



MEDIA CAPTURE IN BULGARIA:

HIDDEN ALLIANCES
AND VESTED INTERESTS



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Institute

BULGARIA

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- Galya Prokopieva, managing director of Economedia, one of the country's leading media groups
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MEDIA CAPTURE: AN OVERVIEW

This report was commissioned to examine the situation of media capture in Bulgaria. It is part of a series of reports produced by the International Press Institute (IPI) looking into this phenomenon in Central Europe.

Over the past decade, illiberal-minded governments in Central Europe have increasingly abused state tools and regulatory competencies to distort the media market and undermine independent media.¹ Hungary's Fidesz government, led by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, has led the way, developing a model of media capture and control that is increasingly being adopted by neighbouring countries, with adaptations to suit the local media market and political environment. In 2021, IPI covered developments in Poland and Slovenia, whose governments have taken steps toward achieving a similar level of control over the media as in Hungary.

Buoyed by Fidesz's increasing control over and instrumentalization of media regulators, competition watchdogs, advertising agencies, and even the justice system, the Orbán government has assumed effective command over a vast range of nominally private media, in addition to public media. In some cases, media have also been closed or taken off air. The bulk of mainstream and public affairs media are now owned by an effectively government-controlled foundation (KESMA) or by party-allied or party-dependent oligarchs, placed there by Fidesz, in some cases with the help of loans from state-controlled banks. The Hungarian government has used its economic, regulatory, and legislative competencies to manipulate the media market against the remaining independent media – undermining their reach and sustainability – while propping up propaganda voices that would hardly be viable without government subsidies.

An advantage of the Fidesz model is that it has allowed the government to capture the media landscape without having to use force, raid newsrooms, or jail critical journalists. This is by design. As the [report](#) from an IPI-led mission to Hungary in 2019 concluded, Hungary's systematic media takeover is “deliberately designed to deter scrutiny”.

By working through supposedly independent bodies and subtly subverting the rules of the media market, Fidesz, and parties inspired by it, have “ensured plausible deniability against accusations of meddling or market distortion and provided governments a semblance of strategic distance from events”.

While media capture can be generally understood as the co-opting of media to serve vested interests rather than the public good (through the publication of independent public-interest news), the Fidesz model represents a specific form of this phenomenon. It can be described as an effort by the dominant political force to use the powers of the state to capture and control the media in favour of advancing a political interest. In this situation, the line between party and state is blurred, “multiplying the repressive apparatus”². While private oligarchs certainly act in collusion and may benefit from the arrangement, the balance of power in the Fidesz model lies clearly with the government.

¹ See MFRR report: <https://ipi.media/mfrr-report-state-capture-and-media-freedom>

² See the media freedom rapid response press freedom report chapters on media capture <https://ipi.media/mfrr-report-state-capture-and-media-freedom-2>

One of the most useful conceptualizations of media capture was produced by Marius Dragomir in the 2019 paper [Media Capture in Europe](#) published by the Media Development Investment Fund. It identifies four key indicators for media capture: control of regulators, control of public media, misuse of public funds to control media and control of private ownership. Dragomir's report cites the Hungarian media market under Orbán as a "textbook case" of media capture.

As noted above, this model of media capture, itself modelled on developments in Russia, is spreading further in the EU, especially in Poland. Having already converted the public service broadcaster into a propaganda outfit, the current PiS-led Polish government, in parallel with its co-opting of the [judiciary](#), has captured most of the media regulatory framework. Over the past 15 months the government has aimed to assume effective control over the otherwise vibrant media sector with the takeover of local media giant Polska Press by state-controlled energy company PKN Orlen and a quest, thus far unsuccessful, to engineer the sale of independent broadcaster TVN into presumably government-friendly hands.

In Slovenia, Prime Minister Janez Janša is an ideological ally to Orbán but presides over a much weaker populist government. Nevertheless, Janša's government spent 2021 wrestling for control of public service media and establishing a private propaganda media bubble with the assistance of state funding and an influx of Hungarian capital.

