.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid., 42.

and envisioned a separate national path. Nationalism appeared everywhere in Yugoslavia as the economic crisis deepened. Thus as in the case of Romania, some scholars explain the emergence of nationalism with the deteriorating economic situation.<sup>256</sup>

The Balkans were not the only place where nationalism thrived. In the Baltic states, Central Europe and some Soviet republics economic crisis and nationalism, often in the form of anti-Russian sentiment, also went hand-in-hand. Bulgaria was not an exception to the economic situation. Although, the crisis was not as severe as in neighboring Romania, Bulgaria accumulated high foreign debt and shortages of basic goods appeared. The international situation additionally added a strain on the condition in the country. During the perestroika, the Council of Mutual Economic Assistance, on which Bulgaria depended heavily, underwent a restructuring that was not to the benefit of Bulgaria. In addition, Bulgaria's relationship with the Soviet Union hit an all-time low. Zhivkov and Gorbachov's bond became very strained and the cracks in their connection became public knowledge. In his memoirs, Zhivkov recounts how in May 1987 he went to Moscow for a prearranged visit with Gorbachov. But the Soviet leader left Zhivkov to wait for thirty minutes in the corridors of Kremlin before he invited him in. "The goal was clear—they made me wait in order to humiliate me."<sup>257</sup> Thus the economic crisis was accompanied with a political one engendered by the collapsing relationship between the Soviet Union and its staunchest ally in Eastern Europe. It is only logical to conclude that this difficult situation contributed greatly to the turn to nationalism in the 1980s and in particular to the tragic events of the late 1980s.

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<sup>256</sup> Kate Hudson, *Breaking the South Slav Dream The Rise and Fall of Yugoslavia*, (London: Pluto Press, 2003), 5.

<sup>257</sup> Zhivkov, *Memoirs*, 382.

At the same time, this explanation, however persuasive, might not be sufficient by itself. After all, the turn to assimilationist politics and the rejection of the early socialist discourses of multinationalism occurred already in the 1960s when the economic situation of Bulgarians was improving. In the mid-1960s the publication of magazines and newspapers in the Turkish language was reduced and there were closure of mosques as well as campaigns for “unveiling” (razferedzhavane) of Muslim women along with medical restrictions on circumcision.<sup>258</sup> In addition, in 1964 a campaign for forced renaming of ethnic Turks was launched, but it was “temporarily” halted as the regime softened its course in the following years until it hardened its policies again in the 1980s. This raises the question of whether nationalism and the scapegoating of Bulgaria’s Muslim minority did not have an ideological affinity with the shift in socialist ideology. This does not mean that Adam Michnik correctly described nationalism as “the last stage of communism.” On the contrary, nationalism predated Eastern European socialism and socialism failed to prevent the reappearance within the socialist era of nationalistic themes from the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The question that is not being asked and the issue that begs for an explanation is whether the post-Stalinist liberalization and its ideological source, socialist humanism, facilitated the emergence of nationalism. In other words, not “communism” as an abstract and general idea, but the particular and actual form of Eastern European late socialism might have set the stage for the events in the 1980s.

It is beyond the scope of this study to trace the theoretical affinities between socialist humanism and nationalism and the role that Western humanism and ideas about the enlightenment in general played in this potential affinity. For one thing, this issue is yet to be explored in general. The goal here is to raise this important question that certainly does not just

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<sup>258</sup> Gruev and Kalionski, 113.

bear on the historical legacy of Eastern European socialism, but has global implications, not only for the past but for the nationalist zeitgeist of today. Based on the analysis of Eastern European socialist mass communications the final pages of this chapter focus on three areas where socialist humanism and nationalism might have aligned.

The first potential problem with socialist humanism, and perhaps with humanism in general is the emphasis on the malleability of the human being. This feature of humanism was something that Hannah Arendt critiqued. According to George Kateb, Arendt interpreted the “totalitarian” leaders’ belief in the pliability of the human for the purposes of ideology as an “overinflated humanism, a hubristically exaggerated faith in the power of human beings to remould the world in accordance with human imagination.”<sup>259</sup> The danger was that in this way humanism can be turned upside down reducing everyone to “something less than human.”<sup>260</sup> The potential problem here is that the standards of the humanistic thinkers could not always be met and there were always groups that resisted. In the Bulgarian case, this happened to be the “adherents of Islam,” as Zhivkov called them. Indeed in his emblematic speech that unleashed “the Great Excursion,” Zhivkov’s pathos was precisely of a thinker angry at a group of people that were an obstacle to the ideological vision of “unitary socialist nation.” He reminded his audience that in 1944 in the areas where ethnic Turks lived ninety-three out of one hundred people were illiterate. People and livestock lived together, he claimed. But, “the socialist state brought the Muslim population out of the darkness” that the Ottoman Empire had placed them

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<sup>259</sup> Quoted in Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 57.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

in.<sup>261</sup> He spoke of “civilized” and “humane” goals of the regime and concluded that the Bulgarian people “would not go back to the Ottoman Empire.” The emphasis on “religious fanaticism,” “domestic conservatism” and the references to the “darkness” in which Muslims lived before the arrival of the socialist enlighteners was omnipresent. For this reason, the cultural historian Ivan Elenkov claims that the historical talk of the late 1980s contained a “sharp colonizing pathos.”<sup>262</sup>

It is in this way that the humanistic belief in the malleability of the human being engendered enemies when the enlightener’s zeal faced resistance. In addition, humanism did not prevent socialist enlighteners from possessing very rigid classifications of who could be enlightened in the first place. For Zhivkov the idea that “exotic” and “backward” countries such as Angola, Mozambique and Ethiopia could become socialist was ridiculous and was even a “blow” against the “socialist ideal.”<sup>263</sup> He asked that if “we European countries” experience difficulties building socialism, how could they do it. Apparently the humanistic vision of late socialism did not eradicate racism. For example, after 1989 it became clear that Ivan Slavkov, Zhivkov son-in law and director of BT throughout the cultural turn of the 1970s and early 1980s, held very racist views. In an interview with a sports website he pondered the “smell” of black people. “Some of them smell like parsley...it’s so horrible. Once I went to a disco club in San

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<sup>261</sup> Todor Zhivkov, “Edinstvoto na Balgarskia Narod e Grizha I Sudba na Vseki Grazhdanin na Nasheto Milo Otechestvo” / “The Unity of the Bulgarian People is a Responsibility and Destiny of Every Citizen of Our Dear Homeland,” *Rabotnichesko Delo*, May 30, 1989.

<sup>262</sup> Elenkov, 439.

<sup>263</sup> Zhivkov, *Memoirs*, 155. Zhivkov praised Cuba as an exception of a “backward” country that built socialism although he critiqued the “ultra-leftism” there. In his memoirs he also praised the “exotic beauty of Cuban mulatto women.” 532.

Francisco and the stench poisoned me...why did HIV appear? To clean up this niggerness (*chernilka*).”<sup>264</sup>

The problematic discussion of who is human and can be enlightened in socialist humanist discourse did not emanate only from the government, but even from the dissidents. Besides the fact that most socialist humanist anti-government thinkers readily embraced capitalism after 1989, some of them became outright nationalists. This was particularly visible in Yugoslavia where prominent Marxist humanists and members of the *Praxis* journal such as Zaga Golubovic, Mihailo Markovic and Ljubomir Tadic became Serbian nationalists in the 1980s.<sup>265</sup> In fact, in the 1990s Mihajlo Markovic became the chairman of ideology under Slobodan Milosevic.<sup>266</sup> During the trial of Milosevic at the International Tribunal at the Hague, the Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences (SANU) co-authored by Markovic in the summer of 1986 was described by the prosecution as a “platform for ethnic cleansing.”<sup>267</sup> Although, Markovic, who appeared as a defense witness on behalf of Milosevic in the 2000s, was an extreme case, it is a fact that other Marxist humanists and former dissidents also embraced nationalism. For this reason, not only the behavior of socialist governments, but also the transformation of some Marxist humanist dissidents draws attention to the potential link between socialist humanism and nationalism.

Besides the issue with socialist humanism’s conception of who can be enlightened and who resists enlightenment within a particular socialist nation, the humanistic discourse of late socialism offered a potential overlap with nationalism in its emphasis on the fusion of past,

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<sup>264</sup> “In Memoriam: 20 Vaprosa kam Ivan Slavkov” / “In Memoriam: 20 Questions for Ivan Slavkov,” May 1, 2011, accessed March 5, 2016, <http://www.sportal.bg/news.php?news=302039>.

<sup>265</sup> Branka Magaš, *The Destruction of Yugoslavia: Tracking the Break-up 1980-1992* (New York: Verso, 1993), 72.

<sup>266</sup> Karkov, 191.

<sup>267</sup> “Milosevic Victim of Demonization?” *ICTY*, November 11, 2004, accessed March 5, 2016, [http://www.sense-agency.com/icty/milosevic-a-victim-of-demonization.29.html?cat\\_id=1&news\\_id=8845](http://www.sense-agency.com/icty/milosevic-a-victim-of-demonization.29.html?cat_id=1&news_id=8845).

present and future. Humanist philosophy views the development of humanity as a progress in which the contemporary individual drew from the cultural achievements of past civilizations, such as ancient Greece and Renaissance Italy. Zhivkova was drawn to this vision of humanism and viewed time as a “single spiral” that accumulated processes and phenomena leading into infinity.<sup>268</sup> But this humanistic vision was also open to nationalistic interpretations in which “humanity” and “humanism” could be interchanged with the “nation” and “nationalism.” Indeed, the ideological representation of Bulgarian culture as a fusion between past, present and future drew inspiration from the humanistic turn of late socialism. The enormous amount of television programming that fused the history of Bulgaria from its establishment in 681 AD to the socialist present, which itself was represented as the “second golden century,” was a direct result of this nationalist appropriation of the humanistic vision. It is this that allowed the authorities to talk about the removal of the “final scars” of “the Ottoman yoke” in the 1980s.

Finally, at the level of language socialist humanism could be portrayed as a “rhetoric of fusion.” Regardless of the theme with which socialist humanism dealt, the structure of the argument always led to some “unitary form.” The vision of “unitary socialist national culture” and the fusion of past, present and future were only some of the examples. Socialist consumption was to be achieved when the material and intellectual interests merged. The socialist consumer was supposed to also be a producer of cultural values at the same time. Work and creative, artistic activity were to become one in communism and the mass communications system was to become a unitary cultural system that engenders, creates and satisfies needs at the same time. The central concept of a “holistically developed personality” was to unite all of the disparate activities of the personality and avoid specialization and professionalization of bourgeoisie

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<sup>268</sup> Elenkov, 515.



society. The programs for aesthetic training were called “unitary” and aimed at the coordination of multiple media and government institutions towards a single goal. It is not a coincidence that Zhivkova’s motto and slogan for many of her initiatives was “beauty, creativity, unity.” Under this rhetoric of fusion, the notion of national unity appears as an expected outcome. The presence of a Muslim minority that speaks a different language and practices different customs and traditions was increasingly more untenable with the unitary logic of socialist humanism.

These three overlaps between socialist humanism and nationalism are only a schematic representation of the affinities between late socialism’s humanistic and nationalist lines of thought. One can hope that this question can draw more future research because the humanistic controversy of the 1960s in which figures such as Foucault, Althusser and Sartre took part remains unresolved. The question of the overlap between humanism and nationalism could shed light on the traps within the supposedly liberatory ethos of humanist thought. The engagement of Eastern Europeans with Marxist humanism during late socialism is a crucial, yet unexplored part of this story, which bears not only on history, but also on our potential socialist futures.

#### **4.0     POLITICIZED STATE MEDIA, THE BIRTH OF ANTI-COMMUNISM AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE FREE MARKET PRESS (1989-1995)**

At the turn of the millennium, one of Bulgaria's most prominent academics, Alexander Kiossev, wrote that the birth of the new democratic public sphere in Bulgaria during the final years of "totalitarianism" could be compared to the emergence of the European public sphere described by Jürgen Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.<sup>1</sup> Ivaylo Znepolski, the author of the first study of Bulgaria's commercial press, *The New Press and the Transition*, cites Habermas's book as the most important work for his investigation.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the analysis of the changes after 1989 via Habermas was common and a number of other media scholars, such as Georgi Lozanov, Manuela Manliherova, Rumen Dimitrov and Stefan Popov utilize the German philosopher in their portrayal of Bulgaria's post-socialist public sphere.

The comparisons between the emergence of the Western bourgeois public sphere that challenged the absolutist state and the Eastern European civil society that resisted the socialist state seemed irresistible. The proliferation of newspapers that accompanied both processes also encouraged parallels. For Kiossev, the birth of free expression in the public sphere was

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander Kiossev, "Chastniat Zivot na Publichnia Ezik: Metafori na Semeistvoto I Agresiata v Balgraskite Medii" / "The Private Life of Public Language: The Metaphors of the Family and Aggression in Bulgarian Media," in *Medii i Prehod / Media and Transition*, ed. Georgi Lozanov et al. (Sofia, Bulgaria: Tsentar za Razvitie na Mediite, 2000), 261.

<sup>2</sup> Ivaylo Znepolski, *Novata Presa Na Prehoda: Trudnoto Konstruirane na Chetvartata Vlast/ The New Transition Press: The Difficult Construction of the Fourth Estate*, (Sofia, Bulgaria: Druzhestvo "Grazhdanin," 1997), 4.

coterminous with the appearance of the commercial press.<sup>3</sup> According to him, by nature, private media were financially and ideologically independent. In contrast, electronic media, which in the 1990s were state-owned, were susceptible to government and party pressure.<sup>4</sup> Through a historical analysis of media during the first half of the 1990s, this chapter questions the deployment of Habermas's major book to describe the Bulgarian reality. In particular, it critiques the representation of the commercial press as a harbinger of democracy and argues that it was actually electronic media that defied the state in the first half of the 1990s.

In Bulgaria, until 1994 state radio and television retained a virtual monopoly. State television was especially important because in the early 1990s, it gathered five to six million viewers during the main primetime news, out of a total population of nine million. In the very first days after the fall of Zhivkov, state media created the sense that what took place in 1989 would be a lasting change that affected everybody. It placed the focus squarely on politics. But more importantly, without the privilege of "flipping the channel," state media had a captive audience that it could not only politicize, but politicize in a certain direction. In this chapter, I historicize how television and radio became the main vehicles for the anti-communist opposition and the political transformations of the early 1990s. As such, state media acted in a partisan way that was not unlike Habermas' description of the early bourgeoisie press. He claims that during its initial stage, which he brackets from 1775 to 1885, the new bourgeois publications engaged in a "rational-critical debate" that subsequently degenerated into a culture of consumption.<sup>5</sup> For Habermas, the early bourgeois public sphere included a multiplicity of partisan voices that wanted to debate rather than consume. Bulgarian state media followed this model. Instead of

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<sup>3</sup> Kiossev, "Chastniat Zivot na Publichnia Ezik," 263.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Habermas, *The Structural Transformation*, 144.

opting for an “objective” or “pluralist” approach that followed the standards of public media such as *BBC* or *Reuters* they engaged in biased politics that benefited the anti-communist opposition. Political commentary during primetime news that targeted the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), condemnation of the historical past and the reference to the socialist era as “totalitarian,” taking the side of the opposition during elections and openly attempting to influence their outcome, were all frequent features of state media. However, while in this respect the bias of Bulgarian electronic media reflected Habermas’s own preference for publications that took partisan positions, there were no other media to engage in a critical debate and provide an equally partisan socialist position. Thus the model was quite different than what Habermas describes. It featured a partisan media, but without rivals.

In sum, the paradox is that the new Bulgarian public sphere was born in state media institutions. It was there that a new space of communication opened and challenged the state. Journalists felt that they won this battle and in the interviews conducted for this study, they expressed a nostalgia for the “freedom” of this early period of Bulgaria’s post-socialist history. However, the issue with this model was that the politicization of Bulgarian society through the state media was unidirectional. When the socialists were in power, state television and radio represented the state as once again usurped by the “communists.” In contrast, when the opposition came to power, they supported them and each problem or controversy was again attributed to the state, but not the state led by the opposition, but the remnants of the “totalitarian” state. In other words, weary of the censorship of the previous era, regardless of whether the BSP or the opposition headed the government, journalists viewed the state as its main enemy and the anti-communist opposition party as an ally in this fight. However, this arrangement only lasted during the first years of the transition, after which the sense of freedom

disappeared, because no longer the weakened state, but the new private media owners and capital turned into the main enemy of journalism.

Another problem engendered by the application of Habermas's ideas to the Bulgarian situation was the emphasis on the press. Not only was the role of commercial newspapers in oppositional politics prematurely prioritized while television and radio ignored, but scholars failed to underline that "rational-critical debate" was not its major product. While state media played a dominant role in the politicization of society during the first five years of post-socialism, the fledgling commercial media had an especially important function in the development of the capitalist economy. The spirit of entrepreneurship that marked these early years of post-socialism emerged in the sphere of the commercial press. Not only were the first privately-owned media newspapers, but they were some of the first private businesses in general. As Znepolski puts it, "privately-owned newspapers appeared before the first privately owned bakeries."<sup>6</sup> Needless to say, many of these new newspapers did not last more than one or two issues. Nevertheless, their emergence reflected the belief, at the time, that in capitalism everybody can succeed. The first advertisers in this new commercial media were small businesses—the newly founded barber shops, grocery stores and garages converted into pubs and cafes. In this way, during the first years of capitalism, privately-owned media established horizontal relationships with other privately-owned small to medium sized businesses and they relied heavily on each other. The final section of this chapter briefly outlines this ephemeral stage of the Bulgarian press that was replaced by the corporate monopolization of the Bulgarian press. Although it disappeared very quickly, it is worth revisiting because it illustrates an early commercial press model that did not fully fit Habermas' conceptualization of the early bourgeois

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<sup>6</sup> Znepolski, *Novata Presa*, 10.

“rational-critical” press. Additionally, it also provides a contrasting background to the degeneration of the Bulgarian press after the mid-1990s that is the subject of analysis in chapter four.

#### **4.1 STATE MEDIA AGAINST THE STATE**

Although in the late 1980s, the socialist regime in Bulgaria undertook significant steps towards the restoration of capitalism, such as the promotion of private ownership and companies, the removal of Todor Zhivkov from power on the 10<sup>th</sup> of November 1989 was the chief signal of change. After all, with his thirty-five years in office, Bulgaria’s communist leader, seventy-eight years old at the time of his removal, was the longest serving communist leader in Eastern Europe. Yet, at first this historic event did not appear very dramatic. To begin with, Zhivkov’s fall was not accompanied by bloodshed or massive street demonstrations. Instead a coup within the communist party carried out by “reformers” and sanctioned by the Soviet leader Gorbachev, with whom it was public knowledge that Zhivkov was at odds, toppled him during a session of the Politburo of BCP. The successor of Zhivkov, the former Foreign Minister, Petar Mladenov, dryly and briefly thanked him for his service and announced that Zhivkov would retreat to a “deserved retirement.”<sup>7</sup> The expression of utter surprise on Zhivkov’s face, inscribed in the memory of many Bulgarians, suggested that he might not have planned his “retirement” yet. But despite Zhivkov’s forced resignation and the sudden turn of events, this development was not completely unexpected. In countries, such as Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, East Germany

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<sup>7</sup> Petar Mladenov, “Shte Varvim Neotklonno po Izbrannia Pat Zaedno s Naroda i v Imeto na Naroda!” / “We Will Follow Unswervingly the Chosen Path Together with the People and in the Name of the People!” *Rabotnichesko Delo*, November 11, 1989, 1.

and throughout the region, signs of political turmoil were already evident. Yet, in contrast to other places in the Eastern bloc, the changes in Bulgaria were not accompanied by mass protests or celebrations. In fact, two days after Zhivkov's removal, a writer for the *Los Angeles Times*, noted:

Anyone, including some perplexed Western diplomats here, who expected dancing in the streets or even modest signs of celebration over the end of 35 years of autocratic rule by Zhivkov was sadly disappointed this weekend. An Italian diplomat, his senses activated by the prospect of political upheaval in dreary Bulgaria recounted how he kept rushing fruitlessly to the window of his apartment on Saturday at the slightest sound, hoping to see street demonstrations or some other acknowledgement of the end of the Zhivkov rule. Usually, he said, it was only a car backfiring or a dog barking.<sup>8</sup>

The reason why "the changes," as Bulgarians call the events of 1989, were not initially felt on the streets was because they were first experienced through the media. In one of the earliest systematic analyses of the Bulgarian post-socialist media, Ivaylo Znepolski claimed that the "new democratic condition is to a large extent a media product."<sup>9</sup> In respect to Gorbachev's perestroika, the author argued that the "liberalization of the Soviet system began from the press, and its liberalization was for a long time the only sign of liberalization."<sup>10</sup> In Bulgaria too, the control over mass media was removed before the change of the Constitution.<sup>11</sup> Znepolski went as far as to conclude that "television and the private press announced the changes and literally bore witness to them before they had occurred...Television and the press systematically imposed the images of those who were about to become the protagonists of Bulgarian political life."<sup>12</sup> In subsequent works, this media scholar and historian continues to maintain that "the liberalization of the media, including the elimination of the political control of state television, was one of the

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<sup>8</sup> Rone Tempest, "Bulgarians Greet Change With Caution, Suspicion," *Los Angeles Times*, November 13, 1989, accessed March 5, 2016, [http://articles.latimes.com/1989-11-13/news/mn-1007\\_1\\_bulgarian-people](http://articles.latimes.com/1989-11-13/news/mn-1007_1_bulgarian-people).

<sup>9</sup> Znepolski, *Novata Presa*, 8.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

first signs of political change.”<sup>13</sup> All journalists interviewed for this project who worked at the time also emphasize the pioneering role of media in laying the foundations of the new political reality.

State radio in particular was very important in this process. Radio journalists claimed that authorities paid special attention to television and this opened an opportunity for the radio to sometimes escape censorship. As early as January, 1989, critical voices could be heard over Bulgarian state radio. At that time, Bulgaria’s *Horizont* radio program launched *12 + 3*. One of its founders described it to me as one of the first “somewhat free shows, which became a leading media show in 1989. It did not just cover the events. At the time media led the changes and actively participated in them.”<sup>14</sup> According to him, in its first months the show tested the limits of the government’s patience with media criticism, while in November it started to destroy these limits. He explained that this was controversial because not everybody in the radio, or in society for that matter, shared the same vision of the political transformation. For instance, this radio journalist recounts the reaction he precipitated on November 11<sup>th</sup>, 1989, when he became the first to address the audience with “Ladies and Gentlemen” instead of the usual “Comrades.” “Immediately afterwards the phones in the studio exploded and would not stop ringing. Half of the people congratulated me for saying this and the other half swore at me.”<sup>15</sup> But radio was not the only medium that employed critical journalists.

Television also braced itself for a major political change even prior to the collapse of the socialist regime in 1989. A television anchor who worked in BT during socialism told me that a

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<sup>13</sup> Iwaylo Znepolski, “Televiziata i Bastiliata ili Postkomunisticheskoto Shturmuване na Telezionnite Reprеzentacii” / Television and the Bastille or the Post-communist Storming of Television Representations,” in *Medii i Prehod*, 63.

<sup>14</sup> Personal interview #15.

<sup>15</sup> Personal interview #15.



particular form of “liberation” (*razkrepostiavane*) surfaced before Zhivkov’s fall. “In 1988, the wind of change was already felt. For the first time we referred to each other with the informal you pronoun. For the first time we entered the studio not in suits but we wore pullovers, and in the summer T-shirts. Sometimes we would even appear in shorts during live broadcasts. We were doing a lot of unusual things even before 1989.”<sup>16</sup> But even more importantly, at the time a group of critical television employees formed the illicit “Television Initiative,” a group that sought an open confrontation with the authorities. After the 10<sup>th</sup> of November 1989, through work stoppages and strikes the members of Television Initiative undermined the grip of the BCP on Bulgarian television, going so far as to threaten the Prime Minister, Andrey Lukanov, with a complete television shutdown in 1990.<sup>17</sup>

In this way electronic media structured reality and brought social change to every home. This was crucial especially for people in the countryside, where what took place in downtown Sofia likely seemed distant and dubious. The first rallies in front of the Alexander Nevski Cathedral in Sofia, various acts of solidarity, the first speeches and acts of the opposition, the proliferation of the new labor unions, “became the main event in our [Bulgarian citizens] lives thanks to the privileged position media endowed them with.”<sup>18</sup> For this reason, many local media scholars agree that “the velvet revolutions in Eastern Europe were accomplished as *media revolutions*.”<sup>19</sup> One should understand this revolution not as an abstract theoretical gesture, but as a phenomenon with concrete ontological expression. A radio journalist recalls how he had a direct impact during the “Round Table Talks”—the negotiations between government and

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<sup>16</sup> Personal Interview #24.

<sup>17</sup> Personal interview # 38.

<sup>18</sup> Znepolski, *Novata Presa*, 10.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

opposition in many Eastern bloc countries that facilitated the loss of power by the Communist Parties:

The national radio and television was obliged to broadcast live the Round Table Talks. But the management tried to air only the speeches of the government representatives. Once it was the opposition's turn we were supposed to interrupt the broadcast and play music. I remember very well that during one of my shifts I ordered the sound engineer to disobey these instructions and to continue the broadcast from the Round Table negotiations. This was important, because Bulgaria did not have alternative news. Unless people knew of them, all these novel things, such as democratic movements, informal organizations, the revival of democratic life, the creation of new parties, and the emergence of citizen initiatives, would be as if they never happened. This was especially true for the countryside. Especially when it came to the countryside! In the big cities people find other ways to inform themselves. But in the countryside, without the help of radio and television, forget about it. That's why radio and television played a key role in the period of change. For this reason, I remember these times with sadness and nostalgia, because being a journalist was a highly-esteemed and appreciated profession then. The society revered the journalists. In contrast, today journalists, lawyers and politicians are all at the same [low] level.<sup>20</sup>

Through these first acts media politicized the public sphere. It placed the focus squarely on specific political transformations in the country and Bulgaria suddenly seemed overwhelmed by events, each of which was more important than the other. This prompted Bulgarian media scholar Ivaylo Dichev to conclude that "[I]n the past it seemed that nothing was happening: we lived under monumental values, borders and factory smoke. The events were taking place far away from us, for example in Vietnam or the Middle East, and had little effect on our lives."<sup>21</sup> He contrasts this condition to the post-1989 political landscape, where "like drug addicts, we can't survive even a day without our dose of news. All of a sudden we were immersed in a whirlpool of events, which directly affect us and sometimes even outright threaten us."<sup>22</sup> "Did more things really start to happen?" Dichev asks and answers himself in the negative. According

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<sup>20</sup> Personal Interview # 15.

<sup>21</sup> Ivaylo Dichev, "Razprozhba na Vremeto" / "Time Sale," in *24 Chasa: Vestnikat / 24 Chasa: The Newspaper*, ed. Georgi Lozanov et al. (Sofia, Bulgaria: Trud, 2001), 111.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

to him, since events are constructed “media artefacts,” one can understand the transition from a “chronic vacuum” of information to an “overwhelmed with facts existence,” by first focusing on the activity of media.<sup>23</sup> To put this in the context of the opening of this chapter, the diplomats whose disappointment the *Los Angeles Times* reported on, saw Bulgaria as “dreary” because they were looking through their windows. If they wanted to see change in these early days of political transformation, they should have looked at the television screen in their hotel rooms. But, this does not mean that the street did not have an effect on media. By the end of 1989, the city squares filled up and large sections of Bulgarian society joined the burgeoning number of rallies and demonstrations. From that point onwards electronic media and the street operated in a symbiotic relationship that accelerated the politicization of society. Street pressure entered the mediascape—sometimes with extreme consequences.

One of the most unprecedented occurrences in the history of Bulgarian television took place on a Sunday evening in August 1990. The Australian television drama miniseries *The Dirtwater Dynasty* was abruptly stopped. On the screen appeared Bulgarian dissident poet Radoy Ralin, as well as Yosif Petrov, another poet and an MP of the anti-communist opposition. In this live broadcast that halted an entertainment program (on a Sunday evening!), the poets announced that Plamen Stanchev and four other men would self-immolate unless the Bulgarian Communist Party removed the big red star standing on its headquarters in downtown Sofia.<sup>24</sup> Approximately an hour after this dramatic announcement, the Communist Party headquarters were stormed by an exalted crowd and burnt down in what would become one of the most controversial events in

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>24</sup> Liliya Raicheva, “Kakvo Stava v Kutiatata na Pandora (Razmisli varhu Nasiliето po Telviziata)” / “What is Happening in Pandora’s Box (Thoughts on Television Violence),” in *Balgarsko Mediaznanie Tom 2 / Bulgarian Media Studies Vol. 2 Mediznanie 2*, ed. Rossen Milev (Sofia, Bulgaria: Balkanmedia 1998), 705.

Bulgaria's post-socialist history. Although extreme, this was not an isolated case of intense interaction between media and the street.

One of the first anti-communist rallies in Bulgaria took place on December 14<sup>th</sup>, 1989 when an aggressive crowd comprised predominantly of students surrounded the parliament. Struggling to get out of the building was Petar Mladenov, Bulgaria's communist leader who had replaced Zhivkov a month before. Surprised at the hostility of the crowd Mladenov told one of his aides that "it's better for the tanks to come." Little did he know that a random cameraman recorded this dramatic moment. The "tank cassette," as it came to be known, became public more than half a year after the event. Its appearance forced Mladenov to resign and propelled the little known cameraman to instant fame. It was not a coincidence that the material was aired in June, 1989, just a few days prior to the first democratic elections in the country. It featured as a part of the electoral campaign of the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF), the main opposition coalition. A colleague and close friend of Eugene Mihaylov, the cameraman who recorded the event, recounts that Mihaylov lost his job as a cameraman after the changes of 1989 and was forced "to make a living by filming weddings, baptisms and whatever else he could find." After the "tank cassette" surfaced, however:

Eugene's career took off. He got elected to parliament [as a member of the UDF]. Then he was appointed the chair of the parliamentary commission on culture, and after that he became the director of the National Film Center. I saw him there and said "Hello. Congratulations! How are you?" He pretended that he did not know me. He became too famous to talk to people like me.<sup>25</sup>

In sum, the "tank cassette" led to the resignation of the head of state, it influenced the outcome of the first democratic elections and helped a little known cameraman to become an MP and the director of the National Film Center over which he presided for eight years. Along with

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<sup>25</sup> Personal Interview # 8.

the burning of the Communist Party's headquarters this case showed media's potential to direct the process of transformation in the early 1990s. But media power manifested itself on a daily basis through less dramatic means. Live broadcasts, engagement with crowds, and interviews on the street signaled a change in dynamic that shifted the attention from protocol meetings and foreign visits to the people on the street.<sup>26</sup> Its power did not remain unnoticed. Oftentimes, during this early post-socialist period, the television came under siege by protestors, prompting Ivaylo Znepolski to conclude that "it is showing that during these restless days, nobody rushed to lay siege on the main prison or the police headquarters."<sup>27</sup> Calling it "our modern Bastille" he argued that as "a bastion of symbolic power," television is the only other institution besides the Bulgarian parliament that had witnessed such "collective, semi-spontaneous, semi-coordinated" acts of protest.<sup>28</sup>

Another media scholar and a former chair of the media regulatory body metaphorically described the situation at the time in a similar way. "Television became the focal point of dramatic events. The times were like a young wine which rages in the cask, sometimes breaking its rings. The roaring wine of the street gradually changed the television reality."<sup>29</sup> In fact, at the end of 1989 and in January 1990, BT was under a constant siege and despite the cold, protestors formed a tent encampment at its entry. On December 17, 1989, Kevork Kevorkian, the anchor of Bulgaria's most popular political media shows, *Every Sunday*, invited protestors as guests of his show.<sup>30</sup> Quite literally, the street entered Bulgaria's top television program. *Panorama*, another very popular political show sometimes lasted for up to three hours, despite the fact that it had an

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<sup>26</sup> Ivaylo Znepolski, "Televiziata i Bastiliata," 63.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Pesheva, *Dvorecat na Dedal*, 143.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 138.

official one hour slot on Saturday evenings. A journalist who worked for it explained the politicized atmosphere in this famous program:

During the first interview of an opposition member, he took twenty minutes to respond to our question without any interruption from our side. This is unthinkable today! The people needed to speak out and television gave them this chance. The people were not ready for a discussion yet, but they needed to shout out things, to say things. Everybody needed it...At the time though, television was only one and the main question was how to avoid the thousands of people who wanted to be guests in *Panorama*. There were no cell phones at the time, but the landlines in the studio were ringing constantly. There were rallies outside, and every comma in the show was scrutinized.<sup>31</sup>

But it was not only the commentary shows that succumbed to the politicization of society. Even the primetime main news program that runs from 8pm to 8:30pm was affected. Sometimes the news half-hour extended to two and even three hours, completely disrupting the television schedule. Furthermore, the program often turned into a tribune for political movements and parties which read their manifestos instead of the daily news.<sup>32</sup>

The end result of this dialectic between mobilized people and partisan media was the politicization of society as a whole. A radio journalist summarized the spirit of the times:

This was the era before the internet, but all over the place, people carried mobile Chinese radios with headphones or little transistors glued to their ears and listened to what was happening in the country and at night they would not stop watching television. It was an extremely interesting and important time. Journalism, especially radio and television, carried out very important work in the early years of the changes. They transformed the way people think.<sup>33</sup>

But perhaps the strongest evidence for the mood in the country were the participation levels in the first free elections. In June 1990, more than 90 percent of Bulgarians voted. This was a record level of involvement that even countries with developed liberal democracy can only dream of and it is notable that this was the last time Bulgarians voted in such numbers. Instead,

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<sup>31</sup> Personal interview # 43.

<sup>32</sup> Ivanova, *Purva Programa*, 204.

<sup>33</sup> Personal Interview # 15.

participation levels declined steadily afterwards and during another election that was loudly publicized as “historic”—the first elections for European deputies in 2007—a mere 28% of Bulgarians went to the polls. Rapid economic decline, IMF prescribed shock therapy, mass impoverishment and disenchantment with the major political actors quickly diffused the hopes of the early 1990s. However, in 1990 the vast majority of Bulgarians felt that democratic participation provided them with a tangible opportunity to guide the destiny of the country. In the 1990s there were two political protagonists that shaped this future.

The Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), the heir of the Bulgarian Communist Party occupied the left spectrum. The anti-communist opposition formed the coalition Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) and became the major right-wing force in the country. These two political blocs shifted power between themselves throughout the 1990s. But, the form of the political split that dominated Bulgarian society was far from clear in the first days of post-socialism. In fact the ideological positions in late 1989 and 1990 were convoluted. A major reason for the unstable ideological field was the absence of organized opposition to the socialist state. Unlike countries such as Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary Bulgaria lacked an alternative language that challenged the hegemony of the BCP. It was only towards the very end of Zhivkov’s rule that oppositional rhetoric emerged.

This is not to say that the BCP did not face *any* opposition. Georgi Markov, assassinated in London in 1978, was an example of a Bulgarian dissident writer with no less acumen and talent than Vaclav Havel or Adam Michnik. Yet, large scale oppositional discourses, such as the ones propagated by the *Solidarity* labor union in Poland or the *Charter 77* civic initiative in Czechoslovakia, were non-existent in Bulgaria throughout most of the socialist years. In his memoir, Todor Zhivkov claims that the first dissident act against his rule took place in March

1988, when a group of citizens formed the “Ruse Committee,” which criticized the lack of concern of the authorities for the heavy air pollution of the city of Ruse.<sup>34</sup> But perhaps the most well-known opposition group was the *Club in Support of Glasnost and Perestroika*, established by Zhelyu Zhelev at the end of 1988. Zhelev was a philosopher who fell out with the government in 1982 when he published his book *Fascism*. The book described National Socialism through implicit parallels with Eastern European socialism and was quickly confiscated from the bookstores, although it continued to circulate as a samizdat.<sup>35</sup> On January 19, 1989 the French President, François Mitterrand, invited twelve Bulgarian dissidents, the majority of whom, including Zhelev, were members of the *Club in Support of Glasnost and Perestroika*, for an “informal” breakfast at the French Embassy. To this day, this is widely regarded as the first international recognition of the existence of dissidents in Bulgaria. But in sum, these were late phenomena that were still far from being a well-developed and coherent movement ready to become hegemonic.

For these reasons, the true beginning of alternative politics in Bulgaria began only after Zhivkov’s fall. State media turned into the institution that helped the opposition to develop into a formidable force. In this sense, we must understand the role of media in this early period not simply as institutions that tried to encourage broad participation through neutral language. Their goal was not simply to energize people to get involved in politics, regardless of whether they were from BSP or UDF. But by “politicized” we should understand state media as openly partisan. In the first few years of post-socialism, state media openly took the side of the opposition to the socialist past and the BSP. Hence, like Habermas’ model of the early bourgeois

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<sup>34</sup> Zhivkov, *Memoirs*, 386. Zhivkov described the Ruse committee as an “intellectual spit spot” (plyuvalnik) in which orators competed in “spitting at people.” The pollution of Ruse was the result of the fumes emitted by a Romanian factory in Gurgevo, on the other coast of Danube.

<sup>35</sup> See Valiavicharska, “How the Concept of Totalitarianism Appeared in Late Socialist Bulgaria.”



public sphere, electronic media were partisan and polemic, but in contrast to his model, there were no other electronic media that could offer a pro-socialist counterpoint and engage in a “rational-critical” debate. Hence, despite the new rhetoric of “pluralism” and “objectivity,” state media became an active player in the opposition and the spread of its ideology and discourse.

One of the initial changes media embarked on was the change in language. The terminology of the previous Marxist-based government evaporated from state media almost immediately after Zhivkov’s fall and this was not a small deed. The story of the radio journalist who uttered “Ladies and Gentlemen” instead of “Comrades” demonstrates that even a simple greeting could acquire a heroic aura. The opposition had to purge language, not only from the public sphere as a whole, but also among its lines. On November 18, 1989 a mere week after Zhivkov’s “retirement,” the first opposition rally took place in downtown Sofia. One of the main orators there was Radoy Ralin, a well-known satirist, poet and dissident (the poet who months later would interrupt an episode of the *Dirtwater Dynasty*). Immediately after greeting the crowd, Ralin began to “correct” some of the slogans he saw in front of him: “Here I see slogans ‘Down with the Red Bourgeoisie!’ No! The Plutocracy does not have anything to do with the old Bourgeoisie, in whose attic we find the fur hats and breeches of our ancestors. That Bourgeoisie created wealth and manufactured products. In contrast, our Plutocrats are Asiatic rulers from the Middle Ages with a Roman penchant for perversity.”<sup>36</sup> What bothered Ralin in the “red bourgeoisie” slogan was its leftist connotation, because although critical of the government the slogan was still entrenched in class politics. But what is also evident in Ralin’s statement is the importance of turning the Communist Party into an irreconcilable, retrograde and even foreign enemy (“Asiatic” from the “Middle Ages” and exhibiting “Roman perversity”). In the years to

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<sup>36</sup> Radoy Ralin, “Speech at the Rally on November 18, 1989,” *Balgarski Jurnalist* (December, 1989): 52.

come, this negation of everything branded communist and connected to the forty-five years of socialist rule would become the major tenet of the opposition's ideology. That anti-communism turned into the main popular signifier of the opposition seems natural from the perspective of today. But as Ralin's speech suggests, this was not as clear in the early post-socialist period.

A memorable quote by Petur Emil-Mitev summarizes the climate of ideological chaos in 1990 and 1991. His team of social scientists who carried out the most thorough analysis of the 1991 elections in Bulgaria concluded that "along with the dubious whisky and the chance for a quick profit, the street also offers no less dubious 'market for ideas' and a peculiar ideological gamble."<sup>37</sup> Ideological fusions and contradictions were abundant. One of the oddest examples that Emil-Mitev offers is that of the fringe Bulgarian Communist Party (Revolutionary), which used numerous quotes from the Bible in its campaign slogans.<sup>38</sup>

Besides the ideological confusion, the fledgling opposition faced a formidable enemy in the face of the Communist Party, which had genuine deep roots in society. This proved true during the first free elections in the country in June, 1990. In what Western observers deemed the only case in which Eastern European voters returned the former communists to power, the former Communist Party won with a landslide, gaining 52.75 percent of the vote and 211 MPs in the 400 member Bulgarian Parliament.<sup>39</sup> However, by the following year (1991), after sustained support from state media the balance shifted towards the opposition and it won the parliamentary election for the first time in its history. In comparison to the elections in 1990, the parliamentary elections of 1991 were more confrontational and a major split in society along the line "communism versus anti-communism" appeared. Yet, the situation was paradoxical because the

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<sup>37</sup> Petar Emil-Mitev, *Izbori 91: Ideologicheski Aspekti / Elections 91: Ideological Aspects* (Sofia Bulgaria: Sofia University Publishing, 1994), 9.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>39</sup> Kalinova and Baeva, 261.

major enemy of the anti-communists was the BSP, the political party that had given up the major premises of communism.<sup>40</sup> Thus “the struggle seemed uneven, because the anti-communist activities, including the extreme ones, were not met by a significant ideological communist foe.”<sup>41</sup> In these conditions,

Anti-communism became the fundamental ideological field, while a major technique in the ideological struggle turned to be the exposure of ‘communist mimicry’ and the identification of a given opponent as a ‘communist.’ The identification itself gained the significance of a magical word which strikes the opponent, making them lose the ground under their feet. ‘Labels-incantations’ appeared, reminding us of the ideological atmosphere after the war.<sup>42</sup>

While in the public sphere “communism” acquired an entirely negative aura, the “blue idea” (the color of the opposition) turned into the symbol of democracy, symbolizing “the new”, and “uniting in itself the most vivid negation of the totalitarian decades...It is a mystification that unites a variety of political forces under the flag of anti-communism.”<sup>43</sup> Writing in 1990, one of the most prolific commentators on the Bulgarian transition, Eugene Daynov, claimed that “every normal person today is an anti-communist,” which for him was synonymous to being “a patriot and a European.”<sup>44</sup> Indeed “anti-communism” became the popular signifier that united sixteen diverse pre-1944 political parties and dissident organizations into the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF). Thus, Christian democrats, social democrats, monarchists, nationalists and fascists coalesced to form one of the two political parties that would dominate Bulgaria for the next decade. The other one, the Communist party, felt early on the anti-communist spirit of the time and as of April 3, 1990 changed its name to the Bulgarian Socialist Party.

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<sup>40</sup> Emil-Mitev, *Izbori 91*, 471.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 383.

<sup>44</sup> Liliana Deyanova, “Nevazmoznata Kriticheska Publichnost” / “The Impossible Critical Publicity” in *Medii i Prehod*, 245.