Another common regional feature of media capture is the fact that the politicized media takeovers have been facilitated by the withdrawal, in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, of foreign media owners, especially German ones, but also Swiss, Swedish, and other investors. These owners, while profit-driven, promoted professionalism in the media sector. After leaving or, in many cases, being pushed out, their holdings were distributed to pro-government players. The redistribution of previously foreign-owned media to friendly oligarchs was a decisive factor in Fidesz's rise to media dominance, but it is a pattern that is also seen in Poland, the Czech Republic, and Bulgaria.

This report series by IPI examines the media capture situation in two additional countries in the region: the Czech Republic and Bulgaria. These reports aim to understand the modality of media capture in both countries and the extent to which the specific Hungarian model has taken hold. In both cases, an analysis shows that a distinct form of media capture in both the Czech Republic and Bulgaria exists, even as elements of the Hungarian model are present. A third [report](#) in this series takes a look at the use of Hungarian capital to reshape the media market in regional countries in the image of Fidesz's illiberal model.

An introduction to media capture in Bulgaria

Bulgaria's story is very different from the classic Hungarian model of media capture – whose mechanism of operation is essentially out in the open for all to see. Direct comparisons are therefore inadequate for understanding the processes and dynamics at work.

Bulgaria is ranked as the most corrupt country in the European Union³. Competing power struggles among politicians, oligarchs, media moguls, and organized crime, and their efforts to win over control of state institutions such as the courts, the prosecutors, and the media regulators are hidden behind a web of rumours and political scandals, of banking collapses, public protests and politicized prosecutions.

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³ See Transparency International's [Corruption Perceptions Index](#)

Within this struggle for power, the media has been debased and weaponized as a tool through which private and political interests are projected to both promote and protect public reputations while smearing and demonizing those of their rivals. Serious independent media that are able to stand outside this corrupted sector to pursue investigative journalism are targeted by those they expose and hauled before the courts either through vexatious private lawsuits, or by trumped-up charges drawn up by politicized prosecutors.

What emerges from this murky landscape is how the corruption of politics and media often run hand in hand: just as media owners use their power to buy political and business favours, so politicians use their power to bring media outlets to heel. Crucially, it's all hidden behind a veiled network of oligarchs and their competing alliances and rivalries. Public attention is deflected by a system of smoke and mirrors enabled by corrupted political and judicial institutions, the misuse of state resources, compromised public service media and media regulators, weaponized judiciary and a lack of transparency over media ownership.

As elsewhere, the launchpad for the takeover of media by “vested interests” was the 2008 financial crisis and the subsequent withdrawal from the Bulgarian market of well-resourced foreign owners. Their departure enabled a new type of home-bred media owner who took over media to promote their other vested interests, whether political or business.

There are two key elements that set Bulgaria apart from the classical ‘Hungarian’ model of media capture. Firstly there is a lack of information over the ownership and business interests of the key individuals involved due to weak transparency rules and the use of multiple shell companies to conceal the powers behind the media.

Secondly, Europe’s highest level of corruption and organised crime, facilitated by weak democratic institutions, creates an extra layer of complexity and competing power centres that the media and politicians have found themselves ensnared in.

What is evident, though, is how the powers of the state have been abused to subdue and control public service media, to pressure private media, to prosecute independent investigative media and to smear political or critical rivals.

THE CAPTURE OF PRIVATE MEDIA BY VESTED INTERESTS

In order to understand media capture in Bulgaria, one needs first to understand the role of Delyan Peevski, a well-known member of parliament, business oligarch and now former media mogul, and how he accumulated significant sway over the media and politics in the past 15 years.

Peevski appeared to use his control over the media sector to turn himself into a behind-the-scenes political powerbroker while also expanding his broader business empire. He spread his influence through state institutions.

Shrouded in secrecy and tangled in a web of shell companies, the full extent of his influence remains unknown, raising questions and considerable speculation to which even today, 15 years after his family entered the media sector, we only have partial answers.

Political elites or state institutions often seem frightened even to speak his name, let alone conduct proper oversight of his businesses or personal wealth. Even the longtime former Prime Minister Boyko Borissov was at best ambiguous when a rare journalistic question forced him to address his relations with Peevski.

When in 2020 Peevski sold his newspapers and formally exited the media industry, the news came as a surprise to many (an explanation would later come in June 2021; see below). Yet, due to the murkiness inherent in the Bulgarian media market, and his previous dominance, many media commentators find it hard to believe that he has fully withdrawn his influence.

Indeed, without full transparency over media ownership and control, the problems of media capture in Bulgaria by vested interests, political or oligarch, will continue to haunt and corrupt Bulgarian media and politics.

Delyan Peevski: The rise and fall of a media mogul

In June 2021 the United States [sanctioned several Bulgarians](#) and their networks including 64 related entities under the Global Magnitsky Act, which targets individuals who have been involved in corruption or human rights abuses around the world. One of the sanctioned Bulgarians was Peevski who the [US treasury](#) described as

“an oligarch who previously⁴ served as a Bulgarian MP and media mogul and has regularly engaged in corruption, using influence peddling and bribes to protect himself from public scrutiny and exert control over key institutions and sectors in Bulgarian society”.

The press release also stated that “Peevski negotiated with politicians to provide them with political support and positive media coverage in return for receiving protection from criminal investigations”.

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⁴ Peevski did not stand for election in April 2021, so was no longer a member of parliament when the US announced this decision. He was however re-elected to parliament in November 2021.

Political observers surmise that word of his imminent sanctioning was behind Peevski's decision to sell his media assets in 2020 and not to run for parliament in April 2021.

Peevski has fiercely denied the US allegations justifying the Magnitsky sanctions. However, there is little doubt that he has been a central figure in the world of politics and media, and allegations of corruption have swirled over the past two decades.

In addition to his media holdings, Peevski has a portfolio of business interests spanning a range of other industries, including retail and tobacco production – which is key to understanding the ways in which he has wielded his media influence. He has been a member of parliament for the 'Movement for Rights and Freedoms' (MRF) primarily known for representing Bulgaria's Turkish minority since 2009, with a brief break between April and December 2021. At 21 he was appointed to the board of the biggest port in the country. Four years later he became a deputy minister of emergency situations and in 2013, when he was 33 he was appointed as the head of the State Agency for National Security. He resigned a day later as public protests against his appointment forced his departure. He was also implicated in the huge banking scandal of 2014 which led to the collapse of the fourth largest bank in the country. He is perhaps most notorious for how he has used his control over media to back those in power and to defame and destroy opposition politicians and public critics.

Peevski understood that whoever controls the media can exert political and economic influence and, drawing on political and economic ties in the 2000s, he and his family started building their business empire. In 2007 his mother, Irena Krasteva, a former head of the National Lottery, purchased two daily newspapers, Telegraf and Monitor, and the weekly Politika under the umbrella of the New Bulgarian Media Group. Later she added the sports daily Meridian Match and regional newspaper Borba.

In 2008 Krasteva was also linked to Crown Media⁵, which owned two television stations – BBT and TV7 – and the newspaper Express (all these media outlets have since closed). These, in turn, became part of the UK-based Crown Media Ltd which was owned by a shell company based in Cyprus. The complex network of companies makes it almost impossible to verify the power behind the media but it has long been believed that Peevski and Tsvetan Vasilev, the majority owner of Corporate Commercial Bank, CCB, then the country's fourth largest bank, held very close ties to and influence over the channels. Vasilev was to use TV7 as a launchpad for his own political project in 2014.

Years later it was revealed that many of these deals had been financed with loans provided by the CCB and that, until the bank collapsed in 2014, (see section The captured bank, its collapse and the media) it had been a main source of funding for media outlets linked to Peevski and Vasilev.

In 2014 Krasteva announced plans to sell her media assets to an Ireland-based company created only days before the deal was announced. Then she had an apparent change of heart and a year later formally transferred 50 percent of the shares of New Bulgarian Media Group to her son. Until then Peevski had denied any involvement in his mother's media.