At some point, the word “communist” even began to acquire a negative ethnic overtone. Statements such as “The people in Bulgaria are divided into communists and Bulgarians (the Bulgarian Turks, Jews, and Armenians are more Bulgarian than the Communists)” and “One can turn into a communist from a human being, but from a communist into a human being: Impossible!” became common in anti-communist discourse.<sup>45</sup> This rhetoric was not limited to the media and found extreme expression even in parliament when in 1992, the Minister of Defense from the UDF, Alexander Staliiskii declared that: “There is no such thing as a former communist, a former prostitute or a former nigger.”<sup>46</sup>

But before the anti-communist language became hegemonic in parliament and the political institutions in general, it had already started to dominate state media. It was there that anti-communism as an expression of a pro-Western, pro-market, progressive attitude that embraces the future started to take hold first. In these days, bias towards the UDF was regarded as a sign of democratic journalism and condemnation of “communism” and the BSP as a civic duty. The fact that to this day the biased journalism of the time is described as “professional” and “pluralistic” by some journalists is telling of the hegemony of anti-communist ideology. The same journalist who told me about his heroic replacement of the greeting “Comrades” with “Ladies and Gentlemen” also, unintentionally, gave away the partisan atmosphere in state media. According to him, between 1990 and 1994, the national radio and television were “for the most part a free and professional zone of pluralistic journalism. Actually, in terms of professionalism I am not so sure. In reality, there was a little bit of mixing of one’s civic position with the professional one. But nevertheless there is no doubt that they were pluralistic. All sorts of

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<sup>45</sup> Petar Emil-Mitev, “Sotzialnoto Izmenenie v Politicheskite Ezitzi na Demokratziata I Protodemokratziata, Medii I Prehod,” in *Medii i Prehod*, 284.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

viewpoints were covered, the rivalry between different viewpoints was covered with an *obvious dominance of the democratic coverage and support of the democratic processes*.”<sup>47</sup> Thus, this journalist acknowledges that the fusion of civic position and journalism existed, but he does not find it problematic because, after all, it was in “support of the democratic processes.” Although the reformed BSP also declared itself democratic, he certainly did not imply that state television and radio would lend any support to it. Instead the “obvious dominance” translated into coverage beneficial to the other political force, namely the UDF. The fact that this was interpreted as “pluralism” is precisely the work of ideology. Ideology, an anti-communist one in this case, prepares its adherents to view a certain condition as the “normal” one and as such as the only one possible. Yet not every anti-communist accepted this “normalcy” as easily. Another journalist, a television host with a long experience in BT who also did not hide his anti-communist views, found the overt support for the UDF in the early 1990s problematic in some ways:

RE: In their desire to adapt quickly to the new political situation, some people, constantly overdid things (*presolvaha supata*). This was not nice at all.

MM: What do you mean?

RE: I mean political invectives, sucking up to the new political formations...Look, before the 10<sup>th</sup> of November it was very difficult to climb up in the hierarchy of BT unless you were connected to the Communist Party. And for this reason, I found it disgusting to witness how some people, I won't cite names, who had made a career through their political connections [with the Communist Party] all of a sudden changed their political belonging, in order for them to be liked by the new political forces and to continue their careers.

MM: There were such cases?

ER: There were and not just a few.<sup>48</sup>

The state media “support of the democratic process” in these first years of post-socialism was so widespread that even the main primetime news at 8pm turned into an overt purveyor of anti-communism. In fact, the news was so politicized to the benefit of the UDF that it is hard to

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<sup>47</sup> Personal Interview # 15.

<sup>48</sup> Personal Interview # 24.

understand how journalists, commentators and media scholars continue to describe the profession at the time as “pluralistic” and “objective.” One of the ways that this happened was through the free use of political commentary during the news hour, which to begin with is unacceptable for this genre under any liberal theory of journalism. The political commentary affected even the marking of public holidays, such as Children’s Day. On the occasion (June 1, 1990) a crew of BT visited an orphanage in a remote village in Bulgaria. Throughout the report, the journalist emphasizes the remoteness of the village where the orphanage is located, concluding that “the bright totalitarianism wanted to hide these children along with a lot of other social problems.” Not only does the report take a stab at perhaps the main point of pride for Eastern European socialists at the time, namely the advances in social welfare, but it also points to what will replace this “totalitarian” past in the present and in the future. The next shot shows a reporter giving ice-cream to children in the orphanage. “The company ‘Bioprogress’ treats you on the occasion of June 1,” the reporter tells the children and continues “Bioprogress from the city of Plovdiv began the production of ice-cream and developed seven new fruit flavors not used previously: Coconut, Pineapple, Coffee, Pelargonium, Kiwi, Mango and it will soon start the production of ice-cream cakes. But today the children already had the chance to try the new flavors and even the new ice-cream cake.”<sup>49</sup> Although this report does not require unpacking to expose its bias, it is important to note the insertion of partisan political commentary, through the use of the word “totalitarian” to describe the socialist era, which “isolated” orphaned children in remote areas, and the turn towards the new bright future, where basically an advertisement

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<sup>49</sup> “Po Sveta i u Nas,” June 1, 1990. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kuCvUdIGJrA>. There are about a dozen of issues of Bulgaria’s primetime news program “Po Sveta i u Nas” (Around the World and at Home), posted on youtube.

inserted right in the middle of the primetime news tells the viewer that entrepreneurs will now take care of children, treating them with ice-cream flavors unknown during “totalitarianism.”

The bias in primetime news also appeared as a direct criticism of the BSP. Usually, in this strategy the newscaster presented the arguments of the BSP and the UDF after which the presenter would debunk the argument of the former. For example, in August 1991, the primetime breaking news focused on the parliamentary discussions on whether the Bulgarians abroad could vote in the upcoming parliamentary elections (won by the UDF). The reporter presents the position of the UDF, followed by the position of the BSP, but adds that BSP’s arguments were “less convincing.”<sup>50</sup> In another report, a journalist claims that the BSP “very energetically defended” its position on a certain issue from which he concludes that “it seems that it is not true that the BSP likes to compromise.”<sup>51</sup>

But perhaps the most memorable political commentaries were delivered by Neri Terzieva, a newscaster who in 1992 became the director of Channel 2 of BT and whose commentaries one former director of BT described as “dramaturgical outbursts.”<sup>52</sup> Besides the partisan coverage, in her usual final commentaries at the end of the news hour Terzieva seemed ready to break down into tears. In these final comments Terzieva often quoted from Bulgarian poets and writers, turning the end of the news hour into a “literary reading of the events of the day.”<sup>53</sup> The dramatic effect was hastened by soft, often somewhat sad music that played in the background while Terizeva performed her “literary reading” of the news. For instance, on February 22, 1991, Terzieva seemed ecstatic over the passing of the new law that initiated the destruction of socialist era collective farms and returned the land collectivized in the 1950s to its

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<sup>50</sup> Po Sveta i u Nas, August 8, 1991. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PUaBB1-Ir18>.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Quoted in Pesheva, “*Dvorecat na Dedal*,” 168.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 243.

former owners. She begins the news hour by stating that “old Bulgarians say that ‘the land does not seek vengeance.’ Let’s hope this is the case. Let’s hope it forgives us the experiments, the whimsies, the blood, the poisons” and ends the news program even more dramatically on the brink of crying out of happiness for the new law on private ownership of land:

At the end I want to remind you the breaking news of the today and of the last thirty-five years: The land is being given back! At first, we did not believe that we will live to see this day. We lived to see it! People come and go, but the news remain. If we want them to be good we should not participate in the creeping silence, as Solzhenitsyn once said. I wish this to you. I wish you good news. Goodbye.<sup>54</sup>

Needless to say, not everybody was as excited as Terzieva, because the destruction of the collective farms turned out to be the beginning of the destruction of Bulgarian agriculture and rural areas as a whole (see Introduction). But this type of political commentary during primetime news in support of the UDF became a standard practice in the first years of the transition. Whichever liberal framework of journalism one utilizes, it is hard to accept this type of coverage as a “little bit of mixing up of civic position and professionalism,” as the radio journalist quoted above suggested. That the mix up was indeed very significant became especially evident during elections.

Despite the fact that the elections in 1990 were certified as free and fair by the international monitors and recognized by every country in the West, BT’s newscasters spoke of “extreme tension” on the streets. In addition, regardless of the fact that the BSP had won by a landslide, the primetime news only presented footage from two rallies by UDF supporters. A speech by Zhelev addressing the supporters of UDF was played in full during the news hour. Neither in one-on-one interviews with BSP supporters nor through footage of victory rallies by the BSP, did BT show the winner of the elections. Regardless of the fact that a staggering 53

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<sup>54</sup> “Po Sveta i u Nas,” February 22, 1991. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j-yYjI4rdHk>.



percent voted for the BSP, in the primetime news BSP voters remained phantom.<sup>55</sup> In the days after the elections the primetime news continued to broadcast rally after rally of the UDF and to read the statements of various organizations opposed to the BSP. Sometimes this led to paradoxical situations, such as reading the protest letter of students from Sofia University during primetime news in which they called for the lifting up of the “information vacuum” in the country. In an even more paradoxical example, the primetime news showed footage of a rally in front of its headquarters. In it, the audience sees UDF supporters who hold signs calling for BT to “Show the Truth about the Elections.” What is more, the primetime news audience even got to listen to parts of a speech by a UDF protestor who called for the resignation of Pavel Pisarev, the director of BT.<sup>56</sup> Paradoxically, the protestors, most of them students, accused Pisarev of political bias, despite the fact that every night BT showed detailed coverage of the student strike. In fact, BT agreed to show a 90-minute long show in which the students forced the entire country to learn about their “summer of discontent.”<sup>57</sup> Nevertheless, Pisarev was forced to resign.

Leading up to the UDF’s victory in 1991, BT continued to offer slanted election coverage, as they did with the elections of 1990. The “day of reflection” during the 1991 parliamentary elections, won by the UDF with a percentage point more than BSP, saw serious media violations. Despite the fact that on the day before the Election Day campaigning is illegal, Bulgarian state television engaged in blatant manipulations in support of the UDF. First of all, BT replaced the standard white background of the news hour with a blue one—the color of the opposition. On this evening it ran three advertisements, all of which were rich in blue color and one of them advertising *Demokratzia* (“Democracy”), UDF’s newspaper. This ad showed the

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<sup>55</sup> “Po Sveta i u Nas,” June 11, 1990. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1GWbVDu7BDA>.

<sup>56</sup> “Po Sveta i u Nas,” June 12, 1990. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LtGde0xi9iE>.

<sup>57</sup> Pesheva, *Dvoreca na Dedal*, 152.

front page of the UDF's daily, but on it was the ballot of the UDF. Later, the subtitles of the film that followed the news hour were also for the first time in blue. The decision that evening to play a concert of Bulgarian singer Lili Ivanova, who had openly campaigned for the UDF, was not a coincidence as it was not a pure chance that for months before the elections in 1991 state media constantly played songs that featured in the UDF electoral campaign.<sup>58</sup>

The partiality in coverage continued and although media scholarship at the time was still scant a study conducted in 1992 confirmed the bias. It showed that during the months of September and October the UDF was represented 8 to 10 times more than the BSP.<sup>59</sup> For the UDF, state television turned into the major field of political struggle where the complete victory over the opponent meant its extinction from the screen. Non-partisan coverage of BSP was deemed suspicious and the struggle against the remnants of "totalitarianism" turned into the *raison d'être* of television. Hastened by the new geopolitical situation after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the anti-communist mobilizations in state television intensified and in essence the vast majority of BT's employees, from its managers to its anchors and reporters, sympathized with the UDF. In fact the change of name of BT to Bulgarian National Television (BNT) in 1991 was not inconsequential because with this, its director Asen Agov, who would become a UDF MP in 1994, demonstrated that this was a different, post-socialist television.

In these ways, state media coverage helped to broaden the UDF's reach and propagate its vision. Hence, UDF's first "victory" was in state media, before it actually won elections for the first time in 1991. This is remarkable not only because state media are supposed to serve the entire public, but also because the slanted coverage disregarded the fact that 53 percent of Bulgarians in 1990 voted against the party that state media backed. Hence, there is little doubt

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<sup>58</sup> Emil-Mitev, *Izbori 91*, 235.

<sup>59</sup> Pesheva, *Dvoreca na Dedal*, 180.

that state media played a tremendous role in creating the platform for the opposition. If this was seen as “pluralism” by some journalists, for many supporters of the BSP this was outrageous. Thus it comes as no surprise that in 1991 in the small town of Bansko a peasant supporter of the BSP attacked a crew of BNT, swinging a hoe at them.<sup>60</sup>

Few Bulgarian media scholars acknowledge the bias of state television towards the UDF and if they do, they rationalize it. Margarita Pesheva, a media professor and long-term member of the state’s media regulatory body, defends the thesis that journalism should not simply cover events but also work “for the cause of democracy”:

During a journalism seminar in England, this Bulgarian argument was met with a great surprise by the journalists of BBC for whom democracy is mainly objective and impartial coverage of the facts and the refusal to take a side in political life. But this is the refusal to take a side in the politics of a country with centuries-old democratic traditions. While here, at home, after half of a century of repressing the intellect, the heated to the point of whiteness stone of change calls for a personal position. The totalitarian regime must be condemned while the fragile sprouts of democracy need to be protected.<sup>61</sup>

Pesheva spelled out the element of post-socialist electronic media that resembled Habermas’ portrayal of the partisan and polemic press of the early bourgeois public sphere. Yet again, state-owned media did not have an alternative in the public sphere to engage it in a “rational-critical debate.” The end result was that state media appeared more and more as the spokesperson of the UDF, which alienated large sections of the population that did not support the anti-communist party. How electronic media reached this level of partisanship requires not only an analysis of their content but also an engagement with the structural changes in media institutions. The tendency to support the UDF and oppose the BSP and the socialist past was

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 140, Ivaylo Znepolski calls the revolutions of 1989 as “half-way stimulated and half-way manipulated” but the manipulation he describes as “noble.” Znepolski, *Novata Presa*, 12.

made possible by the replacement of older journalists by young ones. According to one television journalist, the process of “de-communization” of media led to:

The natural need to replace the old journalistic elites who served the communist regime. That’s why in this early period there was a great demand for new journalists. Quite literally, the new journalists were hired by media outlets straight out of the street. In 1990 I was a philosophy student. I wrote reviews of television programs for *Kultura* [an intellectual magazine]. Because of this I was invited to work in Channel 2. By late 1990 and 1991 I was a reporter, after which I became a newscaster. At that time Neri Terzieva had been appointed the director of Channel 2. There was a whole group of young people who were literally hired from the university bench. There was a need for such faces. The doors of media were wide open at the time. I realize that it is much more difficult now. Our generation had a great chance. Me and my colleagues were all twenty, twenty-one years old. We were students. And this was the case in all genres of media, not just news and politics. Comedy, entertainment, everywhere it was open for young people. It was very easy to get a job in media.<sup>62</sup>

Another television journalist who started at the same time and at the same young age echoes this narrative: “I was accepted at the university in 1989. But at the time we were not studying that much. We went to work and we went on strike.”<sup>63</sup> From his very first year in the university this journalist already worked as a freelance writer for a major newspaper. One year later he was hired in the primetime news program of Channel 1 “Around the World and at Home.” A year before he graduated he was already working in *Panorama*, Bulgaria’s most watched political television show.

This was the ideal time. Although sometimes I call it a bad chance as well, because many people who lacked qualities entered the profession. As far as I know, [in the former Eastern bloc] only Croatia had an equally large number of young journalists to enter the media profession. Most of these young people, including myself, entered the profession without any work or life experience. We blocked the way of the next generations. It made the life of people like you and those a little older than you very difficult. We took such great jobs and high positions, and we are not leaving them anytime soon. This is not a very good thing. But this had to happen, because socialist journalism was very different and had to change. Many of the old journalists could not do real reporter’s work. Many

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<sup>62</sup> Personal Interview # 23.

<sup>63</sup> Personal interview # 43.

journalists from the previous era changed their profession after 1989 and many of them became businessmen. All of a sudden there was a huge gap that we had to fill.<sup>64</sup>

The stories of these two journalists with illustrious careers are not unique. They reveal trends that not only marked the period, but continue to structure media in Bulgaria. The upward mobility in the journalistic profession at the time is striking. Even in the US, which many regard as “the land of opportunity,” it is hard to imagine that a college sophomore could be hired in a major primetime news program or a leading political show. What is more, in Bulgaria these young people were not simply unpaid interns who made coffee in the back room of the studio. They appeared on the screen daily, took interviews and covered historical events over the only television station in the country. But the process of media “de-communization” had an ideological component as well. These young journalists viewed, and in the case of the two interviewees cited above, continue to view, the world through the prism of anti-communism. Thus, not only did they block the opportunities for younger journalists, as both of them readily admit, but they also perpetuated the dominance of anti-communist discourse. This explains why nearly three decades later, anti-communism remains a hegemonic paradigm in Bulgarian media.

The reasons for the hegemony of anti-communism among university students at the time are numerous. The economic deterioration of the country and the general sense of decay in the late 1980s certainly played a role. Prior to 1989, Sofia University, the biggest university on the Balkans, employed liberal academics who opposed the regime of Zhivkov and it is not a coincidence that some of the first pre-1989 anti-communist organizations formed there. In fact, there was a famous case in the 1980s when Zhivkov’s regime fired several professors because of their critical views. In addition to the economic crisis that posed a threat to the future of young people and the presence of critical professors, there was a very practical reason why students

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<sup>64</sup> Personal Interview # 43.

became politicized. The campus of Sofia University is located in downtown Sofia less than half of a mile from the parliament and within one mile of the presidency, the former Communist Party headquarters and the Council of Ministers buildings. While in many other capitals across the world, state architects would consider this urban arrangement risky, in Bulgaria it takes students two minutes to walk to the parliament. Thus, in the late 1980s and 1990s, students were quite literally in the political whirlwind and this continued to be the case during almost all other protests and demonstrations in post-socialist Bulgaria. But there was another, more significant reason for the growing opposition of young people to the government that was in some respects beyond politics and economics.

In late socialist Bulgaria and Eastern Europe in general the central committees of the communist parties consisted of ageing politicians. In the Soviet Union this problem was especially acute. Between 1982 and 1985 seven members and candidates of politburo died as “high-ranking death at the level of the party-state leadership became a regular occurrence.”<sup>65</sup> In the 1980s, the socialist regimes were both literally and metaphorically decaying. In his memoirs, Zhivkov recounts that prior to the visit to Bulgaria of the Soviet leader Chernenko, the Bulgarian authorities struggled to build a special elevator that can assist him to get out of the plane because he was so ill.<sup>66</sup> However, he died before the visit to be replaced by Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985. From this angle it is hard to imagine that students and youth would rally behind the aging leadership especially at a time when the entire Eastern bloc was in deep crisis. Instead they united behind “democracy,” the “West” and the “market” because they perceived these terms as modern and of the future. What is more, for the students and the youth, the participation in the protests and demonstrations was not only a rejection of the stale rhetoric of the ageing party

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<sup>65</sup> Yurchak, 257.

<sup>66</sup> Zhivkov, *Memoari*, 513.

apparatchiks, but was an “event.” According to Alain Badiou, an “event” is a rupture in the normal order of bodies and language and the creation of new possibilities.<sup>67</sup> For Badiou, the process of becoming a Subject occurs precisely through the decision to devote oneself to the event as he or she becomes the militant of a truth. Badiou points to the students and workers’ revolution of May ‘68 as the event that was formative for him and many other French leftists of this generation. For the Bulgarian students of the late 1980s and early 1990s it was the changes of 1989. The recollection of Alexander Kiossev, who was a young academic at the time, clearly illustrates not only that 1989 constituted an event for critics of socialism, but it also reveals its power as a youthful phenomenon very different than socialism’s image as outdated and rigid.

Massive street crowds were seized by the parrhesiatic discourse, the word “truth” resounded powerfully at the rallies while at the same time everybody projected on it the quasi-magical power of poesis-the art of the possible, where the new worlds, changes, transitions are constructed rhetorically. At the same time the magic reality of the new free speech merged with the “big blue party” and its liberated acts of the body that easily transitioned from speeches and slogans to dancing and rock music.<sup>68</sup>

This was the situation in which students became politicized in the early 1990s and it was precisely some of the most committed ones that became the new journalists of Bulgarian media. As the personal interviews included in this chapter indicate, the presence of young people in television in particular was very significant. In fact, January 1990 saw the beginning of “Studentska Programa Ku-Ku” (Student Program Cuckoo), which became the first critical satirical show on Bulgarian television. Led by a group of students from Sofia University, all of whom became very popular and wealthy media personalities in the following years, Ku-Ku felt so comfortable at the state channel that in 1991 it became the first show in world history to repeat Orson Welles’ “War of the Worlds” experiment (originally broadcast on October 30,

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<sup>67</sup> Alain Badiou, “The Idea of Communism,” in *The Idea of Communism*, ed. Costas Douzinas et al. (New York: Verso, 2010), 3.

<sup>68</sup> Alexander Kiossev, “Chastniat Zivot na Publichnia Ezik,” 263.

1938). On December 22, 1991 the show simulated an explosion at Bulgaria's nuclear power plant. The students invited regular newscasters from BNT to participate in the prank. The program was "interrupted" to announce the nuclear disaster as archival footage presented as "live coverage" and updates by newscasters kept the emergency situation alive for at least an hour. Mass panic ensued in Bulgaria and the student program faced strong criticism from both the authorities and the general public.

In this process of media transition young politicized students became the new faces of television in Bulgaria. Although, they have now aged, many of them remain leading media personalities to this day. As a result, archaic anti-communism continues to reappear on state television demonstrating how, as Badiou notes, fidelity to an event can serve as a condition for one's becoming a Subject. But while the two interviewees above were honest and even critical of the way in which young people entered media at the time, their explanation of the other side of media de-communization, namely the removal of the "old" journalists, is less frank. The explanation that "many" journalists who worked during socialism decided to become "businessmen" after 1989 is dubious. Even if there were such cases, it is hard to believe that this was the main reason. Instead this process had a much uglier side than a career change does. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to call what happened to pre-1989 journalists a "purge." In personal interviews, two people who held high positions in BT and the BTA reveal important aspects of this side of de-communization. One of the first anti-communist directors of BT claims that BT was "clogged" by workers. This part of our conversation shows how he dealt with it.

AA: By the time I became the director, human resources had cleared the files of the employees that were members of the Communist Party. I did not want to persecute people for their political beliefs. The main goal was to get rid of the state security agents. A significant number of people came to me and quit voluntarily. Others stayed. There was a third group, which was comprised of well-known agents. I fired them. I fired 960 people [earlier in the interview he claimed that BT had 3,800 employees at the time].



MM: Are you saying that they were all spies?

AA: No. Some were just extra.<sup>69</sup>

One of the first post-1989 directors of the Bulgarian Telegraph Agency, an extreme anti-communist himself, recounted a similar story:

I shut down BTA's entire foreign correspondent network. This meant that I deprived 26 officers of the State Security and Military Intelligence from their spying activities. I did not even ask anybody. I did not even ask for permission. I just called the Foreign Minister and told him what I had already done. He simply sighed and said "These are the times." I did many things like that. Although, I was a director of BTA, I continued to write and actively participate clearly taking the side of the democratic changes. This pissed off the red elites who wanted to keep the status quo. It is not a coincidence that in the West they call our socialist, former communist, party "conservative." Because they want to conserve the past as they like it.<sup>70</sup>

Like the two journalists cited in regards to the influx of new journalists after 1989, these former directors also experienced a mind-boggling career growth within the span of a couple of years. After all, the transition from a reporter to a director of the national media or the national news agency involves the skipping of many steps. But their stories also reveal, another, much more problematic side of media "de-communization." Were really more than one quarter of BT's workers (from cleaners to anchors) communist spies? Were all BTA foreign correspondents really military intelligence officers? Were none of these twenty-six people actually a real journalist? These dubious and self-contradicting descriptions, coupled with anti-communist pathos bear the mark of a purge. But more importantly, this is how under the pretext of "de-communization" the balance of power in state media tilted towards the UDF, not only through the change in media content, but also through a deep reorganization of the workforce.

The interchangeability between the expressions "state agent" and "an unnecessary employee" in the discourse of these directors points more to a neoliberal technique of

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<sup>69</sup> Personal Interview # 38.

<sup>70</sup> Personal Interview # 39.

downsizing a company than an actual cleansing of security agents from a repressive institution that ceased to exist in 1989. It set the tone for the on-going post-socialist underfunding of public television, the reduction of its staff and the commercialization of its content. While the crusade against communist spies seems to belong more to the sphere of conspiracy theory, what is certain is that these purges had a crippling effect on state media, not to mention their consequences on hundreds of families of workers laid off amidst a deep economic crisis. An interviewee with a long experience with the BNT portrayed the situation after the director who carried out the purges left. Although she shared his anti-communist views, she was far from supportive of his policies:

EV: He got so carried away with these firings that BNT was left without a correspondents' network. He had fired all of the correspondents.

MM: But weren't they state security agents?

EV: God no! State agents? All of these unfortunate people working all over Bulgaria?! I am talking about the correspondents around the country. When I went to work at BNT there was not a single correspondent left! It used to have the best correspondent network. We did not have a single soul left to tell us what was happening outside of Sofia.<sup>71</sup>

These neoliberal practices were in line with the policies of the first government of UDF that unleashed privatization, removed price controls and in general initiated the first waves of destruction of the socialist welfare state. The directors of state media institutions extended this into the sphere of mass communications under the pretext of "de-communization." The outcomes were anti-communist content of television for the years to come along with a weakened infrastructure of public media that paved the way for the privatization of one of the two state channels in 1999 and the inability of the remaining one to compete with the new commercial television channels.

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<sup>71</sup> Personal interview # 46.

## 4.2 THE PERIOD OF FREEDOM FOR POST-SOCIALIST MEDIA

In sum, these interviews with journalists and directors of state media reveal the politicization of society as well as the state media's primary role in opening a space for the opposition and its anti-communist discourse. In regards to this early post-socialist period, I encountered a narrative that I initially paid little attention to, though it kept reappearing in the interviews. As explained, many of the media professionals who worked in the first years after Zhivkov's fall began as anti-communists and supporters of the UDF. As can be noticed from the quotes above, some of them still adhered to this ideology. Others were disenchanted and referred to post-socialism as a "so called democracy." Some even seemed to regret their initial enthusiasm with the UDF and the changes that accompanied its rise. Yet, what they all shared was a very positive, at times even nostalgic attitude, for the situation of media in the early 1990s. What is more, like the radio journalist who claimed that until 1994 national radio and television were "for the most part a free and professional zone of pluralistic journalism," they all seemed to point to 1994 and 1995 as a watershed moment. "From 1989 to about 1994, the first wave of democratization, BNT, and especially its Channel 2, as a whole were free and pluralistic," one television journalist told me.<sup>72</sup> A newscaster who worked for Channel 2 echoed this sense of freedom during this period: "We were inspired by freedom. The feeling that you are defending the principles of freedom and of independent journalism was very strong. This was our ideology."<sup>73</sup> Television and radio journalists were not the only ones to share this sentiment. A reporter for *Trud*, one of Bulgaria's leading newspapers and a pioneer of the commercial press, who otherwise described 1989 as a "revolution with several pairs of quotation marks", expressed the same view:

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<sup>72</sup> Personal Interview # 15.

<sup>73</sup> Personal Interview # 23.

Corporate media today have nothing in common with the media from the first few years of the transition. Because I dare to say that until 1994, when the government of Zhan Videnov [Prime Minister from BSP 1994-1997] came to power the media situation was completely different. Things back then were as we dreamed of them to be. Total freedom of the press! It does not matter what people tell me about capital accumulation, organized crime and so on. Whatever material I sent to the editors it came out in print without any changes. No internal or external censorship. Censorship appeared afterwards.<sup>74</sup>

Another journalist for *Trud*, who was at the end of her career when I interviewed her, collaborates this story:

RS: Politics is always the same. But during this time, there was more freedom. Today twenty or so years later, big capital very strongly interferes in the work of media. This is definitely a big minus.

MM: When did this process start?

RS: Gradually. They figured out that media is not the fourth estate. It is the first estate. And they started to conquer territories. During the second half of the 1990s, this process was already felt very strongly.<sup>75</sup>

A television anchor at the nationalist channel SKAT and a former correspondent of BT advances a very similar explanation:

During the first years of the so called democracy there was a very strong media freedom. It reached the point of anarchy. One can say that until Zhan Videnov's government was elected in 1994 there was a very strong media freedom. Once again I will repeat: to a certain degree it reached the point of anarchy. But better anarchy than dictatorship. After Videnov's government gained power iron chains shackled Bulgarian media. But they were placed not by the government of Videnov or by the subsequent government of Kostov or by the one headed by Simeon II, but by the economic groups who bought off and conquered Bulgarian media...The former prime ministers that I mentioned to you were in fact stooges for these economic groups. For this reason media before 1995 were fundamentally different than what followed after.<sup>76</sup>

All of these journalists experienced the first few years of post-socialism as "free" just as all of them thought that starting in the mid-1990s media freedom began to evaporate. Why did these journalists view the years of pro-UDF bias as "pluralistic" and "free"? Why did they think that the anti-BSP coverage on a publicly funded television and radio constituted "freedom" at a

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<sup>74</sup> Personal Interview # 19.

<sup>75</sup> Personal Interview # 22.

<sup>76</sup> Personal Interview # 41.

time when the majority of the population supported the BSP? And finally, why did this freedom end in 1994?

In regards to the latter question, one possible explanation are the results of the parliamentary elections on December 18, 1994. Amidst skyrocketing unemployment, dismantling of the welfare state, and the destruction of local agriculture and the rural areas, Bulgarian people began to understand that capitalism might not have been what they expected it to be. Disenchanted by the “democratic reforms” voters elected the BSP with a resounding victory hoping that it would halt the social anomie unleashed after 1989. More than forty-three percent voted for the left-wing party while the disappointment with the UDF brought them a mere twenty-four percent. One can interpret the outcome of this election also as the Bulgarian people’s disillusionment with state media that had pandered to the UDF during the previous five years. Whereas the triumph of BSP in 1990 was an outlier in Eastern Europe, in 1994 their victory was part of a wider regional phenomenon, which some commentators described as “nostalgic.” At the time, in a number of former Eastern bloc countries socialists returned to power due to widespread disappointment with capitalism. Although the new government did not embark on a radical reversal of privatization and liberalization, supporters of the UDF interpreted this development as a “return of communism.” Among them were the multitude of anti-communist journalists whose experience with their profession was deeply linked to the process of media “de-communization.”

Indeed, their worries that the new government might try to change the situation of state media were not unfounded. Prompted by the broad mandate of the voters, as well as by their desire to reverse their fortunes with the media from the first half of the 1990s, the socialists launched legislative initiatives to curtail “state media bias” and appointed as directors people

connected to the party. A notable example of the latter trend was the appointment of Ivan Granitski as a director of BT. Granitski, a Marxist literary critic, undertook reforms that for a short while brought back the memories of the socialist humanist era. Commercial advertising on state television was halted and Granitski argued that media must serve society through education and the stimulation of cultural advancement.<sup>77</sup> Many journalists saw these initiatives as a reversal of the democratic changes or as one radio journalist put it in an interview with me “the government tried to bring back the old game.”<sup>78</sup> As a result, the socialists were met by relentless opposition in state media. Numerous strikes, work stoppages and protests took place. Even a brand new journalist union called “Svobodno Slovo” (Free Speech) that opposed the existing Union of Bulgarian Journalists was formed. “Once again we were playing Beatles’ ‘Let it be’ over the internal information channel at BNT” a television journalist told me.<sup>79</sup> A year into its mandate the government faced tremendous difficulties and by 1996 hyperinflation of almost 600 percent raged in the country along with shortages of basic foods. After massive protests and blockades of the parliament building, on January 10, 1997, the government was forced to resign after two years in power.<sup>80</sup>

In sum, although the socialist government did try to regain power in state media it failed because of the strong anti-communist backlash it faced. In fact the protests and stoppages at both state television and radio contributed to its collapse. Hence, the explanation that the BSP government curtailed the initial feeling of freedom is insufficient. This government barely served half of its mandate and the journalists walked out victorious in their battle with BSP. What is more, the UDF returned to power and became the first post-socialist government to serve its

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<sup>77</sup> For more on Granitski’s directorship see chapter 5.

<sup>78</sup> Personal Interview # 4

<sup>79</sup> Personal Interview # 24.

<sup>80</sup> See the Introduction for more on the economic crisis of 1996-1997.

entire mandate (1997-2001). Yet, none of the journalists I interviewed suggested that the media situation improved after this government was overthrown and replaced by the anti-communist opposition. Instead, all of them remembered the situation before 1994-1995 with nostalgia and as something that was lost forever.

The reason for this feeling was that in the early 1990s, through the purges in state media and through the radically partisan coverage against the BSP, the party that had managed the state since World War II, journalists crushed the source from which censorship seemed to emanate. We “dictated how things should happen” one journalist told me.<sup>81</sup> In terms of media content, management and state regulation, the first half of the 1990s was a period when journalists possessed an autonomy that never existed in Bulgaria before. Because of this sense of freedom, for them terms such as “pluralism” and “free expression” meant not as much the presence of diverse viewpoints in media. Rather, they connoted the possibility for boundless criticism of the state and the former communist party without any repercussions. The problem of this type of “pluralism” was that it translated into support for the UDF, one of the parties that dominated Bulgarian politics in the 1990s. In contrast, BSP was on the receiving end and any attempt to change the situation was interpreted as the return of state censorship. Restoration of this type of censorship did not succeed in the mid-1990s and it was not its feared return that put an end to the sense of freedom shared by journalists.

What started to change radically four or five years after Zhivkov’s fall was the emergence of a whole new form of media censorship that no longer emanated from the state. The source of it was capital. As privately owned media increased in number and became more powerful, the journalists faced a new enemy that in many respects was much more formidable than the state.

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<sup>81</sup> Personal Interview # 15.

Now journalists had to confront owners of media and their money. This explanation was detectable in the answers of the journalists interviewed for this study. The influence of “big capital” and “economic groups,” mentioned by two of them above, was precisely a gesture in this direction. A new type of censorship emerged that strangled the media. Although the process had already begun in the earliest days of post-socialism by the mid-1990s capitalism and private property were bringing to the fore a very different relationship between media and society. This is why the journalists divided the development of media in Bulgaria into two periods: before and after the mid-1990s. The emergence of corporate, capitalist censorship was what changed the game. It is for this reason that despite their pro-UDF political views, none of them suggested that the UDF government (1997-2001) led by Ivan Kostov, an iconic figure in the anti-communist movement, restored the freedom they enjoyed in the early 1990s. The problem was bigger and it would only get worse with time.

### **4.3 THE NEW PRESS AND THE SPIRIT OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP**

The transformations in state media from 1989 to the mid-1990s had deep consequences. Most importantly, they helped bifurcate Bulgarian society into two political blocs and provided the much necessary publicity and support for the opposition. But state media were not the only ones to experience change. In fact, one of the early signs of change after 1989, not just in the sphere of mass communication but in society as a whole, was the emergence of the commercial press. The proliferation of newspapers in these first few years of post-socialism is nothing short of



astounding. In 1989 there were 301 newspapers, 540 in 1990 and 1058 in 1995.<sup>82</sup> By 1995 Bulgaria had fifty-eight dailies, which was 3-4 times more than in 1989.<sup>83</sup> According to Totka Monova, in the second half of 1990 and throughout 1991, new newspapers were born almost every day.<sup>84</sup> The first commercial media were the newspapers, but by the mid-1990s Bulgaria also had close to 150 private radio stations.<sup>85</sup>

No doubt this proliferation also contributed to the image of early post-socialist media as free. This is why some scholars concluded that “the birth of free speech” in Bulgaria coincided with the emergence of the private commercial press.<sup>86</sup> Like the journalists interviewed for this study, anti-communist intellectuals regarded “free speech” as unrestricted criticism of the socialist era, the state and BSP. This chapter hopes to have shown that the emergence of this discourse took place in electronic media rather than the commercial press. But this argument aside, the emergence of the commercial press was not associated with the appearance of a Habermasian bourgeois public sphere that sustained “rational-critical” debate. Instead, Bulgarian scholars touted it for the introduction of the entity that Habermas was cautious of in the latter half of his book—the market.

By their very existence, privately owned media communicated the possibility of a market economy in a society in which private property had been suppressed for a long time. According to one Bulgarian media scholar, the newspaper market itself was “the new model in market

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<sup>82</sup> Petranka Fileva, “Mediaikonomicheski Portret na Balgaria (1996-1997)” / “Media Economic View of Bulgaria (1996-1997),” in *Mediaznanie vol. 2*, 327.

<sup>83</sup> Orlin Spassov, “Medii i Prehod” / “Media and Transition,” in *Medii i Prehod*, 102.

<sup>84</sup> Totka Monova, *Noviat Journalizam na Prehoda / The New Journalism of Transition* (Sofia, Bulgaria: Paradox, 2012), 89.

<sup>85</sup> Boryana Dimitrova, “Deset Godini, koito Raztarsiha Elektronnite Medii (no ne I nacionalnia efir)” / “Ten Years that Shook the Electronic Media (but not broadcasting),” in *Medii I Prehod*, 50.

<sup>86</sup> Kiossev, “Chastniat Zivot na Publichnia Ezik,” 263.

relationships, but not just their propagandist.”<sup>87</sup> Orlin Spassov argues that in this first phase of the Bulgarian transition “media formed one of the few spheres of relative economic activity” and concludes that “amidst the widespread economic difficulties the vitality of the media sphere is truly remarkable.”<sup>88</sup> Ilianna Koseva poetically describes the intertwining of media and the market in the early years of post-socialism:

After 1989, the Bulgarian press was the first entity to be ‘sucked in’ by the market economy, submitted to its mechanisms, experienced the catharsis and the change, survived the horror of death and the pains of a new birth, it passed with difficulties, pain, scandals, yet fast, into a different historical time. In this sense, the press turned into the litmus test of the new being, which also exposed the wrinkles on the changed face of media in society.<sup>89</sup>

Many other media scholars agree with this diagnosis. Ivaylo Ditchev concludes that “two years after the fall of Zhivkov a new commodity appeared: information (in the beginning it was the only commodity available on the market).”<sup>90</sup> In 2000, Mikhail Nedelchev, media scholar and an MP for the UDF, claimed that “since 1989 the free press is one of the few real achievements of the democratic transition towards an open market economy.”<sup>91</sup> In this way, across the board Bulgarian media scholars note and celebrate the Bulgarian press in this early period as “open” and “analogous to the one in the countries with developed liberal democracy,”—a praise they would spare for just about every other sphere in Bulgarian society.<sup>92</sup>

Yet, at first the new press in Bulgaria emerged not as independent, but as affiliated to the different political parties. On February 1, 1990 *Svoboden Narod* (Free People), the newspaper of the Bulgarian Social Democratic Party came out. This newspaper is considered to be the first

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<sup>87</sup> Penev, 102.

<sup>88</sup> Spassov, “Medii i Prehod,” 102.

<sup>89</sup> Iliyana Koseva, “Pechatat i Vlassta na Parite,” “The Press and Power of Money,” in *Balgarsko Mediaznanie I*, 230.

<sup>90</sup> Ditchev, “Razprozhzha na Vremeto,” 113.

<sup>91</sup> Mikhail Nedelchev, “Lipsi, Otsastvia, Otkazi” / “Lacks, Absences, Denials,” in *Medii i Prehod*, 78.

<sup>92</sup> Penev, 102.

non-communist daily after 1989. But the two major newspapers in this early period were the dailies affiliated to BSP and UDF. After the BCP changed its name to BSP, it also changed the name of its official newspaper from *Rabotnichesko Delo* (Worker's Deed) to *Duma* (Word). Although not as directly tied to the BSP as *Rabotnichesko Delo* was to BCP, since April 4, 1990, *Duma* has touted itself as the "left-wing newspaper." In the first couple of years it was the most widely sold newspaper in the country.<sup>93</sup> On the opposite side of the political spectrum stood the UDF newspaper *Demkratzia* (Democracy), which appeared for the first time on February 9, 1990. However, the foundations of the Bulgarian commercial press, not affiliated to any party, were laid by the weekly *168 Hours* first published on April 26, 1990.<sup>94</sup> But all Bulgarian scholars agree that the model for Bulgaria's commercial press is the daily *24 Chasa* (24 Hours), owned by the same company that started *168 Hours*. The connection between capitalism and the commercial press is indeed quite explicit on the pages of these new newspapers. When it began on April 18, 1991, *24 Chasa*, announced on its front page that its goal would be "to support liberal democracy, private initiative and the free market."<sup>95</sup> By 1992 the newspaper was selling more than all of the other dailies combined and for the larger part of the 1990s remained the most sold newspaper in Bulgaria. One of its founders recounts the interconnection of this newspaper to capitalism:

Life in Bulgaria is changing radically and in the entire press, *24 Chasa* reflects this change the best. The general perception is that now one can get rich and everybody whets to be a capitalist. People display on the sidewalk their *Moskvich* for sale, they withdraw their savings and transform their garages into small shops. In the beginning of 1993 there were 780,000 private companies and they were all regular readers of *24 Chasa*. The

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<sup>93</sup> Monova, 137.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>95</sup> Rossen Yankov, "Krakta Istoria" / "Short History," 17.

reason for this accordance is the undeclared slogan of the newspaper from those years: “Long Live Private Property!”<sup>96</sup>

Like the commercial press, commercial radio was also tightly connected to the fledgling market economy. One Bulgarian scholar writes that “Their first mass consumers became the small private shops, garages, coffee shops, grocery stores, barber shops. As such the emergence of new electronic media naturally connects to the rise of small and medium businesses. The two spheres nurture each other. The first garages are the first advertisers on the radio stations, and at the same time the first ‘consumers’ of their product.”<sup>97</sup> The author estimates that at that time 80 percent of the audience of the new private radios were employed in the “small, private ‘garage’ business.”<sup>98</sup>

The enthusiasm of liberal media scholars with the emerging commercial press market was in some ways expected. In the local academia, but also in the English language literature on Eastern European media, the separation between media, the state and civil society figures as the primary goal of the transition to capitalism. According to Ivaylo Znepolski, the major task of Bulgaria after 1989 was to separate the society from the state and the commercial press “became the motor for this change.”<sup>99</sup> This chapter hoped to show that, paradoxically, the separation between the state and media began in state media and not the commercial press. But because Znepolski, Kiossev and other liberal scholars saw, and continue to see, the market as the only guarantor of free expression, they failed to register the crucial role of electronic media. In addition, their view of the private press is hardly a surprise since they relied heavily on

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>97</sup> Dimitrova, 53.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Znepolski, *Novata Presa*, 145.

Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*—one of the most quoted, if not the most quoted books, by Bulgarian media scholars.

According to Habermas the precondition for the development of the public sphere was “a market that, tending to be liberalized, made affairs in the sphere of social reproduction as much as possible a matter of private people left to themselves and so finally completed the privatization of civil society.”<sup>100</sup> The market created space for the European public sphere that faced absolutism just as the market created space for the post-socialist public sphere that countered “totalitarianism.” The problem with these parallels made by Bulgarian scholars was that even if there were grounds for them during early post-socialism, with its numerous newspapers in symbiotic relationship with the mushrooming small businesses, this stage of media was ephemeral. In fact, as the following chapter explains in detail, the harbinger of Bulgaria's commercial newspapers, *24 Chasa*, was owned by First Private Bank, Bulgaria's first commercial bank. Thus, from very early on, there were signs of monopolization and the creation of oligopolies that pursued the interests of their capitalist owners rather than “rational-critical” debate.

In their idealization of the post-socialist commercial press, Bulgarian scholars have ignored its erosion from a relatively free and vibrant one to one concentrated and subservient to private capital. This is somewhat ironic because it seems as if they skipped the second part of Habermas' book in which he critiques the downfall of the bourgeoisie public sphere from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Habermas launches a criticism of consumption and advertising, which as the following two chapters of this dissertation explain, had the most pernicious effects on the Bulgaria post-socialist public sphere.

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<sup>100</sup> Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 74.

When the laws of the market governing the sphere of commodity exchange and of social labor also pervaded the sphere reserved for private people as a public, rational-critical debate had a tendency to be replaced by consumption and the web of public communication unraveled into acts of individuated reception, however uniform in mode.<sup>101</sup>

These statements are in no way marginal to Habermas' groundbreaking book. But, perhaps precisely because of the parallels with Marxism as well as the works of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, Bulgarian anti-communist scholars have ignored this part of Habermas' work. Instead, they focus on his description of the early bourgeoisie public sphere as they themselves find great promise in the interconnection between the emerging capitalist market and media in Bulgaria. But, the initial multiplicity of newspapers and seemingly idyllic free market of the first two or three years of post-socialism was rapidly replaced by media concentration and the emergence of large monopolistic media outlets, including Western ones. The following chapter traces this development of the Bulgarian press in this direction.

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 161.

## 5.0 NEOLIBERAL MEDIA POPULISM: NEW PRESS, NEW MONOPOLY

In her book, *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt lays a great emphasis on beginnings. Every beginning, which she links to natality, carries a transformational potential just like every newborn introduces a change to the world. Every new birth and every beginning offer human beings not only the possibility for change, but also a chance to interrupt existing destructive social processes.<sup>1</sup> The spirit of grassroots entrepreneurship that engulfed Eastern European societies in the early days of post-socialism expressed the mass desire of people to begin anew. Their faith in imminent affluence instilled the mass aspiration to transform themselves from state employees to prosperous businesspeople. As the final section of the previous chapter argued, the emergence of the new commercial press also contained the utopian element that every beginning shares. Readers and writers plunged into the search for the new, precipitating a proliferation of publications:

In a short period of time, the number of publications grew from just a few major titles to more than 2,000. The Bulgarian citizen was frantically buying everything: from the avalanche of sex and porn magazines, to weeklies about magic, herbs, martial arts and witchcraft, along with business and political dailies. Almost every week a new publication with a sensationalist title appeared. For a longer or shorter time this new publication found an audience and tested its capacities oftentimes leading to tragic illiteracy and unprofessionalism.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1958), 9, 177-178 and 246.

<sup>2</sup> Koseva, 231.

Yet, this initial enthusiasm was ephemeral. From its very inception there were signs that the commercial press fused with big capital. As a result, the two entered a symbiotic relationship that left neoliberal economics unchallenged, concentrated press ownership and created a peculiar relationship between the readers and the new press. In contrast to the partisan approach of state media and the political parties' official newspapers, the commercial press criticized the political field as a whole. When the first private newspapers appeared in 1991, they sensed that the enthusiasm of 1989 was vanishing in the context of growing poverty, income disparity, crime and a widespread feeling of disappointment. Instead of picking a side in the sphere of politics dominated by the ex-communists of the BSP and the anti-communists of the UDF, the new commercial press attacked all politicians, parties and the state. This created a situation of media populism in which society bifurcated. On one side were the commercial newspapers and the people, while on the other one stood the political class and the state. In this process, the commercial press adopted the role of an institution that helped people in their daily life. Newspapers provided advice about taxes, university entry exams, medicines and pension funds and in general acted as if they, but not the state or the political class, could ameliorate the hard life of the Bulgarian people.

This model, however, was not a progressive populism of the left that targeted the status quo. Instead it was a neoliberal media populism because it never criticized the neoliberalization of the economy. Instead, its oppositional appearance sprang from the use of a particular type of crude language that targeted the political field more generally. In this way, the new press reaffirmed the common citizen's belief that all politicians and all state institutions are corrupt. While this type of criticism of the state and politics was not always unhealthy in a post-socialist society, its effect was not a more politicized society in which people engaged in debates. Instead,



the feeling of participation remained at the level of newspaper language. The newspapers offered the language of the common person who used the same rhetoric when it came to politicians and state institutions. This produced a feeling of “emancipation” for readers, but one that did not negatively affect capitalism or the neoliberalization of the economy. Instead, neoliberalism became even more entrenched, which was illustrated by the very criticisms that Bulgarian intellectuals levied against the language of the commercial press. They found themselves in the peculiar situation of praising the commercial press as an economic success while at the same time despising its product—the non-intellectual crude language of the street. They sought to locate the root of this problem in the moral sphere, oftentimes through self-colonizing criticism of the “Balkan mentalities” that allegedly engendered this type of rhetoric. But Bulgarian media scholars *never* sought to interrogate the commercial model of the press as a possible source for this rhetoric. In this way, newspaper owners and their critics sparred over language, but they both shared a commitment to neoliberalism.

This chapter revisits some of the arguments of Bulgarian intellectuals and offers a different political-economic, rather than moral, approach to the development of the commercial press in Bulgaria. It historicizes the process of fusion between capital and media that began from the very first days of the post-socialist commercial press and culminated in the monopolization of the Bulgarian press after the entry of the German newspaper giant Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung (WAZ). From 1996 to 2010, WAZ and its two major Bulgarian newspapers, *24 Chasa* (“24 Hours”) and *Trud* (“Labour”), dictated the development of the press in post-socialist Bulgaria. This chapter analyzes the neoliberal populist media model that the Bulgarian owners of the press and later WAZ reinforced in Bulgaria. It argues that the newspapers were first and foremost concerned about advertising and circulation and because of this they offered the news

in a shallow way that further enforced neoliberalization. This was a model that did not open more space for debate and discussion based on ideological commitments or economic visions, but shifted to entertainment and populist language that were financially beneficial for the owners.

## **5.1 THE NEW NEWSPAPER LANGUAGE AND THE REVOLT OF THE INTELLECTUALS**

One of the main weapons of the neoliberal populism of the press was a specific kind of language. In Bulgaria, this was a language that broke away from the rhetoric of the socialist era. On one hand, intellectuals associated this crude and often vulgar discourse with the perceived low culture and intellect of “the people.” On the other hand, the journalists who used it defended its values on behalf of “the people.” Its main proponent, the Chief Editor and creator of *24 Chasa*, Valeri Naidenov, claimed that the words of this language were “from the people, of the people and for the people.”<sup>3</sup> Naidenov perceived its use as a response to the rhetoric of the previous era, which he described as “the stupid state-bureaucratic language.” Naidenov, who had a long experience in using this former language as a socialist journalist, claimed that writing in this style was like being put on “the torture wheel during the Spanish Inquisition.”<sup>4</sup> According to him, this language was so stale that, he asks, “how could one not reach for the bottle of vodka in the desk drawer?”<sup>5</sup> Because of this, he argued that not only the regime, but their words also had to change.

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<sup>3</sup> Valeri Naidenov, “Predi da se Rodi Vestnikat i Malko Sled Tova” / “Before the Newspaper was Born and a Shortly Afterwards,” in *24 Chasa: Vestnikat*, 35.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

This “people’s language” was not to the taste of liberal intellectuals. Although all major Bulgarian media academics praised the new economic model of media, the language Naidenov and other media professionals employed was revolting to them. One of the most prominent Bulgarian post-socialist intellectuals, Alexander Kiossev stated that the “absolutely necessary riddance of the communist clichés and ‘wooden language’ unsuspectedly went farther than anybody expected.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, the intellectuals drove themselves into the awkward position of criticizing the very language that, according to journalists such as Naidenov, destroyed the stale socialist dictionary. Interestingly, anti-communists were on both sides of this debate, because, like the intellectuals, Naidenov liked to remind people that “communism drove entire nations into the grave.”<sup>7</sup> However, and ironically, the post-socialist intellectuals and their defense of culture and “polite” expression, now occupied the place of the socialist intellectuals and their embrace of high culture and humanist values. But, in contrast to the socialist intellectuals, their criticisms were profoundly anti-populist because they did not care for the cultural enlightenment of broader social strata.

The intellectuals’ critique of the new press is an important part of the story of Bulgarian post-socialist newspapers. Their revolt against the new media language is indeed the most encountered form of media criticism in post-socialist literature on communications. Ivaylo Znepolski referred to the commercial newspapers’ discourse as “plebian publicity” (plebeiska publichnost). Like Kiossev, he believed that “plebian publicity” occupied the spot left by the socialist discourse. Also like Kiossev, and many other media critics, Znepolski was caught in a serious contradiction. On one hand, he viewed the new Bulgarian “market realities” as an

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<sup>6</sup> Kiossev, “Chastniat Zivot na Publichnia Ezik,” 265.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 50.

antipode to the “ideological prejudices” of the communist era.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, he greatly disliked the product of these realities. The language of the “plebian publicity” was “direct,” “purposefully rude,” “inimical” and full of “malicious celebration of the failure of ‘the other.’”<sup>9</sup> It was replete with “barbarianism,” “cynicism” and “archaism.” “We could say it is a language without restraints! This is the language of the simpleton who recently became rich as well as of the embittered pauper.”<sup>10</sup> According to him, “plebian publicity” inhibited the appearance of “an adequate democratic publicity.”<sup>11</sup> In this way, Znepolski despised this new language of the press, but not the market that thrived on it.

Similarly to Znepolski, Alexander Kiossev praises the free market press because he sees the words “commercial,” “free” and “independent” as synonyms. But, he also finds himself in the paradoxical situation of disliking the product of the commercial press. He tries to overcome the contradiction by claiming that the “free press” precipitates a “double result” (“dvoistven”). On one hand they are “free.” On the other hand, their “unique product,” “namely their strange, to put it mildly, media language” was not to his taste.<sup>12</sup> He refers to it as a “rhetoric of mass traumas and fantasies” and an embodiment of “blatant aggression, pornography and a Balkan swearing misanthropy.”<sup>13</sup> In earlier works, Kiossev described this rhetoric as the “speech of the wrestlers.” “Wrestlers” (bortzi) was the common description of former athletes (most commonly wrestlers, weight-lifters and boxers) who joined criminal structures and gangs after the collapse of the socialist state and subsequent decline in support for sports. The image of the wrestler was that of a muscular man with meager intellectual capacities, who earned his living through

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<sup>8</sup> Znepolski, *Novata Presa*, 5.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>12</sup> Kiossev, “Chastniat Zivot na Publichnia Ezik,” 263.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

extortion, racketeering and other criminal activities. In its “absolute brutality,” Kiossev asserted, the new press language was precisely that of these non-intellectual, criminals.<sup>14</sup> This “anti-intellectual” and “anti-cultural” language, Kiossev further argued, “normalizes everything criminal and places it at the center of public attention.”<sup>15</sup> But as with Znepolski, one is left wondering what alternative can emerge within the same market system that Kiossev celebrates. Although he insists on “the civilizational publicity” and the “mandatory hidden liberal ethos of democratic debate,” these expressions remain undefined by him and sound as hollow as the “wooded language” of the previous era.<sup>16</sup>

The Bulgarian linguist Mikhail Videnov describes the language of the new press as “speech extremism.” He agrees with Kiossev and Znepolski that it replaced the “langue de bois” (“wooden language”) of the previous era and provides concrete examples of this shift. He claims that during socialism one could see the following newspaper article title regarding a theft: “In the region of Sliven telephone cables worth 3 million leva are unaccounted for.” After socialism, the title would state “Bandits lifted phone cables worth 3 million leva in Sliven.”<sup>17</sup> He calls this type of rhetoric “the street bum language” (*hashlashki ezik*) and singles out several extreme examples of article titles indicative of the radical shift. He points to an article title in *Demokrtazia*, which declared that “Luben Berov [the Prime Minister] farts in a bathtub and tries to catch the bubbles” as well as to *168 Chasa*’s “Filip Dimitrov [the former Prime Minister] is like a man who kills his

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<sup>14</sup> Alexander Kiossev, “Malchanieto na Agnetata i Slovoto na Borcite” / “The Silence of the Lamb and the Speech of the Wrestlers,” In *Mediite i Ezikat / Media and Language* (Sofia, Bulgaria: Eko, 1999), 74.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 77-78

<sup>16</sup> Kiossev, “Chastniat Zivot na Publichnia Ezik,” 265.

<sup>17</sup> Mikhail Videnov, “Dinamichni Procesi v Ezika na Savremennite Balgarski Medii” / “Dynamic Changes in the Language of Contemporary Bulgarian Mass Media,” in *Balgarsko Mediaznanie tom 2*, 300.

wife because he cannot get a hard on.”<sup>18</sup> Videnov concludes that the newspapers were writing with the language of “cleaners, prostitutes and drunks.”<sup>19</sup>

There are numerous other colorful descriptions of this “linguistic populism” that sprang from “the street and the square.”<sup>20</sup> Vladimir Trandafilov portrayed the discourse of *24 Chasa* as the “language of the neighborhood dude with a beer belly who steps out of his apartment in slippers to go to the grocery. It’s precisely a language ‘in slippers’ replete with sex and money...”<sup>21</sup> Georgi Lozanov views it as the language of “pubs, streets and bedrooms.”<sup>22</sup> Rumen Dimitrov claims that it is “a senseless language, a speech expression of the body, the jargon of the bartender, the cab driver and currency exchange shop attendant.”<sup>23</sup> Dimitrov portrays this language as a post-socialist “emancipation of the lower part of the body.”<sup>24</sup> Most recently, Totka Monova portrayed it as “unapologetic, to the point of vulgarity language.”<sup>25</sup> The examples of this type of criticism seem endless and it appears that there is no Bulgarian media scholar who did not express a negative opinion about the new language of the press.

One can understand why the crudeness of the new press language repelled post-socialist intellectuals. But their identification of the root of the problem needs to be questioned. Literally, all of them blamed it on the lower strata of society. In their view “prostitutes,” “hoodlums,” “drunks,” and “embittered paupers” stood in the way of a truly “democratic public sphere.” Stuck on these moral and classist explanations they even fell into the trap of Balkanist discourse

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 303.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Iwaylo Znepolski quoted in Spassov, *Medii i Prehod*, 107.

<sup>21</sup> Vladimir Trendafilov, “Intelktualci sreshtu Jurnalisti: Borбата za Mediinata Istoria” / “Intellectuals against Journalists: The Struggle for Media History,” in *Medii i Prehod*, 144.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Spassov, *Medii i Prehod*, 107.

<sup>23</sup> Rumen Dimitrov, “Medii i Mitove v Iztochna Evropa” / “Media and Myths in Eastern Europe,” in *Medii i Mitove / Media and Myths*, ed. Orlin Spassov et al. (Sofia, Bulgaria: Sofia University Publishing, 2000), 354.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Monova, 105.

whereas “Balkan transgressions”<sup>26</sup> and “the Balkan and Bulgarian fixations” that emerged from “the collective political unconscious”<sup>27</sup> were to blame. These examples fit in Maria Todorova’s definition of Balkanist discourse as the transformation of a geographical appellation into one of the most powerful pejorative designations in history, international relations, political science and general intellectual discourse.<sup>28</sup> But, with this type of anti-populist, moralizing criticism, the intellectuals detached themselves from the larger society they presumed to understand.

Valeri Naidenov, the founder of the newspaper *24 Chasa*, sensed the weak arguments of the intellectuals and turned them against themselves. In 2000, he was invited to write an article in an edited academic book that also featured a virtual “who is who” in Bulgarian media scholarship (including Kiossev and Znepolski). With irony and crude language, the style of his very own newspaper, Naidenov mocked the media intellectuals who criticized him. According to him, they disliked his newspaper because they confused writing with masturbation. “You should write in such a way that you are the only one to understand what you wrote. If other people understood what you wrote you are screwed. If you yourself don’t understand what you wrote, than you are a true master.”<sup>29</sup> In his criticism, Naidenov singled out Ivaylo Znepolski, calling him a “governing professor” because of his career as an MP for the UDF and his service as a Minister of Culture. Naidenov asked Znepolski not to lecture him on writing because Znepolski’s own style was so dull and rigid that his thought moved from sentence to sentence like “a frog crawls through freshly tilled land.”<sup>30</sup> According to Naidenov, the media intellectuals did not understand the idea behind newspapers because their brain crevices lead only “to Foucault, or

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<sup>26</sup> Kiossev, “Malchanieto na Agnetata, 77.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, 7.

<sup>29</sup> Naidenov, “Predi da se Rodi Vestnikat i Malko Sled Tova,” 32.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 30.

Dahrendorf, or Popper.”<sup>31</sup> In this way, Naidenov came to the defense of “the people,” for which the anti-communist media intellectuals shared a Nietzschean dislike.

Through words the people received a startling and unpredictable power over such highly esteemed beings such as MPs, judges, diplomats, privatizers and others. One governing professor [Ivaylo Znepolski] bitterly called this upside-down form of power “a plebian publicity.” That’s right, the Bulgarian is a plebian with a university degree. He is poor and absolutely deprived of rights and can only change something through the newspaper.<sup>32</sup>

Engaged in classist rhetoric and pseudo-academic discourses about Balkan mentalities, few media scholars paid attention to the actual function of this newspaper language. The Bulgarian press capitalized on the angst engendered by post-socialist poverty and deprivation. It provided its readers with a sense of “power” over the political class. As such, this language was not an expression of some innate Balkan features or genetic cultural deficiencies, but had economic and political sources.

The introduction of this project addressed the rapid deterioration of the economic situation in Bulgaria after 1989. The destruction of Bulgaria’s rural areas and agriculture through the “Liquidation” process, the loss of the Eastern bloc economic markets, the removal of price controls and the implementation of other similar measures of economic liberalization precipitated a severe economic crisis. In 1993 a third of all Bulgarian households were classified as poor compared to only 2 percent in 1987-1988 and by 1996, 20 percent of school-age Bulgarians were found to be protein deficient.<sup>33</sup> Because of the dire circumstances, between 1989 and 1996, 650,000 mostly young people emigrated from Bulgaria.<sup>34</sup> After beautiful words of hope and promises for future prosperity during the first anti-communist rallies, in 1995 the

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>33</sup> Vassilev, “De-Development Problems in Bulgaria,” 6 and Vassilev, “The “Third-Worldization” of a “Second-World” Nation,” 110.

<sup>34</sup> Vassilev, “De-Development Problems in Bulgaria,” 7.



former dissident philosopher and at the time President of Bulgaria, Zhelyu Zhelev, announced at the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen that Bulgaria faced a “catastrophe.”<sup>35</sup> Unemployment, poverty, income inequality, mass emigration, crime and corruption wiped the remnants of any utopian ideas about capitalism. The new commercial press functioned within this context of economic deterioration and disenchantment.

But the press did not frame social discontent in terms of political ideologies or economic policies. After all, both parties were responsible for the outcomes since the volatile political environment constantly reshuffled the actors governing the state. In the period between 1989 and 1997, Bulgaria had four parliamentary elections and a total of eight governments as on several occasions caretaker cabinets had to replace a recently toppled administration. In this environment of political instability with no signs of improvement there was room for a criticism of everything political as well as for a withdrawal from the political altogether. Voter turnout during the four parliamentary elections between 1990 and 2001 clearly showed the latter trend. In 1990, a record 90 percent of Bulgarians voters went to the polls but by 2001, voters’ participation had dropped to 58 percent.

Besides the shared blame of both parties and the declining enthusiasm for politics there was another reason why the commercial press decided to avoid politicization of the society in a particular political direction. Despite the heated rhetoric between the anti-communists and ex-communists, the political field became more and more ideologically homogenous. While the UDF maintained an outdated anti-communist rhetoric, the socialist party steadily moved to the right. In 1990, BSP spoke of “democratic socialism,” but in its platform for the elections in 1991, this phrase was replaced by terms from the dictionary of European social-democracy, such as

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<sup>35</sup> Vassilev, “The “Third-Worldization” of a “Second-World” Nation,” 108.

“social state” and “social market economy.”<sup>36</sup> In 1994, BSP’s leader Zhan Videnov declared that the former communist party “recognizes, supports and acknowledges the achievements of European liberalism defended today by the socially responsible Bulgarian entrepreneurs.”<sup>37</sup>

In sum, the brutal primary accumulation of capital and its social consequences, along with the spreading disenchantment with both the communists and the ex-communists and the homogenization of the ideological sphere contributed to the construction of a particular economic model of the new commercial press. In contrast to the anti-communist endeavors of state television the commercial press decided to pursue a different approach. The crude language that the newspapers used was a central component of it. It was a language that denigrated the left and the right through the use of a rhetoric that created a particular sense of satisfaction in the reader. The newspaper language simulated a sense of expression of discontent and anger on behalf of the Bulgarian citizens who struggled with daily life. It suggested that readers could participate in politics through the language employed by newspapers that alleged to be on their side. However, this was simply a concealment of the absence of any meaningful radical politics that could transform the Bulgarian society and media. But most importantly, this type of language was part of an economic and structural media model. It was part of the shallow, emotional and superficial, but ultimately cheap presentation of the news. All of this requires a political-economic and historical analysis of Bulgaria’s commercial press, not merely a linguistic one.

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<sup>36</sup> Petar Emil-Mitev, *Izbori 94: Ideologicheski, Sotzialno-Psihologicheski i Sotsiolingvistchni Aspekti / Elections 94: Ideological, Socio-psychological and Sociolinguistic Aspects*, (Sofia Bulgaria: Sofia University Publishing, 1994), 35.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

## 5.2 THE EMERGENCE OF THE TWO PILLARS OF THE BULGARIAN POST-SOCIALIST PRESS: 24 CHASA AND TRUD

The first newspapers independent of the communist party emerged in 1990. However, these new media outlets were not strictly speaking “independent” because they belonged to nascent political parties and movements. The first newspaper not affiliated with any party was *168 Chasa* (168 Hours)—a weekly that took off in April, 1990. One year later, its daily counterpart, *24 Chasa* (24 Hours) also began publication. While *168 Chasa* had already gained an audience it was *24 Chasa* that accelerated the growth of the commercial press and turned into the model to emulate. Besides its novel content, form and language, *24 Chasa* also introduced a new economic relationship between media and capital that became a standard feature of the Bulgarian post-socialist media sphere. Although widely acknowledged, this relationship is rarely problematized by Bulgarian media scholars.

The tight connection between Bulgaria’s pioneering commercial newspaper and big capital was visible even at the level of physical space. Initially, the company that owned *168 Chasa* and *24 Chasa*, “168 Hours Press Group,” occupied “a few rooms” in a building that also housed the Union for Economically Active Citizens (UEAC), and First Private Bank (FPB).<sup>38</sup> Their cohabitation was not a coincidence, because FPB provided “168 Hours Press Group” with their much needed initial capital. “168 Hours Press Group” was created in 1990 by six young journalists<sup>39</sup> who became partners and stakeholders in the new commercial company. Several of them were colleagues in *Otechestven Front* (Fatherland Front), a socialist era newspaper that

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<sup>38</sup> Yankov, “Kratka Istoria,” 14.

<sup>39</sup> Valentina Gotcheva, “Vestnikat Kakavto e” / “The Newspaper as It is” in *24 Chasa Vestnikat*, 8. The journalists were Valeri Naidenov, Petyo Blaskov, Vladimir Raychev, Radostina Konstantinova, Dragomir Vassilev, Emil Petkov.

ceased to exist after 1989, including Petyo Blaskov who quickly established himself as the main figure in the company. Blaskov likes to tell romantic stories about his beginning as a newspaper publisher. According to him, during socialism he was so poor that he had to drive a cab in order to supplement his meager income as a journalist.<sup>40</sup> Then, the story went, at the dawn of democracy in a basement with one old typewriter and a staff of three, Blaskov began his capitalist endeavor that would change the face of the Bulgarian press. But regardless of how hard-working and entrepreneurial he was it is hard to imagine how a poor journalist (and a cab driver) could establish the most powerful newspaper company in Bulgaria without a robust financial backing.

This backing came from Valentin Mollov and Ventsislav Yosifov, founders of First Private Bank. Mollov was not only the founder of the first commercial bank, but he was also the chairman of the Union for Economically Active Citizens which aimed to unite and strengthen the nascent capitalist class in the country. He presented himself as the new capitalist entrepreneur during television and radio appearances and wrote numerous pro-business commentaries. Early on, some media scholars noted Mollov's strategic self-presentation:

His desire to plant in the public consciousness the image of the big capitalist entrepreneur is obvious. He demonstrates conservative beliefs, pragmatism and businesslike behavior. Mollov flaunts family values, religion and respect to tradition as his main ideals. Sometimes he uses measured cynicism with which he carefully adds to the portrait of the new capitalist. He likes to emphasize that in a market society everything is measured by money. This image is really novel and impressive for large sections of the Bulgarian society...which for decades was persuaded that the capitalists were the evil enemy, while the poor workers were bearers of all values.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Dani Zlatancheva, "Jurnalistat Legenda Petyo Blaskov: Oshte Zhaliya za Ivo Karamanski" / "The Journalist Legend Petyo Blaskov: I Still Mourn Ivo Karamanski," *PR & Media Novini*, September 3, 2012, accessed March 5, 2016, <http://prnew.info/jurnalistyt-legenda-petio-blyskov-oshte-jalq-za-ivo-karamanski/>.

<sup>41</sup> Koseva, "Pechatat i Vlassta na Parite," 234.

But behind this novel image of a pious family man and a good capitalist, laid a whole sphere of dubious financial transactions. Already significantly eroded by the mid-1990s the romantic image of the good capitalist crumbled in 1996 when Bulgaria experienced one of the largest banking crises in the world. At that time, fifteen banks collapsed and Mollov's FPB was one of the biggest ones to go bust. Along with the millions in savings that people lost, the image of the good entrepreneur embodied by Valentin Mollov also evaporated. But, in the initial years of the transition, Mollov retained his heroic capitalist aura. One of the first editors of *24 Chasa* described the interaction between Blaskov, Mollov and Yosifov as the "embodiment of entrepreneurship, private property and rapid enrichment."<sup>42</sup> This romanticized narrative, however, inevitably omits the unsavory details of the interaction between a bank, a big business association and a newspaper. Although the wider public would probably never know the full story of this new beginning, parts of the less "romantic" side of the history of *24 Chasa* can be reconstructed from a close analysis of the paper's founding.

According to the Editor-in-Chief of the newspaper, initially Blaskov offered to publish the official publication of the Union of Economically Active Citizens. But a similar proposal had already been accepted. However, the banker, Mollov, liked Blaskov's idea of a newspaper model and lent the full support of the bank to launch the project as an "independent" newspaper.<sup>43</sup> In a personal interview, an editor of *24 Chasa* recounted that, in the beginning, Blaskov "took out large loans probably through his personal connections."<sup>44</sup> In fact, *24 Chasa* received large loans from Mollov's bank after which the socialist government passed a special law with the sole purpose of forgiving the newspaper's loans. In turn, through funds from the state's budget the

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<sup>42</sup> Yankov, 14.

<sup>43</sup> Naidenov, 50.

<sup>44</sup> Personal Interview # 42.

government repaid the loans of *24 Chasa* to the bank.<sup>45</sup> Because in 1990 the government was headed by the former communists, this transaction engendered a popular conspiracy theory, that Blaskov's company was the creation of the KGB.<sup>46</sup>

But there is no need to engage in conspiracy theories to explain the transactions between the state, the banks and the nascent private media. These types of interactions were a part of the process of creating a new propertied elite in a society in which private property was marginal for decades. Ivan Szelenyi, Gil Eyal and Eleanor Townsley's groundbreaking book *Making Capitalism without Capitalists: The New Ruling Elites in Eastern Europe* explored precisely these processes.<sup>47</sup> The issue with this approach in the media sphere was that the media owners viewed newspapers purely as a profit-making enterprise. The creator and long-term Editor-in-Chief of *24 Chasa*, Valeri Naidenov, states that besides fame and exciting professional experience, the newspaper also allowed him "to ride in expensive cars and build a house."<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, the desire for profits and the backing of banks, big business and initially the state was not a guarantee for success. Despite the financial support of various actors without which the company would not have succeeded, "168 Hours Press Group" encountered serious obstacles that shed light on the challenges of the new newspaper businesses at the time.

In these early days of post-socialism, the state's control of paper and newspaper distribution was a serious hindrance for new enterprises. The final decision on the number of copies each newspaper could print was made by the state printing plant "Rodina." Rossen Yankov, one of the editors of the newspaper, recalls how the workers at the plant refused to print

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<sup>45</sup> Elizer Alfandari, "Medii, Politika i Biznes" / "Media, Politics and Business," in *Balgarsko Mediaznanie I*, 134

<sup>46</sup> Zlatancheva, "Jurnalistat Legenda Petyo Blaskov."

<sup>47</sup> Gil Eyal, Ivan Szelenyi and Eleanor Townsley, *Capitalism without Capitalists: The New Ruling Elites in Eastern Europe* (New York: Verso, 1998).

<sup>48</sup> Naidenov, 61.

*24 Chasa*'s first experimental issue because they "did not take the job seriously and left work early."<sup>49</sup> Then, on April 11, 1991, the workers stayed on the job and printed the test copy, but this time they set up another trick. Instead of following *24 Chasa*'s request to print a limited number of copies for internal consumption, they secretly printed several thousand additional ones and released them on the market for profit. They sold out immediately and on the next day, *168 Chasa*, the weekly published by the same company, issued a statement that the April 11<sup>th</sup> publication of *24 Chasa*, which contained "many senseless texts," was not "real."<sup>50</sup> At last, the "real" first issue of *24 Chasa* appeared on the newspaper pavilions on April 18, 1991.

Distribution was another notorious problem exacerbated during the UDF's government in 1992. According to the Editor-in-Chief of the newspaper, the state's distribution agency tried its best to hinder the delivery of *24 Chasa* to the benefit of the UDF's official newspaper *Demokratzia*. Newspaper vendors constantly called the offices of *24 Chasa* to complain that they were provided with fewer copies than they requested. At the same time, *Demokratzia* was experiencing serious troubles and was always left with many unsold issues. According to Naidenov the distribution agency would stack the unsold issues of *Demokratzia*, then put a few issues of *24 Chasa* at the top and the bottom of the stack and charge *24 Chasa* for the scraps.<sup>51</sup> Because of these problems, Naidenov concludes that in these months, to write the texts and prepare the layout was the easiest thing. The most difficult tasks were to "find paper which was not sold freely, to persuade the printing house to print the newspaper, to make sure they don't

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<sup>49</sup> Yankov, 16.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Naidenov, 64.

make a mistake in the last moment, to make sure they don't steal the issue, to make sure the state's distribution agency don't lose it, to obtain bank loans and find building premises."<sup>52</sup>

But "168 Hours Press Group" grappled with these problems and quickly gained ground. By the end of 1991, *24 Chasa* was already the newspaper that had the highest non-subscription sales. Because of its high subscription rates, *Duma*, the socialist newspaper, was still ahead in overall sales. But by January 1992, when *24 Chasa* sold on average 280,000 copies each day, it was clear that it aimed for the top and in fact by the end of the same year it was selling more newspapers than all of the other dailies combined.<sup>53</sup> In the following five years *24 Chasa* became the uncontested leader in sales. As the market conditions changed to its benefit, it turned into a model for the rest of the press. In 1992, the first small private newspaper distribution companies emerged and began delivery of *24 Chasa* across the country. In addition, "every morning hundreds of pensioners, students and school pupils picked up 100-200 issues at the access ramp of *24 Chasa*'s premises and sold them by hand around Sofia."<sup>54</sup> At that time, the newspaper company also purchased six German vans and started its own distribution operation by delivering newspapers directly to distributors in cities outside Sofia.<sup>55</sup> Eventually, commercial sales of paper also began when private individuals, oftentimes former journalists who turned into businessmen, imported it from abroad.<sup>56</sup> Finally, in 1994, through loans provided by First Private Bank, the "168 Hours Press Group" began the construction of its own printing plant.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 52.

<sup>53</sup> Yankov, 18.

<sup>54</sup> Naidenov, 64.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Personal Interview # 42.

<sup>57</sup> "Silnite Upotrebiha PCB, Vsichki Ste Plashtat" / "The Strong Used FPB, Everybodi Will Pay," *Kapital*, May 27, 1996, accessed March 12, 2016.  
[http://www.capital.bg/politika\\_i\\_ikonomika/1996/05/27/1024400\\_silnite\\_upotrebiha\\_pchb\\_vsichki\\_shte\\_plashtat/](http://www.capital.bg/politika_i_ikonomika/1996/05/27/1024400_silnite_upotrebiha_pchb_vsichki_shte_plashtat/)



In sum, *24 Chasa* encountered serious hurdles. But by 1992, the commercial newspaper's circulation challenged the press affiliated with political parties. While in the beginning of 1990 an average of 1,100,000 newspapers belonging to political parties sold each day the situation a few years later was radically different.<sup>58</sup> The socialist *Duma* averaged 680,000 copies in 1990 and the anti-communist *Demokratzia* sold 420,000. In 1995 *Duma*'s circulation had dropped to 70,000 and *Demokratzia*'s to 50,000.<sup>59</sup> The deterioration of the party press continued throughout the 1990s. *Demokratzia*, the newspaper of the UDF, sold 39,700 in 1996, 32,600 in 1997, and 25,000 in 1998. In 2002, *Demokratzia*, the harbinger of the Bulgarian anti-communist press, ceased to exist altogether.<sup>60</sup> The socialist *Duma*, sold 63,600 copies in 1996, 43,900 in 1997 and 28,000 in 1998. In December 1994, during a month of tense election campaigning, *24 Chasa* sold 273,000 copies each day. For the same period, the socialist *Duma* sold 102,000 and the UDF's *Demokratzia* sold 68,600. At this point in time, the press affiliated with political parties (a total of six newspapers) was selling less copies than *24 Chasa* alone.<sup>61</sup> In addition, in contrast to the party press, *24 Chasa* continued to grow in the late 1990s. It averaged 252,700 copies in 1995, 292,700 in 1996, 380,000 in 1997 and 221,000 in 1998.<sup>62</sup> With its success *24 Chasa* was quickly turning into a successful model of the Bulgarian press. "Five years after its launch most of the Bulgarian newspapers turned into twins of *24 Chasa*."<sup>63</sup> Provoked by the competitors' attempts to imitate it, in 1995 *24 Chasa* placed next to its title on the front page the phrase "The Original," in order to emphasize its uniqueness.

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<sup>58</sup> Emil-Mitev, *Izbori 94*, 247-248.

<sup>59</sup> Ivan Nikolchev, "Polarization and Diversification in the Bulgarian Press," in *Post-communism and Media in Eastern Europe*, ed. Patrick O'Neil (London, Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1997), 129.

<sup>60</sup> Petranka Fileva, *Medii i Pari / Media and Money* (Sofia, Bulgaria: Sofia University Publishing, 1999), 50.

<sup>61</sup> Petar Emil-Mitev, *Izbori 94*, 247.

<sup>62</sup> Fileva, *Medii I Pari*, 51.

<sup>63</sup> Yankov, 15.

Although *24 Chasa* was the newspaper that set the tone for the Bulgarian press, another “independent” newspaper called *Trud* (“Labour” in English) was its strongest competitor. *Trud* was similar to *24 Chasa* in its praise of capitalism and private business. Its long-term Editor-in-Chief, Tosho Toshev, took issue with *24 Chasa*’s claim that it was the newspaper that supported business entrepreneurship. Toshev described this statement as nothing more than an “advertising slogan” because at the time “there was no newspaper or media for that matter that did not support business entrepreneurship.”<sup>64</sup> In fact, Toshev went one step further by stating that *Trud* treated private business “more honorably” than *24 Chasa* did. Both newspapers advocated free market economics, however, *Trud* was also very different primarily because of its history and the way it became a major commercial newspaper.

*Trud*’s path paralleled the development of the Bulgarian modern society. There were a number of short-lived newspapers entitled *Trud* issued in the 1920s and early 1930s. But the systematic publication of the newspaper began on March 1, 1936 during the pro-German monarchy. The paper was the official publication of the state-owned “Bulgarian Workers Union.” Following closely the official fascist corporatist ideology, it advocated for “harmony between labour and capital, opposition to communist agitation for class struggle, defense of the politics of the authoritarian state and unity under the victorious banner of the nation supremely protected by our great leader—the King.”<sup>65</sup> Thus in the decade before September 9<sup>th</sup> 1944, *Trud* upheld the official line of the regime, which saw labour unions as non-confrontational and friendly to capital, while emphasizing the importance of a united nation undivided by the

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<sup>64</sup> Tosho Toshev, “Vestnikat s Harakter” / “The Newspaper with Character,” in *Liderat Trud / Trud: The Leader*, ed. Georgi Lozanov et al. (Sofia, Bulgaria: Trud Publishing, 2002), 27.

<sup>65</sup> Filip Panayotov, “Stranici ot Biografiata na Trud” / “Pages from the Biography of Trud” in *Liderat Trud / Trud: The Leader*, 46.

antagonistic class politics of the communist movement. All this changed dramatically at the end of World War II.

In the early morning of September 9, 1944, the day of the communist takeover in Bulgaria, a group of armed partisans from the anti-fascist Popular Front stormed the premises of *Trud*. The publication was selected as one of the “fascist newspapers that must be shut down immediately.”<sup>66</sup> On October 20, 1944 in an effort to distinguish itself from the “fascist” *Trud*, the newspaper reemerged under the name *Zname na Truda*, (“Banner of Labour”). In 1946, the newspaper received its old title back and during the socialist era it became the official publication of the Common Union for Workers and Professionals. Up until 1992, *Trud* remained tightly linked to the syndicates. According to its Editor-in-Chief, Tosho Toshev, after 1989, the newspaper was no longer receiving any funds from the unions. Instead, it subsidized them.<sup>67</sup> In December 1991, the unions and the newspaper reached an agreement that the newspaper would no longer be affiliated with syndicates. Under this “civilized and democratic” agreement, as Toshev likes to call it, the unions received 10 percent of the newspapers’ profits in 1992 in exchange for parting with their newspaper altogether. Thus, after publishing 13,000 issues under the banner of the unions, *Trud* entered the vicious market competition of the new capitalist era.<sup>68</sup>

According to Toshev, the union leaders agreed to part with their media outlet because they understood that under the new conditions a newspaper affiliated with a union was futureless. Thus, while “168 Hours Press Group” was born with the help of dubious loans and dealings between the socialist government and the first private bank, *Trud* emerged after a hasty

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>67</sup> Toshev, 12.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 13.

privatization.<sup>69</sup> In this way, in 1992, the newspaper that represented the unions for almost six decades was now a capitalist enterprise and Tosho Toshev, the deputy editor of the newspaper throughout the 1980s, turned into its private owner. Unlike Bulgaria's first commercial newspaper, which was initially a project on paper, the new owners of *Trud* inherited the entire material base of the enterprise in which the state invested for decades. Thus, Toshev and his partners did not have to worry about machines, building premises, and even staff, because a number of good journalists remained to work there. Lastly, although now a capitalist enterprise, *Trud* still invoked respect from union members in Bulgaria who continued to buy it. It is hard to imagine that the material and intellectual assets, as well as the clout it still had with union members, were worth just 10 percent of *Trud*'s 1992 profits. As with so many privatization deals, *Trud*'s transformation was problematic to say the least. A journalist who worked for the newspaper for more than twenty years, spanning from the perestroika to the mid-2000s described the privatization of the newspaper as follows:

The newspaper and the brand *Trud* was bought by a company with a main stakeholder, Tosho Toshev. Prior to this there were some overtures with workers-managers associations (laughs), but at the end, Krastyo Petkov [Chairman of the Unions] and Diana Damyanova [Vice Chairman] wangled things in such a way so that Tosho bought the newspaper.<sup>70</sup>

The “workers-managers association,” that this journalist mentions was in fact one of the major ways of privatizing formerly state-owned property. Under this model, state property was conceded to “workers-managers associations,” however, the workers themselves owned very few stakes in comparison to the managers. Shortly after this maneuver, the former state enterprise, which was already in crisis due to lack of finances and deliberate mismanagement, was sold to a purely private company. In other words the “workers-managers associations” were nothing more

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<sup>69</sup> Alfandari, 134.

<sup>70</sup> Personal Interview # 22.

than a transitional form from state to private property. As seems to have been the case with Tosho Toshev, the former state managers of the enterprise acquired the former state property and transformed themselves into capitalist owners. From the beginning of this process, the directors of these enterprises were selected purely on a political basis as they were close to one of the political parties that was in power at the moment.

Although, the “workers-managers associations” were the most popular form of privatization during the UDF’s government (1997-2001), the journalists interviewed for this study claimed that *Trud* underwent a similar style of property reorganization as early as 1991-1992. What is certain is that in the 1990s media enterprises were privatized in this manner. In fact, there was an attempt to privatize in this way what was perhaps the most lucrative media enterprises in Bulgaria, the Boyana Film Studios—a massive state institution with an extensive technological base and very significant real estate. Established in 1962, the Boyana Film Studio was the largest film production unit on the Balkans during socialism. The initial attempt to privatize it was through a “workers-managers association” during the UDF’s government (1997-2001). Although this scheme ultimately failed (the California-based Nu Image Studio bought it in 2005) due to the change of government, the description of the “workers-managers association” privatization set in motion in 1997 illustrates how the process worked in the media industries. A sound engineer who worked at the Boyana Film Studios at the time explained the practice:

Engineer: When the talk about the sale of the studios began, its equipment started to be ruined, so the price depreciated. Many things were destroyed. The recording studio was wracked.

MM: How did they get destroyed? Did you just stop maintaining them?

Engineer: Martin! We went into the studio with pliers in our hands and started cutting cables! One colleague of ours was finishing her work on a film. We waited at the door and once she was done we went in and started chopping cables.

MM: Why would you do this?!

Engineer: So it becomes cheaper. But then the new government stopped the privatization.

MM: But how would this “workers-management association” have worked? Did you know the distribution of shares? What did you get?

Engineer: Yes. We knew very well the breakdown. Six-hundred shares were allocated for Eugene [Eugene Mihaylov-director of the Film Center and the lucky owner of the “tank videocassette” from chapter 2]. Each of the members of the board of directors received two hundred shares. The Film Studios had three film labs, (animation, documentary and fiction) and each of the lab directors received 200 shares. Then there was us, two-hundred workers who received a total of two hundred shares. They [the people with most shares] already had hired lawyers and were going to become the owners, but the new government stopped it.<sup>71</sup>

Under this type of privatization, the “managers” and never the “workers” were the beneficiaries of the “workers-managers association.” It was perhaps precisely through this type of “redistribution” of shares that Toshev transitioned from a deputy editor to an owner. Even though Toshev likes to present *Trud* as an underdog and complain that in 1992, he was still driving an old Lada, while the leadership of “168 Hours Press Company” drove Mercedes, *Trud*’s start was clearly not from scratch.<sup>72</sup> Quickly, the newspaper gained ground. By 1994, *Trud* was selling 85,000 copies each day. Although this was only a third of *24 Chasa*’s circulation, the former union newspaper was already ahead of the UDF’s daily and within reach of the socialist *Duma*. In 1995, *Trud* reached 135,000 copies, which equaled the combined sales of *Demokratzia* and *Duma* albeit still 100,000 copies less than *24 Chasa*.<sup>73</sup> Its growth continued and in 1996 *Trud* sold 188,500 and in 1997, 230,000 to reach a whopping 380,000 in 1998.<sup>74</sup>

In sum, by 1995 *Trud* and *24 Chasa* were the leaders of the newspaper market with a combined total of 48 percent of the sales.<sup>75</sup> But obviously the romantic stories about the establishment of the new commercial press narrated by newspaper owners, such as Blaskov, as well as the fascination of Bulgarian intellectuals with the “independence” that the free market

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<sup>71</sup> Personal Interview # 8.

<sup>72</sup> Toshev, 14.

<sup>73</sup> Fileva, *Medii i Pari*, 51.

<sup>74</sup> Emil-Mitev, *Izbori 94*, 247.

<sup>75</sup> Fileva, *Medii i Pari*, 51.

engendered, need to be criticized. Although in different fashion, the two biggest Bulgarian newspapers took advantage of the neoliberalization of the economy. Whether through cooperation with banks or through shady privatization deals, the emergence of Bulgaria's commercial press was part and parcel of the primary accumulation of capital in the early 1990s. It is at this level that the discussion of newspaper business in Bulgaria must start, rather than at the level of morality, language or imaginary Balkan "transgressions." These newspapers were first and foremost a progeny of the new capitalist order. Thus, the term "neoliberal" in the phrase "neoliberal media populism," used to describe this type of media in this project, implies also their origin in a highly deregulated (or unregulated) media market. Yet, the story of their emergence, by itself, does not suffice to explain their successful business model.

Both newspapers sensed that the deteriorating economic situation dampened the political enthusiasm of the first few years of the transition and they also noticed the ideological homogenization of the political field. Instead of ideology and political commitment their interests and the competition between them were dictated first and foremost by advertising and circulation revenues. The decline of the party affiliated press showed that the ideological battles of the early post-socialist period were not a sound business practice. Neoliberal media populism functioned differently.