However, the New Bulgarian Media Group is unlikely to have been the full extent of the Peevski family's media assets.

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⁵ Krasteva was appointed to the board in late 2008 for six months.

“We have never known the full scale of his business endeavours or his media operations for that matter,” said Orlin Spassov, a lecturer in Journalism at Sofia University and a co-founder of the Sofia-based Media Democracy Foundation.

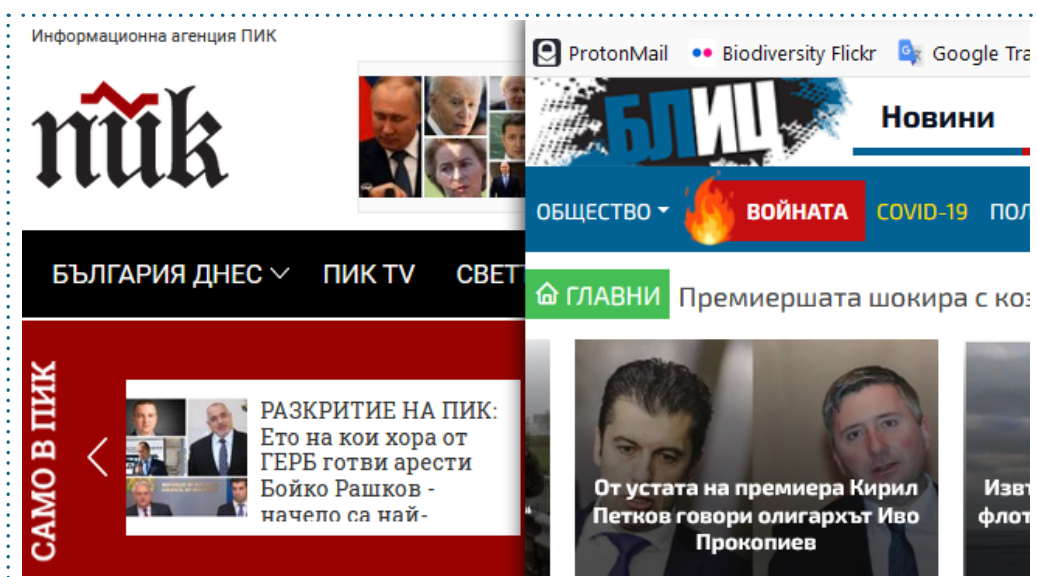
The same year, after months of rumours that Peevski was linked to the television channel Kanal 3, Krasteva announced plans to add Kanal 3 to her media portfolio, only to withdraw once the deal was approved by the anti-trust regulator. Nevertheless, the channel continued to be linked to the family. Iva Stoyanova, a former acrobat turned journalist seen as close to Krasteva, quickly rose through the ranks, from reporter to programme director in 2014. Five years later, she acquired 90 percent of the channel’s share.

Peevski and his family have also been linked to ownership of print distribution in the country. Reliable statistics on the print media reach are hard to find but in 2013 the [New York Times reported](#) “Mr. Peevski helps run his mother’s media empire, which includes roughly 40 percent of the print market in Bulgaria, the biggest printing press in the country, the fourth-largest television broadcaster, the distribution company for about 80 percent of the country’s newspapers and many other media outlets, according to industry watchers.”.

However, the full extent of Peevski’s control over media is impossible to pinpoint as Bulgarian legislation requires media to register their actual owner but not the source of the money behind the company. As a result it is likely that many more publications are, or were, controlled by Peevski than those formally registered in his name. One way of identifying publications likely to have ties to Peevski is by examining the range of publications that closely mirror the editorial policies of Peevski’s media stable, including which public figures to discredit or revere, and the common treatment of certain topics.

For instance, Pik and Blitz, two popular online sites notorious for their tabloid-style coverage and breaking of basic journalistic rules of objectivity, ethics, and privacy, are not owned by Peevski. However, over the years they have followed the same editorial lines, actively led smear campaigns⁶, and acted as the most loyal supporters of Borissov’s government. This has led observers to conclude that Peevski maintains a level of influence over them. In 2011 Pik’s publisher, Nedyalko Nadyalkov, claimed that he had sold 50% of ‘Weekend’, (a tabloid he founded), to Peevski before later denying it.