### **5.3 THE COMMERCIAL PRESS' BUSINESS MODEL**

"168 Hours Media Group," the company that owned *24 Chasa*, and "Media Holding," the one that published *Trud*, sensed the shift of attitudes engendered by the anthropological collapse of Bulgarian society. Both groups understood that the enthusiasm of the first two years after

Zhivkov's fall and the chanting of political slogans were quickly evaporating amidst spreading disenchantment. The former dissidents were no longer innocent actors who could blame everything on socialism, but participated in governance and bore their own share of responsibility for the country's state of affairs. The newspapers' response was a relentless criticism of everything political and a stance that portrayed every public representative as suspicious and self-serving. Their criticism was rarely embedded in political ideologies. On the contrary, they understood that the ideological debates of communism versus democracy belonged to a time of the past. Instead, they adopted a populist, crude language that drew a line between themselves (the newspapers) and the entire political class. Hence, instead of entering the crossfire between the party newspapers *Duma* and *Demokratzia*, the commercial newspapers ridiculed them.

According to the Editor-in-Chief of *24 Chasa*, the political dailies continued "Todor Zhivkov's newspaper model." "At the very front page they placed commentaries. The news were somewhere deep inside, where one could hardly find them. All of their article titles claimed something and aimed at persuading you."<sup>76</sup> The two main parties were gridlocked in a fight and so were their publications.

*Duma* and *Demokratzia* were constantly arguing with each other. For example, one could not understand if this cup [points to the cup in front] is white or red. One newspaper says that it is red and the other one that it is white. One could not recognize even one solid fact in these papers. In contrast, *24 Chasa* remained neutral and held the facts in high regard. In its commentaries it took an ironic approach to the state and all of the parties. For example, former Prime Minister Philip Dimitrov wrote a book before he became a big politician. Nobody wanted to publish it and his colleagues told him that it is an unreadable example of graphomania. But when he became the Prime Minister they published it immediately and even gave him an award. This was idiotic. It was a real torture to read this book. I love to read and I tried to read it but I gave up. There was a rumor that he wrote the book as a form of therapy when he was at a psychiatric ward (Laughs). Most likely this was not true, but the book read like somebody's work of

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<sup>76</sup> Personal Interview # 42.



therapy. *Demokratzia* took the affair seriously while [in *24 Chasa*] we used irony and ridiculed the whole affair.<sup>77</sup>

For *24 Chasa* to argue about ideology was a bad business decision and so was partisan and politicized reporting. Naidenov insisted that the most innovative feature of the newspaper was its “separation of opinions from facts.” “It was very hard for me to teach them [his reporters] not to put their own reflections in the reports...There were even some reporters with heroic inclinations. You send him to cover a rally, instead he gets on the tribune and delivers a speech.”<sup>78</sup> But the move away from the ideological battles of the early 1990s did not always mean that the newspapers shied away from taking sides. However, whenever they jumped into a partisan battle the decision was made on the basis of financial calculations rather than ideological commitments. Thus, Naidenov’s claim of objectivity and the respect of facts was not very accurate. Partisan battles erupted often and despite the fact that ideology was in the background the competition between *Trud* and *24 Chasa* was fierce. Their struggle for high circulation sparked what in the 1990s was referred to as “the newspaper wars” (*vestnikarskite voini*) and even led to a documentary film with the same title.

By 1995, *Trud* and *24 Chasa*, maintained significant political influence. The competition between “168 Hours Press Group” and “Media Holding” intensified as powerful economic and political groups increased their interaction with the “independent” press. But the spark for the major clash between *Trud* and *24 Chasa* occurred in the beginning of 1995 when the new socialist government announced plans for mass privatization. The state’s Agency for Mass Privatization announced a contest to determine the recipient of the contract for the design and manufacturing of the advertising materials promoting the mass sale of the state’s property. The

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<sup>77</sup> Personal Interview # 42.

<sup>78</sup> Naidenov, 48-49.

competition was won by “168 Hours Press Group.” But “Media Holding” promptly accused them of gaining the state’s contract through “fraudulent means.” What followed was a nasty war of words between *Trud* and *24 Chasa* during which discrediting information and insults were exchanged.<sup>79</sup> In fact, it is because of this incident and the investigative reports that the journalists of the two newspapers did that we know of the suspicious beginnings of *24 Chasa*, as a creation of big capital and the former communists, and of *Trud*, as a newspaper privatized under questionable circumstances.

The situation deteriorated when *24 Chasa* decided to back the candidate of the socialist party for mayor of the capital, Sofia. The candidate, Ventsislav Yosifov, was the chairman of First Private Bank, to which *24 Chasa* owed large amounts of money not to mention its very own creation in 1991. The owner of “168 Hours Press Group,” Petyo Blaskov, became Yosifov’s campaign manager. In other words, the newspaper backed its benefactor, but this was not appreciated by the audience of the newspaper. Because many readers of *24 Chasa* had embraced its advertised commitment to private entrepreneurship and liberal democracy they were not impressed by the newspaper’s backing of the socialists. Seeing a financial opportunity to this development, *Trud* entered the mayoral race as well, backing the candidate of the UDF, Stefan Sofianski. The culmination of this clash was especially foul, damaging *24 Chasa*’s reputation. In a remarkable (and positively illegal) development on the day of reflection before the runoff between Sofianski and Yosifov, *24 Chasa* published a large photograph of a fake Communist Party membership card of Stefan Sofianski. In this way, on its front-page the newspaper claimed that the candidate for mayor of the anti-communist UDF was in fact a communist. In response, Sofianski appeared on live television and swore on his own children that he had never been a

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<sup>79</sup> Koseva, 236.

member of BCP. The falsification backfired and Sofianski won the election. For the first time, *24 Chasa* started to lose ground to *Trud*, prompting its editor, Valeri Naidenov to publicly apologize for the falsification.<sup>80</sup>

Besides showing that the description of non-party newspapers as “independent” is inaccurate, the newspaper wars also highlighted the press’ adjustment to a political field with receding ideological differences. On one side of the political spectrum was the Bulgarian Socialist Party, which chose as its candidate for mayor of the capital a wealthy banker. *24 Chasa*, the newspaper that enthusiastically advertised its support for private property, business entrepreneurship and liberal values, backed the candidate of the ex-communists. The main weapon of the socialist candidate was to discredit the opposition candidate by portraying him as a socialist. On the other side of the political field, was the anti-communist candidate of the UDF. Because *Trud* saw that *24 Chasa* would inevitably lose readers because of its support for the socialists, it turned its full support to the anti-communist forces. Thus, purely on the basis of a financial calculation that circulation would increase, the newspaper that still attracted union members and was seen as left-leaning backed the liberal candidate of the UDF.

In sum, ideology was not what divided the newspapers. The partisan debates based on ideology were left to the party press, while newspapers, such as *24 Chasa* and *Trud*, adopted an “ironic” stance to these divisions while critiquing the entire political class. What mattered for the commercial press was the distribution of economic assets. Not vague ideas about “civil society” and “democratization,” but capital determined its decisions. Furthermore, at this point in time even the newspapers belonging to political parties were swept by private capital. Amidst the “wars” of the commercial press, a scandal erupted in the socialist newspaper *Duma*. Its Editor-in-

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<sup>80</sup> Koseva, 236.

Chief, Stefan Prodev, publicly attacked the socialist party for the sale of *Duma* to a powerful economic company without his knowledge. It turned out that an “unknown businessman” owned half of the shares of the publishing house of *Duma* and the socialist newspaper had been privatized behind the back of its editorial staff and journalists.<sup>81</sup> Similarly, in mid-1995, *Demokratzia* announced that it would no longer serve as a publication of the UDF and its publisher, the “Demokratzia Agency” was transformed into a joint-stock company.<sup>82</sup> Even the party newspapers were not spared by large capital.

#### 5.4 THE ENTRY OF WAZ

The entry of Westdeutsche, Allgemeine Zeitung (WAZ) on the Bulgarian press market was a watershed moment in the post-socialist history of Bulgarian media. It is referred to by some as the “second revolution”<sup>83</sup> in the Bulgarian press, the first one being the emergence of the non-communist press itself. In the fall of 1996, WAZ bought *24 Chasa* and in February 1997, it also acquired its major competitor *Trud*. For the following almost fifteen years WAZ dictated the development of the Bulgarian press market. With a readership surpassing 70 percent of the audience and its attraction of two-thirds of the advertising revenues WAZ was the behemoth of the Bulgarian newspaper market. But Bulgaria was by far not WAZ’s only venture. In the 1990s, it was the second largest newspaper company in Germany after Springer and with its 500

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<sup>81</sup> Koseva, 236.

<sup>82</sup> Nikolchev, 137.

<sup>83</sup> Gotcheva, 9

publications in nine European countries WAZ remains one of the biggest European media companies.<sup>84</sup>

WAZ's entry in the Bulgarian market overlapped with the deep economic crisis of 1996-1997. This was not a mere coincidence because WAZ's intention was to take advantage of a dire economic situation when newspaper businesses were struggling. It was yet another confirmation of the interaction between neoliberal economics and the commercial press. Its purchase of *24 Chasa* demonstrated the capacity of a Western corporation to penetrate nascent markets. In 1996, the situation of "168 Hours Press Group" was precarious. First Private Bank, the bank that backed the newspaper company, was one of the banks affected by the economic crisis and it would eventually go out of business. An editor of *24 Chasa* recounted to me the delicate situation of the newspaper at the time:

I was very critical of Videnov's government in 1996. But by that time, *24 Chasa* and actually the entire "168 Hours Press Group" was in a deep crisis. We had bought a printing plant through enormous loans. At some point we could no longer make payments on these loans. We were on the verge of bankruptcy. Previously, we were financed by our partner First Private Bank and relied on loans from it. But the bank itself was pretty much bankrupt at the time and the Central Bank had to come to its aid. However, one of the government's conditions for helping the bank was to get rid of me. In fact, the Chairman of First Private Bank shared with me that the cabinet of Videnov was entertaining the idea of assassinating me. Many people got shot at the time. They shot [Andrey] Lukanov afterwards [Bulgaria's Prime Minister in 1990-1991 assassinated on October 3, 1996 in front of his home]...They fired me on the fifth anniversary of *24 Chasa*. The partners called a meeting and they kicked me out and took my shares in the newspaper. I created the newspaper but nevertheless, they kicked me out. They sold it to the German company WAZ.<sup>85</sup>

In this way, this editor described how the dependencies between the bank, the newspaper and the government was entering such a deep crisis that allegedly even assassinations seemed a

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<sup>84</sup> John Downey, "Transnational Capital, Media Differentiation, and Institutional Isomorphism in Central and Eastern European Media Systems," in *Central and Eastern European Media in Comparative Perspective*, ed. by John Downey et al. (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), 128.

<sup>85</sup> Personal Interview # 42.

possible form of resolution. Taking advantage of this situation, WAZ acquired 70 percent of the shares of *24 Chasa* in the fall of 1996. The German company's next step was to subject the rest of the press to aggressive price dumping in order to bankrupt them. A former editor of *24 Chasa* recalls this strategy:

They created a situation of monopoly for the first time. They did it through such a brutal price dumping that if this happened in the United States they were going to get arrested in no time. They simply destroyed all the other newspapers. In 1997, when the dollar was exchanged for 3,000 leva, they used to sell their paper for 30 leva. In other words, the price of their newspaper was one cent. They were losing money in order to kill the other newspapers and in fact all of the other newspapers collapsed and were never revived afterwards. They monopolized the advertising market.<sup>86</sup>

The long-term editor and owner of *Trud*, Tosho Toshev, shares similar observations. According to him, "Media Holding" was forced to sell *Trud* to WAZ. After the Germans bought *24 Chasa* in the autumn of 1996, "their prices were literally falling every day, especially during December 1996. It became very expensive to make a newspaper. At the time, it cost us nineteen cents to produce our newspaper, but we had to sell it for one cent and a half (50 leva). Every day we were losing tens of thousands of dollars."<sup>87</sup> In addition, *24 Chasa* not only offered a price well below the market value, but it was thirty-two pages long and in color while *Trud* was twenty-four pages and was in black and white. Thus, Toshev recalls that they were selling less newspapers, while reducing the number of pages and raising the prices.<sup>88</sup> "We could not afford to print in color. Hence, we repelled the advertisers, who preferred to place ads in a color newspapers at the same price," Toshev adds, concluding that "[w]e had to sell ourselves. I view

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<sup>86</sup> Personal Interview # 42.

<sup>87</sup> Toshev, 39.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

the deal with WAZ as a necessary evil.”<sup>89</sup> In this way, by February, 1997, WAZ owned most of the Bulgarian press.

Meanwhile, the remaining newspapers created the Association of the Bulgarian Newspaper Publishers in an attempt to challenge the German corporation. As part of the effort to organize against WAZ, the editors of several national dailies wrote an open letter to the German company accusing them of price dumping, the creation of a monopoly market and a conspiracy against the Bulgarian press.<sup>90</sup> In an expression of solidarity with the Bulgarian publishers in October, 1997, private and state distributors refused to supply the vendors with WAZ’s newspapers. However, despite this resistance, the Bulgarian publishers quickly lost the uneven fight. The result was the total monopolization of the Bulgarian press market, a situation unknown to post-socialism and only comparable to the state’s total ownership of newspapers before 1989.

In 1995, when *24 Chasa* was the leader in the market its share was approximately 30 percent, its archrival *Trud* maintained a 17 percent share. But in addition to the competition between the two top newspapers, there were other publications which were not to be underestimated. *Standart*, with a 12 percent market share and a circulation sometimes reaching 100,000, was not far behind *Trud*. Printed on its signature light-blue paper and with a more balanced view than *24 Chasa* and *Trud*, this newspaper held a strong third position.<sup>91</sup> Another newspaper, called *Novinar*, held 7 percent of the market. At that time, although struggling, these two major dailies still mattered with their combined market share of almost 20 percent. Lastly, the newspaper *Zemia* (“Land”), which was geared towards rural Bulgarians and tended to criticize the liberalization of the economy, had high subscription rates and as a result held 8

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Znepolski, *Novata Presa*, 146.

<sup>91</sup> Nikolchev, 136.

percent of the market.<sup>92</sup> In sum, while *24 Chasa* was clearly the top-selling newspaper in 1995, the market appeared relatively diverse for a country of eight million people. This changed dramatically with the entry of WAZ.

After they were bought by the Germans, in 1997 *24 Chasa* and *Trud* reached a combined total of 74.6 percent of the market and a year later, their share hit 80 percent.<sup>93</sup> The two WAZ newspapers had a circulation of more than half a million copies a day and with a control of four-fifths of the market they were now dictating the rules. Their strongest competitors barely survived with 3-4 percent of the market share. The MBMD polling agency found out that in October 1998, 47.8 percent of newspaper readers bought *Trud* and 34.4 percent bought *24 Chasa*. Thus the WAZ newspapers were read by more than 80 percent of the audience followed by *Standart* with a meager 4.5 percent.<sup>94</sup> Besides bankrupting its competitors, WAZ also drove out of business the state's publishing house. Since the high-circulation *24 Chasa* and *Trud* were printed in WAZ's own printing plant, the state's printing house was now only publishing a few of the remaining low-circulation competitors to WAZ. With the going out of business of numerous publications, the state's printing house was experiencing a 50 percent decline in production. Its crisis was exacerbated by the fact that several newspapers and companies owed large sums of money to the printing house. As a result the state's printing house was prepared for privatization.

But this was not the full story of the extent of WAZ's monopoly. The German company was not satisfied with the ownership of the national dailies and expanded aggressively in the regional newspaper market. In 1997 it bought *Plovdivski Novini* ("Plovdiv's News"), the local

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<sup>92</sup> Fileva, *Medii i Pari*, 51.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Lozanov, Georgi, Liliana Deyanova, Orlin Spassov, "Predgovor" / "Introduction" in *Medii i Prehod*, 5.



newspaper of Bulgaria's second largest city, Plovdiv. WAZ turned it into a supplement of the daily *24 Chasa*. Thus, one could buy the 48-page long *24 Chasa* that included the local supplement at the same price as the regular *24 Chasa*.<sup>95</sup> WAZ did the same in other big cities outside of Sofia.<sup>96</sup> In early 1998, in the Black Sea city of Varna, *24 Chasa More* ("24 Hours Sea") began publication.<sup>97</sup> Similar processes occurred in Burgas, Ruse, Vratza, Veliko Turnovo, Stara Zagora, Blagoevgrad and many other cities.<sup>98</sup> The end result of this strategy was a two-tier concentration. The regional supplements tucked in the national daily essentially destroyed the regional press. Because of the national popularity of the dailies, these regional supplements became attractive to local advertisers who stopped doing business with the remaining local newspapers.<sup>99</sup> The result was a further decline in the regional press. But the disappearance of local newspapers, such as *Plovdivski Novini*, was not simply a market transformation; it also meant the disappearance of a local audience with a certain identity and culture.<sup>100</sup> Of course, this was not something that WAZ was concerned with. In sum, from 1997 to 2010, when WAZ left Bulgaria, the Bulgarian national and regional press was practically German-owned and without competitors. WAZ felt so comfortable with its position as a monopolist that its director Bodo Hombach joked about it in an interview with the German magazine *Taz*.

Question: The whole press in Bulgaria is owned by WAZ?

Hombach: No. Not all.

Question: How much of it then?

Hombach: Almost all of it!<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Denitza Grozeva, "Vestnicite Preodoliaha Parvata Kriza," in *Mediaznanie* tom 2, 641

<sup>96</sup> Fileva, *Medii i Pari*, 57 and Grozeva, 645.

<sup>97</sup> Gotcheva, 10.

<sup>98</sup> Fileva, *Medii i Pari*, 57 and Grozeva, 645.

<sup>99</sup> Fileva, *Medii i Pari*, 29.

<sup>100</sup> Grozeva, 645.

<sup>101</sup> Downey, 128.

Although there were some attempts to challenge the legality of WAZ's monopoly all of them were ultimately unsuccessful. In March 1997, the Commission for Defense of Competition received a complaint from seven national newspapers. They argued that since WAZ clearly violated the law by owning more than 35 percent of a media market the state should intervene. The courts, however, refused to annul the deal through which WAZ purchased *24 Chasa* and *Trud* and its monopoly remained intact. In 2005, according to the Commission for Defense of Competition's own findings, *Trud* and *24 Chasa* had 65 percent of the audience and collected 61 percent of the newspaper advertising revenues. Nevertheless, the commission concluded that this situation did not constitute a threat to the press market because of the "serious plans for investment of WAZ in Bulgaria and the job openings these investments will create."<sup>102</sup> However, as it turned out, these plans were actually not that "serious" and after a few years WAZ pulled out of the market altogether. Nevertheless, WAZ's owners were keen on emphasizing the "investment" argument as an excuse for monopolism throughout their stay in Bulgaria, because the question of bringing more foreign investment to Bulgaria was constantly discussed as a solution to the permanent crisis. Thus, Erich Schumann, one of the directors of WAZ, warned in the typically didactic manner through which the German owners communicated with Bulgarians that it is dangerous for the Bulgarian economy to represent foreign investors as "aggressors."<sup>103</sup> Another director of WAZ, Bodo Hombach, claimed that its entry in Southeast Europe actually

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<sup>102</sup> Ivo Indzhov, *Mediite mezhdu Svoboda, Politika, i Biznesa / The Media between Freedom, Politics and Business* (Sofia, Bulgaria: Institute for Modern Politics, 2011), 194.

<sup>103</sup> "WAZ na Pat da Monopolizira Mediinia Pazar" / WAZ is about to Monopolize the Entire Market," *Kapital*, February 24, 1997, accessed March 17, 2016, [http://www.capital.bg/biznes/1997/02/24/996242\\_vac\\_na\\_put\\_da\\_monopolizira\\_mediiniiia\\_pazar/](http://www.capital.bg/biznes/1997/02/24/996242_vac_na_put_da_monopolizira_mediiniiia_pazar/)

diversified the market because the German company prevented newspapers “from falling into the hands of criminals or from being subservient to political parties because of financial need.”<sup>104</sup>

Bulgarian post-socialist intellectuals did not offer a criticism of these arguments and in fact echoed them. For them, not the market, but the “street” and its language was the problem. To my knowledge there is no media scholar who criticized WAZ for reinforcing the position of the newspapers that used the language deplored by the intellectuals. No scholar argued that this monopolization curtailed the possibility of a competitive newspaper market that could offer a different, more “democratic” language. What is more, many of these media scholars condemned any criticism of WAZ’s monopoly.

Sofia University political economist of media Petranka Fileva treated WAZ as a “savior” despite the fact that she acknowledged its monopoly. She described the criticism of WAZ as a “post-communist Balkan thinking” that presents WAZ as a “Trojan horse” for the German geopolitical interests.<sup>105</sup> According to her, WAZ brought to Bulgaria “capitalism in its purest form.”<sup>106</sup> Some scholars even dismissed the pre-WAZ era of newspaper proliferation. Iliana Koseva described this period as “the ‘naïve’ phase of the development of the Bulgarian press”<sup>107</sup> and Rossen Milev argued that the monopolization of the market was unavoidable because the “bazaar” model of the early press system in Bulgaria had to come to an end under the new laws of the market.<sup>108</sup>

In fact, the major change WAZ introduced in Bulgaria was the economic model it applied. Through this model, WAZ restructured the relationship between journalists and media

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<sup>104</sup> Downey, 129.

<sup>105</sup> Fileva, “Mediaikonomichestki Portret na Balgaria (1996-1997),” 338.

<sup>106</sup> Fileva, *Medii i Pari*, 57.

<sup>107</sup> Koseva, 233.

<sup>108</sup> Rossen Milev, “Uvodni Belezhi” / “Introduction,” in *Mediaznanie* tom 2, 14.

owners as well as the interaction between state institutions, political parties and media companies. As far as newspaper content is concerned, the changes from the period before 1996 were less dramatic and more complicated. Similar to the newspapers' administrations before WAZ, the German company openly supported free market policies, political liberalism and Bulgaria's membership in NATO and the EU. But, how could it be otherwise, when the newspapers' administration remained almost completely unchanged? Tosho Toshev and Petyo Blaskov continued to run *Trud* and *24 Chasa* as Chief Editors. Thus, although they were no longer the sole owners of the newspapers they still headed them. At the level of language things did not change much either. Yet, there is a consensus among Bulgarian media scholars that actually after WAZ the tabloidization of the press increased. The section that follows the discussion of the economic model of WAZ addresses the complexity of the tabloidization of WAZ's newspapers.

## **5.5 THE GERMAN ECONOMIC MODEL**

As described earlier, WAZ's first move was to buy a newspaper in deep crisis during a period of hyper-inflation and economic anomie. In this respect, WAZ confirmed Andrew Mellon's famous dictum that "in a depression, assets return to their rightful owners." By "rightful owners," this American industrialist meant oligarchs like him who capitalize on the mass impoverishment of broad sectors of society. Similarly, WAZ became the "rightful owners" of the Bulgarian newspaper assets at a time of economic chaos. As mentioned earlier, WAZ could afford aggressive price dumping that threw the entire press market into disarray. As one could predict, after the newspaper bankruptcies WAZ raised the prices of its newspapers several times. In 1997,

the price climbed to 250 leva, which was approximately 50 leva more than the price of non-WAZ newspapers.<sup>109</sup> In a shattered market, a big and stable enterprise can do as it pleases. In fact, WAZ could afford to even twist the hands of advertisers. WAZ required advertisers to purchase ads not only in one newspaper, but in both.<sup>110</sup> In other words, a company could not just place an ad in *24 Chasa*, but the same ad had to be “mirrored” in *Trud* as well. Of course this cost advertisers more.

“Mirror advertisement” was one of the tenets of WAZ’s economic model. But perhaps the most important feature of WAZ was its restructuring of the newspaper hierarchy and staff. In fact, it was this very restructuring that WAZ represented as proof that the company was not a monopolist. Under this model, the journalists of each newspaper were autonomous. Thus, although both *24 Chasa* and *Trud* were WAZ’s property, a group of journalists worked only for one of the newspapers. However, the production, distribution, advertisement and the administration were common—an economic model referred to as “joint operation agreement” in the US.<sup>111</sup> Nevertheless, WAZ argued that although they controlled three-quarters of the Bulgarian press market, the autonomous editorial boards and journalistic staff permitted market competition. Tosho Toshev, who remained the Chief Editor of *Trud* throughout WAZ’s entire period in Bulgaria defended this logic. “The newspapers compete with each other, just because by nature we compete with each other.”<sup>112</sup> This kind of argument leaves one wondering what the difference was between WAZ’s corporate monopoly and the state’s ownership of media during socialism. But, the Commission for the Defense of Competition accepted WAZ’s arguments and

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<sup>109</sup> Dimitar Frangov, “Komunikacionnata Revolucia” / “The Communication Revolution,” in *Mediaznanie tom 2*, 265.

<sup>110</sup> Indzhov, 196.

<sup>111</sup> Fileva, “Mediaikonomicheski Portret na Balgaria (1996-1997),” 328.

<sup>112</sup> Toshev, 42.

perhaps it was precisely because of this deregulated or rather unregulated local market that WAZ remained in Bulgaria for almost fifteen years.

The relationship of the company to its employees was another complicated part of the German economic model. The first strike by journalists in commercial media took place in 24 *Chasa* under WAZ as early as 1997. Then, 24 *Chasa* journalists asked for a 150 percent increase of their salary in order to recover from the inflationary shock. According to the spokesperson for WAZ's media workers, the expenses for the salaries of journalists constituted under 2 percent of the production costs for the newspapers while in the West this figure was around 40 percent.<sup>113</sup> Another component of WAZ's initial experience with the Bulgarian journalists was to downsize their staff. According to the Editor-in-Chief of *Trud*, the company employed 400 people in 1996. But one year later WAZ reduced their number to 250.<sup>114</sup> According to him, the fusion of the administrative, advertising and printing units of 24 *Chasa* and *Trud* was the reason for the drastic reduction.<sup>115</sup> However, this is only partially true because besides administrative and other staff, journalists were laid off as well. One of them recounted her experience in a personal interview:

When WAZ bought *Trud* a bunch of people were laid off including seven correspondents. At nine in the evening on that day I received a message that I am one of these correspondents. I called my editor at ten o'clock at his home and he said that I am not fired. But then on the next day he simply said "We all make mistakes" and it turned out that indeed I was fired. I went to Sofia to receive my official layoff documents. One hour later the newspaper called with an offer to give me back my job. But, this time I was going to be an advertising agent because they decided to turn the correspondents into advertising agents. Of course, I refused...The whole layoff was done in such a dishonorable way.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> "V Pressgrupata Shte ima Stachka," / "There will be a Strike at the PressGroup," *Kapital*, June 2, 1997, accessed March 13, 2016, [http://www.capital.bg/biznes/media\\_i\\_reklama/1997/06/02/845130\\_v\\_presgrupata\\_shte\\_ima\\_simvolichna\\_stachka/](http://www.capital.bg/biznes/media_i_reklama/1997/06/02/845130_v_presgrupata_shte_ima_simvolichna_stachka/).

<sup>114</sup> Toshev, 40.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Personal Interview # 19.

In this way, this investigative journalist and then a single mother of two was laid off without even a one month notice. The offer to stay in the newspaper as an advertising agent was a humiliation a few journalists would accept. What is more, the transformation of a correspondent into an advertising agent revealed WAZ's priorities. But, solely blaming the German company would be an error. Although the orders must have come from its headquarters, the selection of the unlucky journalists was made at the local level. The journalist I interviewed was a union secretary who did not shy away from confronting *Trud*'s owner, Tosho Toshev, months before the sale of the newspaper to WAZ. She recounted that during one meeting of *Trud*'s journalists she asked Toshev why he claimed to value the correspondents the most when they received the lowest salary. She asked why she received 500 leva while a recently hired young, female reporter from Sofia received 5000 leva. "He slammed the table with his fist, the whisky glasses jumped and he told me to go complain to Mincho Koralski [Minister of Labor and Welfare at the time]."<sup>117</sup> This journalist believed that her ten-year long career in *Trud* ended precisely because of this confrontation.

Despite this negative encounter, according to several other journalists interviewed for this study, WAZ was a fair employer. "Everything was completely legal and transparent. The salaries were always paid on time and not under the table."<sup>118</sup> Their positive assessment of WAZ was always connected to the employer's German origin. "You only knew that you are owned by Germans because WAZ was as perfect as all Germans. The salaries were perhaps the highest in the entire press. In 2000-2001 I was getting 1200 leva salary, which was excellent. I used to get bonuses as well and sometimes they were as much as my monthly salary."<sup>119</sup> In sum, according

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<sup>117</sup> Personal Interview # 19.

<sup>118</sup> Personal Interview # 1.

<sup>119</sup> Personal Interview # 22.

to many journalists, WAZ was a fair employer. But this was not the full story of WAZ's relationship to its workers.

There was an exploitative practice WAZ engaged in that has remained largely overlooked despite the fact it was a central feature of its economic model. In an attempt to increase circulation, WAZ engaged in frequent campaigns to promote their publications through the attachment of various media products to their newspapers either for free or at a discount. Books, DVDs, Music CDs, magazines, calendars and many other items were part of the long list of products WAZ liked to attach to its newspaper. In 2005, every Tuesday, readers of *24 Chasa* and *Trud* received with their purchase of a newspaper a free book from the "20th Century Golden Collection." The collection included 30 classic titles, such as Umberto Eco's "The Name of the Rose."<sup>120</sup> A "Golden Collection of Bulgarian Films" was also very successful and lasted for fifty-one weeks. Children's books, DVDs with Russian classic films and History Channel documentaries, various encyclopedias, cookbooks, health advice guides, fitness instruction DVDs, CDs with classical music and many others were some of the series of items distributed with WAZ's newspapers.<sup>121</sup> Besides the fact that this strategy was met with anger by bookstores and other commercial venues, this system was most unfair to the workers who manually assembled the newspaper and the promotional item. An underpaid and impoverished group of people was responsible for this task. While to my knowledge there are no studies or reports of this part of WAZ's operation in Bulgaria, I was able to obtain an oral account of this process from a former journalist of *24 Chasa* who visited the site where assembling took place.

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<sup>120</sup> Borislav Kandov, "Edna Kniga s Vestnika" / "One Newspaper Along with the Newspapers," *Kapital*, April 2, 2005, accessed March 13, 2016, [http://www.capital.bg/biznes/media\\_i\\_reklama/2005/04/02/230731\\_edna\\_kniga\\_s\\_vestnika/](http://www.capital.bg/biznes/media_i_reklama/2005/04/02/230731_edna_kniga_s_vestnika/).

<sup>121</sup> A list of some of the products offered with the newspaper could be found here: <http://www.vgb.bg/bg-BG/ServicesAdditional.asp>.



There was something like an agency in which the Germans invested a little bit of money. It was located in an underground-looking place. There, workers assembled the attachments to the printed newspaper. Many workers were needed for this, because it had to be done by hand. One had to manually insert a book, a CD, etc. into the newspaper and this had to be done for 100,000 copies or more. If WAZ wanted to do an operation of such scale in Germany they would have had to pay these workers a real salary and the newspaper company would have gone bust. While here [in Bulgaria] they gathered a group of destitute people to do it. They really looked very poor. It was not a pretty sight. But the Germans were really proud of it and they kept bragging about it. I really disliked the whole thing.<sup>122</sup>

The account of this journalist impressed me not only because of its content, but also because at the time of the interview this journalist worked for the pro-business newspaper *Kapital* and throughout our conversation expressed the type of right-wing, neoliberal views shared by every journalist in this newspaper. The fact that even he was not impressed by this business operation was telling of its nature.

## **5.6 WAZ AND THE ISSUE OF CENSORSHIP**

WAZ's economic model transformed the outlook of the Bulgarian press. But, the changes in newspaper content were more nuanced. This stemmed from the fact that the Bulgarian leadership of the newspapers remained the same, which makes the discussion about change in content more complicated. What is more, WAZ seemed concerned only with profits, making it appear detached from the political situation in Bulgaria. This also complicates any story about the relationship between newspaper ownership and content.

Five journalists interviewed for this project spoke about their experience with WAZ. All of them claimed that WAZ was not interested in Bulgarian politics, cared solely about profits and

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<sup>122</sup> Personal Interview # 16.

if the newspapers entered political schemes, they did so on the initiative of the Bulgarian editorial boards rather than the German owners. Variations of this answer came from journalists who worked for *24 Chasa*, *Trud* and *168 Chasa* during the WAZ era:

I only met random Germans in the corridors, but never spoke to them because there was nothing for us to talk about. My impression was that they viewed newspaper publishing only as a business. The Bulgarian editors were doing whatever they wanted. They [WAZ] were very linear, strict Germans but they would not control the newspaper's editors because their model did not call for it. All they did was visit Bulgaria three or four times a year to check on how their business is doing.<sup>123</sup>

Another long-term journalist corroborated this view: "There was a German administrator who sat in one office and monitored circulation numbers, advertising revenues, earnings, expenditure and profits. That's it. He could not care less what we wrote. The restrictions originated on the local level from the editors of *24 Chasa* and *Trud*, but not at the level of the owners."<sup>124</sup> A photojournalist for *24 Chasa* gave a similar answer to my question:

MM: What was WAZ interested in?

Photojournalist: Money. Absolutely nothing else. The journalistic part was not important for them. They were interested in advertising revenues. If there were any instructions from them on the editorial board we the journalists would not know. There was a clear division though. WAZ was not *24 Chasa*. WAZ was the big owner. We at *24 Chasa* were the factory where one worked certain hours, received a salary and went home."<sup>125</sup>

Like the journalists quoted above, one can only guess whether during private meetings with WAZ's directors the Bulgarian editors received political directions. If there were any political biases on the side of WAZ they were probably minimal because their main concern was profits. The fact that WAZ left Bulgaria once it started to lose money suggests that if they had any political goals they were certainly secondary. In sum, in terms of censorship of content, the German owners' limited involvement in the political leanings of the newspapers constituted a

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<sup>123</sup> Personal Interview # 1.

<sup>124</sup> Personal Interview # 5.

<sup>125</sup> Personal Interview # 16.

significant change for Bulgaria. Yet, all of the interviewees clearly suggested that forms of censorship remained in place. They linked it to the newspapers' local leadership, which did not change with WAZ. As mentioned earlier, Tosho Toshev, who transformed *Trud* into a non-union commercial newspaper, retained a small part of its shares and remained its Chief Editor during WAZ's fourteen years in Bulgaria. When the German company bought *24 Chasa* in the summer of 1996 it kept the newspaper's founder, Petyo Blaskov, at the helm of the newspaper for another year. Then WAZ bought his remaining 30 percent shares and fired him. But, he was replaced by Valeri Naidenov, Blaskov's former partner, creator of *24 Chasa*, and its editor during the first five years of its existence. He remained its Chief Editor during the first three years of WAZ's full ownership of the newspaper after which he was replaced by his long-term assistant editor, Venelina Gotcheva, who remained at the helm of the newspaper throughout WAZ's venture in Bulgaria. In sum, while WAZ itself might not have had an interest in Bulgarian politics, the very same actors who participated in partisan battles prior to 1996 remained in charge of the newspapers. What is more, Blaskov, Toshev, and Naidenov were not alone, as teams of journalists followed each of them around. Thus, the editorial direction of these papers is not just a question of leaders, but of entire groups of people and respective modes of operation. Then it comes as no surprise that all of my interviewees acknowledged that their work was not free from political interference. On the contrary, some of them shared with me experiences of heavy-handed censorship, such as the one described by a long-term journalist of *Trud*:

RS: They [WAZ] left the former owners to do politics here. Toshev retained his leadership and surrounded himself with a selected group of journalists who were his courtiers. WAZ itself did not interfere in politics. I don't know whether he received instructions when he met the owners in Germany, but the presence of WAZ in editorial policy was not felt. WAZ did not exercise any censorship. However, inside the newspaper there were pressures. There were sacred cows and people one should beat over the head. At that time one of the sacred cows was [Stefan] Sofianski. He was the mayor of Sofia and Lubomir Pavlov was the head of the municipal bank. Pavlov was his banker.

He used to come to our offices carrying around suitcases...So, you won't find a bad word about Sofianski in both of the newspapers. There were cases when I received signals for frauds and scams in the municipality. At that time, a lot of scams were happening in the municipality...

MM: Did anybody tell you not to publish this kind of materials?

RS: Oh yeah! This kind of material would have never come out in print. I was directly told: "Don't deal with investigations of this nature."<sup>126</sup>

According to this journalist, during his tenure as mayor (1995-2005) Stefan Sofianski enjoyed a very cozy relationship with the press. The keyword "suitcases," a euphemism for bribes in Bulgaria, and the direct orders not to write critically of a higher official constitute a serious violation of press freedom. A textual analysis of the newspapers' content could verify whether the claim that there was not even one "bad word" about the mayor Sofianski is true. Needless to say, the allegation of this journalist that there were significant frauds in the Sofia municipality will be much more difficult to check. Nevertheless, the suggestions of misconduct by Lubomir Pavlov, the mayor's right-hand man, are not far-fetched. Pavlov is a prominent anti-communist, who participated in the creation of the Union of Democratic Forces and was one of its representatives during the 1990 Round Table Talks. A Christian-democrat, Pavlov led the tumultuous 1995 campaign of Mayor Sofianski and in 1998 was appointed as the Chairman of the Municipal Bank. In 2005, the State Prosecutor accused Pavlov in a criminal offense against the bank. The charges were dropped a few years later, but the prosecution revived the case in 2012. Among other things, Pavlov was accused of tax evasion and money laundering through the Municipal Bank. Specifically, Sofia's City Prosecutor, Rumiana Arnaudova, claimed that Pavlov siphoned money from the Municipal Bank to his account. With part of the money he bought real estate in France while the rest (300,000 Euros) was discovered in a bank safe owned by his wife,

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<sup>126</sup> Personal Interview # 22.

Dilyana Grozdanova, a prominent anti-communist television anchor.<sup>127</sup> An investigative report by TV7 found out that the former anti-communist municipal servant owned real estate worth 110,000,000 leva (55,000,000 Euros). Some of his property was in exquisite spots on the French Riviera and Cannes, in neighborhoods with prominent residents, such as the king of Saudi Arabia, the Sheikh of Kuwait and the owner of Porsche.<sup>128</sup>

Perhaps WAZ really did not know about this and other examples of censorship. In addition to the statements of the journalists interviewed for this project, the Chief Editor of *Trud* himself claimed in 2002 that after six years of work with WAZ the Germans never asked him once to follow a certain political line.<sup>129</sup> Yet, even if WAZ's non-involvement in politics was true, this does not exonerate it of any guilt since it could have intervened during these ten years. But even more importantly, WAZ was also culpable because it created a monopoly. In such an environment, how could a journalist, like the one interviewed above, leave her job in search of a media that is more fair and accurate in a monopolized market? The problem is that the situation did not change after WAZ left in 2010. Could it be otherwise when Lubomir Pavlov, the man with the "suitcases," bought *24 Chasa* and *Trud* from WAZ?

The claim that WAZ was a detached observer of Bulgarian politics and cared only about profits becomes complicated if one traces how WAZ themselves viewed their presence in Bulgaria. But even before that, the claim that WAZ's sole concern is money creates the image of the company's CEOs as apolitical people whose only competency is in the sphere of economics.

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<sup>127</sup> "Lubomir Pavlov s Novi Obvineniyata za Prane na Pari ot Obshtinska Banka" / "Lubomir Pavlov with New Charges for Money Laundering of Municipality Bank," *Mediapool*, July 27, 2012, accessed March 12, 2016, <http://www.mediapool.bg/lyubomir-pavlov-s-novi-obvineniya-za-prane-na-pari-ot-obshtinska-banka-news195642.html>.

<sup>128</sup> "Lubomir Pavlov Pritezhaval Imoti za 40 million Euros na Lazurnia Briag" / "Lubomir Pavlov with Property worth 40 million Euros," *Novini. Bg*, June 14, 2016, accessed March 2, 2016, <http://www.novini.bg/news/70494>

<sup>129</sup> Toshev, 40.

There is some truth in this statement. Even the International Federation of Journalists stated that WAZ “have installed bankers as media-managers. Is this a sensitive personnel policy?”<sup>130</sup> But the political and economic should not be viewed as separate. WAZ’s competency was not only in media finances. In Germany, WAZ is widely known to support the Social Democratic Party (SPD). In fact, Bodo Hombach, the CEO of WAZ who used to joke about the monopoly situation in Bulgaria, joined the media company right after leaving Gerhard Schroeder’s Cabinet in which he held an influential position.<sup>131</sup> In short, WAZ was far from politically illiterate.

Even more important, however, is their own representation of their mission in Southeast Europe. In none of their statements can one find the claim that they were in Bulgaria simply to do business. On the contrary, not money, but lofty political ideals seemed to have driven them to enter the tumultuous Bulgarian market in 1996-1997. According to John Downey “WAZ sees itself not merely as a profit-making organization” and claims that its foremost values are “human rights, no nationalism, no extremism either from left or right, parliamentary democracy.”<sup>132</sup> WAZ was one of only two media companies that signed with the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), an agreement for a common code of conduct between directors and journalists which included: “standing up for human rights, standing up for the UN Charter, democratic rights, the parliamentary system, fighting totalitarian activities of left and right and fighting ‘any nationalist or racial discrimination.’”<sup>133</sup> Downey’s conclusion is that the agreement creates “space for editorial independence that may be more generous than direct political control

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<sup>130</sup> Wolfgang Luef, “Acquiring a Mind-Blowing Market – The German Media Company WAZ and their Dominant Role in South-Eastern Europe,” *deScripto* 1, (Winter 2005): 10.

<sup>131</sup> Downey, 128.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

but it is still ideological-political control but by more subtle means.”<sup>134</sup> In other words, WAZ’s policy was caught between insistence on editorial independence and the promotion of the West’s hegemonic ideology of democratic capitalism. The statements of German directors of WAZ in the Bulgarian press are replete with civilizational narratives whereas the Bulgarians were being taught by their democratic German friends what democracy really is. Whenever a problem linked to their newspapers emerged, WAZ spoke of the need to “reeducate” the journalists, who from WAZ’s perspective were still attracted by the totalitarian mindset of previous decades. This was an ironic stance since the Nazi fathers of these very crusaders of liberalism wreaked havoc on the Balkans half a century before WAZ’s entry. But the important point here is that there was a significant dissonance between what journalists of WAZ shared with me and what WAZ’s directors emphasized. No journalist mentioned human rights or anti-racism and this makes sense since *24 Chasa* and *Trud* constantly engaged in racism and xenophobia. This apparently did not come to the attention of the German owners.

## 5.7 YELLOW JOURNALISM AND WAZ

The issue of censorship and ideological control was caught between the independence of local editors and the distance of foreign owners, the local political games and the relentless corporate search for profits. The important issue of the tabloidization of the Bulgarian press is also caught between these same power nodes. In one of the most recent studies of Bulgarian journalism, Totka Monova concludes that after 2001, the Bulgarian press “gradually, but permanently

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

became tabloid.”<sup>135</sup> The Bulgarian media scholar, Orlin Spassov claims that WAZ’s main contribution in respect to newspaper content was its “reaffirmation” of the “hybrid press model.”<sup>136</sup> Under this model, entertainment and serious news coexisted in the same publication. Spassov’s example is how on one page *Trud* had the title “The Director of the World Bank Visits Bulgaria,” while on the next one was the title “They Turned Violeta Gandeva’s Grandmother into a Baby” (a title for a story addressing a hospital computer error).<sup>137</sup> While scholars might not fully agree on when exactly the press made its permanent “yellow” turn, it is clear that WAZ’s ownership was a catalyst for this shift. Spassov is correct, however, to use the verb “reaffirm” in his description of WAZ’s relationship to tabloid culture, because signs of yellow journalism were already evident before the German corporation entered the Bulgarian market. *24 Chasa*’s and *Trud*’s retreat from the debates of the two major parties and their full embrace of capitalism contained an element of a shift towards entertainment.

Before 1996, the newspapers covered politics and participated in political battles, but they also differed from the political parties’ dailies. They included entertainment themes and sections which provided distractions from the political and economic conditions of the country. For example, in its 41<sup>st</sup> issue, *24 Chasa* began the publication in sixteen installments of Eric Ambler’s criminal novel *Dirty Story*. A page dedicated to “Liveliness” was focused purely on entertainment. A section for the horoscope became a daily feature as well as a rubric called “Witticism,” which collected provocative and funny quotes from public figures. The sections “Muses” for cultural events, “Four Paws” for pets, “Steering Wheel” for cars, and “Health”

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<sup>135</sup> Monova, 17.

<sup>136</sup> Orlin Spassov, “Mediite i Politikata: Zalezat na Chetvartata Vlast” / “Media and Politics, The Sunset of the Fourth Estate,” in *Medii i Politika*, ed. Georgi Lozanov et al. (Sofia, Bulgaria: FMD, 2011), 224.

<sup>137</sup> Orlin Spassov, “Kriminalnia Zhanr i Tabloidiat,” “The Criminal Genre and the Tabloid,” in *Liderat Trud*, 107.



further expanded the scope of the newspaper pioneer well beyond what took place in the parliament.<sup>138</sup> These were all features that suggested that *24 Chasa* was not a newspaper that only covered politics and serious issues. Some Bulgarian scholars noticed the turn towards entertainment well before the entry of WAZ. Writing as early as 1994, Bulgarian media scholar Ilianna Koseva concluded that the newspapers of “168 Hours Press Group” embodied the “Bulgarian model of Neil Postman’s phrase ‘amusing ourselves to death’ because they transformed the news into a show.”<sup>139</sup>

Entertainment was in fact deeply ingrained in the ideology of the newspaper’s creator, Valery Naidenov. He claimed that “if you can make a professor, a crane operator and a dark-skinned porter (“murgav hamalin”) laugh at the same time you are ready for journalism.”<sup>140</sup> That Naidenov took to heart this idea of journalism became evident after he was fired from *24 Chasa* in 1996 and became the Chief Editor of another Bulgarian newspaper called *Kontinent* (“Continent”). *Kontinent* emerged in 1992 as a high-quality newspaper with serious news and well-researched analyses. With these goals and with its broadsheet format, *Kontinent* emulated the British newspaper *The Guardian*. Although in 1995 there were already signs of a retreat from this model, Naidenov’s appointment in 1996 permanently turned *Kontinent* into a tabloid. A journalist who worked for this newspaper at the time of the shift described Naidenov’s effect on the newspaper:

People used to read this newspaper because it was written in a good, high-quality (“gramoten”) language. It differed from *24 Chasa* in this respect, because they did not have the honor to use good Bulgarian language. When Naidenov arrived in *Kontinent* he turned it into a tabloid. It started to resemble *24 Chasa*. He argued that he changed its format because people found it inconvenient to read such big format newspapers. So he adopted a tabloid format and things changed. The information offered became more

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<sup>138</sup> Yankov, 17.

<sup>139</sup> Koseva, 235.

<sup>140</sup> Naidenov, 26.

stupid and there was no longer enough space to analyze issues in depth. We began organizing competitions. For example, we had the “Slave Isaura” competition [“Slave Isaura” was a Brazilian telenovela popular in the former Eastern bloc countries. The phenomenon is known as “Isauromania”]. A bunch of girls were invited to come to a soccer stadium dressed as Isaura and were photographed. Some of the photographs appeared in the newspaper and the one who resembled Isaura the most was declared a winner. This sort of thing would have never made it into the newspaper before. The newspaper started to fill up with this kind of yellow elements. Then, the newspaper started to follow the night high life. In which club did the elite drink expensive drinks? Who wore what kind of pants and expensive shoes? Easily this turned into a PR section, because certain people wanted to appear on these pages.

The tabloidization of *Kontinent*, described so well by this journalist, led to the decline of its competitiveness. With its previous large format and serious materials, *Kontinent* was different than other publications of the time; Naidenov’s makeover turned it into one of many similar newspapers. WAZ’s vicious price dumping was the final nail in its coffin and in 1998 *Kontinent* ceased to exist and, as mentioned above, Naidenov returned as a Chief Editor of *24 Chasa*. This development prompted the journalist quoted above to entertain a conspiracy theory, according to which Naidenov was a stooge planted in *Kontinent* by WAZ in order to ruin the high-quality newspaper and clear the market for the Germans.

“Media Holding” was not behind in this process. It was in fact somewhat of a leader. As early as 1992, it created the first yellow newspaper in Bulgaria called *Noshten Trud* (Night Labour). Thus, the first fully tabloid newspaper appeared as early as 1992. Initially, the idea was to direct “low quality” materials to *Noshten Trud* so more space could be allowed for serious journalism in the daily and weekly issues of *Trud*. But this changed in the second half of the 1990s when yellow journalism invaded all of Media Holding’s newspapers.<sup>141</sup> In the late 1990s *Trud* had the “mandatory” tabloid naked girl and its titles were just as sensationalist as *24 Chasa*,

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<sup>141</sup> Spassov, “Kriminalnia Zhanr i Tabloidiat,” 107.

including such headlines as “Bill Clinton did not Dig Oral Sex” and “Fellow Drinker Bit off the Nose of a Russian Man.”<sup>142</sup>

In sum, tabloidization and its agents were active even before WAZ entered the market. Perhaps with or without WAZ this process would have only deepened. The problem is that with a monopoly in the market there was no room for a high-quality press and WAZ certainly did not want to invest in a broadsheet, serious newspaper. This abandonment of serious content was most visible in the weekly *168 Chasa*. While its daily counterpart, *24 Chasa*, was becoming more and more of tabloid in the 1990s, *168 Chasa* tried to maintain its identity as a newspaper where high quality journalism thrived. In the beginning of the 1990s, *168 Chasa*, as the first non-party newspaper on the Bulgarian market, strived to be a strong and independent media outlet. It offered important information and investigative journalism. The newspaper was bulky and with its rich content allowed audiences to read it throughout the entire week as a “digest” type of publication. Politics and economics were its primary spheres of interest. Its front-page headline news story was usually an investigative report. Several other titles on the front-page were serious journalistic materials developed at length on the inner pages. But in the early 2000s the newspaper started to become a tabloid as well.

The transformation of this newspaper was important because it highlighted a radical shift in a newspaper that was the pioneer of the Bulgarian independent press. How did a newspaper replete with investigations and analyses degenerate into a yellow media outlet full of fluff? During my search to interview a journalist who worked in the newspaper at the time, I was pleasantly surprised to discover that a friend of mine worked for *168 Chasa* for more than eight years. My surprise came from the fact that he was a graduate of the National Academy for

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

Theatre and Film Arts. He is an artistic and creative personality fascinated by the cinematic arts and as such it never crossed my mind that in the 2000s he could have worked in newspaper journalism. I asked him how he ended up in *168 Chasa* and his answer explained well why somebody like him would fit a newspaper in the process of tabloidization:

YT: I think I fit very well in *168 Chasa*. I really enjoy strange stories and somehow I was always able to discover the strangest stories out there. I did not have to create these stories. I just have this special skill of finding strange stories. I had a file in which I collected bizarre and interesting stories and during the weekly planning meetings with the editors I always had ideas.

MM: Can you give me an example of a story you worked on?

YT: Ah, they are so many. Once one guy came to the office of the Editor-in-Chief and announced to him ‘I created a hybrid between a goat and a sheep.’ My editor sent this guy to me (laughs). It turned out that this man really believed that he had created a hybrid animal, which he called “kikachi.” So I went to his village right outside of Sofia. And actually the animals he owned looked very strange. They looked like goats, but it looked like they had wool too. He called his method of cross fertilization “Cataclysmic Reproduction.” Under this method, which he said he “patented,” he would get up at three in the morning and turn on a constantly blinking electric light bulb. Then he played to the goats “The Rolling Stones” over an old phonograph. He claimed that the animals experienced great stress from the music of this band and animals under stress, the theory went on, start to copulate because they feel in danger and want to continue the species. It turned out that he had frequently visited university science departments and institutes and was in fact officially banned from entering the premises of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences because he tended to pitch his ‘discovery’ rather aggressively.<sup>143</sup>

Now it made more sense why a student of film and theatre could find pleasure in a tabloid newspaper and write more than 3,000 stories for it. This story was a good representative anecdote of the definitive turn of *168 Chasa* towards yellow journalism. According to this same journalist, by 2006 the newspaper was sometimes directly copying the layout of tabloids such as *The News of the World* and *The Sun*. Like them, *168 Chasa* was looking for scandals to boost its circulation.

Although the story about the “Cataclysmic Reproduction” could have made a fascinating script for a film, its connection to the political and economic life of a country in crisis was

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<sup>143</sup> Personal Interview # 1.

miniscule. The reasons why *168 Chasa* and other similar newspapers chose this radical turn are complex and interrelated. First, media owners genuinely believed that the ongoing disappointment with the state of affairs in the country was permanently turning people away from serious politics. In other words, people wanted to be distracted by a strange story about a hybrid animal rather than read an investigative report about yet another fraudulent privatization deal in an economy beyond repair. In addition, fluffy stories provided an opportunity for reporters to avoid doing real journalistic work. In this way, they concealed their newspaper's own corporate and political dependencies, in that reporters were not doing the kinds of work that might reveal some of these underlying conflicts of interest.

But most importantly, this type of journalism costs little. For instance, the journalist whom I spoke to began as an intern at the newspaper and remained at this level for four years. Although he was not working for free and was paid per text, it was only in the second half of his experience in *168 Chasa* that he became a permanent employee under a work contract. *168 Chasa* could afford to do this because he was in his twenties and lacked serious experience. It is hard to imagine that a seasoned reporter with a long experience of investigative journalism would have cost them the same. The cost of investigative journalism and its disappearance in Bulgaria was emphasized to me by a journalist who had many investigations behind his back. He explained that investigative journalism is “an expensive endeavor.” According to him, especially at the current moment of crisis, the publications in Bulgaria are becoming thicker and thicker to simulate volume and be competitive. However, one needs journalists to fill up these pages and the investigative reporter is not the type of journalist who can fill up two pages each day. Instead, the investigative reporter “requires from you to pay him or her a salary without a visible return for two or three months, and in the fourth month he or she will make a hit. But during these three

months you have to feed them.”<sup>144</sup> I was reminded of the precariousness and almost complete extinction of investigative journalism in Bulgaria when I learnt that this same journalist lost his job a few months after our interview because the magazine he worked for went bankrupt.

It is clear that WAZ’s business model did not envision a long-term investment of capital in investigative journalism. Instead they were fine with filling up the pages of their newspapers with fluff. Besides the investment in the journalist, the method that produced tabloid news was much cheaper. The journalist who told me about the “hybrid goats” described two ways through which news stories were “born” in *168 Chasa*. The first one was to read the rest of the press and see if you could discover an “interesting” angle or a viewpoint to a story that was already in circulation. The other way, which according to him happened “very often,” was to browse the archive where *168 Chasa* stored all of the press from across the country, including small local newspapers from remote corners of the country. The journalists examined the provincial newspapers looking for “interesting” news that could be developed further in a national newspaper such as *168 Chasa*.<sup>145</sup> The journalist boldly told me: “I am not ashamed to say that a lot of the news we produced through this method were mere speculations that sometimes turned out to be true.”<sup>146</sup> In sum, both of these methods constituted the two categories of the same process of news recycling with an added “interesting” and “strange” element. This contradicted the goal of investigative journalism to discover and bring to light something unheard of or politically important. Judging by what journalists and commentators saw as WAZ’s primary interest, namely money, one could conclude that the German owners were satisfied with the costs of this type of journalism.

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<sup>144</sup> Personal Interview # 14.

<sup>145</sup> Personal Interview # 1.

<sup>146</sup> Personal Interview # 1.

The sensationalist stories were one part of the tabloid model of the German press. They provided distraction and entertainment at a time when the political was in crisis. But, the tabloidization of the Bulgarian press included another component that contained a political charge. This was the tendency of media outlets to produce and create the news. Sometimes, this practice had an investigative bent. Along with the crude language, it steered emotions in the reader. The creation of news and the provocative language were central to the “neoliberal media populism” of the commercial press because they split society in two. On one side were the people and their media while on the other side were the political parties and the state.

The newspapers fought on behalf of the people, but this was done in fairly superficial ways that did not address the root of the problems in the economy and the political sphere. The media strategy of news creation sometimes had the effect of exposing corruption and greed. Yet again, the news story’s power was in its shock value. It stirred a strong emotion, but this was not followed by an analysis of the reasons that certain social problem remained unresolved. Thus, the creation of news stories had a limited value that only confirmed established beliefs in the audience, such as “all politicians are corrupt,” without asking why this is this case and what can be done to stop it.

A memorable example of this strategy took place in 2010 when a team of journalists from *168 Chasa* and bTV, News Corporation’s Bulgarian television channel, created a fake event for the opening of a luxurious boutique they named “Klaus Barbie.” In fact, no such boutique existed and the name Klaus Barbie belonged to a SS Nazi captain known as the “Butcher of Lyon.” However, according to a journalist who participated in this operation, they chose the name because it sounded somewhat high-class.<sup>147</sup> The journalists distributed invitations for the

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<sup>147</sup> Personal Interview # 1.

“opening” event to 38 Members of Parliament. The invitation stated that everybody who attended would receive the newest model of the luxurious *Vertu* cell phone with a 4G network for free. The price for this type of cell phone at the time was 6,000 leva (3,000 Euros). The hour of “opening” of the non-existent boutique was during the MPs worktime. It also coincided with a part of the day when they were supposed to vote on important new legislation. Sixteen out of the 38 MPs invited left work in order to receive their “presents.” Allegedly, some of the others who could not attend, including the Deputy Speaker of the Parliament, asked if they could send their secretaries to pick up their cell phones. To their great embarrassment the diverse group of politicians representing almost all parties in parliament realized that they were not participating in a boutique opening but were the victims of a hoax that was recorded by the television cameras of *bTV* and the photographers of *168 Chasa*. A large photograph and a title in capital letters stating “Greedy MPs Disgraced the Parliament” covered the entire front-page of the weekly. The names of those who attended circulated in numerous television and press reports and the case continues to be discussed to this day. The journalist who came up with this idea, was in fact an investigative journalist of *168 Chasa*, who gained fame after this case.

This memorable report is one example of a whole new model of media coverage that created rather than searched for the news. Although tabloidization was creeping in during the 1990s, this was a new regime of media. It was precisely through this kind of populism that media aligned itself on the side of the people against their political representatives and the state. Yet, few of these journalists would interrogate this as a systemic problem produced by a neoliberalized economy that rewarded greed and allowed state representative to pursue their capitalist interests. The examples of this type of journalism are extensive. For instance, a journalist shared with me how he and his colleague stalked a politician for weeks until they were



able to photograph him on his yacht a mile into the sea by using photographic cameras with powerful lenses. His yacht then appeared on the front page along with lengthy speculations of how he could afford it. But there were no speculations as to the political and economic system that allowed this to happen. Instead, thousands of journalistic materials such as this one reaffirmed the widespread popular belief that politicians are greedy people who only cared about their own interests. While creative and not necessarily untruthful, after all the “Klaus Barbie” case showed that, indeed, many Bulgarian MPs are greedy and ready to abandon their duty for a free cell phone, this type of constructed news story is shallow. With all of the media coverage about the “Klaus Barbie” case, there was not even one commentary that attempted to think about this material as a representation of broader social problems encountered in every capitalist society, such as inequality and poverty. Instead the discussion remained at the level of morality with lengthy discussion of the Bulgarian MPs unique greed and lack of work ethic.

This process of news construction is always accompanied by an affective charge. It seeks to spark negative emotion towards the political class, but it also combines it with a feeling of revenge produced by the media’s reaction against this class. A journalist of *168 Chasa* discussed an example of this model of news story. One day in the mid-2000s the Prime Minister Sergey Stanishev appeared at a press conference wearing a tie decorated with images of white sheep and only one black one. A vigilant photojournalist snapped a photograph that prompted a discussion about the meaning of the Prime Minister’s tie. As if this discussion was not fluffy enough, an editor of *168 Chasa* intervened by organizing the dressing of approximately one hundred live sheep in white shirts and ties which had the image of the Prime Minister. Besides being a clear example of news creation, this act of *168 Chasa* was purely affective. It threw a punch at the Prime Minister and sought a visceral reaction of satisfaction. Could this be regarded as criticism?

Perhaps in a satire magazine, but not in the newspaper that in 1990 spearheaded the “strong” and “independent” press. The increasingly more tabloid German-owned press sought visceral reactions prompted more by images than analyses of actual political situations.

There were also more “innocuous” type of news creation. One journalist explained a technique used to make newspaper interviews more intense through “putting words in the mouth of the interviewee.” His example: “The journalist asks ‘When the earthquake struck, did you feel like you will die, that your heart will burst and did your entire life pass in front of you as on a film reel?’” While, the respondent simply utters ‘Yes’ in the printed interview, the journalist writes that the person outright said “During the earthquake, I thought that I am dying and my heart was going to burst. My whole life passed in front of me as on a film reel.”<sup>148</sup>

The problem of this construction of news was that it focused on particular personalities and rarely addressed broader social problems. It also concentrated exclusively on the state while ignoring corporations and private businesses. In these ways, media discourse did not confront the neoliberalization of the economy. According to Bulgarian media scholar and Minister of Culture under UDF, Ivaylo Znepolski, from “its inception the new press created a very negative image of the state administration, the legislature, the judiciary and the political field as a whole.”<sup>149</sup> With its relentless criticism of all authority the new press approached the “threshold of anarchism.”<sup>150</sup> Znepolski’s criticism was based on his belief that the press solely represented “pure disappointment” without distinguishing between “the corrupt and incompetent official and the institution they represent at the moment.”<sup>151</sup> One can deduce that as a former Minister of Culture and a staunch anti-communist member his normative assessment implied that one had to

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<sup>148</sup> Personal Interview # 1.

<sup>149</sup> Znepolski *Novata Presa Na Prehoda*, 40

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 59

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 40

distinguish between the “good” UDF representative of the institutions and the “corrupt” ex-communists. However, it was precisely this type of normative prescription that the new press avoided. It did not want to back a particular party, even if it was the anti-communist UDF, with which many journalists and owners shared the same ideology. Instead, the entire political and the state in particular were the targets of this type of shallow and emotional criticism.

The broader, anti-statist logic was explicitly stated by the newspaper editors. Venelina Gotcheva, the Editor-in-Chief of *24 Chasa* throughout the entire 2000s, argued that in the beginning of this decade the need was felt for a publication that “did not just listen to its readers, but helps the taxpayer crucified by state bureaucrats.”<sup>152</sup> Gotcheva listed some of the ways that *24 Chasa* responded. It collected high heating bills and provided expert explanations about the reasons for the high cost. Famous lawyers traveled around the country on behalf of *24 Chasa* to advise people for free. People with high electric bills were included in lotteries, the winner of which had their bill paid by the newspaper. Doctors were invited to provide advice to patients “confused by the health reform.” The newspaper even included pamphlets with advice about taxes, university entry exams, medicines and pension funds.<sup>153</sup> The other part of this type of populism in which media actors pretended to be doctors, lawyers and accountants, but rarely journalists was to provide “the people” with an opportunity to express themselves against the politicians. “We provoked people to cross out the name of the MP who they are embarrassed with. Thus we created a people’s arrangement of the next parliament, which clearly showed why

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<sup>152</sup> Gotcheva, 9.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

the politicians were afraid of the majority vote.”<sup>154</sup> In 2000, on certain days *24 Chasa* even published issues in which “politics were strictly forbidden.”<sup>155</sup>

But while helpful in some ways, as it provided some assistance to the readers and critiqued the state, the ultimate outcome of this strategy was an entirely negative image of the political class, no deep analysis of social problems and the representation of the media outlet itself as an institution that directly fixes social problems. This discourse stirred emotions rather than analyzing the concrete structural reasons why the state had, in fact, retreated from the social and economic sphere. One of the assistant editors of *24 Chasa* claims that it was the first newspaper to distinguish “the society” from “the state,” and “the people” from “the rulers,” which, according to him, was a revolutionary act in a country with a “statist consciousness.”<sup>156</sup> The creator of *24 Chasa*, Valeri Naidenov, also shares similar libertarian visions dressed in his alleged belief in the power of words against the state. “Even if the journalist is passionately in love with the state, the very nature of the words of humans is that they are incorrigible hooligans.”<sup>157</sup> However, a bigger problem was not the division between the people and the state, or the language and the state, but the fusion between powerful economic conglomerates and media. Needless to say, this was to the benefit of WAZ and its “hybrid model” thrived in an environment such as this one. With a control of advertising revenues and circulation close to 80 percent of the market, it is a small wonder that criticism was directed at the “bureaucracy” and the state and not at neoliberalism’s strategy of dismantling the social and regulatory framework of the state.

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>156</sup> Yankov, 19.

<sup>157</sup> Naidenov, 32.

In many ways commercial television followed this model, as the next chapter explains. The end result of neoliberal media populism was the retreat of the state from the public sphere. Under this model it seemed that media trained people to live not only without the state but also without democracy. As the editor-in-chief of *24 Chasa* stated people felt that they “can only change something through the newspaper.”<sup>158</sup> Those who believed and continue to believe that a vibrant “public sphere” could exist under contemporary, post-socialist capitalism refuse to notice the consequences of this media model. They remain focused on language and morality, but without political economy the story of post-socialist media remains incomplete to say the least.

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 33.

## **6.0 “COMMERCIAL TELEVISION WITH A PUBLIC ROLE:” BTV’S NEOLIBERAL POPULISM AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMMERCIAL TELEVISION IN BULGARIA**

In 1998 the Bulgarian government announced its intention to privatize the second channel of BNT. In 1999, it became clear that the beneficiary of this privatization deal would be the American media conglomerate News Corporation. In 2000, the state channel ceased its broadcasts and on its frequency appeared bTV—Bulgaria’s first national commercial channel. In this way, the channel that the state launched in 1975 to pursue the cultural enrichment of the population became the property of the Australian-born American neoconservative billionaire Rupert Murdoch. In February 2010, Murdoch sold the television channel and the rest of his media in Bulgaria to Central European Media Enterprises (CME), headed by the conservative US billionaire Ronald Lauder. In the last several years, Time Warner has been gradually acquiring shares in CME. Thus, bTV swapped one conservative billionaire with another, and one American corporation with another, which did not cause any major political or economic transformations in the television channel.

Since 2000, bTV has developed a strong business model and most media experts and commentators agree with the television ratings that show bTV as the most popular channel in Bulgaria. As such, the history of bTV is a crucial part of the development of Bulgarian post-

socialist media. This chapter offers the most detailed and in-depth analysis to date of the commercial television model that bTV introduced in Bulgaria.

The first section offers a brief history of the emergence of video and the introduction of cable television in early post-socialist Bulgaria, because they offered the first challenge to the hegemony of state television. The next part traces the controversies surrounding the privatization of Efir 2 (Channel 2), the second state channel, and the contentious issues engendered by News Corporation's entry into the Bulgarian media market. The major focus of this chapter is bTV's model of a "commercial television with a public role." In the last fifteen years, bTV launched numerous charity and volunteer campaigns that both in terms of scope and in terms of their centrality to the television channel's identity have no equivalent in the US or Western Europe. This chapter investigates whether the legacy of socialist morals and socialist television play a role in this crucial component of bTV's identity.

While bTV acts as an institution concerned with the social problems of regular people in EU's poorest country, its ideology is dictated exclusively by the flow of capital. In its economic structure and competitive practices the television channel embodies neoliberalism. Yet, with its social responsibility campaigns and with its focus on particular individuals who struggle to survive, bTV functions as a populist media network because it splits society into two parts. On one side are the common people and their helpful television channel and on the other side is the entire political class and the corrupt state. The bulk of the chapter investigates this type of neoliberal populism introduced by BTV and to a large extent copied by Nova Televizia (Nova), the second national commercial channel in Bulgaria.

## 6.1 THE EARLY ROOTS OF COMMERCIAL TELEVISION

In Bulgaria the beginning of commercial television is widely associated with bTV's entry into the Bulgarian market in 2000. Without a doubt, News Corporation's arrival in the Balkans was a watershed moment. However, the initial challenge to the domination of state television began prior to its arrival and according to some scholars it even predated the collapse of socialism. In the 1980s, videocassettes from the West started to appear on the other side of the "Iron Curtain."<sup>1</sup> The Bulgarian government felt a need to respond and in 1985 it opened "Bulgarian Video," a state-owned plant geared to the production and distribution of videocassettes. Between 1985 and 1989 the plant offered more than one thousand mostly Bulgarian and Soviet films. Thirty stores opened doors in major cities to sell products of "Bulgarian Video."<sup>2</sup> Despite the difficult political and economic situation, in 1989 the state imported 30,000 videocassette players of the Japanese brand "Akai."<sup>3</sup> Yet, "Bulgarian Video" constantly lost ground to the flourishing "black market" of videocassettes. With the collapse of socialism, its situation deteriorated as it could not compete in the new market reality, which offered a wider selection, including videocassettes of the taboo genres of horror and porn.<sup>4</sup> "Bulgarian Video" quickly lost its market, but the new medium and the thriving underground market was the first one to pose a challenge to state television.

Immediately after the collapse of socialism, the first private distributors of videocassettes were not companies but entrepreneurial individuals. Garages, basements and attics turned into

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<sup>1</sup> Emil Lozev, "Videoto i Kabelnata Televizia v Balgaria" / "Video and Cable Television in Bulgaria," in *Balgarsko Mediaznanie 1*, 314.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 316.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 318.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 320.



videocassette rental stores.<sup>5</sup> In many standard socialist blocks of flats, the space of the back entrance of the buildings was walled off by an entrepreneurial neighbor who converted it into a private videocassette rental shop. In the chaotic socio-political climate of the early 1990s this market grew tremendously. This type of store offered primarily pirated films and music videos. The illicit trade flourished to such an extent that it became a global concern. Copyright violation on an industrial scale alarmed American film companies and in 1994 the *Hollywood Reporter* claimed that the US film industry lost \$100 million annually because of illicit trade in Bulgaria.<sup>6</sup> Some sources ranked Bulgaria second only to China in the production of pirated videocassettes.<sup>7</sup>

The growth of the videocassette rental industry did not remain unchallenged. However, the response did not come from the state, which attempted to reign in the illicit CD and videocassette industry. It was another entrepreneurial activity that interfered with the business of videocassette rental stores. Around 1993, the fledgling cable networks launched “video channels” through which they showed films they borrowed from videocassette rental stores. As one media scholar put it, “the robbers started being robbed.”<sup>8</sup> Thus it is important to note, that the emergence of video in Bulgaria was an inseparable part of the story of the appearance of commercial cable networks.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 322.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> “Bulgarian Police Seize Pirated Video Production,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, August 15, 1997, accessed March 12, 2016, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/bulgarian-police-seize-pirated-video-production.aspx?pageID=438&n=bulgarian-police-seize-pirated-video-production-1997-08-15>. The situation in respect to the music industry was even worse. The International Federation of Phonographic Industry's director-general, Nicholas Garnett, said in 1997 that: “The sheer size of Bulgaria's illegal CD industry, which is quite disproportionate to the size of the country, has created one of the most serious international piracy problems for the recording industry.” See Paul McCann, “Bulgarian Pirates Hijack World CD Market,” February 7, 1997, accessed March 12, 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/bulgarian-pirates-hijack-world-cd-market-1271544.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Lozev, 323.

Throughout the 1990s, the official position of the government was that electronic media existed in a state of “legal vacuum.”<sup>9</sup> The first media law passed in 1996, but the Constitutional Court revoked it. It was not until 1998, almost ten years after the fall of Zhivkov, that Bulgaria enacted liberal media legislation. But, private television proliferated prior to that. According to Rossen Ginev, by the end of the 1990s, 150 “low-quality” cable television networks operated in the country.<sup>10</sup> Another study points out that in 1999, there were 113 illegal cable television operators on the territory of Bulgaria.<sup>11</sup>

One of the pioneers was the cable network “Krakra” in the post-industrial city of Pernik. In 1994, the neighborhood of “Iztok” (formerly “Lenin”), the largest one in Pernik, launched a cable network located on the premises of a local hotel. It consisted of two anchors and two editors, who were also operators. Once the television channel’s owners purchased cameras, the editors/operators became cameramen as well. Initially, the anchors’ function was simply to read the cable channel’s schedule for the day. Then, the network launched up to three minutes long news segments and it gradually created its own local identity. Interestingly, other neighborhoods, such as “Tzentara”, “Teva” and “Prouchvane” copied the model and launched their own programs. It is fascinating that in the first half of the 1990s a city of 100,000 people had several “mini-cable networks,” each of them serving a particular neighborhood of the former mining and metallurgical town. According to a journalist who worked at the time, the small cable networks exchanged video materials and reports. Through the use of their personal automobiles

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<sup>9</sup> Rossen Ginev, *Modernia Panoptikon* (Varna, Bulgaria: Chernorizets Hrabar, 2006), 258.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Lozanov, Georgi, Orlin Spassov and Liliana Deyanova, “Predgovor” / “Introduction,” in *Medii i Prehod*,

representatives of each network drove to their counterparts across the city in order to exchange videocassettes with visual materials and interviews.<sup>12</sup>

In a short period, all of the neighborhood cable networks of Pernik united into a single cable network called “Krakra” that operates to this today. Owned by one of the *nouveau riche* businessman of post-socialist Bulgaria, the cable network showed “citizens of this city, that everybody more or less knew.”<sup>13</sup> In less than a year the news segment of the network expanded. In addition to regular news, Krakra launched talk shows and by 1995 the cable network, which started with two anchors and two editors/operators/cameramen, employed three separate crews each of them staffed by an anchor, editor, cameraman and several reporters, including sports reporters. According to the cable network journalist interviewed for this study, soon thereafter the cable channel was able to fill an entire hour solely with non-repetitive, thirty seconds long ads.<sup>14</sup>

The new cable networks lacked the equipment, finances and personnel to seriously undermine the hegemony of state television. But their regional focus made them popular among local audiences, which revealed that BNT was no longer the only game in town. Additionally, their rapidly growing profits highlighted their strong standing. The emerging economic cartels viewed them as a lucrative business and struggles for ownership of different cable networks ensued. Because of the lack of a legislative base and the multiplication of oligarchic and repressive economic alliances, the development of the cable mediascape was “spontaneous” and done “in the dark.”<sup>15</sup> In fact, one member of the state’s first liberal media regulatory body

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<sup>12</sup> Personal Interview # 11.

<sup>13</sup> Personal interview # 11.

<sup>14</sup> Personal interview # 11.

<sup>15</sup> Margarita Pesheva, *Brod: Vizualnata Kultura 2000-1986 / Ford: The Visual Culture* (Sofia, Bulgaria: Magus, 2000), 189.

warned that “self-regulation among private televisions is not only spontaneous, but it is sometimes very dangerous: “in the last few years [late 1990s], not once or twice we witnessed ‘self-regulatory’ cutting of cables, explosions of cars and homes and even assassinations of rival cable operators.”<sup>16</sup>

Along with the cable networks, BNT faced a challenge from the nascent private broadcast television channels as well. Similarly to cable television, broadcast channels’ emergence was also controversial. The first private broadcast television channel, Nova Televizia (Nova TV) started operation in August 1994. At first its signal covered only the capital, Sofia, and the city of Pernik. However, Nova’s signal was picked up by cable operators and re-transmitted almost everywhere in Bulgaria. A senior figure at Nova told me that cable networks did this “sometimes legally and sometimes illegally.”<sup>17</sup> “These were tumultuous times, I remember that we were in a huge fight with the cable operators because we wanted them to transmit our signal legally and pay us a fee.”<sup>18</sup> In 1996, Nova reached an agreement with the cable operator Evrokom to legally transmit its programming to major cities in Bulgaria.<sup>19</sup>

By 1995, Nova employed 200 people and had audiences across the country. As such, it posed a more serious threat to BNT than the local cable networks did.<sup>20</sup> The owner of Nova was the Serbian businessman Darko Tamindzhic. According to one journalist who worked there at the time, Tamindzhic equipped the new television channel with “contraband equipment.” Although he imported all of the technology necessary for operation of a television channel, including production control room equipment and cameras, Tamindzhic managed to present

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Personal Interview # 44.

<sup>18</sup> Personal Interview # 44.

<sup>19</sup> Fileva, “Mediaikonomicheški Portret na Balgaria (1996-1997),” 326.

<sup>20</sup> Margarita Pesheva, “Televizionnata Alternativa: Nova Televizia and TV 7 Dni (1996-1997)” / “The Television Alternative: Nova Televizia and TV 7 Dni (1996-1997),” in *Balgarsko Mediaznanie II*, 691.

these goods as “temporarily imported” items. Because of this he did not pay tariffs even though the equipment was by no means “temporary” and had been used for years in Bulgaria. At first Nova broadcasted from a gymnasium refurbished as an all-purpose space with three studios, ten cameras and rudimentary lightening. Nevertheless, the channel managed to produce 24-hour programming and competed successfully with BNT. According to my informant “people loved this channel very much. Mobile production studio was bought only four years after Nova’s emergence and we had to carry everything by hand—cameras, tripods, cables, hardware. But we were recognized and respected and cab drivers would pick us up for free.”<sup>21</sup>

Nova was not the only one to challenge BNT in the mid-1990s. Another broadcast television station that gained prominence was TV 7 Dni (TV 7 Days). It appeared in May 1995 and was smaller than Nova as it employed only forty people. TV 7 Dni was connected to a fraudulent bank just like the newspaper 24 Chasa, which was tightly linked to First Private Bank. The CEO of TV 7 Dni, Georgi Agofonov, regarded widely as a “credit millionaire,” was also the president of “Slaviani” bank, which went bankrupt in 1997.<sup>22</sup> Agofonov, who owned other media as well, stood trial for embezzlement and the lending of high-risk loans, but like the rest of the bank owners from the 1990s he was found innocent.

By the end of the 1990s, Nova and TV 7 Dni built a substantial audience. Although most viewers remained loyal to Channel 1 of BNT, a sociological study from February 1997, showed that the second channel of BNT was watched by twice as few viewers as each of the two private channels.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Personal Interview # 32.

<sup>22</sup> Pesheva, “Televizionnata Alternativa: Nova Televizia and TV 7 Dni (1996-1997),” 695.

<sup>23</sup> Fileva, “Mediaikonomicheski Portret na Bgaria (1996-1997),” 325.

In sum, the proliferation of videocassettes and videocassette rental stores, the multiplication of cable channels and the emergence of Nova and TV 7 Dni show that market challenges to state television existed before the entry of News Corporation in Bulgaria. Yet, it is not a surprise that most commentators view bTV's entry as the first test to the hegemony of state television. Not only did the channel introduce a new model of television, but bTV became the first media outlet to defeat BNT in the fight for television audiences. What is more, the signs of this historical achievement were visible very shortly after bTV's launch. Available television ratings illustrate that in early 2001, only several months after its first broadcasts, bTV surpassed the state's channel in terms of the number of viewers.<sup>24</sup> While the national channel retains a loyal audience, it is undisputable that in the past decade and a half bTV has been most popular television channel in Bulgaria. However, in spite of the fact that many people saw bTV as a modern, flexible and Western channel that countered the old, rigid, state television, its existence was not without controversy.

## **6.2 NEWS CORPORATION AND THE TRIUMPH OF WESTERN MEDIA CAPITAL**

The entry of News Corporation into Bulgarian market marked perhaps the most crucial moment in Bulgarian post-socialist media history. According to one media expert interviewed for this study, bTV had a "civilizing effect" in Bulgaria. But, the "civilizing" mission of bTV was far from without defects. Although, many expected the channel to be a carrier of decent business

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<sup>24</sup> Orlin Spassov, "Novinite na bTV i Preobarnatata Optika kam Politicheskoto" / "bTV's News and the Inverted Optic of the Political," in *bTV: Novata Vizia*, 147.

practices, a series of problematic developments questioned the good intentions of News Corporation. The first set of issues had to do with the manner in which the Bulgarian government privatized the second channel of BNT.

As the economic section of the introduction explained, the anti-communist UDF government that replaced the socialists in 1997 embraced structural adjustment programs required by the IMF. Rapid and massive privatization became the hallmark of the cabinet of Prime Minister Ivan Kostov. One of the most memorable slogans of the time was the statement of the Bulgarian president, also a member of the anti-communist UDF party, who exclaimed “the factory for illusions must shut down.” Among other things, the metaphor meant that the privatization of state enterprises could no longer be delayed. Hence, it came as no surprise that as early as 1998, the government indicated that BNT would not be spared from the wave of privatization and would have to part with its second channel.

One could debate whether this was a good decision and whether it was inevitable. But, what was evidently problematic was the manner in which the government carried out the privatization. Not only did the UDF eliminate BNT’s second channel, but it also embarked on a campaign to weaken Channel 1. The goal of this destructive strategy was to incapacitate the remaining state channel so it could not compete with the new commercial television. One way it did this was through drastic restrictions on advertisement in public television. In 1998 the parliament passed a law that banned BNT from broadcasting ads during primetime.<sup>25</sup> As a result, for two years prior to the privatization deal with News Corp, Bulgarian public television did not feature ads during the time slot between seven and ten in the evening.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Fileva, *Medii i Pari*, 39.

<sup>26</sup> Margarita Pesheva, *Televizionnata Sreda 2001-2010 / The Television Environment* (Sofia, Bulgaria: Faber, 2011), 210.

While public media should not include advertisements, in the post-socialist context the revenue from them cannot be underestimated. In a poor post-socialist country with a neoliberal government that slashes state budgets left and right, their elimination placed serious financial strain on what was left of public television. The budget on BNT revealed this. In 1997, the entire state subsidy was used solely to pay the salaries of BNT's employees while the rest of the expenses were covered by income from advertisement.<sup>27</sup> In 2000, the state subsidy amounted to 33 million leva (16.5 million Euros), but advertisements alone brought in an additional 32 million leva (16 million Euros).<sup>28</sup> In sum, there is no doubt that the state's restrictions on advertisement during the two years prior to BTV's launch was detrimental, especially when one bears in mind that BNT could not take advantage of the lucrative advertising revenues during the election season.

Besides the deliberate bloodletting of state television, the second controversial issue with the privatization of Channel 2 had to do with the selection of Rupert Murdoch as the beneficiary of the deal. News Corporation was not the only contender. While the American company's strength could not be doubted, there were at least two other formidable proposals. One of them was a project of the Swedish Modern Times Group (MTG), which at the time owned fifteen polythematic channels across Europe and collaborated with media giants such as 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, Warner Brothers and Sony Pictures.<sup>29</sup> However, the most formidable contender seemed to be Nova. Most people expected that it would replace the state's second channel because it was a proven, existing project with a growing audience.

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<sup>27</sup> Fileva, "Mediaikonomicheski Portret na Balgaria (1996-1997)," 324.

<sup>28</sup> Margarita Pesheva, *Obarnato Ogledalo: Mediini Analizi i Kritika / Inverted Mirror: Media Analyses and Criticism* (Sofia, Bulgaria: Sofia University Publishing), 153.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.



Nova had expressed its desire to turn into a channel with national coverage since its very inception. In addition, in 1999 the controversial Serbian businessman Darko Tamindzhic sold Nova to the powerful Greek media company Antenna Group owned by the Greek shipping magnate Minos Kyriakou. Thus, not only had Nova built a solid audience in order to prove that it deserved a national license, but by 2000 it was also relieved from its tarnished reputation as a television owned by a shady businessman who some believed was involved in organized crime. Thus, many saw it as a natural successor of the state's second channel and, in fact, during the initial stages of the privatization, first Nova won the license. However, shortly afterwards the Supreme Court of Appeals annulled the deal and News Corporation obtained the license. Nova had to wait until 2003, when it became the second licensed national commercial television channel.

The selection process of a successor of Channel 2 was marked by scandals and legal complaints. The reason for this was not only the government's surprising choice of a project on paper instead of an already working television channel. The privatization of Channel 2 was not solely a process of obtaining a national broadcast license, but it also included the appropriation of a vast infrastructure and an existing broadcast system. A senior figure at Nova explained to me what was at stake at the time.

MM: Why could you not acquire the license of the second channel back in 2000?

BK: Well, because they thought that the vision, program scheme and documents of bTV were better. I personally believe that there were some political struggles behind the decision. But this is in the sphere of speculation and I cannot tell for sure. This cost us three more years of fighting, which led to economic losses for the company because if you have a national license, the prices for advertising are completely different than if you are a regional broadcaster. In addition, regional television's broadcast quality is not as good as the national one. When bTV gained the license of Channel 2, it also inherited the state channel's network of broadcast relay stations and transmitters. Thus, the investment required from them [bTV] was close to zero. We, on the other hand, had to build our own transmitters and relay stations in order to cover the entire country, because there is a law that requires you to cover a certain percentage of the territory of the country in order to

qualify for a national license. It is for this reason that the fight for the license back then was so fierce. Whoever won the first private license was going to inherit an already existing infrastructure. It was a guarantee of remarkably low investment and remarkably high profit from advertising immediately.

MM: So at the end the committee chose a project that was on paper, rather than Nova's already functioning channel?

BK: Yes. It was strange [laughs]. As a matter of fact, everybody in our company back then was really disappointed, because it took several years of efforts and hard work to prepare ourselves. We proved our capabilities and persuaded the viewers to like us. I dare say Nova was loved by the audience.

MM: So you believe that there was a political basis in the decision?

BK: Political and economic interests stood behind this decision. It cost us three more years to gain the second national license.<sup>30</sup>

One can easily dismiss the suspicions raised by the representative of Nova as biased. After all, bTV remains their main competitor to this day (2016). But, the accusations of foul play did not just come from direct competitors of bTV. Moreover, in the following years, it became clear that political bias was only one of the problematic issues that emerged. Another criticism of the channel was the suspicious structure of its ownership and management. The third problem had to do with bTV's promise that it would serve a socially responsible, public function. The following three sections describe the debates surrounding the politics, the ownership and the program content of bTV because they provide a valuable insight into the business model of Bulgaria's first national commercial television.

### **6.2.1 "Kostov's Television": UDF and bTV's License**

The economic section of the introduction of this dissertation described the right-wing government of Prime Minister Ivan Kostov as one of the most neoliberal and anti-communist administrations in Bulgaria's post-socialist history. During its mandate (1997-2001) the UDF

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<sup>30</sup> Personal Interview # 44.

dismantled the remnants of social welfare and introduced further austerity. In addition to its anti-social activity in the economic sphere, the government pursued a fight against the ghosts of communism. In 1999 the government of Kostov decided to detonate the empty building of Georgi Dimitrov's Mausoleum. Even though Dimitrov's mummy was cremated and buried in the city's cemetery in 1990, the former Mausoleum that housed his body still bothered the rabid anti-communists of UDF. Although polls at the time showed that two-thirds of Bulgarians were opposed to its removal, the Mausoleum was destroyed with four explosions as it took the government more than a week to finally topple the building (longer than it took to build it).<sup>31</sup>

This short description of the UDF's government provides an idea of why it might have felt an ideological affinity with Rupert Murdoch and his media. The painful IMF prescribed structural adjustment programs had thinned the support for the UDF. Thus, at the time UDF's government might have considered News Corporation as a powerful ideological ally that was sufficiently anti-communist and neoliberal. Of course, this did not mean that the UDF or anybody else expected that the Greek shipping magnate and billionaire Minos Kyriakou would invest in left-wing television. Nova's history under Kyriakou's management proves this. None of the other candidates, including the Swedish based multinational media company MTG, were expected to be left-leaning either. Yet, for an extremely conservative government the ideological affinity with Murdoch and the luster of an American-owned corporation, could have played a significant role in the selection process. In retrospect, their choice made sense as few people, including the management of bTV, denied that this was a right-wing media outlet.

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<sup>31</sup> For the politics of memory and history of Dimitrov's Mausoleum see Maria Todorova, "Blowing up the Past: The Mausoleum of Georgi Dimitrov as *Lieu de Memoire*," in *Remembering Communism: Genres of Representation*, edited by Maria Todorova (New York : Social Science Research Council, 2010).

In the edited volume, *bTV: the New Vision*, which contains articles and interviews by media scholars, media managers and television anchors, Svetlana Vassileva, who was the Managing Director of bTV and general manager of FOX Bulgaria argued that “from an abstract point of view one could call bTV rightist because of its development as a private and not state-owned media.”<sup>32</sup> In the same volume, Bulgarian advertisement magnate, Krassimir Gergov, was even more straightforward in his assessment that bTV was “rather rightist.”<sup>33</sup> Georgi Lozanov, a professor of communications and journalism and a member of the media regulatory body since its creation in 1997, was the most explicit in this respect. He openly supported the UDF and to this day publicly expresses his conservative and rightist views. But more importantly, he was one of the nine members of the media regulatory body (NSRT) who voted in favor of bTV, which makes his view of the new channel’s politics especially revealing. Lozanov claimed that he supported bTV’s candidacy because it “carried the aroma of ‘pure’ capitalism” while the state television “stood to the left” and “still smelled like socialism.”<sup>34</sup> According to him the media outlet “sounded right-wing and despite its search for pluralism, including a political one, the ideology of private capital was for the first time the ideology of a television program.”<sup>35</sup>

Murdoch had to play the role of the park ranger of the Bulgarian television channels, who deploys the means of the market and competition to finally chase away “the poachers”—the media derivatives of the banditicized, home-based capitalism that had entered into the cable networks and broadcast television (in the face of Darko Tamindzhic). The true businessman against the fake businessmen—precisely this drama turned bTV in the first television which could carry the label “private,” because it could bring to it legitimacy from the “outside,” from the big international business.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Svetlana Vassileva, “Televizia na Profesionalizma” / “The Television of Professionalism,” in *bTV: Novata Vizia*, 61.

<sup>33</sup> Krassimir Gergov, “Globalizaciata Vodi do Profesionalizam i Neutralnost na Mediite,” in *bTV: Novata Vizia*, 88.

<sup>34</sup> Lozanov, *Kraiat na Edin ‘Efiren’ Mnopol*, 129-130.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

Lozanov's argument is important because he is not only a professor of communication, but also the longest-serving member and chairperson of Bulgaria's media regulatory body during its two-decade long existence. His crucial support to bTV at the time provides a glimpse of some of the ideological considerations that played a role during the selection process. But besides ideological commitments, there was also a practical and expedient political reason.

For some time bTV was described as "Kostov's television" because in its proposal for the television schedule it included a number of journalists and anchors who were well-known for their anti-communist views and support for the UDF. The most prominent among them was Ivo Indjev who became the anchor of bTV's major political and economy commentary show "V Desetkata" (In the Bull's Eye). Indjev is one of the most prominent anti-communist and anti-Russian journalists in Bulgaria. He holds very rigid views to the point that one can often predict what he has to say next. He describes Russia as "the Empire of Evil" and has to this day organized numerous protests in support of the demolition of the monument of the Soviet army in Sofia. In a personal interview, one of his colleagues mocked his ongoing conspiratorial theories about how Russia is behind every evil in Bulgaria.

He is straight out of Jurassic park. One can put him in a cage and show him around. Go ask him about the price of vegetables and you will still end up talking about the monument of the Soviet Army, ask him about the soccer world cup and again you will end up talking about the monument of the Soviet Army. He is like a sausage machine. No matter what you put on one end, sausage comes out on the other one.<sup>37</sup>

Hence, Indjev's presence as the anchor of the major political commentary show provided bTV with an anti-communist outlook. In *BTV: the New Vision*, the Managing Director of News Corporation's channel, Svetlana Vassileva, critiqued the description of bTV as "Kostov's television," but acknowledged that "to some extent the presence of Ivo Indjev, as the author of

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<sup>37</sup> Personal Interview # 32.

the first commentary show on the channel, linked us to the ‘blue’ government and perhaps Indjev himself did not do enough to counter these associations.”<sup>38</sup> Although Indjev was an extreme example, there were other journalists with similar views who found a place in bTV. Another prominent example was Svetla Petorva who led the political show “Seismograph.” She had earned the respect of the UDF for her active participation in the strikes in state media that contributed to the overthrow of the BSP government.

For many people, the appointment of figures such as Indjev and Petrova was a signal that they were a part of the deal to select bTV as the heir of the state’s second channel. In fact, this was partially acknowledged, not without pride, by one of these journalists during a personal interview.

Later, people from bTV told me that one of the reasons why Kostov gave them a license was that when they went to ask him for it, they mentioned my name and told him that I will work there and this was enough to tip the balance to their benefit. I am not sure if this is true. I mean...[pause] I am sure they mentioned my name, but I can’t speculate whether this really changed the balance.<sup>39</sup>

It is also well-known that the Prime Minister Ivan Kostov was not an inactive observer in what took place in Bulgarian media and throughout his mandate he clashed with media outlets. In *bTV: The New Vision*, bTV’s executive director Albert Parsons mentions that Kostov “sometimes” told him that “he is not very happy with part of the things we do, but this never led to something which I can describe as pressure. Once he told me he did not like “Slavi’s show” because he attacked him too much.”<sup>40</sup> We can only wonder what else they talked about and how frequently, but it is curious enough that the Prime Minister had regular meetings with News Corporation’s emissary to bTV during which they discussed the content of the media outlet.

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<sup>38</sup> Vassileva, 61.

<sup>39</sup> Personal Interview # 39.

<sup>40</sup> Albert Parsons, “Nikoga ne Vzemame Strana” / “We Never Take Sides,” in *bTV: Novata Vizia*, 100.

### 6.2.2 Who Owned bTV?

Besides the question of political dependency that overshadowed bTV's entry on the Bulgarian market, there was also another very serious issue connected to its ownership. Specifically, the concern was with the role of Krassimir Gergov in bTV. Gergov, who in 1994 became the owner of what to this day remains the biggest advertising agency in Bulgaria, figured as a "consultant" to News Corporation. However, many people suspected that he was not just a "consultant," but also owned shares in bTV. This was illegal under the 1998 media regulatory law that prohibited owners of advertisement agencies from also owning electronic media outlets. Thus many suspected that Gergov's "consultancy" was simply one way to avoid regulation.

Krassimir Gergov is certainly one of the most important figures in post-socialist Bulgaria. Similarly to the early newspaper market when thousands of new titles emerged every day, the early advertisement market also saw the proliferation of hundreds of advertising agencies. By the mid-1990s many of these newspapers and advertising agencies were going out of business, while the strongest ones solidified their position. In 1994, Gergov's company, Kres, was already the strongest advertising agency. Staffed by sixty employees with an average age of 28, Kres presented itself as a creative and youthful company that opened Bulgaria to modern advertising.<sup>41</sup> However, its success was not primarily due to its image as it was to Gergov's capacity to sign a contract with BNT that was highly detrimental to state television, but very lucrative to him. In the mid-1990s, Gergov, who has maintained a strong anti-communist stance, signed a deal with state television under which Kres acquired the right to manage the state channels' advertising slots. Under this contract only Kres and no other company could do this.

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<sup>41</sup> Zdravko Raykov, "Reklamata v Balgaria" / "Advertising in Bulgaria," in *Balgarsko Mediaznanie II*, 341.

Essentially, this created an advertising monopoly in electronic media. In the following years, companies linked to Gergov received the best prices for advertising slots on national television. “This allowed him to create a network of different companies that turned him into a mythological persona in the advertising business.”<sup>42</sup>

Some people, including Gergov himself, claimed that the law that prevented the ownership of an advertising agency and television station at the same time was written to thwart him from monopolizing not only advertising but media as well. It was impossible to check whether he owned shares because the company through which Murdoch invested in Bulgaria, Balkan News Network, was registered in the offshore zone of Delaware. In this zone, public access to the list of shareholders was not allowed and the company never commented on Gergov’s role.<sup>43</sup> It was declared that News Corporation held stakes in Balkan News Corporation and the company sent its representative Albert Parsons to fight for the license. But who else had shares in Balkan News Corporation and whether Gergov owned something remained unknown for nearly a decade. He denied having shares at Balkan News Corporation and described his role in the project in the following way:

Gergov: I called News Corporation and told them that I want to meet them. We met in Poland in mid-September 1999. It was at that time that I persuaded News Corporation to invest in Bulgaria.

Interviewers: With what arguments?

Gergov: With the argument that this is a developing market and they will find it interesting to create such a project.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Dimitar Peev, “Edno Licemerie po Malko: Krassimir Gergov Prizna Publichno , che e Sadruzchnik v bTV” / “One less Hypocrisy: Krassimir Gergov Admitted Publicly that he is a Co-Owner in bTV,” *Kapital*, June 4, 2010, accessed February 12, 2016, [http://www.capital.bg/biznes/media\\_i\\_reklama/2010/06/04/912007\\_edno\\_licemerie\\_po-malko/](http://www.capital.bg/biznes/media_i_reklama/2010/06/04/912007_edno_licemerie_po-malko/).

<sup>43</sup> “Krassimir Gergov Prizna che e bil i e Sobstvenik v bTV” / “Krassimir Gergov Admitted that he was and Continues to be an Owner in bTV,” June 1, 2010, accessed May 1, 2015, [http://www.dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2010/06/01/910238\\_krassimir\\_gergov\\_prizna\\_che\\_e\\_bil\\_i\\_e\\_sobstvenik\\_v\\_bi/](http://www.dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2010/06/01/910238_krassimir_gergov_prizna_che_e_bil_i_e_sobstvenik_v_bi/).

<sup>44</sup> Gergov, 81.



The story that he “persuaded” Murdoch that investing in Bulgaria would be “interesting” and that he only served as a consultant became even more suspicious when bTV revealed who would serve as the managers of bTV. It turned out that most of the people in top positions came directly from Gergov’s company and were some of his most valued employees. Svetlana Vassileva, the managing director of Balkan News Corporation, was previously a director of Traida, one of the first private television channels in Bulgaria owned by Krassimir Gergov. Vicki Politova, the CEO of bTV and Margarita Alexandrova, the director of “analysis and research,” came from an advertising agency associated with Gergov.<sup>45</sup> However, the advertising mogul argued that they were selected simply because they were good professionals and he himself was chosen as a consultant because of his experience, success and contacts in the US. Indeed, Gergov’s links to the US media industry could not be underestimated as he collaborated with CNN in his attempt to create private television channel in the mid-1990s.

In Atlanta, where the headquarters of CNN are, I was able to meet all of the most significant media people as well as many influential persons outside of media...Al Gore, Jimmy Carter, Hillary Clinton, and the President of Mexico. In addition, I knew almost all of the bosses and owners of the biggest media companies. I already mentioned Ted Turner. I went to a dinner with him and Jane Fonda. The only person I did not know was Murdoch, but at that time he was in a conflict with Ted Turner, so I heard a lot about him. Ted constantly gave conferences and spoke against him and in one interview he even expressed regret that he did not push Murdoch down a slope at Mont Blanc where the two were skiing.<sup>46</sup>

Throughout the years Gergov continued to emphasize his personal contacts and professional success as the reason behind his selection as a “consultant” to News Corporation. Sometimes, he evaded the question of whether he owned shares in Balkan News Corporation in violation of Bulgaria’s media law. Other times, he was cynical. When in 2001 a journalist asked him about the nature of his links to bTV, he answered that News Corporation’s representatives

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<sup>45</sup> “Author’s Bios,” in *bTV: Novata Vizia*, 279-280.

<sup>46</sup> Gergov, 83.

were in Bulgaria “and were looking for a luxurious car so I drove them around and took them sightseeing in Sofia. I helped them navigate the capital. I made them coffee, etc.”<sup>47</sup> In another interview he answered that his role was to supply bTV’s studios with spring water.<sup>48</sup>

The charade continued for a decade until Gergov’s mockery of media regulation ended in 2009. One of the very first laws passed by the newly elected conservative government of Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (CEDB), whose Finance Minister was the infamous neoliberal and World Bank economist Simeon Dyankov, was yet another portion of media deregulation. At the time, the law that prohibited advertising agencies from owning media outlets was repealed. Almost immediately, Krasimir Gergov admitted that he owned 6 percent of bTV’s shares and confirmed what everybody knew. Thus, in the 2000s Gergov owned the largest advertising agency and his company also had signed a contract with the state’s channel to manage its advertising sales. One of the policies of BNT was that discounts on advertising slots could be arranged only if a company bought advertising time worth more than 1,5 million leva (750,000 Euros). This was a very rigid policy that redirected companies to the more supple procedure of bTV.<sup>49</sup> For Gergov, it was a win-win situation. bTV collected the bulk of advertising revenue, while Gergov also benefited from his contracts with the state channel.

In 2006, there were 188 television channels in Bulgaria, three of them with national coverage—BTV, BNT and Nova, which finally obtained its national license in 2003. 47.36 percent of total advertising profits went to BTV, 30.20 percent went to Nova and only 6.0 percent went to the state channel. It must also be noted that 73 percent of all investment in media

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<sup>47</sup> “Krasimir Gergov Prizna che e bil i e Sobstvenik v bTV”

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Pesheva, *Televizionnata Sreda 2001-2010*, 223.

advertising was in television.<sup>50</sup> Channel 1 struggled because under the law public television was prohibited from broadcasting more than 15 minutes of advertisement each day and it could not include more than five minutes of ads in a single hour (for example, during prime-time).<sup>51</sup> The situation of the state channel was further exacerbated by the succession of neoliberal governments which reduced its subsidy. In 2003, its budget was reduced by a whopping 6 million leva (3 million Euro). While BNT estimated that it needed 52 million leva, the government provided it with less than 35 million. However, bTV was committed to bankrupting the national channel and took it to court in 2003 claiming that the subsidy to the national channel created “unfair competition.”<sup>52</sup> Under these pressures the national channel could barely compete with bTV, while through Gergov, Balkan News Corporation controlled the lucrative circuit of advertising revenues. But this was not all.

bTV was a major proponent for the establishment of a television audience rating system. In fact, it became the first channel to include clauses in its contracts with producers that required media products to maintain a certain rating. It was also the first one to tie prices for advertising to the ratings of particular hours of the day.<sup>53</sup> The first television audience measurement company in Bulgaria was TNS/TV Plan with which bTV signed a contract. The co-owner of the company was Kancho Stoychev who attempted to create a television ratings company in the mid-1990s with the support of none other than Krassimir Gergov. Gergov “admits” that at the time he helped Stoychev with “personal funds” to create a rating agency but nothing came out of it.<sup>54</sup> But Gergov denied that he had anything to do with TNS/TV Plan, despite Stoychev’s participation in

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 236

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 227

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 212

<sup>54</sup> Gergov, 93.

it. Needless to say, this did not sound convincing and many analysts strongly believed that Gergov was also behind the television audience measurement company.<sup>55</sup>

TNS/TV Plan consistently showed that BTV was by far the most watched television channel. This was extremely important, because under the new system the price of ads was calculated based on “Gross Rating Points” (GRPs) measured by TNS/TV Plan. A GRP indicated the percentage of successful reach to a particular target audience. Thus, if the targeted audience were men between the age of 18 and 34 and the television channel guaranteed 9 GRPs that meant that 9 percent of men in this age group watched its program during this time slot. If the channel charged 200 leva per GRP, then the final cost for a standard 30 second long ad would be 1800 leva.<sup>56</sup> This new system completely changed the relationship between the audience, the advertisers and the media outlet. Thus, the suspicion that Gergov controlled the measurement company, too, raised serious concerns for bTV’s competitors because this threatened their advertising revenues.

It did not take long until BNT and Nova expressed their doubts about the accuracy of TNS/TV Plan, which consistently showed bTV ahead.<sup>57</sup> In 2005, the conflict between Nova and bTV “almost turned into a war” after TNS/TV Plan showed that “Star Academy,” a reality show that Nova was really proud of, was lagging substantially behind bTV’s programming.<sup>58</sup> Nova felt that Gergov had managed to completely close the circle between a media outlet, a television audience measurement company and an advertising agency. This engendered another curious situation in the Bulgarian media sphere. In 2006, a second audience rating company, GfK

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<sup>55</sup> Veislava Antonova, “Bitkata Mezhdur GfK i TNS/TV Plan Zapochna, “The Battle between GfK and TNS/TV Plan Had Began” Kapital, November 17, 2006, accessed January 7, 2016, [http://www.capital.bg/biznes/media\\_i\\_reklama/2006/11/17/294611\\_bitkata\\_mejdu\\_gfk\\_i\\_tnstv\\_plan\\_zapochna/](http://www.capital.bg/biznes/media_i_reklama/2006/11/17/294611_bitkata_mejdu_gfk_i_tnstv_plan_zapochna/).

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Pesheva, *Televizionnata Sreda 2001-2010*, 237.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

Audience Research Bulgaria (GARB), entered the Bulgarian market and Nova and BNT became its customers. Thus, at that point in Bulgaria something akin to a dual currency system existed. Frequently, GARB was favorable to Nova, while TNS/TV Plan continued to favor bTV. The dual system continued to exist until 2011, when GARB bought TNS/TV Plan. But then Nova was once again suspicious of the ratings company. In 2012 another ratings company, MediaResearch, entered the Bulgarian market to compete with GARB. Since 2014, the American rating agency Nielsen has been a majority stakeholder in MediaResearch. Nova has a contract with it and the dual currency system continues to exist. In a personal interview a senior figure at Nova explained the channel's struggle with ratings companies.

We have been fighting a war with the ratings agencies for many years. We suspected that the measurements were not fair, that there were not enough measuring devices installed and that they are not up-to-date. Behind this was the hand of bTV, to put it mildly. There were doubts about the ownership of the TNS/TV Plan and that the real owner behind Stoychev and Raychev was Gergov. There were also doubts at the time, which turned out to be true, that Gergov has shares in bTV. It was 'an octopus structure' because one man had an ownership in a media outlet, the only rating agency that measured the audience, and he owned advertising agencies. A complete, closed circle. Last year [2014] we switched to Nielsen. According to their ratings we are number one. I have not seen GARB's rating in the last year because we stopped getting them since October. We stopped paying the subscription to them. We decided that it makes no sense to pay them to lie to us. If our suspicions are true, this means we paid them so they can rob us because by artificially deflating our ratings they reduced our profits. The rating measurements are directly tied to the profits from advertising.<sup>59</sup>

### **6.2.3 A Commercial Channel with Public Functions?**

The third controversy that News Corporation sparked was related to the content of the new channel. One of the major strategies that Balkan News Corporation used when it lobbied to receive the license of the second state channel was to represent bTV as a channel with a public

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<sup>59</sup> Personal Interview # 44

function. Gergov claimed that the idea behind the model of bTV was “undoubtedly” that of a television with a “public character.”<sup>60</sup> For Vicki Politova, the CEO of bTV, this meant serving the interests of the viewer and preserving “national culture” and “identity.”<sup>61</sup> For the Americans who participated in this project this vision was aligned with American conservative ideology. According to Albert Parsons, bTV had to be “family television,” that promoted “family values.”<sup>62</sup> This emphasis was not as fruitful in the Bulgarian context as it is in the US Midwest and South. Even anti-communist, conservative scholars did not perceive it as a successful strategy. According to Ivaylo Znepolski, “the concept of ‘family television’ is unsuitable for the Bulgarian reality today, because the traditional Bulgarian family is in a deep crisis...If bTV was really a family television, it would have been doomed to fail.”<sup>63</sup> High divorce rates, the growing tendency of couples not to marry, the growing number of children born out of wedlock, and the timid, but steady appearance of gay and lesbian discourses were indeed a challenge to the traditional Bulgarian family. In addition, numerous studies show that Bulgaria remains one of the most atheistic countries in the world. Thus, News Corporation’s import of the rhetoric of “family values” was out of step with Bulgaria culture. Yet, the idea of “family television” complemented the representation of bTV as committed to the public. bTV realized that it would replace a state channel founded as an educational and cultural institution that would enlighten the population. Although its functions changed after 1989, throughout its 25 years, the second state channel was a public institution with a social commitment. For this reason, in its program proposal bTV claimed that it would also serve the public—despite its commercial nature.

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<sup>60</sup> Gergov, 82.

<sup>61</sup> Politova, 25.

<sup>62</sup> Parsons, 98

<sup>63</sup> Ivaylo Znepolski, “Televizionnata Mesa Obshtestvoto na Spaktakala” / “Television in the Society of the Spectacle,” in bTV: Novata Vizia, 122.

That this was only a rhetorical strategy to obtain the national license became clear immediately after the channel went on air. This is well documented in Western scholarly literature on media. The birthday of bTV (October 1, 2000) coincided with the public holiday that commemorates the national heroes who died in the struggle against the Ottoman Empire. But while the state channel aired live ceremonies commemorating the occasion, bTV showed Harrison Ford's *Blade Runner*.<sup>64</sup>

Initially, bTV emphasized heavily American programming. During its primetime hours, bTV featured Hollywood blockbusters and B-rated action movies, covering the same time slot as the two most popular political and social TV magazine shows on Kanal 1 [Channel1]... the only new shows added to the already familiar children's cartoons were syndicated reruns of *ALF* and *Perfect Strangers*, which were previously twice aired on Kanal 1....In addition to such internationally popular staples as *Funniest People and Animals*, bTV offers Bulgarian viewers a taste of American television with such shows as *Everybody Loves Raymond*, *Friends*, *Dharma and Greg*, *Married with Children*, *Vital Signs*, *Fast Lane*, *Ally McBeal*, and more recently *Mad about You*, *Malcolm in the Middle*, and *24*.<sup>65</sup>

American entertainment dominated the program, while European and Bulgarian media products were marginal. The whole concept of a television with a "public function" appeared as a ruse. As a result, "the lack of new, culturally engaging programming started a public wave of discontent against the fledgling private channel."<sup>66</sup> The first clash was precipitated by the American "wrestling" shows *WWE SmackDown* and *WWE Raw*, which aired during prime-time. The Council of Electronic Media was forced to examine whether these crass programs were appropriate for children.<sup>67</sup> The aggression and vulgar language of "The Rock," "Stone Cold" and "Triple H" of American commercial "wrestling" (WWE), all of whom were shown during prime-time, neither fit the Bulgarian understanding of "family values" nor the concept of "social

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<sup>64</sup> Elza Ibroscheva and Maria Raicheva-Stover, "First Green Is Always Gold: An Examination of the First Private National Channel in Bulgaria," in *Negotiating Democracy*, 228.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 229

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 230

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 256

responsibility.” A public discussion ensued whose participants included not only bTV managers, but also representatives of the police, the teacher’s union, the Ministry of Education, the State’s Agency for Children’s Safety and the State’s Agency for Youth and Sports. MPs, well-known intellectuals, NGOs, media professionals’ organizations, members of the “Parents” Association and many other state and civil society representatives were also involved.<sup>68</sup> Eventually, CEM had to step out of its usual inactivity and force bTV to show “wrestling” only after 11pm.

In sum, the enthusiastic promises of concern for the public interest and “family values,” evaporated immediately after bTV went on air. Its claim that its content would contain at least 55 percent of European and Bulgarian media products was simply a lie. In January 2001, bTV showed 2.73 percent Bulgarian and European products, while American content fully dominated the channel.<sup>69</sup> Thus, instead of celebrating the arrival of a modern, culturally rich American channel, large segments of the Bulgarian population protested against its content. Because of the public outcry, “CEM ordered a special monitoring of bTV’s content and a reevaluation of News Corporation’s contract for the broadcasting license.”<sup>70</sup> Nothing came out of this effort, but it was clear to everybody, except for the anti-communist right, that Western corporations were not inherently concerned for the local, public interest.

### **6.3 BTV’S NEOLIBERAL MEDIA POPULISM**

Bulgarian scholar Ivaylo Ditechev explains that those in Bulgaria “who are in touch with the West to the extent that they know who Murdoch is, are by definition anti-communists and for the

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<sup>68</sup> Pesheva, *Obarnato Ogledalo*, 34.

<sup>69</sup> Ibroscheva and Raicheva-Stover, 230.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.



strongly ideological right-wing in this country, everything private is better than the public.”<sup>71</sup> But it was not only the anti-communists who expected that bTV would introduce positive business practices in the country. Common people, regardless of political or ethnic belonging, believed that News Corporation would be transparent, independent from political parties and economic elites and committed to a healthier public sphere. Instead bTV’s ownership was dubious, the UDF exerted an influence over it in the beginning and, finally, it inundated the viewer not with socially important and educational programming but with cheap American entertainment. While these three features reveal that the positive role of Western corporations was exaggerated, left at this stage they do not fully reflect bTV’s business model, which I describe as “neoliberal media populism.”

At its most basic level, this concept implies media that promote neoliberal economics. However, this does not necessarily imply overt support for a particular party. Thus, in this respect bTV differs significantly from Fox News. Although, it was also owned by News Corporation in the 2000s, bTV preferred to adopt a more detached position in regards to the entire political field. In fact, several of the journalists interviewed for this study described the channel as “conformist,” because it rarely criticized the government, even when the socialists headed it. Unlike Fox News, bTV was far more non-confrontational. Under their business model, taking a specific political party position risked losing audience members who disagreed. In other words, although the channel engaged in anti-communism and rightist rhetoric, its politics were primarily linked to audience ratings and advertising revenues. Because of this, confrontation among media was moved from the political field to the economic one. While BNT, bTV and Nova all seemed similar in respect to politics, they clashed over profits. bTV was perhaps the

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<sup>71</sup> Ivaylo Dichev, “Franchaizing, Normalizacia, Patriotizam” / “Franchising, Normalization, Patriotism,” in *bTV: Novata Vizia*, 212.

most vicious in this respect. The quarrels surrounding its ownership and the creation of a monopolistic economic triangle between a media outlet, an advertising agency and a television audience ratings company were the outcomes of this bitter struggle. In this field, bTV was uncompromising because the ideology of bTV was the ideology of capital. This also explains why instead of educational and cultural programming or expensive European and Bulgarian media products, bTV chose to inundate the viewer with cheap American entertainment.

bTV was different than Fox News and Western media in general in another crucial respect. While it offered cheap entertainment, it would be erroneous to interpret bTV's proposed commitment to the public as a mere manipulation. In fact, the channel developed a unique social responsibility model that facilitated charity and volunteering at levels unseen in contemporary media in the West. bTV and to a lesser extent Nova, strived to be involved in the solutions to social problems. Most of the time, this participation in the resolution of concrete issues did not involve calls on the state or political parties to get involved. In essence, this split society into two parts. On one side was the population of the poorest country in the EU. On the same side of the barricade were bTV and Nova as they represented themselves as helpers of the people. On the other side of the barricade were the dysfunctional state and the corrupt political class that were immune to the daily struggles of common people.

Because of this particular model of commitment, I call this media "populist." They side with the people and their legitimate grievances and actually get involved in resolving their problems. At the same time, these are neoliberal media, because their primary concern is capital. Both in respect to their cheap entertainment programming, but also in regards to the austere management of these media, they operate as neoliberal economic entities that at the end of the day preserve the status quo. The rest of the chapter historicizes this unique business model by

elaborating on the political commitments of bTV, its concern with capital and the historical and contemporary impetuses behind its social responsibility model.

### **6.3.1 “Kostov’s Television” No More**

Criticism of US foreign policy, balanced assessment of Eastern European socialism and in-depth coverage of twenty-five years of neoliberal economics are completely absent in bTV’s programs. The most frequent guests in the political commentary shows of bTV are experts from the network of neoconservative think-tanks. While this must not come as a surprise to anybody familiar with other News Corporation media outlets, such as Fox News, the politics of bTV are not exactly the same. In a personal interview, a Bulgarian media expert who heads an American-based private company that trains journalists emphasized the difference between Fox and bTV.

I have been unable to explain the difference to my American colleagues. Whenever I tell them that it was a good thing that News Corporation owned a Bulgarian channel, they raise their eyebrows and cannot understand. This is because Fox has a certain image in America. bTV is very, very different than Fox News. The fact that they had a common owner does not mean that they had the same ideological orientation.<sup>72</sup>

Bulgarian media scholar, Ivaylo Dichev also notes the difference between Fox News and bTV. He claims that the distinction is clearly visible to anybody who watches both programs, but might be elusive to those who are familiar with only one of them. “Whoever has watched Fox in America can see the difference: although both televisions are the property of the same corporation, Fox News sounds far-right, it’s confrontational and looks for scandals [Dichev cites Bill O’Reilly as an example], while bTV aims at a conservative, yet dually consensual center of

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<sup>72</sup> Personal Interview # 15

the human, on the one hand, and the national, on the other.”<sup>73</sup> Unlike Fox News’ model, which draws an audience through partisanship, bTV’s business ideal assumes that media outlets that back a political party tend to lose part of its viewers. At first sight, this appears contradictory to parts of the discussion in the beginning of this chapter. After all, bTV appointed journalists that backed the government of UDF and Prime Minister Ivan Kostov. However, it is precisely the story of partisan journalists, such as Ivo Indjev and Svetla Petrova, that illustrates bTV’s economic priorities.

In 2006, the show “In the Bull’s Eye” led by the extreme anti-communist Ivo Indjev, was canceled. The American channel fired Indjev because during one of his shows he accused the Bulgarian president at the time, the socialist Georgi Parvanov, of receiving an expensive penthouse apartment as a present from one of Bulgaria’s wealthiest people. bTV claimed that Indjev mishandled the case and relied on unverifiable information. Indeed, after Indjev made the allegation he added: “I am sorry that I am saying something that, I admit, I have not checked...”<sup>74</sup> Nevertheless, he insisted that the President received the penthouse as a gesture of appreciation from an oligarch whom he awarded with a presidential medal. Besides Indjev’s presentation of the “facts,” the assertion that the symbolic value of a presidential medal was worth a penthouse in downtown Sofia and that the President would risk his reputation in such a way during a re-election campaign was dubious to say the least. The secret (at the time) stakeholder of bTV, Krassimir Gergov claimed that Indjev relied on an anonymous source without checking the information. According to him, this amounted to “trusting a letter sent from

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<sup>73</sup> Dichev, “Franchizing, Noralizacia, Patrotisam,” 212.

<sup>74</sup> “Ivo Indjev Izgonen ot bTV zaradi Skandal s Prezidenta Parvanov,” / “Ivo Indjev Kicked out From bTV because of a Scandal with President Parvanov,” *Vesti*, October 10, 2006, accessed May 17, 2015, <http://www.vesti.bg/novini/zhurnalistyt-obiavi-che-dyrzhavniiat-glava-imal-mezonet-v-centyra-na-sofiia-a-ot-predizborniia-shtab-na-pyrvanov-go-obviniha-v-kleveta-948264>.

James Bond.” He added that a journalist “must not report information sent to him from Agent 007.”<sup>75</sup>

Several explanations of Indjev’s firing emerged. News Corporation’s envoy Albert Parsons said that he did not fire Indjev, but only “temporarily canceled” “In the Bull’s Eye.”<sup>76</sup> The shadow owner Gergov claimed that Indjev was not fired, but resigned.<sup>77</sup> The journalist himself bitterly insisted that he was fired due to “political pressure.” It is difficult to believe that Murdoch’s News Corporation could not handle the pressure of BSP. However, bTV’s own explanations about Indjev’s mishandling of the case were also not the real reason behind his dismissal. The actual motive behind this decision was Indjev’s outdated rhetoric and misfit with bTV’s economic model. By the mid-2000s, his commitment to the UDF, anti-communism and Russophobia appeared archaic. While his appointment in 2000 might have helped News Corporation to obtain the license of the second state channel, a couple of years later his presence was less beneficial. His show struggled to overcome BNT’s much more neutral program “Panorama.”<sup>78</sup> Indjev was a product of the ideological split of the 1990s that divided the political field into anti-communists (UDF) and ex-communists (BSP). But at the dawn of the new millennium this equation changed.

As the economic section of the introduction explained, in 2001 the anti-communist UDF government lost its reelection bid resoundingly, not to the ex-communists, but to the newly minted party led by the Bulgarian former king, Simeon II of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha. “The King” tapped into the disappointment of the two parties that dominated Bulgarian politics in the 1990s, but his initial popularity disappeared quickly. Although, “the King” exited the Bulgarian political

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<sup>75</sup> Gergov, 88.

<sup>76</sup> Parsons, 99.

<sup>77</sup> Gergov, 89.

<sup>78</sup> Pesheva, *Obarnato Ogledalo*, 154.

field as quickly as he entered it, his tenure marked an irreversible change in the political landscape of the country. The BSP and UDF continued to lose ground. The UDF in particular entered a deep crisis accompanied by internal struggles and electoral support in the single digits. During the 2006 presidential elections, the remnants of the UDF featured Nedelcho Beronov, a lackluster 80 year old lawyer as its candidate. Beronov lost his bid in the first round to Volen Siderov, a far-right candidate and a leader of the fledgling party Ataka (Attack), who gained two times more votes than Beronov.

It was amidst this decline of the partisan politics of the 1990s that bTV's anchor Ivo Indjev accelerated his pro-UDF, anti-communist rhetoric. The target of his final attack on bTV's platform was the socialist president who won re-election a few weeks later, beating the extremist Siderov with a 50 percent margin. In other words, Indjev directed his conspiracy theories at a popular President. But more importantly, Parvanov did not fit at all with Indjev's schemes that the President was a Russian stooge.

Parvanov is credited for persuading his colleagues at the BSP to support Bulgaria's entry in NATO. He embraced the membership publicly, which in contemporary global geopolitics constitutes one of the most anti-Russian acts an Eastern European leader could do. In addition, Parvanov actively lobbied for Bulgaria's membership in the EU. Finally, under his watch Bulgaria permitted the construction of five US military bases on its territory and he approved the "new military positioning within the global context."<sup>79</sup> Although Parvanov opposed Bulgaria's participation in the "Coalition of the Willing" during the second Iraq war, his criticism consisted of a few equivocal media statements and no meaningful political action.

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<sup>79</sup> "Levicata Narushi Malchanieto si za Amerikanskite Bazi" / "The Left-wing Party Quit its Silence in regards to the American Bases," *Kapital*, December 12, 2003, accessed February 26, 2016, [http://www.capital.bg/politika\\_i\\_ikonomika/bulgaria/2003/12/13/224320\\_levicata\\_narushi\\_mulchanieto\\_si\\_za\\_amerikanskite\\_bazi/](http://www.capital.bg/politika_i_ikonomika/bulgaria/2003/12/13/224320_levicata_narushi_mulchanieto_si_za_amerikanskite_bazi/).

In sum, Indjev created a fight with a popular president, whose policies were definitively not pro-Russian. In addition, the anti-communist journalist's association with the UDF at a time when the party experienced an internal crisis and dwindling support did not help him either. It seemed that Indjev wanted to reintroduce an outdated partisan discourse at a time when the country was just about to enter the EU with elevated hopes for the future and disdain for the past. All of this was at odds with bTV's non-confrontational business model. Instead Indjev antagonized and repelled most people who were not members of the shrinking anti-communist core of the UDF. This feature of his show, and not bTV's official explanation about his unprofessional behavior, cost him his job.

The story of Svetla Petrova, another high-profile journalist associated with the UDF, was even more revealing of bTV's politics. In 1995, Petrova was among the radio journalists who went on strike against the socialist government of Jan Videnov and in the late 1990s she held a senior position at UDF's daily *Demokratzia*. Hence, although her anti-communism was not as pronounced as Indjev's, her presence in bTV was also associated with the UDF.

In the early days of bTV, Petrova led a political debate show that was supposed to take place not only in the capital, Sofia, but across Bulgaria. However, almost immediately bTV decided to stop its broadcasts outside of Sofia because of their higher expenses.<sup>80</sup> In the summer of 2001, Petrova became the anchor of "Seismograph," a political debate show, which, according to her, sought to create "civilized debate" and avoid shouting and rudeness. But, BSP politicians rarely participated as they feared Petrova's bias. Its problem, however, was not only its partisan nature, but its exclusive focus on mainstream politics. In 2006, months before the cancelation of Indjev's show, bTV limited Petrova's "Seismograph" to a half-hour slot. But the reduction of the

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<sup>80</sup> Svetla Petrova, "Seismograph, ili kak se Blansira v Zonata na Obshtestvenite Trusove/ "Seismograph or how to Balance in the Zone of Public Quakes," in *bTV: Novata Vizia*, 39.

time allocated to this political show by one half was only a prelude to the real change that followed.

bTV renamed “Seismograph” and turned it into a media product that resembled a game show rather than a “serious debate” program. According to Petrova, the new show, called “Pyramid,” was a “symbiosis of politics and entertainment.”<sup>81</sup> Each participant was limited to a one-minute long statement on a particular theme and the show was driven by competition rather than meaningful debate. Political and public personalities had to respond to questions which they were not experts on in a game show format of question and answer. Petrova admits that oftentimes this led to shallow discussions and a poor quality debate that contributed to the alienation of “the most intelligent and active viewers who could not accept the new format of Seismograph.”<sup>82</sup> Perhaps the most problematic part of the show was the pseudo-democratic idea that the viewer could select the “winner” of the debates through a text message, which cost 1.20 leva (.60 Euros) to the send. The problems with this approach were numerous, besides the fact that it seemed like just another way for bTV to earn some extra cash through viewers’ participation. Strangely enough, the audience could vote on who won the debate, one week prior to the debate. One of the viewers who sent a text message was awarded 4000 leva (2000 Euros). The problem with this was that the winner of the money was selected solely from the pool of viewers who voted for the winner of the debate—that is the “debater” who received the most text messages. Because of this, viewers who sent a text message voted not for the person who debated well, but chose the one who they thought might win.<sup>83</sup> Finally, because the debaters had to appeal for viewers’ votes in a very short period of time, they engaged in simplistic rhetoric in

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 44

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 43-44.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 45.



which the “loudest” and “the most shameless” won.<sup>84</sup> Petrova adds that the producer’s pressure to select “more attractive” debaters, who will likely generate extra text messages, also affected the show’s quality.<sup>85</sup> Thus she concludes that the main challenge to her throughout her work in bTV was to “make a non-commercial product in a commercial television channel.”<sup>86</sup>

In this way, “Seismograph” transitioned from a political debate program to a game show with winners, losers, and awards. The Bulgarian newspaper editor Valeri Naidenov described the evolution from politics to entertainment in Petrova’s program memorably. According to him, “Seismograph” was a boring show that could “put a galloping horse to sleep” while “Pyramid” “only lacked fire-swallowers.”<sup>87</sup> “Pyramid” remained on air for only a year and “Seismograph” was restored. But, the show was never the same as it retained some of the entertainment and competitive features of “Pyramid.” The new “Seismograph” lasted for a few more years until it was cancelled in 2011 amidst scandals and accusations in censorship.

In sum, Indjev’s confrontational rhetoric and Petrova’s desire to anchor a serious political debate show coupled with their political leanings were incompatible with bTV’s business model. Regardless of their initial role in the privatization deal of the second state channel, as time progressed their presence came to be viewed as risky. Despite the overall rightist outlook of bTV, the channel did not want to inflame the political passions of the 1990s. It also seemed uninterested in sustaining political debate shows with serious discussions. As a matter of fact, bTV actively sought to distance itself from the political field as a whole. The transformation of

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>87</sup> Valeri Naidenov, “bTV kato Hormonalno Iavlenie” / “bTV as a Hormonal Phenomenon,” in *bTV: Novata Vizata*, 245.

“Seismograph” into “Pyramid” was a glaring example of bTV’s attempt to evade political debate and focus on entertainment.

It is important to note that although bTV was the pioneer of this entertainment-driven model, the other major television channel, Nova, actively pursued the same goals. In fact, it featured a show that illustrated much better than “Seismograph” the marginalization of political commentary. In 2004, Bulgaria’s second national commercial channel persuaded Ivan Garelov to host an American-style game show called “Vote of Confidence.” This was a peculiar development because Garelov is perhaps the most recognized figure of Bulgarian political journalism. Since the 1960s, he had made numerous documentaries and interviewed people such as Henry Kissinger, Zbigniew Bzezinski, Yasser Arafat and many other historical personalities. After 1989 he became the anchor of BNT’s signature political show “Panorama,” which was the major venue for the 1990s heated debates between former communists and opposition leaders. In sum, his stature in serious political journalism could be compared to a figure such as Walter Cronkite in the US. Nevertheless, in 2004 he agreed to host Nova’s new game show during which several contestants answered oftentimes very trivial questions such as: “What is the main source of energy for the planet Earth? (Answers: A. The Moon, B. The Sun, C. Bulgaria’s Nuclear Power Plant).” Similarly to “Pyramid,” the game show involved the viewers through paid text messages. The winners won monetary awards and each Friday two finalists rotated a wheel of fortune for additional cash.

It was difficult to believe that Garelov could have led this show. Because people “voted” based on the personal qualities of the contestants, he asked them provocative questions and engaged in trite conversations. Although this show did not last very long, it illustrated that even a titan of political journalism such as Ivan Garelov, who previously seemed to be always in the

whirlwind of history, was not immune to commercial television's goal to transform politics into cheap entertainment. Finally, not only left-wing discourse, but sometimes even rightist, anti-communist voices, such as those of Indjev and Petrova, fell victim to this commercial crusade.

### **6.3.2 The Ideology of Capital**

As mentioned earlier, Bulgarian media experts expected that a Western-based corporation would bring transparency and fair competition to the Bulgarian market. Instead, News Corporation registered its subsidiary in an offshore zone and concealed Gergov's violation of Bulgarian media regulation. Gergov's control of Bulgaria's advertising sphere and suspected involvement with the first television audience measurement company created a highly monopolistic media sphere. Retrospectively, such moves are not surprising. The ideology of bTV was capital. It was merciless in its pursuit of profits and ready to take risks that could tarnish its image as "modern," "transparent," and "fair." What bTV was not ready to risk was its business model and the capital it accumulated. The firing of Indjev and Petrova confirmed that it viewed commitments to political parties as a liability and it avoided strong politicization even in respect to the anti-communist cause. In short, bTV was uncompromising when the issues at stake were ratings and advertising revenue and was cautious when it came to mainstream politics, which it preferred to transform into entertainment.

bTV's business model worked very well. In spite of the suspicions of a link between bTV and TNS/TV Plan, in all likelihood bTV's ratings were indeed the highest in Bulgaria. According to TNS/TV Plan, bTV's market share between 2001 and 2006 hovered around 40 percent. In contrast, the state's channel share contracted almost by half, from 30 percent in 2001 to 16 percent in 2006. At the same time, Nova's share grew from 4 percent in 2001 to 17 percent in

2006, but it was still much smaller than bTV's.<sup>88</sup> In 2001, the state channel owned 19 of the 25 most watched television products while bTV had only six. By 2003, the situation was completely reversed and bTV had 19 of the 25 most watched products while the state channel was left with six.<sup>89</sup> These trends remained the same throughout the 2000s.<sup>90</sup> When it came to advertising revenue, bTV's dominance was clear. In 2006 roughly 728 million leva (approximately 360 million Euros) were invested in media advertising (65.5 percent of this investment was in television alone). 47.36 percent of television advertising revenue went to bTV, 30 percent to Nova and 6 percent to the state channel.<sup>91</sup>

bTV's advertising revenues are especially important in highlighting its priority. From 2001 to 2008 bTV collected roughly half of all advertising revenue in television. During these years the Bulgarian advertising market experienced tremendous growth. In 2005 the net advertising revenues was 270 million leva, in 2006 it reached 371 million leva and in 2007 it grew to 473 million leva to peak in 2008 at 526 million leva.<sup>92</sup> However, the 2008 global economic crisis affected the market and net advertising revenues fell to 382 million leva in 2009 and to 329 million leva in 2010. In the first half of the 2010s net advertising revenue was approximately half of what it was at its peak in 2008.<sup>93</sup>

As this crisis loomed, information emerged that Murdoch intended to sell bTV and in 2010 News Corporation left Bulgaria after it sold its television channel to another American-owned company—Central European Media Enterprises (CME). In many respects, the change of

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<sup>88</sup> Pesheva, *Televizionnata Sreda 2001-2010*, 128-129.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 139-140.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

<sup>92</sup> "2010 Cenata na Kompromisite / 2010 The Price of Compromise," Association of Advertising Agencies March, 2011.

<sup>93</sup> "Net Advertising Budgets," Piero 97, accessed March 10, 2016, <http://www.piero97.com/en/Media-market?vid=39&bid=40>.

ownership was not dramatic, as bTV essentially passed into the hands of another neoconservative billionaire. The new owner of bTV, Ronald Lauder, was a Republican who Ronald Reagan appointed as an ambassador to Austria in 1986. He made an unsuccessful bid to become New York City's mayor in 1989 as he challenged Rudolph Giuliani for the Republican nomination. Lauder, who is also a long-term supporter of the far-right in Israel, paid \$400 million to buy bTV along with bTV Comedy and bTV Cinema, as well as at least six radio stations that News Corporation also owned.<sup>94</sup> Needless to say, the transfer from Murdoch to Lauder did not result in significant change in bTV's politics. CME, whose main stakeholder currently is Time Warner, continued the bTV business model. The sale was in fact the ultimate confirmation of the channel's commitment solely to the ideology of private capital.

News Corporation's "civilizational" mission, as one media expert called it in an interview with me, ended immediately after the flow of advertising revenues dried out. In light of this development, all of the early discussions about bTV's role in democratization and the construction of a vibrant public sphere seemed naïve to say the least. As long as economic growth occurred, like the newspaper company WAZ, News Corporation pretended to have a moral, higher purpose in the country. When the economic crisis hit, both companies packed up and left. This raises a question that is applicable well beyond the borders of Bulgaria: what is the role of commercial media in a democracy when even large conglomerates are so vulnerable to economic crises? The situation of bTV showed that during an economic crisis the flow of supposedly democratic discourse is disrupted by the disturbed flows of capital.

bTV's commitment to the ideology of private capital also explains why it focused on commercially-driven, cheap entertainment programming instead of expensive political journalism.

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<sup>94</sup> "bTV Prodadena za 400 miliona Dolara na SME" / "bTV Sold for \$400 million to CME," February 18, 2010, accessed March 2, 2016, <http://www.segabg.com/article.php?id=456069>.

According to TNS/TV Plan between 2007 and 2010, twenty-three out of the twenty-five top rated media products belonged to bTV, but only one of them was a political journalism show. The rest were mostly films and reality shows.<sup>95</sup> From the beginning, bTV did not intend to invest much. Its goal was to entertain and distract, but not to politicize. In contrast to socialist media's preoccupation with high cultural values and early post-socialist television's relentless politicization, bTV offered an entirely different model.

Could the first national commercial channel have developed differently? As mentioned earlier News Corporation's entry in Bulgaria coincided with the beginning of a new political dynamic in the country. In 2001, "the King" had broken the two-party system. The subsequent disappointment with his government intensified the widespread disenchantment with mainstream politics, clearly visible in the falling levels of voter turnout. In this situation, bTV had two options. It could invest in diverse political shows that provided platforms for debate and invited guests who could formulate alternatives to the status quo. Along with this, bTV could have promoted investigative journalism and documentary films. The second option was not to counter de-politicization, but to provide distraction and entertainment as an alternative to a political situation that did not offer alternatives. bTV opted for the latter, because it calculated that reruns of *Everybody Loves Raymond* were much cheaper than investigative journalism. While one can debate whether bTV could have embarked on a different path, it is important to note that its main competitor, Nova, did not offer an alternative to its business model. In fact, its challenge to bTV came in the form of more and different entertainment programming.

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<sup>95</sup> Pesheva, *Televizionnata Sreda 2001-2010*, 164.

The first time Nova's program ranked in the top 25 rated media products was in 2005 with the reality show *Big Brother*.<sup>96</sup> *Big Brother* was created in the Netherlands in 1999 but its format spread quickly throughout the world. In it, twelve to fifteen participants are placed in a house constructed for the purposes of the show. They live there for several months under constant video surveillance. Inspired by George Orwell's 1984, *Big Brother* features sexual content, obscene language and even physical fights. In fact, to this day viewers of *Big Brother* remember the "winner" of the show's first season (2004-2005) for his televised masturbations.

Initially, bTV resisted the temptation to broadcast reality shows as well. While Murdoch's channel was as entertainment-driven as Nova, its content consisted of game shows, sitcoms, television series and films. bTV's executive director Albert Parsons invoked the traditional US "family values" discourse to counter the pressure on bTV to compete with Nova with a similar reality show. "Have you seen this show? Do you think that meaningful entertainment translates into watching people who sit around, attack each other, drink and smoke while nothing happens whatsoever? This is not my vision of a fulfilling family television program."<sup>97</sup> But, in 2005 Nova launched the second season of *Big Brother* as well as a music reality show called *Star Academy*. bTV could no longer resist Nova's competition and in 2005 it launched the Bulgarian version of the American reality show *The Beauty and the Geek*.<sup>98</sup> This signaled a significant shift in its program scheme as reality shows became a permanent feature of bTV from then on. The American-based reality shows *Survivor*, *Music Idol* ("American Idol" in the US), *Dancing Stars*, *Bulgaria is Looking for Talent*, *The Voice of Bulgaria* ("The Voice" in the US) and a number of others were introduced in Bulgaria through bTV. Thus, while bTV had

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>97</sup> Parsonos, 98.

<sup>98</sup> Pesheva, *Televizionnata Sreda 2001-2010*, 237.

focused on entertainment since 2000, to its credit, it resisted reality formats for five years. It was Nova that shifted the competition between the two channels in this direction. But most importantly, both channels engaged with reality shows because of their low cost, capacity to fill large slots of television time (*Big Brother I* lasted for 92 days) and apolitical content.

“Reality television” producers often market these programs for their alleged authenticity and capacity to broadcast regular people. But, one interviewee explained to me, the emphasis on authenticity is misleading. Originally from Minneapolis, US she participated in a reality show on bTV that featured non-Bulgarians, such as her, who reside in Bulgaria.

Every week they gave us a task. Kind of like *Survivor*, but it was all related to Bulgaria. One week we had to go to a village and do village farm work. One week was about folk dancing. Another week was about speaking different Bulgarian dialects. But the thing that really bumped me about it and that I did not like at all was that those shows are really staged. Like, they are really, really staged. You basically have a handler-screenwriter. Each one of us was assigned a couple of screenwriters. They have senior and junior screenwriters. I think those assigned to us were mostly junior screenwriters. A lot of the foreigners could not speak Bulgarian that well or they freaked out in front of the camera. So they would stage a lot of the tasks and this was annoying, because it really depended on who your screenwriter was. I did not like my screenwriter, because, it’s kind of a sad story, but his mother was dying from cancer and he was not in a space to think of anything funny. You think that it is very unscripted, but it is totally scripted. Maybe not totally, but to a very high degree. They developed, scripted and staged the idea to fit their own aesthetic.

She explained that throughout the ten-week long show, the entire crew was “obsessed with the ratings.” The show scored average ratings of around 12 to 14 percent, which was high for Bulgaria. If its popularity fell under 10 percent, the producers “freaked out.” The initial idea was that each week one participant would be “booted out” by the jury, but then the screenwriters took into account the popularity of the show and decided to keep everybody until the end. This clearly demonstrated the influence of ratings and advertisements on bTV. The show was extremely cheap to produce because none of the participants were paid. My interviewee felt somewhat exploited especially after she learned that she would be kept on the show until its end.



Jokingly, she added that the only benefit to her was that five years later, people on the street still recognize her from the television screen.

The micromanaged, tightly controlled nature of these shows allowed screenwriters and directors to “guide” the reality program to higher ratings. Along with their low cost, this made them financially appealing to television stations in Bulgaria and across the world. Finally, these media products do not require significant research, invention or creativity because in places such as Bulgaria, the television channels simply copy the Western format of the show. In a personal interview, a senior figure in the management of *Nova* explained to me how this process worked. When she listed the reality shows on *Nova* she referred to them by their names in English as if they were not translated in Bulgaria.

*The X-Factor, Dancing with the Stars, Your Face Sounds Familiar*, are shows with a specific format that we have to buy in order to broadcast. We pay a license fee to broadcast them and we follow the “bible” of the show. There are standards that we have to follow. These are the standards of the producers who own the license of the show. You can’t just do it low key, because you want to invest less. In other words, if you watch the American show on one television screen and its Bulgarian variant on another one, they must look the exact same way. They [the producers] have requirements for everything, including the stage and the décor. The house of *Big Brother* has to follow a specific design. You cannot just built your own one.<sup>99</sup>

The influx of reality formats in the mid-2000s along with the multitude of sitcoms, game shows and television series pushed Bulgarian television firmly into the sphere of entertainment. Thus in television one noticed similar developments to the tabloidization of Bulgaria’s newspapers. Like *Trud* and *24 Chasa*, *Nova* and *bTV* were pro-capitalist, pro-American, right-wing media and as such they did not clash over ideology. In addition, like the newspapers of the 1990s, when their interests collided, it was not over political ideologies or parties, but over the access to advertising revenues.

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<sup>99</sup> Personal interview # 44.

As mentioned earlier, one of the first clashes was over the low ratings of Nova's *Star Academy*. But, after the economic crisis of 2008, when the advertising market contracted significantly, the clash between Nova and bTV intensified. bTV's monopoly on advertising revenues increased and in 2011 it held 63 percent of the television advertising market. Nova held only 31 percent and the state channel was far behind with a 4 percent share of the advertising revenue.<sup>100</sup> Nova reacted by filing a lawsuit at the state's Commission for the Defense of Competition. It accused bTV of unfair business practices and "predatory pricing" of advertising time slots.<sup>101</sup> According to Nova, bTV provided advertisers with a huge discount if they signed a contract that they would not advertise anywhere else, but bTV portrayed this accusation as a "gross misrepresentation of the facts."<sup>102</sup> In Bulgarian media, the hegemonic force was the ideology of capital.

### **6.3.3 Commercial Television's Public Interest**

The ideology of capital explains why bTV avoided politicization even at the expense of their ability to promote anti-communism. It also explains why Nova and bTV fought over advertising revenue and television ratings rather than over political views. It is also the reason why these television channels' signature programs were cheap reality shows rather than investigative journalism or political debates. However, this does not mean that they were entirely apolitical. Deflecting the attention from the political field and maintaining the status quo in the poorest country in the EU is not apolitical. The reinforcement of the sense of disenchantment with

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<sup>100</sup> Pesheva, *Televizionnata Sreda 2001-2010*, 247.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 246.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

politics entrenches the lack of desire for political participation and this has tangible political consequences. But if left at this stage, the description of bTV and to a certain extent Nova, leaves unexamined a crucial and unique component of their business model.

The overwhelming amount of entertainment programming on bTV creates the sense that Balkan News Corporation lied when it promised that although commercial, bTV would serve a public role. It turned out that cultural and educational programs were almost non-existent in its schedule while local and European products were scarce. Along with its attempts to turn even political programs into American-style game shows, all these undermined any “public interest” argument. However, although grounded in the ideology of capital, bTV built an image of a socially responsible television channel. In fact, not only did it create the feeling that it served a public function, but it managed to wrestle this function out of the hands of the national channel, leading to the paradoxical situation that News Corporation’s bTV seemed more committed to the public than public television. It is precisely the success of this part of its business model that prompts my description of this type of media as both neoliberal and populist.

In the edited volume, *bTV: The New Vision*, published almost ten years after the first commercial channel entered the Bulgarian market, its managers place special emphasis on the “public role” of bTV. Its CEO, Vicki Politova, states that the managers of the channel “sincerely believe” that bTV’s success lies primarily in its public character. According to her “viewers often contact bTV to ask for help in resolving a particular problem,” because the channel “had time and again exhibited concern and empathy.”<sup>103</sup> bTV turned into a “true friend and a helper” of the viewer in times of “disasters and problems” as it not only publicized the problems, but it

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<sup>103</sup> Politova, 25.

also resolved them.<sup>104</sup> Luba Rizova, the director of News and Current Affairs, asserted that the popularity of bTV contributed to the growth of expectations that it should help society. According to her, meeting these expectations was “the permanent chief responsibility” of bTV.<sup>105</sup> Media scholars have also commented on this feature of bTV. Journalism professor and media regulator, Margarita Pesheva, claimed that bTV’s concern for regular people “undoubtedly separates it from the commercial and increases its role as a national television, which openly expresses its citizen’s position.”<sup>106</sup> Martin Zahariev concluded that “bTV is impressive because of its campaigns to the benefit of society and its charity that engenders tangible material effects.”<sup>107</sup> Paradoxically, it seemed that despite all of the entertainment it featured, bTV fulfilled its promise to be a social and public media outlet. As such, this part of bTV’s story deserves special attention.

The success of bTV had two components: its collective action and charity campaigns and its focus, primarily in the news, on particular individuals and their personal story. Thus, bTV understood the public commitment of media not in terms of a focus on education, culture and mainstream politics but in terms of a concern with concrete social problems. At first sight, this model appears as another example of corporate social responsibility (CSR). Today CSR is a part of almost every corporation, including the media conglomerates. In 2011, 95 percent of the 250 largest global companies reported about their CSR activities.<sup>108</sup> News Corporation, the company that created bTV is not an exception. Its “corporate citizenship” commitment, includes

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>105</sup> Luba Rizova, “Zashto bTV Novinite i bTV Reporterite Stanaha Zapazena Marka” / “Why did the bTV News and bTV Reporters Turn into a Trademark,” in *bTV: Novata Vizia*, 33.

<sup>106</sup> Margarita Pesheva, “Noviat Televizionen Sviat” / “The New Television World,” in *bTV: Novata Vizia*, 177.

<sup>107</sup> Martin Zahariev, “Biznesat Idva, Kogato Content is the King” “Business Arrives when Content is the King,” in *bTV: Novata Vizia*, 258.

<sup>108</sup> Marisol Sandoval, “Corporate Social (IR)Responsibility in Media and Communication Industries,” *Javnost-The Public* 20, no. 3 (2013): 40.

“philanthropy,” “volunteering” and “environmental Impact.”<sup>109</sup> However, upon closer look, the social responsibility model of bTV is unique both in terms of its centrality to the television channel’s identity and in terms of the sheer volume of activities that it is involved in. In short, for bTV, CSR is not simply a practice that it must reluctantly follow, but it is something that it embraced.

The multitude of bTV campaigns that encourage volunteering and charity are impossible to list here. Yet several deserve special attention. “The Bulgarian Christmas” was the name of one of its first major campaigns that raised money for sick children. In 2005, in less than two months it collected 1,3 million leva (650,000 Euros), which was an unprecedented amount by Bulgarian standards. Because of its success, it is now an annual campaign that even managed to draw the President of Bulgaria to assist with the fundraising. During 2005, bTV initiated “bTV: Your Help” to assist people affected by the floods of 2005. According to the CEO of bTV, in less than a month the campaign collected 1,2 million leva (600,000 Euros) with which it built 13 houses for 48 people who had lost their homes.<sup>110</sup> In the following year, bTV launched “You are not Alone,” which was a campaign in support of several Bulgarian medics unjustly sentenced to death in Libya (they were eventually released). In 2008, the channel launched a new reality show, called “The Magnificent Six,” which raised money for the construction of a new and modern orphanage. In cooperation with UNICEF, the campaign raised 1 million leva (500,000 Euros) after twelve issues of the “The Magnificent Six.”<sup>111</sup>

These are only a few of the more massive and more publicized campaigns that bTV launched. There were also big campaigns to stop human trafficking and to prevent child abuse.

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<sup>109</sup> “Citizenship,” News Corporations, accessed March 1, 2016, <http://newscorp.com/citizenship/>

<sup>110</sup> Politova, 26.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

In 2008, bTV organized a charity campaign to treat children with Encephalitis Lethargica, a disease in which patients may enter into a coma. The campaign raised 177,000 leva and five children received treatment. In 2007, along with several newspapers, bTV organized a campaign against drunk driving.<sup>112</sup> “Say No to Weapons,” “A Warm Meal for Each Child,” “Protect the Child” and “A Light on the Road” (preventing car accidents that involve children), “Because of the Love towards Life” (for breast cancer), “I want to be Clean around Me” (for a clean environment), and “A Pair of Eyes on Four Pawns” (to raise money for dog assistants for the blind) were the names of other bTV campaigns. Perhaps its most publicized campaign has been the volunteer drive “Let’s Clean up Bulgaria in One Day,” which calls on people to join bTV in collecting garbage on May 12 each year.<sup>113</sup>

In the US, *CNN Heroes* is perhaps the media product that most shares some features with bTV’s campaigns. Established in 2007, for this program CNN selects a number of nominees who contributed to society through humanitarian work. The audience votes for its favorite candidate and he or she receives a monetary award. But, in spite of the similarities with bTV, this show does not appear as a central component of CNN’s identity. In addition, CNN sometimes also reacts to disaster, but unlike bTV it does not run its own charitable and volunteer campaigns. Instead, it directs the audience to a “here is how you can help” section that lists charities and organizations such as the Red Cross, that run campaigns which are not administered by CNN. In contrast, bTV constantly reminds the viewer that the television channel itself acts on behalf of the people in need. These campaigns are actively advertised on the channel’s program and are often accompanied by documentaries or short clips stressing the importance of a particular

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<sup>112</sup> “Mashtabni Kampanii Inciarani ot bTV” / “Major Campaigns Initiated by bTV,” *bTV*, accessed January 5, 2016, <http://www.btv.bg/otgovornost/infotmacia/kampanii-btv/>.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

campaign. For example, the charity campaign to treat children with Encephalitis Lethargica began after bTV broadcasted a report about such children in one of its shows. Weeks before its campaign to clean Bulgaria in one day, bTV's promotion of the event cannot be avoided by any viewer of the channel. Thus, bTV's campaigns are more numerous and more publicized than CNN's as they are a central feature of the television channel's model. For these reasons, in 2009, 2010 and 2011, bTV was selected as "The Biggest Corporate Donor" by the "Bulgarian Donor Forum" and to date it has won numerous other CSR awards.<sup>114</sup>

There is another difference between some of bTV's campaigns and CSR in the West. bTV's appeals for help are often personalized and involve the real stories of real people. This approach differs from the broad and general accounts focused on groups of people in Western CSR. This difference is noticeable even if one compares bTV and its owner, News Corporation. In its philanthropy section, News Corporation features five items, one of which is "Veterans," accompanied by a photograph of two soldiers and the brief description: "We are committed to supporting our veterans as they transition from the armed services to civilian life."<sup>115</sup> In contrast, bTV provides much more personal and concrete appeals. bTV's website offers a section called "Appeal for Help," which includes hundreds of stories of sick people who need medical treatment, but cannot afford it. "Let's help the 2-year old Betty" describes Betty's struggle with leukemia and the need for her to be treated in the US at the cost of \$1 million. This 400 word essay is personalized, touching and very different than News Corporation's succinct statements about "veterans" or other groups of people rather than particular individuals. Betty is described as a child "with a charming smile" that makes one want to live a long life in order to see her

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> "Philanthropy," News Corporations, accessed January 27, 2016, <http://newscorp.com/philanthropy/>

grow up.<sup>116</sup> At the end of each of these hundreds of stories, one finds bank account numbers, paypal accounts as well as an option to donate through a text message. Some of the stories include a link to a facebook page that provides more information about each person and updates on their treatment. Many of these individual stories appeared as news reports or in other formats of bTV's broadcasts. The story of a lady bound to a wheel chair after a severe injury begins by reminding the reader that "last autumn [2013] during bTV's News we told you the story of the 39-years-old Boryana" and directs them to a link with the news segment that reported on her tragedy.<sup>117</sup>

There are good reasons to be critical of CSR campaigns. First of all, they raise questions as to what extent they can take the place of political institutions in improving the lives of people, especially in places with profound social problems, such as EU's poorest member Bulgaria. I raised this issue with a senior figure in Nova, which also features a CSR policy similar to bTV.

BK: We have a CSR policy as well. We help a lot of orphanages.

Me: Is this the result of weak state institutions?

BK: Yes, because there is such a profound need for help in so many different spheres of life, that media are called in to help. This means that the institutions are not working. Sometimes, we feel bad because, on one hand we help, but on the other hand we help 50 or 500 children, but there are 1500 or 5000 more that need assistance. So you say to yourself: 'I don't want to play God and to choose who should live and who should die.' Each day we receive appeals for help. People raise money for their sick relatives, neighbors and friends and ask us to call on people to donate money. This means that our healthcare system does not work, that it does not have the required equipment, and that our doctors are emigrating. The system has huge problems.

Me: Can media replace the functions of state institutions?

BK: No it cannot. It can help to some extent but it cannot be substitute for the state.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> "Da Pomognem na 2-Godishnata Beti" / "Let's help the 2-year old Betty," bTV, accessed January 28, 2016, <http://www.btv.bg/article/otgovornost/zov-za-pomosht/da-pomognem-na-2-godishnata-beti.html>.

<sup>117</sup> "Da Pomognem na Boryana da Prohodi," / "Let's Help Boryana to Walk," bTV, accessed January 28, 2016, <http://www.btv.bg/article/otgovornost/zov-za-pomosht/da-pomognem-na-boryana-da-prohodi.html>.

<sup>118</sup> Personal Interview # 44.



In another personal interview, a media expert who writes weekly columns about media and PR in Bulgaria also emphasized the tendency of these campaigns to help only a selected group of people. Overall, he approved of bTV's campaigns, but he underlined the subjective element that drives some of the charity campaigns that raise money through text messages.

There was a campaign to help a girl who became sick from a rare disease which made her look prematurely old. They showed a beautiful photograph of her before she got sick, but they also showed a picture of her after she contracted the disease and appeared very old. In no time the televised campaign raised 100,000 leva. At some point, they even made an appearance to thank the donors and asked people not to give any more money because they had overachieved their goal. But, when the story is about some old grandma or old grandpa in a god forsaken village, nobody cares.<sup>119</sup>

The problems highlighted by Nova's official and the media expert interviewed for this study underlined the pressures that limited the scope and reach of CSR campaigns. But, in addition to this issue, there was the question of the real goal behind this media campaigns. Was it a genuine urge to help people or it was simply a self-advertising campaign? I raised this question with the senior figure at Nova, and her response revealed that media know very well that these campaigns help their image.

MM: It seems that bTV is more active in the social responsibility sphere than you are.

BK: This means that our PR department is not as good as theirs [laughs]

Me: So it is about PR?

BK: After the flooding in the summer [2014] in Northeastern Bulgaria, we created a huge campaign to raise money for the people who lived in these areas. They were left without a roof over their head and lived in the mud. They had nothing—no food, no clothes, no homes. So if you have not heard about this campaign, this means that we did not publicize our work well. Many people sent text messages and donated a very large sum of money so we can buy people in these areas in crisis trailers and temporary houses until their homes were rebuilt. We gave them vouchers for food. To be left without a house and food during the cold winter that followed was a grim prospect. So I do not think we do less than bTV. We just don't praise ourselves as much. Simply put, we are more elegant (laughs).<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Personal Interview # 21.

<sup>120</sup> Personal Interview # 44.

This interview illustrates the fact that commercial television channels in Bulgaria did not engage in CSR solely for altruistic purposes. In fact, the interviewee suggested that bTV overpublicized its activities to polish its own image. Besides the PR purposes of commercial media, it is clear that these campaigns are limited and cannot help large groups of people. Nevertheless, they must not be dismissed as standard CSR and mere manipulation. Why did these campaigns occupy a central place in bTV's, and to a lesser extent in Nova's, business model and identity? Why does this model work so well in Bulgaria and not in the US and the West in general? Manipulation or not, people donate money and participate in these campaigns. In fact, besides the shortcomings of these campaigns, the senior figure at Nova also suggested that people who knew somebody who suffered initiated these campaigns. She claimed that the television channel received "tens of letters each day." Thus a discussion focused primarily on the television channels' motives and their limitation, cannot shed light on the push from below that also shapes and engenders these campaigns.

In general, the question why people participate and donate to CSR campaigns is complex and difficult to research. But in the Bulgarian context, this issue is even more puzzling because the high levels of participation and desire to help contradict the expected outcomes of at least two phenomena. The first one is the post-socialist economic situation of the country. These charity campaigns take place in the poorest country in the EU. Yet, primarily through text messages many regular people donate despite their own economic difficulties. In addition, common people join volunteer actions in large numbers although they work long hours in order to survive. The second phenomenon that complicates this issue is historical. These campaigns occur in Eastern Europe, which experts regard as a very difficult place for charity work because of the perceived absence of a culture of donating and volunteering. Under this logic, during

socialism people relied solely on the state and due to this legacy today they do not understand why they should donate money or time to fix social problems. However, the post-socialist history of commercial television seems to defy the logic of both of these phenomena. Neither poverty, nor socialism prevents people from responding to the appeal of television campaigns. What is more, they do it at higher rates than people in the West, which is both more affluent and lacks a history of socialism. bTV's biggest campaign, "Let's Clean Bulgaria in One Day," is a particularly strong example of this perplexing situation.

In 2014, 300,000 people took part in the annual campaign to clean Bulgaria in a single day. They collected 14,000 tons of garbage through organized cleaning in 630 different locations across the country.<sup>121</sup> One can debate whether this action really cleaned up Bulgaria in one day and whether bTV, whose logo appeared on garbage trucks, garbage bags and volunteer t-shirts, organizes this event because of altruism. However, the sheer volume of volunteers cannot be dismissed as an insignificant outcome of media manipulation. In fact, when the President of Bulgaria noticed the popularity of the campaign, he also put on gloves and joined the campaign. More than four percent of Bulgaria's population took part in the campaign. The same level of participation in the US would translate to 15 million people. What makes people in an otherwise depoliticized society care about each other and participate in collective actions to an extent unseen in the US and Western Europe? Was it possible that this perplexing phenomenon was not hindered by the socialist past but reinforced by it?

At first, it did not occur to me that socialist egalitarianism and collective action might play a role in bTV's CSR campaigns. After all, the idea that Murdoch's News Corporation could benefit from socialist morals did not seem logical. The hint that, contrary to common liberal

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<sup>121</sup> "Nad 300,000 Chsitha Balgaria za Edin Den" / "More than 300,000 Cleaned Bulgaria in One Day," *Dir.bg*, April 26, 2014, accessed January 15, 2016, <http://dnes.dir.bg/news/chistene-boklutzi-16580992>.

perceptions, collectivity and egalitarianism predisposed Bulgarians to join charity campaigns, came to me by accident during a conversation with a Bulgarian media expert. During our talk he joked that bTV's campaign to clean Bulgaria in one day reminded him of a "Lenin's Saturday." In the Eastern bloc, "Lenin's Saturday" referred to a particular day of the year on which people gathered to clean public spaces. In the first "Lenin's Saturday" on April 12 1919, Lenin himself took part in the cleanup of debris in the Kremlin. When my interviewee made the comparison, I thought that it was a good joke and both of us laughed. After all, it was hilarious to imagine that Murdoch or Lauder's Bulgarian television channel organized a volunteer work campaign modeled on a "Lenin's Saturday." But later I realized that this was not a joke at all to some people. Blogs and other social media were replete with this comparison, which was often accompanied by a distinct anti-communist pathos. But the comparison surfaced in mainstream media as well. Nova's highest rated show, *Gospodari na Efira* ("The Lords of the Airwaves"), ridiculed bTV's campaign by comparing archival footage from the socialist era to bTV's own coverage of the cleanup. The report, called "Let's Cleanup Lenin's Style," claimed that the function of the Communist Party had been adopted by bTV.<sup>122</sup> In one of the major newspapers, Bulgaria's legendary television anchor, Kevork Kevorkian, compared bTV's campaign to "Lenin's Saturday" as well.<sup>123</sup>

While bTV's campaign was a very different affair than "Lenin's Saturday," the comparisons, however skewed, were perhaps not entirely unfounded. As chapter one explained, people interacted with state media and appealed to them for the resolution of their social problems. One could also add the persisting influence of socialist morals of collective work,

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<sup>122</sup> "Lenin's Saturday," *Gospodari na Efira*, April 29, 2014, accessed March 1, 2016, <http://gospodari.com-video33023.html>.

<sup>123</sup> Kevork Kevorkian, "Bokluci i Bokluci" / "Garbage and Garbage," *Standart*, May 15 2012, 14, [http://www.kevorkkevorkian.com/plugins/news/plugin.news.view.php?article\\_id=5114](http://www.kevorkkevorkian.com/plugins/news/plugin.news.view.php?article_id=5114).

egalitarianism and selflessness as historical legacies exploited by bTV's CSR campaigns. Intentionally or because of pressure from below, bTV tapped into a three decades long cultivation of the relationship between the viewer and its television in a socialist society with strong egalitarian values. bTV not only continued this traditional interaction, it even developed it further. Hence, regardless of the substantial amounts of entertainment programs, the television channel also focused on pressing social problems and interacted with its viewers in understanding and resolving them. Thus, when bTV's managers claimed that this media outlet was commercial but with a "public role," they were not completely manipulating the public. Although its educational or cultural programs were almost non-existent, bTV pursued the public interest in the sphere of societal problems. It did not have to create and instill new habits to follow this model. Three decades of socialist television had already accomplished it.

#### **6.4 BNT'S CONFUSED "PUBLIC INTEREST" AND BTV AND NOVA'S CARE FOR THE INDIVIDUAL IN CRISIS**

It is ironic that Nova's top rated show "Gospodari na Efira," [Lords of the Airwaves] ridiculed bTV's "Let's Clean Bulgaria in One Day" as a remnant of socialism, because its own model thrived on the socialist-era tradition of approaching television stations for the resolution of social problems. Since 2003, "Lords of the Airwaves" has been the highest ranked program on Nova. The show parodies the mishaps of other television channels but also features an investigative component as it tries to expose corruption and frauds. Thus, it is a unique combination of entertainment, satire and politics. But, the most interesting part of the "Lords of the Airwaves" is that the audience generates its themes. On its website, a bright yellow section invites the

audience “to file a complaint” and “notify us about any irregularities, blunders and obvious injustices and we, at ‘The Lords of the Airwaves,’ won’t leave things as they are!”<sup>124</sup> I was able to have a short conversation with a member of this show who told me that each day, they receive 300 letters. She admitted that they simply have no capacity to respond to all of them. At the time of our conversation there was an election campaign and she shared with me that during this week many of the complaints were against political parties that pasted their street campaign posters in public spaces that restricted political advertising.<sup>125</sup>

It is no coincidence that “Lords of the Airwaves” is both one of the oldest and the most popular post-socialist television shows in Bulgaria. Similarly to bTV’s campaigns, it engaged the audience and focused on pressing social problems. The person working for “Lords of the Airwaves” whom I spoke with, admitted she “earned money because the institutions were not working,” and people sought media for the resolution of their problems.<sup>126</sup> While this phenomenon had novel features, one cannot exclude the influence of the three decades long tradition of socialist television connecting with its viewers. The writing of letters addressed to the television channel was a firm practice during socialism and programs such as “Lords of the Airwaves” continued to maintain it.

In addition to this legacy of socialist media, there was another feature from the past that both bTV and Nova tapped into. As chapter two explained, the socialist humanist discourse of late socialism redirected both theory and practice to the development of the socialist personality. This legacy of an emphasis on the individual was something that both Nova and bTV embraced. However, they took it into a very different direction. Socialist media’s emphasis on the

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<sup>124</sup> Gospodari na Efira, Nova TV, accessed March 12, 2016, [http://gospodari.com/signals/send\\_signal](http://gospodari.com/signals/send_signal).

<sup>125</sup> Personal Interview # 49.

<sup>126</sup> Personal Interview # 49.

development of the “holistically-developed personality” focused on the intellectual and cultural growth of each person. But while cultural programming turned its attention to the individual, primetime news remained bound to a bureaucratic presentation of news items that zeroed in on the head of state’s activities and the communist party’s initiatives. If there were reports that interviewed common people or focused on their daily life they were buried in the background. bTV and Nova reversed this trend. They abandoned the focus on culture, art and creativity, with the personal story becoming the central item of the news with officialdom all but eliminated. In other words, they tapped into socialist humanist concern with the personality, but they shifted its original locus from culture to the difficulties of daily life.

The main character of primetime news of both Nova and bTV became the Bulgarian citizen who struggles to survive in post-socialist Bulgaria. The senior figure at Nova interviewed for this study emphasized to me that this focus made it popular in the mid-1990s, long before it transitioned into a national broadcast channel in 2003.

We received letters from all over Bulgaria...We looked for the human angle and the personal example in the news. We helped a lot of people to solve their problems after they notified us. We would send a crew to research and cover the situation. We had a very strong connection with the viewer. They wrote to us letters and rang the phones. There was no internet yet. Our main politics was to avoid officialdom and show the human point of view. For example, if we received the news of the passing of a new law we sought to show its effect through its consequences on a particular person. We would not just announce that the ministers have decided to raise the eco tax. Instead, through simple language, we would try to explain what this meant for you and me. Is my car tax going to go up? Or if they raised the amount child support funds, how will this affect a family three? What more can they buy? We talked to the person who experienced the news and did not just broadcast the official who announces: ‘Today, we are raising child support funds.’ So what?<sup>127</sup>

When bTV took the license in 2000, it also amplified the focus on the personal and the social problems that regular people face. But as with the charity and volunteer campaigns one

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<sup>127</sup> Personal Interview # 44.

must ask whether this focus was engendered by PR concerns and the fight for television ratings rather than altruism. Without a doubt, the concern for common people during primetime news and other programs improved the image of the commercial television channels. But again, similarly to the charity and volunteer campaigns, one cannot dismiss the grassroots impetus for this focus. Clearly Bulgarians cared about these stories and their fellow citizens in crisis. Otherwise, one can rest assured that the commercial channels would have changed this approach long ago. In addition, while one can doubt the motives of the management of bTV and Nova as well as the intentions of owners such as Murdoch, Lauder and Kyriakou, the personal investment of regular media workers must be taken into account. This became apparent to me during an interview with a young bTV reporter who worked full-time despite the fact that she was only in her junior year of university. Without me asking, she talked about her future in the social mission of bTV:

RR: After I get my Bachelor's degree, I was planning to enroll in a Master's program for journalism. But now I am not sure because I also want to study production. But either way I will for sure continue to work in television. I want to become even better at social journalism. The reports I make are mostly about the most common people. Poor, abandoned, harassed and jaded people.

Me: Is there room for this kind of journalism at bTV?

RR: Yes and I want to develop in this sphere. Because it turns out that there are so many people with astonishing fates and we can help them in this way. You give them a chance for people to learn about them and maybe somebody would help them. This is very nice, because besides being paid, you also do good. I can give you a recent example. Two weeks ago we filmed a woman that lives in downtown Sofia. Her husband died and she has three children. She works at a hospice for children with cerebral palsy and her salary is 330 leva [165 Euros] a month. She pays 120 leva [60 Euros] for rent. After she pays her bills, she is left with 100 leva [50 Euros] with which she must feed her children and provide them with clothes and shoes. People keep calling me to this day. Just regular, common people who watched the report on TV and want to help her. I talked to this lady three days ago and she was so happy. People sent her toys for the children, they sent her clothes and money. So I feel like I helped her live a little better...bTV is the most socially engaged television and I really like this. The question is not to make a video material, edit



it and broadcast it, but not ask yourself why you made this video. What do you want to show with it? And it is nice to have a positive result at the end.<sup>128</sup>

Regardless of the intentions of the management it would be a travesty to dismiss the good intentions of this young journalist. It would also be unfair, to say the least, to brush aside the care and participation of regular people described by her. It is this combination of grassroots pressure and journalistic commitment that sustains this component of bTV's business model. In this respect, Nova and bTV are actually very different television channels than their counterparts in the West. When would CNN or Fox News find time for the stories of regular people who struggle economically? Astutely described by US comedian Jon Stewart as "24-hour, political pundit, perpetual panic conflictinators," US mainstream television concerned primarily with electoral campaigns or terrorism seem completely detached from the social problems of regular people. But some of the same companies, such as News Corporation and Time Warner, that own media in the US approve of a different model in Bulgaria. Of course, the reason for this is not that they care more about poor Bulgarians than poor Americans, but because this particular business model generates money in Southeastern Europe. It is precisely the historical legacy of socialist morals such as collectivity, selflessness, egalitarianism and socialist journalism's tradition to serve the people as an agent of social change that underline bTV and Nova's success. The success of commercial television was also greatly facilitated by the state television channel, which after 1989 equated social responsibility and public interest with anti-communism.

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<sup>128</sup> Personal Interview # 30.

#### 6.4.1 Public Television without a Public Interest

Chapter three described the politicization of state media during the first years of post-socialism. Although the fervent spirit gradually subsided, the dominance of anti-communist discourse continued in BNT. The state channel abandoned its public functions to educate and enlighten while advertising and entertainment became more common. Overstaffed by anti-communist journalists within a situation of gradual commercialization and the disappearance of artistic and cultural content, the public role of state television appeared to be the denouncement of communism. But with anti-communism on one side and commercialization on the other, BNT laid the foundations for its future marginalization.

Throughout the 1990s BNT was a hotbed of resistance to the Bulgarian Socialist Party whether it was in power or not. In the mid-1990s, there were attempts to change the configuration of state media during the two years long rule by the socialists, but they were met with strikes that ultimately contributed to the demise of the government. During the UDF government of Prime Minister Ivan Kostov (1997-2001), BNT was completely on the side of the government and anti-communism dominated state television. Bulgarian media scholar and media regulator, Margarita Pesheva wrote in 2001 that it was precisely this relentless continuation of archaic politics that determined BNT's loss of a large section of its audience to bTV. Pesheva cites the political show *Ekip 4* of BNT as an example of "political asymmetry" with its pronounced anti-communist bias. "But who in BNT cares about the public interest as long as they press the propaganda button until their finger turns blue."<sup>129</sup> According to Pesheva, BNT

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<sup>129</sup> Pesheva, *Obarnato Ogledalo*, 166.

lost its public and social mission because it was too busy serving “a particular political interest [read UDF’s].”<sup>130</sup>

In fact *Ekip 4* was not the only example of a media product dominated by anti-communists. Another product of the late 1990s and early 2000s was the show *Glasove* (“Voices”) led by the outspoken anti-communist Iavor Dachkov. Dachkov was very close to the Prime Minister Ivan Kostov and after he left BNT in 2001 he started to work as in PR for Kostov’s foundation. From 1999 to 2001, Dachkov was provided with a full hour during primetime on Sunday to anchor his anti-communist show. In general, anti-communism prevailed in the programs of BNT, which came as no surprise since the director of state television was Liliana Popova, an outspoken anti-communist who led the protests of the state radio against the socialist government of Videnov and worked at UDF’s daily *Demokratzia* previously. In short, in the 1990s and especially during the few years prior to the emergence of national commercial television, BNT’s public role seemed to be focused on the struggle against the specters of communism. At the same time, the socio-economic situation in the country worsened. While people struggled with high unemployment and sluggish economic recovery after one of the worst post-World War II banking crises and moments of hyperinflation, BNT seemed detached from their immediate problems. What is more, BNT ignored the difficult economic situation and kept the archaic anti-communist rhetoric alive at a time when the two party political model was in crisis. When bTV appeared in 2000, it immediately shifted the focus on the human story of the individual or the family who struggles to pay their bills and survive. Small wonder, that most people stopped watching state television.

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 166.

In addition to losing its social mission as a defender of the public interest, BNT also suffered from its turn to entertainment. When the commercial channels appeared, they also offered entertainment but more of it and of better quality. Thus, by the end of the 1990s, BNT had not only lost its identity as a defender of the public, but it had also prepared the ground for a commercial competition it was bound to lose.

Several Western television series started to appear during the *perestroika*, but the move towards cheap American entertainment accelerated after 1989. The emblematic soap opera *Guiding Light* (the longest-running soap opera in history) set in the American Midwest became a daily show on BNT. Another long-running American soap opera, *As the World Turns*, also found a place on the Bulgarian screen as did the emblematic *Dallas*. *Doctor Quinn, Medicine Woman*, set in post-Civil War Colorado Springs, was another prominent series during the early 1990s.<sup>131</sup> In 1993, the first commercial American-style game show, *Nevada*, named after one of the US states, became the pioneer in this sphere. Although there were game shows during socialism, there were significant differences. First of all, the producers explicitly stated that this would be a show with an “American appearance” and the awards in it were different than those during socialism. Instead of a symbolic award, such as a book, in *Nevada* the winner received an automobile. But most importantly, the show “instilled a new type of competitive culture” in which people depended “not on their intellectual resources, but on their luck.”<sup>132</sup> Gone were the socialist-era game shows in which people demonstrated their intellect and won symbolic prizes. But the commercialization of the state channel went further to reach a new low unknown for

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<sup>131</sup> Ivanova, *Parva Programa*, 219.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 219-220.

public channels around the world. After midnight, Bulgaria's public channel started to offer the so called "pink series" and the 105 episode long "Playboy" series.<sup>133</sup>

The post-socialist development of Efir 2 (Channel 2), BNT's second channel, which was created in 1975 to promote education and cultural enlightenment, was especially revealing of the new trend of commercialization. Television series, soap operas, and game shows replaced socialist era cultural programming. The commercialization of the second public channel became most visible in 1993 when it launched the program "Teleshopping," during which you could "buy while you watch."<sup>134</sup> In the absence of regulation, even primetime news featured advertisements. In 1991, the cigarette company *Rothmans* became the first to advertise during a news hour.<sup>135</sup> But perhaps one of the most important shifts towards commercialization was the new policy according to which the two state channels had to compete with each other. Channel 2 adopted its famous slogan "Two is More Than One" and the competition was not only not fictive, but at times it was seditious. For instance, Channel 2 broadcast the popular American soap opera *Dallas* at 8 pm, when the main primetime news program started on Channel 1.<sup>136</sup> Broadcasting during this time was seen as a direct attempt to steal the audience of Channel 1. The time when the two channels complemented each other to provide better educational and cultural programming was gone and now they could sabotage each other with cheap soap operas.

In short, in the first half of the 1990s, the state channels moved towards entertainment at a rapid pace. From erotic films to soap operas and from television games to teleshopping, post-socialist public media became very different than their socialist predecessors. For this reason, Polyva Ivanova accurately points out that Channel 1 of BNT was the first one to "start developing

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<sup>133</sup> Ivanova, *Vtora Programa*, 112.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 106

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 115.

commercialism in the media sphere.”<sup>137</sup> The situation degenerated to such an extent that when the socialists came back to power in the mid-1990s, they felt compelled to remake television to look as it did before 1989. In 1995, the newly appointed director of BNT, the staunch socialist Ivan Granitski, launched an unsuccessful attempt to transform state television. In the first days of his short tenure he described his mission as a “fight against programs with low artistic qualities” and declared an end to “sex, gambling and violence” on state television. He signed an agreement for cultural cooperation with the Writers’ Union and its director Nikolay Haitov, who was one of the most prolific screenwriters and producers of socialist television before 1989. At the same time, he threatened to replace the “endless soap operas” and other “subcultural products” with the “highest models of world art.”<sup>138</sup> For a short time, television portraits and intellectual programs about books and art returned to the television screen. At the end of 1995, Granitski made a cancellation list of “kitsch programs,” which included almost all of the television game shows.<sup>139</sup>

In sum, Granitski, who lost his job after barely one year after he took the helm of BNT, managed to reintroduce cultural programming. But this was a short-lived and ultimately unsuccessful return to socialist-era television. His reforms were immediately repealed by the next director, which set BNT back on the road to a “furious flourishing of entertainment programming.”<sup>140</sup> By the end of 1997 the time allocated for political and current affairs shows was reduced by one half, with the other half to be filled by entertainment programs.<sup>141</sup> Commercialization deepened to such an extent that at the end of 1997, the journalists in BNT

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<sup>137</sup> Ivanova, *Parva Programa*, 219.

<sup>138</sup> Ivanova, *Vtora Programa*, 125.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

went on strike to protest the amount of entertainment in the television program at a time when “the country is drowning in problems.”<sup>142</sup>

When bTV arrived on the scene in 2000, BNT had already developed the audience’s desire for entertainment. But bTV offered more choices and better quality entertainment. Unfortunately, the only other product that BNT had developed in the 1990s was outdated anti-communism. While BNT struggled to find its new public mission in the new conditions of market competition, through social responsibility campaigns, volunteering and charity, bTV constructed its image as television concerned with the plight of the Bulgarian citizen. This did not remain unnoticed by the major media scholars in the country.

The media outlet’s goal to demonstrate commitment is crucial. Many of the reports are planned in such a way that the very ‘pressure’ of the fact that a material is broadcasted leads to the solution of a concrete problem. In this way the viewers see the broadcasts as ‘helpful:’ a change in a bureaucratic practice, a repair of a dangerous section of a road, an answer to a long avoided question by a politician or an institution.<sup>143</sup>

One of Bulgaria’s foremost political scientists, think-tank chairman and a contributor to the *New York Times*, Ivan Krastev, described bTV as “paternalistic” because it spoke from the position of “a society that must care.”<sup>144</sup> But, what is missing in all of these analyses is any notice of the pressure from below that underpinned bTV, as well as Nova’s, engagement with issues of public concern. Bulgaria was a fertile ground to develop this type of business model not just because of the past and the sentiments and values instilled during socialism. The post-socialist situation of economic decay and falling living standards, mass emigration, and a widespread feeling of disillusionment with political institutions in one of the poorest countries in Europe was a fertile ground for a media outlet that acted as an agent of social justice. Thus, the

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>143</sup> Spasov, “Novinite na bTV,” 159.

<sup>144</sup> Ivan Krastev, “Be TV: Badi Televizia” / “Be TV: Be Television,” in *bTV Novata Vizia*, 224.

fusion of socialist morals, such as collective action, selflessness and concern for the common person with the contemporary situation of socio-economic decline shaped bTV's business model and identity.

## **6.5 MEDIA WORKERS, SOCIAL IRRESPONSIBILITY AND THE LIMITS OF NEOLIBERAL MEDIA POPULISM**

The disenchantment with traditional political institutions and the commercial television's involvement in the resolution of social problems had contributed to a peculiar situation not always welcomed by commercial media. The expectations from them rose dramatically and more often people did not expect the state to act after a critical report on bTV or Nova, but media themselves were expected to fix the problem. Thus, bTV's former director of News and Current Affairs, Luba Rizova explained that the expectations of the viewers "pushed their [bTV's] engagement beyond representing and revealing reality" into "real action" in which the producers and reporters of news turned into a "rapid reaction force" that pursued solutions to pressing social problems.<sup>145</sup> According to her, thousands of people trusted the television channel and donated money to charity campaigns because they knew that their donations "won't sink into the sands of bureaucracies and institutions."<sup>146</sup> In essence, what one witnesses in Bulgaria is the shift of the political field from parliament and other state institutions, perceived as corrupt and indifferent, to the mediascape. What began as a CSR campaign had degenerated into something both unique and very big.

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<sup>145</sup> Rizova, 35.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.



This stunning shift had reached peculiar proportions that surprised the journalists themselves. According to Rizova, there were cases when bTV received letters with grievances by citizens that were initially sent to the parliament or other institutions but were then forwarded by this same institution to bTV.<sup>147</sup> It seemed that not only the people, but even the state itself thought that television could solve problems better. While this type of trust and positive view of media guarantees high ratings, the expectations of them have grown so much that media face a challenge to even acknowledge the growing diversity of expectations. When a senior figure in Nova shared with me her anguish with this situation, she directed her criticism at the defunct state institutions. According to her, state dysfunctionality bred newer and harder to meet expectations that were redirected to the media. She gave me a striking example to illustrate how far this process has gone.

BK: There is a strange paradox. If one has a problem, they do not call the institution that can solve the problem, but they call the television stations.

Me: Why?

BK: Because there is no trust in the institutions. There is a huge absence of trust. Even when people are trapped in the mountain. A week ago we had a case when a group of people called our phone and told us: “We are in a mountain lodge. The road is blocked by snow. We do not have electricity. It’s a crisis situation. Please help us.” I asked them if they had called the mountain rescue service, because they are the people who can respond in the quickest manner. They have helicopters, dogs and they are prepared. But they said “No. We first called you.” And this happens for all sorts of problems, from domestic violence to potholes on the roads, to electricity shutdowns. For everything people first call the television stations.<sup>148</sup>

The Nova manager told me this story without any hint of pride, but with frustration with the mounting expectations on television organizations. Although extreme, the example of the people trapped in a snowstorm illustrates the extent to which this media model has transformed the relationship between people, media and political institutions. bTV and Nova’s campaigns are

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>148</sup> Personal interview # 44.

examples of CSR activities that pretend to substitute for the state. As such, they constitute a neoliberal strategy that deems public investment unnecessary as corporations themselves fix the problems. It is highly problematic that media nourish these high expectations that they cannot possibly fulfil. This is not to say that they do not help. After all, in its fifteen years of operation bTV addressed many social problems. The channels continue to raise money for important causes, including funds for life-saving medical treatments. The goal of a critique of these campaigns is not to denigrate the commercial channels, but to point out that their CSR are inherently limited and media must not pretend that they address roots of certain social problems. These campaigns create a sense of quick resolution (bTV called its reporters a “rapid reaction force”), but their effect is inherently short-lived and limited because by themselves, they cannot alleviate systematic social conditions.

During my research for this project, it turned out that the high expectations from media are shared by members of my family. The situation I observed provided me with a concrete example of both the speed and limits of these campaigns.

In the summer of 2014, I received a call from a friend of mine who informed me that he had watched my grandmother on Nova. When I left my grandparents’ house in the morning to head to the national library in Sofia, I was not aware that they planned any television appearances. In fact, they did not. In the previous weeks, irregular garbage collection had led to the accumulation of a heap of rubbish right next to our yard. Just like the people trapped in the mountains, my grandmother skipped any attempt to call the authorities and instead she alerted Nova. The television channel dispatched a reporter who called the mayor of the city to tell her that a television crew would check the situation. In turn, the mayor acted so quickly that prior to the arrival of the reporter two trucks came in and loaded the trash. Nevertheless, the reporter

arrived at my grandparents' house as did the mayor. What followed was an acrimonious debate between my grandmother and the city mayor that Nova broadcast live. Thus, while I was in the library during this summer afternoon, our trash problem was resolved and my grandmother had gained national media coverage through her televised spar with the mayor.

My initial reaction was awe with the capacity of media to act with stunning speed. When Nova's report became available online, I watched it and apparently so did all of our close and distant relatives, abroad and in Bulgaria. There was a sense of victory and accomplishment in the family and of course much laughter. However, all of these evaporated a week later when the garbage piled up again. My grandmother did not want to call Nova again. "How many times would viewers want to see my face?" she asked. But more importantly, did she have to call the television station each week in order to get her garbage collected?

This brief example illustrates well the fundamental limitation of media social responsibility campaigns. While they react quickly, they cannot address the source of the problem. In this particular case, the major problem was that my hometown of Pernik was hit the hardest during the post-socialist de-industrialization. After 1989, as the coal mines and steel factories shut down violent crime and drug addiction increased and Pernik, once the proud birthplace of the international communist leader Georgi Dimitrov, turned into a depressed town cited each year as "the worst Bulgarian city to live in." In fact, several months after my grandmother's heroic television appearance, the mayor of Pernik declared the city bankrupt. Needless to say, the garbage problems remains unresolved years after Nova's report.

While it is commendable that commercial media tries to resolve social problems, one must ask whether this must be their main purpose. It is one thing to play the role of a "rapid reaction force" that attempts to quickly fix social ills, but it is a completely different thing to

criticize economic structures and political ideologies that engender these ills. Nova and bTV happily play the role of the garbage removal guy, but what they never do is include criticisms of systematic impoverishment, growing inequalities, crumbling infrastructure and the potential alternatives to other deep social problems that accompany the restoration of capitalism in Eastern Europe. These issues have been completely absent in their programs.

One can extend these conclusions in respect to all of their campaigns. It is positive that they help some children receive medical treatment. But, it is very problematic that voices critical of the privatization of the Bulgarian healthcare system are absent on their broadcasts. All of the major social problems in Bulgaria require a political solution that involves social movements, political parties, the state and critical and informative media. In addition, it is positive that in the news and in some political shows, bTV focuses on the stories of individuals and families in crisis. However, this television channel remains committed to entertainment first and foremost. In the poorest country of the EU, the predicament of people who experience marginalization and poverty requires much more exposure.

The limits of the CSR campaigns of commercial television channels question the extent of the public role of these media. But, there is also a serious “internal” paradox in their social responsibility model. I conducted four interviews with media workers at bTV that highlighted the hypocritical nature of the television channel’s alleged concern for the public. Specifically, the atmosphere at bTV was grim as the media workers I interviewed expressed discontent with their situation. Fear of layoffs, meager salaries and low morale contradicted bTV’s image of a channel concerned with social justice and regular people. After all, if bTV did not treat its own workers well who would they?

Prior to my ethnographic interviews at bTV, I did not imagine that a media outlet owned by the US neoconservative billionaire Ronald Lauder would be too overly generous and benevolent to its non-Western employees. Nevertheless, I envisioned a cordial atmosphere and a degree of unity at a television channel that adopted social responsibility as its core principle. But the technical employees I interviewed painted a much grimmer picture than the one I expected.

ZV: I work in other media as well, although I am not allowed to do it. But money is tight. To put it simply I just cannot survive with this salary.

Me: Is this common here?

ZV: Absolutely. Every single person in this television channel works somewhere else as well. The salary is just very small and by very small I mean: very small. Let me give you an example. If I go to work as a cashier at *Fantastico* [a supermarket chain] I will get 1200 leva a month [600 Euros]. With all my qualifications and skills and the specialized tasks that I can perform I don't even get a full 1000 leva [500 Euros]. I receive 950 leva [475 Euros]. This is super ridiculous.

Me: But how come? Isn't this the most popular television channel in Bulgaria?

ZV: That's old glory...In the last several years [the management] justifies this with the economic crisis. At the end of the day, we, the people who make the profits and accomplish the projects and do the work suffer. Nobody is in the mood to work. You come to work unwillingly. Everybody is really tired. Everybody! Not to mention that we survived four or five layoffs just in the last four years [2009-2013]. I am talking about mass layoffs. During each one of them at least fifty or sixty people lose their jobs. I survived all sorts of things here including that I was also laid off. The strange thing is that when I was on the job market, they [bTV] asked me to work as a freelancer. We are a team here. We work well with each other, so they could not just find somebody to replace me. We are a team without conflicts. But they break this team intentionally.

Me: But isn't this counterproductive?

ZV: We ask ourselves this question. It is an issue of finances. Each year the media outlet sets profit goals for the following year. So if this year they earned 200 million leva, then the following year they expect to grow and earn 230 million leva. A few years ago they justified a massive layoff by claiming that the media outlet lost 3 million leva. However, they did not lose any money, they were just 3 million leva shy of realizing their profit goal. And this was a reason to lay off people!

Me: Did they lay off many people?

ZV: Oh yeah. More than one-hundred workers. This is a lot of people, because at the moment, we at the technical crew are about one-hundred.

Me: Are you still a freelancer?

ZV: No they hired me back because I was asking for more money and they needed me. At the end, they realized that it is cheaper for them to hire me full-time again.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Personal Interview # 29.

The other two technical workers I spoke with painted a similar picture. One of them, who had worked in bTV since its launch in 2000, claimed that after the economic crisis of 2008, the situation worsened dramatically. “Just certain people get paid, others get laid off,” another one said.

HM: There are constant budget cuts and the atmosphere at work is very grim...two entire departments were laid off. There are layoffs in my department now too...The explanation is that there is no money, which I believe is a vile lie.

Me: How is this possible in the highest rated media outlet in Bulgaria?

HM: bTV is beneficial for the viewer, but not for its staff. I have not had a pay raise in the last eight years [2008-2014], while the prices of everything are going up. The excuse is that there is no money.

Me: Did you ever ask for a pay raise?

HM: I tried once or twice but when there is no understanding on the other end you give up. When you work in this type of environment you look for other ways to feed your family. Naturally, you start not to care much about your job. You just pretend that you are actively working, which is very deprived thing to do. So it's not just about money, but the low moral around you is very disheartening...I hope things improve in the future. I have been here for fourteen years and I would hate to leave, but I will if I get a better offer. I have two children to feed at home.<sup>150</sup>

The third bTV technical staff member collaborated the story and described the negative atmosphere in bTV. Although he worked full-time at a different television station he was called in bTV each week as a freelancer. He claimed that this is the future of bTV—getting rid of most of the staff and calling freelancers when needed. He claimed the week before our interview they laid off the entire makeup room staff. From then on, the make-up artists and hairstylists were to be called only when needed. In this way, bTV did not have to pay any benefits or health insurance. But he also added another component to the austerity regime in this commercial television channel. “The equipment here is old. Every time I go to work I say a prayer that the technology does not fail. They invested some money in the beginning [2000] and since then they

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<sup>150</sup> Personal Interview # 31.

only collect profits without investing. They don't invest, because they know only how to swallow [money].”<sup>151</sup>

In sum, the interviews with these technical workers not only did not reveal a spirit of care and compassion in bTV, but they exposed an atmosphere of disillusionment prompted by purges and austerity. According to the interviewees, the constant threat of lay-offs and budget cuts disenchanted the entire staff of bTV. I was able to interview not only technical workers but also journalists. However, in this sphere bTV also tried to cut costs aggressively. A former bTV anchor of a commentary show recounted the overemphasis on tight budgets even prior to the economic crisis of 2008.

I did not ask them for international trips or for expensive international televised connections. So to speak, I ‘carried my program on my own shoulders’ using my own experience and skills as a journalist. It was clear that this was a product made with the bare minimum. For example, I did not have permanent producers. I would get whoever is available from the primetime news. So they rotated. The situation with the reporters was even worse. According to the channel’s plan the reporters from the newsroom should have also worked for me. But none of them was doing this willingly because they were not remunerated for the extra work. They did not have any stimulus and the only thing I could do to stimulate them was to offer to broadcast during my show a report of theirs that was not accepted by the news department. To say the least, this was a degrading attitude of the management towards me. I did not have a budget, my own reporters or resources of any kind. Everything was improvised. So I ask a reporter “Will you do this for me?” and their response oftentimes would be “We will see.” I complained a few times, but then felt embarrassed to get into conflicts with the reporters because of my complaints to the management. We had so scant video materials, that at some point their only use was to broadcast them while guests in the studio exchanged seats.<sup>152</sup>

To conclude, bTV and to a certain extent Nova, placed social responsibility as a central feature to their identity. However, what this chapter has tried to explain is that this business model was to a large extent formed from below. Paradoxically it was influenced by socialist morals, such as collective action, selflessness and egalitarianism as well as by the tradition of

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<sup>151</sup> Personal Interview # 25.

<sup>152</sup> Personal interview # 39.

socialist media to act as agents of social change at the service of the people. While, the CSR campaigns have helped hundreds of people over the years, the ideology of these television channels was not altruism, but was dictated by the flow of capital. bTV's economic model was vicious and monopolistic, while at the same time it was everything, but socially responsible to its workers. bTV's combination of neoliberal economics and an alleged concern for common people prompt the description of this business model as "neoliberal media populism."



## 7.0 CONCLUSION

On May 20<sup>th</sup> 2011, Muslims gathered for prayers in front of *Banya Bashi* mosque in downtown Sofia, the capital of the EU's poorest member—Bulgaria. The mosque, built in 1576, is located in the “triangle of tolerance,” which also includes the St. Nedelya Orthodox Church and the Sofia Synagogue. During the worship, approximately two hundred activists of the far-right party Ataka (“Attack” in English), wearing black shirts and touting a Bulgarian flag, interrupted the prayer. They shouted obscenities, pelted the Muslims with eggs, and initiated a fight. Despite police intervention, several worshipers lay bloodied as prayer mats burned nearby. The President of Bulgaria, Georgi Parvanov declared the violence, a “provocation unknown in the new Bulgarian history.”<sup>1</sup>

In 2005, Ataka won 9 percent of the parliamentary vote and in 2006 its leader and founder, Volen Siderov,<sup>2</sup> reached a run-off for the presidency where he achieved 24 percent. In 2007, the year Bulgaria entered the European Union, Ataka gained 14 percent in the historic first elections for European Deputies. In the parliamentary elections of 2009, Ataka gained 9.36 percent and for the larger part of the term supported the ruling conservative party Citizens for

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<sup>1</sup> “Bulgaria Shocked as Nationalists Assault Praying Muslims in Sofia Mosque” *Sofia News Agency*, May 20, 2011, accessed August 15, 2014, [http://www.novinite.com/view\\_news.php?id=128474](http://www.novinite.com/view_news.php?id=128474).

<sup>2</sup> This is how Volen Siderov describes himself in the biographical note on the cover of his numerous books: “The author participated in the dissident anti-communist movement before the 10<sup>th</sup> of November 1989 and in the creation of the political opposition to the communist party—Union of Democratic Forces (UDF), as well as the free press. One of the few in this sphere who has never been connected with the Bulgarian Communist Party and the secret services of the communist regime.”

European Development of Bulgaria (CEDB). After a lackluster performance in the 2011 presidential elections and a crisis within the party, many predicted the end of Ataka. However, riding the tide of mass protests over the high price of electricity, Ataka proved resilient, gaining 7.3 percent of the votes in the May 2013 snap elections.

Founded only six weeks prior to the elections in 2005, Ataka stunned many commentators. Until 2005, Bulgaria remained somewhat of an exception in Eastern Europe because it lacked a “consolidated racist extremist movement or aggressive nationalist leader.”<sup>3</sup> However, after the parliamentary elections of 2005, Ataka changed this situation. It needs to be noted that Ataka’s “unexpected” success came precisely at the moment when the national elites had firmly established a stable neoliberal consensus. The two-party model of the 1990s had collapsed after 2001 and practically all parties adopted technocratic ideologies, presenting themselves as “neutral experts” supporting EU Accession, NATO membership, the establishment of US military bases, active support for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, in addition to economic liberalisation. With its opposition to all of these policies and the fiery rhetoric of Siderov, who is without a doubt one of the best political orators in the Bulgarian parliament, Ataka presented itself as an alternative to the status quo. In retrospect, in the difficult economic situation and homogenous political field of late post-socialism, Ataka’s novelty should not have been underestimated. But there is another reason why Ataka’s confrontational, mean-spirited and racist rhetoric found a fertile ground.

While political commentators acted surprised at the emergence of a party that threatens ethnic co-existence they failed to note that xenophobic rhetoric was already widespread in mainstream media and was especially prevalent in the media outlets of the supposedly liberal,

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<sup>3</sup> Cas Mudde, “Introduction,” in *Racist Extremism in Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. Cas Mudde (New York: Routledge, 2006), 2.

human rights oriented, Western corporations of WAZ and News Corp. For these reasons, the rise of Ataka serves as a fitting conclusion to the developments of post-socialist media as well as to the discussions and analyses of this dissertation. The neoliberal media populism that developed in Bulgaria after 1989 had a range of powerful and problematic political implications, of which Ataka is an especially virulent example.

As mentioned in chapter four, WAZ was one of only two media companies that signed with the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), an agreement for a common code of conduct between directors and journalists that included: “standing up for human rights, standing up for the UN Charter, democratic rights, the parliamentary system, fighting totalitarian activities of left and right and fighting ‘any nationalist or racial discrimination.’”<sup>4</sup> But in reality their major publications in Bulgaria, *24 Chasa* and *Trud*, which occupied three-quarters of the press market, were replete with nationalism and racism. The main target of WAZ’s newspapers were the Roma people, a minority group that accounts for approximately five percent of Bulgaria’s total population. What is more, the racism of these papers was not subtle but quite explicit:

Everybody knows that the main occupation of the gypsies is stealing. This practice needs to stop once and for all. The police needs to enter Stolipinovo [A Roma ghetto in the city of Plovdiv] and discipline all gypsies. If they were a normal ethnic group and they did not steal, the Hindus would not have kicked them out of their state centuries ago. One could cope with the gypsies only when they are kept under control.<sup>5</sup>

This quote from *24 Chasa* from 2002 is by far not an outlier. The WAZ newspapers referred to the Roma people with the racially charged epithet “darkies” (*murgavi*) and *Noshten Trud*, the yellow version of *Trud*, simply called them “mangali,” an even more derogatory term.

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<sup>4</sup> Downey, 128.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Galia Lazarova, *Obrazat na Romite: Edno Izsledvane na Savremennia Balgarski Pechat / The Image of the Roma: A Study of the Contemporary Bulgarian Press* (Sofia, Bulgaria: Fondacia ‘Sega,’ 2002), 19.

Before Bulgaria's entry in the EU the Roma people were blamed as an obstacle to Bulgaria's integration in the European Union because their alleged innate ethnic backwardness hindered Bulgaria from joining the prosperous, white West. An empirical research study from 2003, conducted two years prior to Ataka's founding, discovered that the "dangerous gypsy" was the most frequent representation of the Roma people in the Bulgarian press, followed by the image of the "savage gypsy." The description of the Roma as thieves and as people who live off the state welfare was also one of the most frequent descriptions.<sup>6</sup> Neutral or positive images of the Roma were almost completely absent from WAZ's newspapers in the mid-2000s.

When Ataka entered the parliament in 2005 it only amplified these stereotypes, but it also fused them with economic grievances. This fusion of economic complaints and racism is a major part of Ataka's rhetoric:

The Bulgarian society witnesses how the entire welfare policy of the state is mainly turned towards easing the life of the gypsy population at the expense of the compliant tax payers [...] When will the Bulgarian state build at least one home for a young, ethnic Bulgarian family? A family that works for the lowest salary in the EU, pays taxes, insurance, sends its children to school, survives at the edge of destitution, abides the laws of the country and pays rent or a life-long mortgage? If the above mentioned program is only geared towards the gypsy ethnicity, we should ask ourselves—who is discriminated against?<sup>7</sup>

Besides the Roma minority, Bulgaria's Muslim population, which is 10 percent of the population, is also a major target of Ataka. Ataka's hatred towards the Bulgarian Muslims extends to an anti-Turkish rhetoric, as it regards them as the "fifth column" used by Turkey to hinder the Bulgarian state. But once again, the stalking of historical Bulgarian nationalism directed at the Ottoman Empire and its perceived heir Turkey was a permanent feature of WAZ's 24 *Chasa* and *Trud* as well. In fact, in 2007 the newspapers were instrumental in fuelling the

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<sup>6</sup> Mariana Popova, *Romite v mediite 2003 i 2005 / The Roma in the Media 2003 and 2005* (Sofia, Bulgaria: Fondacia, 'Sega,' 2006), 43.

<sup>7</sup> Ilian Todorov, "The Tax Payers' Money Promote Brown Idleness," *Ataka*, August 18, (2011): 8-9.

nationalist hysteria against the historians Martina Baleva and Ulf Brunnbauer who were scheduled to present academic papers at a social science conference. Their topic was the social construction of the popular memory of the Ottoman repression that followed the quelling of the uprising of April 1876. However, Baleva and Brunnbauer were accused of denying this repression. This was despite the fact that they never did this, but rather explored the historical transformation of the representation of Ottoman violence. *24 Chasa* and *Trud* waged a media war that alleged that Baleva and Brunnbauer were “hired” by “the West” to “falsify” history. This scandal culminated with the banning of the conference. There were also violent threats in the media against the scholars and even the burnings of their books by a few extreme nationalists.<sup>8</sup> The situation escalated to the extent that WAZ could no longer pretend that their newspapers were champions of human rights, anti-racism and anti-nationalism. They admitted that its newspapers acted unprofessionally, but claimed that it was the Bulgarian journalists’ fault since they needed to be re-educated.<sup>9</sup>

The situation on television was similar as bTV, which also actively participated in the Baleva and Brunnbauer witch hunt, has turned nationalism into its central component. One of the most nationalistic programs on Bulgarian television is bTV’s most successful show, *Slavi’s Show*, which remains the only Bulgarian program to be nominated for an EMMY award (2002). Slavi Trifonov, the anchor of the evening show, closely emulates David Letterman and with its band, dance troop, and famous sofa the program copies a Western format.<sup>10</sup> However, nationalistic rhetoric, as well as homophobic jokes are a frequent feature of the program. Through satire and edgy commentary *Slavi’s Show* has been the most overtly political program

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<sup>8</sup> Martin Marinos and Georgi Markov, “Bulgaria: the Rise of Ataka,” in *The Far Right in Europe*, ed. by Fred Laplat (London: International Institute for Research & Education, 2015), 71.

<sup>9</sup> Downey, 130.

<sup>10</sup> Ibroscheva and Raicheva-Stover, 231.

on bTV. Like so many popular media personalities in Bulgaria, Slavi emerged as an anti-communist who, since the early 1990s, was a leading figure in the first satirical and critical show on Bulgarian television, the student show *Kuku*.

Since he joined bTV in 2000, Slavi's criticism has been directed at the entire political class and especially at the political parties in power. But his criticism has been increasingly more nationalistic. Slavi represents himself as a patriot and a guardian of Bulgarianess. In addition, through his band, Slavi has released older traditional "patriotic" Bulgarian songs. In the edited academic volume *bTV: The New Vision*, in which he was invited to contribute a piece, Slavi claims that bTV "remains the only Bulgarian television channel that exercises public and patriotic functions that are not ordered by a blue, red or a yellow cell phone" [referring to the UDF, BSP and the "King's" party].<sup>11</sup> Slavi criticizes the accusation that bTV is an American-owned television and claims that no other television station marks as well the Bulgarian national holidays as bTV and admits that for this reason he is honored "to work for such an 'American' television" network. He challenges his critics "to point to another 'Bulgarian' television station that has done more for the national self-esteem of Bulgarians than bTV and my [Slavi's] crew."<sup>12</sup>

Patriotism, the preservation of Bulgarianess and national identity have been a consistent feature of Slavi Trifonov's repertoire, which he mobilizes in his criticism of the political establishment. Like all nationalisms, Slavi's cannot avoid confrontation and exclusion despite the entertainment format of his show. Bulgarian media scholar Viara Angelova has argued that Slavi reaches to the "average Bulgarian" citizen, but he does so through an appeal to his or her

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<sup>11</sup> Slavi Trifonov, "Televiziata ne Sluzhi samo za Zabavlenie, tia Triabva I da Vazpitava" / "Television Must not only Enteritain but also Edcuate," in *bTV: Novata Vizia*, 54.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

stereotypes, rather than through an attempt to change them.<sup>13</sup> For instance, homophobic content is present in “almost every issue of the show” as Slavi has constructed himself as “hyper-macho.”<sup>14</sup> It comes as no surprise that Valeri Naidenov, the founder of *24 Chasa* and the main culprit behind the crude newspaper language discussed in chapter four, finds “Slavi’s Show” as “the last source of the good, healthy male humor” that “provides bTV with testosterone lacking in the other television stations.”<sup>15</sup>

bTV’s most famous and long-lasting program offers plenty of nationalism, machismo and homophobia. But this is not the only format where one encounters these phenomena. bTV’s commentary shows and the news have also engaged with nationalism and racism on a consistent basis. One of its most recent nationalistic reports even caught the attention of global media. In mid-February, 2016, bTV produced several news stories and interviews with Dinko Valev, “Bulgaria’s vigilante migrant hunter,” as *BBC* called him.<sup>16</sup> Through cell phone videos recorded by his companions and in his own explanations to bTV reporters, the audience learned that Mr. Valev had spent several months “capturing” Syrian refugees trying to cross the Turkish-Bulgarian border. bTV presenters praised Valev for subduing a group of 12 Syrian men, three women and a child “with his bare hands.”<sup>17</sup> The muscular Valev claimed to have captured 25 refugees since August 2015 and admits that he had to use physical force to subdue some of them. Mr. Valev described the Syrian refugees as “disgusting and bad people [who] should stay where they are” and claimed that the Syrians were “terrorists, jihadists and Taliban.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Viara Angelova, *Sotzialni Maltzinstva i Medii / Social Minorities and Media* (Sofia, Bulgaria, Sofia Publishing, 2002), 168.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>15</sup> Naidenov, 248.

<sup>16</sup> Matthew Brunwasser, “Bulgaria’s vigilante migrant ‘hunter’” *BBC*, March 30, 2016, assessed April 4, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-35919068>.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

bTV mythologized the case of Dinko Valev, turning him into a national champion and referring to him as a “superhero.” With the new media attention brought by this main commercial channel, Bulgaria’s equivalent of Arizona’s far-right Sheriff Joe Arpaio started forming “volunteer” squads to capture more “illegals” and called on authorities to provide the vigilantes with wages. When the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, the main human rights organization in Bulgaria, filed a lawsuit against his activities, people organized rallies in defense of the practice. This is simply the most recent case of bTV’s controversial engagement with issues of national identity. Along with the even more aggressive nationalistic journalism of the Bulgarian newspapers, this phenomenon calls for a revisit of the concept of “neoliberal media populism” advanced in this dissertation. Specifically, it is important to seek ways to qualify the word “populism.”

In his rhetorical theory of populism, Ernesto Laclau identifies a social demand as the smallest unit in the constitution of a popular identity. A series of social demands coalesce in an “equivalential chain”—a diverse group of unsatisfied demands. The equivalential chain is instrumental in the establishment of an “internal frontier” that splits the political spectrum (unfulfilled social demands vs. unresponsive power).<sup>19</sup> The chain has to transition from a mere bond of solidarity of unfulfilled demands to a stable system of signification in order to become the ground for popular identity. The moment of “thickening” and crystallization of the equivalential links is what constitutes “the people” of populism.<sup>20</sup>

This project advances Laclau’s definition of populism by showing how Bulgarian post-socialist media splits the political spectrum into two parts, the people and their media vs. the political parties and the state. Yet, it is also important to distinguish between right-wing and left-

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<sup>19</sup> Laclau, 74.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.



wing populism. The main difference between the two is the reductive and exclusionary meaning of “the people” of the right and the generally inclusive and broad meaning of the term on the left. For this reason, in a recent piece on the leftist Greek party SYRIZA, Yannis Stavrakakis and Giorgos Katsambekis criticize the subsuming of SYRIZA and the Golden Dawn (the Neo-Nazi party in the Greek parliament) under the same banner of “populism.”

It is clear that in the context of SYRIZA’s discourse, ‘the people’ is called upon to participate actively in a common project for radical democratic change, a project of self-fulfilment and emancipation. As we have also seen, unlike the ‘people’ of the extreme right, the ‘people’ of the left is presented as a plural, inclusive and active subject unbound by ethnic, racial, sexual, gender or other restrictions; a subject envisaged as acting on initiative and directly intervening in common matters, a subject that does not wait to be led or saved by anyone.<sup>21</sup>

In the Bulgarian case, too, the media populism must be qualified. As the nationalism of WAZ’s newspapers and bTV shows, this is not inclusive, but the exclusive populism of the right that appeals to the majority ethnic group and excludes the Roma, Muslims and homosexuals. In this way, this media model set the stage for the emergence of the far-right party Ataka in 2005. In fact, this extreme political party and other similar movements have adopted features of this model and generally thrive in this media environment.

Ataka emerged as a low cost, reactionary cable television show (also called *Ataka*) in 2003 and metamorphosed into a political party in 2005. For this reason Siderov criticizes those who found Ataka’s success surprising. “The truth is that 300,000 Bulgarians voted for an idea that I have developed for years through hundreds of articles, books, and almost 700 television shows on the Skat television network. Neither did I come out of the woods yesterday nor did I fly in here with a UFO.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, some scholars have argued that Ataka’s “rise to prominence

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<sup>21</sup> Yannis Stavrakakis and Giorgos Katsambekis, “Left-wing Populism in the European Periphery: the Case of SYRIZA,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 19, no.2 (2014): 135.

<sup>22</sup> Volen Siderov, *Moiata Bitka za Bylgaria / My Battle for Bulgaria*, (Sofia: Boomerang, 2007), 20.

was largely aided by its skilfully crafted media blitz.”<sup>23</sup> In fact, in 2011 Ataka became the first political party in Bulgaria with its own television network (*Alfa*). In this way, Ataka channels a significant amount of its state subsidy into media operations. There is a revolving door between the parliamentary group and the journalists of Ataka. Several of its MPs, including Siderov, are television hosts who combine their work in parliament with their television shows. Most, if not all, of the MPs contribute to the party newspaper of which Siderov is the editor. Additionally, Ataka uses an entertainment-style song and billboards to advertise its television network across Bulgaria.

With its media operations Ataka has been able to remain in parliament for more than twelve years, and at some point even participated in a governing coalition. What is more, since 2014 its media success has been replicated successfully by two other newly minted, extreme rightist formations that are now also in parliament. One of them is the National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria (NFSB) whose slogan is “The Party of SKAT!” SKAT is a twenty-year-old television channel with a far-right agenda. The director of the television channel is also the leader of the party. Since 2015, NFSB has been a key partner in Bulgaria’s right-wing ruling coalition. The other new far-right party is Bulgaria without Censorship (BWC). If the name is not enough to suggest this, it is also a media project led by a famous nationalistic Bulgarian television host who led bTV’s morning segment from 2003 and 2010. Another major figure in BWC and an MP of the party is Rossen Petrov who joined in 2014. Petrov, who served as the main screenwriter of “Slavi’s Show” from 2003 to 2011, was an anchor of a political commentary show on bTV in 2014. Without a warning, in February 2014 while on air he announced his resignation from the show and his decision to join the new far-right party. Thus,

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<sup>23</sup> Ibroscheva, Elza and Maria Raicheva-Stover. “The Politics of Hate: Media and the Rise to Power of Ultra Nationalism in Bulgaria,” *Limina* 15 (2009): 1.

as the examples above suggest, bTV has not only served as a purveyor of nationalism but also as an incubator for nationalist media personalities turned politicians.

There are numerous techniques that these formations copy from the neoliberal media populist business model. One of the most glaring ones is their emulation of the corporate social responsibility campaigns introduced by Murdoch's bTV. Like bTV, Ataka's Alfa television presents itself as a helper to people in need. It has launched a special program called "Orthodox Solidarity" that offers help to people in need of medical treatment or impoverished citizens. It offers funds for people who want to go to the university, helps build churches, assists pensioners in need of food and many other activities. The only difference between this and bTV is that Ataka's campaigns are much more unrefined. For example, on May 22, 2014 an Ataka MP and an Alfa television crew visited the impoverished home of Atanas Georgiev, an eighteen-year-old blind boy on hemodialysis. "We come to you on a good occasion," the Ataka MP tells the boy as he puts 1000 leva in his hand. The focus falls on the exchange of money while the deputy smiles at the camera. "It is noble but very populist and insufficient," acknowledged an anchor at Alfa in a personal interview.<sup>24</sup>

The far-right political representatives have also taken advantage of the superficial news stories of mainstream media and the manufacturing of cheap content. With their conspiracy theories and simplistic ethnicized explanations that fail to analyze problems at their economic and political roots, far-right actors thrive in a media environment equally simplistic and open to racism. Similarly to US Republican Presidential candidate Donald Trump, who blames undocumented Mexicans for America's social ills, Ataka, NFSB and BWC have attributed Bulgaria's economic difficulties to the Syrian refugees, the Roma people and the Muslim

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<sup>24</sup> Personal interview # 20.

minority. In addition, they have also learned mainstream media's addiction to shock stories and sensationalism. Once again, like Donald Trump's ability to attract media with outlandish statements and the promotion of violence, Siderov has engaged in similar and even more extreme actions to attract media attention.

In 2006, Siderov claimed that a slight car accident in which he was involved was actually an assassination attempt. The case gained enormous publicity. In 2011, he led the assault on the Sofia mosque described in the beginning of this conclusion. In 2014 he assaulted a French diplomat during a flight and punched a policeman at the Varna airport in Bulgaria afterwards. In 2015 he initiated a massive brawl in Bulgaria's foremost theatre and art school. Like so many other conservative, right-wing politicians his name was also involved in a publicized sexual affair. In 2011, Ataka barely survived a soap opera-like drama after it became public that Siderov had an affair with Denitsa Gadzheva, the leader of Ataka's youth wing and a fiancé of his stepson and the MEP of Ataka, Dimitar Stoyanov. At this point, Kapka, Siderov's wife and the editor of the party newspaper divorced him and quit her job. Stoyanov, her son and Ataka MEP, also started a public feud with his former step-father, party leader and up to that point in time, secret lover of his fiancé.

In essence, what has taken place in Bulgaria is that far-right political actors have adopted the neoliberal populist media model developed for years by Murdoch's bTV and WAZ's newspapers. But instead of profits from advertising they have cashed in on politics. There are some differences between the neoliberal populist media business model and the far-right media political model. Unlike bTV and WAZ's newspaper, Ataka, NFSB and BWC have launched a criticism of Bulgaria's experience with capitalism. From privatization deals, to poverty, to the destruction of agriculture, to the depopulation of the country, to Bulgaria's participation in the

war in Iraq, these parties criticize the outcomes of the Bulgarian transition. In fact, Ataka became the first post-socialist Bulgarian political party to use the term “neoliberalism.” This has distinguished them from the mainstream corporate media, which fail to address these issues and unlike Ataka are cautious in criticizing the role of the anti-communist, liberal right in the outcomes of the Bulgarian tumultuous transition to capitalism. This has allowed Ataka to occupy a media market niche that offers to audiences a form criticism of the status quo unavailable in mainstream media.

However, while Ataka takes advantage of the disillusionment with what it calls “market fundamentalism” and mimics leftist arguments, in the speeches of its leader and the discourse of its official newspaper, its anti-neoliberal rhetoric frequently departs from classical left-wing narratives. In fact, in this discourse neoliberalism is not only highly ambiguous but it also figures as a noneconomic project. Although Ataka occasionally interprets neoliberalism as an economic doctrine that impoverishes the majority while enriching a minority, this type of economic argument frequently succumbs to a cultural understanding of neoliberalism not as an economic phenomenon but as a cultural and globalist project focused on multiculturalism, “Islamization,” minority rights and anti-nationalism. This view of neoliberalism permits a rhetorical fusion of issues of identity and economics that converts minorities and neighboring countries into economic oppressors.<sup>25</sup>

The situation in Bulgaria is not unique. In many countries in Eastern Europe far-right movements have been gaining strength and in some places they are a part of governing coalitions. At the time of this writing, the Polish parliament is discussing a complete ban on

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<sup>25</sup> Martin Marinos, “Anti-Neoliberal Neoliberalism: Post-Socialism and Bulgaria’s “Ataka” Party,” *Communication, Capitalism and Critique* 13 n.2 (2015), 277.

abortion, while in Slovakia, the openly neo-Nazi party “Our Slovakia” has won fourteen seats in the country’s parliament. But even more importantly, the xenophobic, extremist rhetoric has spread throughout the political spectrum as conservatives, liberals and former socialists also engage in this discourse. In some ways there is nothing new about this since the signs of these developments were already in plain sight right after 1989. In the early 1990s, *Solidarity Weekly*, the official publication of the Polish trade union “Solidarity,” whose beautiful story of self-organization and resistance to Soviet-style socialism pushed even Ronald Reagan to utter a few good words about a labor union, was already publishing columns by Rush Limbaugh.<sup>26</sup>

As the campaign of Donald Trump illustrates, it is clear that even the so called “beacon of democracy” is not immune to this phenomenon. Building on its resentment of Turkey, in 2011 Ataka became the first political party in Bulgaria to propose the construction of a wall on Bulgaria’s border with its southeastern neighbor. Many people laughed at this proposal, just as people today laugh at Trump’s proposal to build a wall on the Mexican border. But the wall on the Bulgarian-Turkish border is now a reality as eventually every party came behind this proposal. It is time to take this phenomena seriously and turn our attention to the media spheres that nourish these extreme political positions.

The first step in this direction is to acknowledge that in a highly neoliberalized economy, such as Bulgaria, the perception of civil society as disconnected from the economy is a theoretical delusion. A healthy civil society will require a healthy economic environment as well. The concentrated political economy of media described in this study is the exact opposite of this.

Nationalization of the commercial media is one radical approach towards a solution. In its present state in Bulgaria and in many other places, including the United States, media are highly

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<sup>26</sup> David Ost, *The Defeat of Solidarity: Anger and Politics in Postcommunist Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), 87.

concentrated and almost the entire spectrum is owned by a handful of companies. Those who fear that the expropriation of media corporations would automatically result in “totalitarianism” must explain how some forms of public ownership would be worse than corporate media bound by the interests of its owners. In the Bulgarian case thirty years of a highly deregulated, commercial media sphere has without a doubt been a major source of increased levels of racism, xenophobia, the depoliticization of the population and a general lowering of the cultural and intellectual capital of the people. When one looks at the situation from this angle—a monopolistic commercial structure that produces highly detrimental content—the call for nationalization does not seem as outlandish.

The idea of civil society as completely disconnected from economic dependencies is a fantasy. For this reason, public ownership of media could guarantee the financial independence necessary for a lively, progressive civil society. Why, thirty years after 1989, must we still hold out hope that the media oligopolies can be more beneficial to civil society than an active state that promotes it? How radical is it to claim that the state can assist in the development of a better civil society in ways that corporate ownership has failed?

Public ownership could be developed in many ways. Citizens committees that contribute to the management of television stations could democratize media funded largely by the state. A tax levied on the population based on the BBC model is another option that would guarantee certain media independence and democratic ownership. However, in a poor country such as Bulgaria, it is hard to ask people to pay for television when many of them struggle to pay their electricity suggesting that any state funded model of media must be connected as well with wider political economic reforms within the country as a whole. Regardless, by levying higher taxes on foreign and local corporations and wealthy individuals, a state could establish a fund for public

media that was under the control not just of experts and technocrats but also of regular citizens representative of various layers of society.

A less radical path would be to breakup the media monopolies and institute robust legislation that prevents concentration and forbids media owners to be involved in other businesses besides media. But while state intervention could reduce the size of media corporations and forestall the creation of oligopolies in which media outlets serve as PR firms to large capitalists, this alone cannot guarantee more diverse opinions in the public sphere. While media programming would certainly become richer, media developments across the globe clearly demonstrate that corporate media are a highly unlikely to offer serious and consistent criticism of the current neoliberal impasse. In fact, they are always complicit in sustaining the status quo. For example, in the United States, MSNBC is now considered to be a liberal and progressive television network diametrically opposed to the far-right Fox News channel. Yet, its owner, Comcast, is currently one of the major corporate backers of the Trans-Pacific Partnership free trade agreement. Comcast's long-standing controversial corporate politics could be one reason why even on MSNBC one rarely finds criticism of neoliberal economics and why this media outlet overall appears more centrist than leftist. For this reason, not only robust media regulation, but also strong public media are necessary for the development of a healthy civil society. Public media are far more likely to engage in critical analysis of the dominant economic and ideological neoliberal premises. Expecting the same from corporate media is unrealistic.

Strong regulation and the creation of public media that includes leftist programs and venues for leftist voices is a less radical option than nationalization. The development of communal and grassroots media modeled on South and Central American media experiments could reinvigorate the public sphere as well. Although their successes are not always obvious,



Latin American communal media have put up a fight against corporate commercial media that has consistently opposed leftist governments and in some cases have even actively participated in overthrowing them (i.e. RCTV in Venezuela in 2002). Although they struggle for funds and their dependence on government support sometimes translates into complicity with the state, communal media have offered a narrative that is different than that of corporate media and sometimes critical of the state as well.

Finally, it is crucial to study media history and different mass communications models that can inform the present, such as the one constructed in Eastern Europe during the twentieth century. Its historical importance and unique features must be included in debates about the future of media.

The post-socialist framing of civil society has underestimated the importance of the political economy of mass media and neoliberalism at large. This dissertation attempted to interpret these negative developments. It is time to change them.

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