Screenshots from [pik.bg](#) and [blitz.bg](#)



⁶ A recent example was Pik’s smear campaign against President Rumen Radev when he supported the 2020 anti-corruption protests

Peevski's asset disclosure statements, submitted as a member of parliament, offer a glimpse into his business. They show that he went from a lawmaker owning several humble homes, some meagre savings, and a second-hand Opel, to a media mogul owning a range of businesses in retail and tobacco and a number of offshore companies whose activities were unknown. It remains unclear where his sudden personal wealth came from. While prosecutors repeatedly refused to launch investigations into Peevski's wealth and businesses, on the rare occasions when they did – forced by public pressure – none of them uncovered any wrongdoing.

The media mogul as political power broker

Although Peevski and members of the MRF party have downplayed his influence as a media mogul and political power broker, his media have exercised an important role in supporting the government.

During the 2009 election campaign Peevski's media – then still formally owned by his mother – fiercely attacked Boyko Borissov, a political newcomer at that point, and his centre-right GERB party. However, when Borissov scored a decisive victory, Peevski's media, almost overnight, heralded Borissov as the new messiah of Bulgarian politics.

Bulgarian opposition
GERB party leader
and Sofia Mayor
Boyko Borissov talks
to the press, after
casting his ballot in
Bankiya, Bulgaria, 05
July 2009.

Photo by EPA/
NIKOLAY DOYCHINOV



Why would a politician who had just lost political power redirect his media to support his opponent, newly installed in office?

Galya Prokopieva, managing director of Economedia, one of the country's leading independent media groups, says that Peevski masterfully used media as a bargaining chip to grow his economic and political influence. She calls him "one of the architects" of media capture in Bulgaria, albeit in the shadows.

"We are following in the footsteps of Hungary. The only difference is that in Bulgaria it happens through the back door and out of the public eye," she says.

Borissov took over as prime minister in 2009 and his party GERB dominated the political scene until its defeat in 2021. Unlike Orbán, Borissov took a strong pro-European stance and positioned himself as a reliable ally of Western European leaders and fellow politicians within the European People's Party.

While GERB campaigned on ending corruption, Borissov built a strong network of patronage supported by oligarch-owned media. And as Borissov was enjoying the loyal support of the media, Peevski's accumulation of wealth, power and influence appeared to grow.

"All key institutions are in the hands of a group of oligarchs, including the executive and judiciary (mostly prosecution) branches. As a result Bulgarian media acts as a lapdog trained to bark against all those deemed inconvenient – from activists and independent media to politicians who challenge the status quo," said Stoyana Georgieva, editor-in-chief of the independent news site Mediapool.bg.

Peevski's media were at the forefront of this. Dubbed "media cudgels" (medii buhalki), his publications were weaponized to attack competitors, trash political enemies, and silence critical voices, including human rights activists and independent journalists.

"[Peevski] managed to undermine media autonomy and, in turn, reduce the press to a mouthpiece of a certain political or business group. This ultimately changes the role of the media – instead of serving the public interest, they serve the private interest of a group of people," said Orlin Spassov.

The captured bank, its collapse and the media

On rare occasions, unexpected plot twists offered glimpses into the hidden alliances between Peevski and political elites and their accumulation of power. The sudden collapse of the Corporate Commercial Bank, CCB, the fourth largest bank in Bulgaria in 2014 was one of the more instructive such events.

In 2014 a [public fallout](#) between Peevski and his alleged former ally, then CCB's majority owner Tsvetan Vasilev, following the [collapse of the bank](#), led to revelations about how the two men had used the bank for personal gain, and funds for the media aligned with them.

Established in the 1990s, from 2007 it rose rapidly from a marginal bank to become the fourth biggest in the country by 2014. Its success and eventual collapse were due to highly dubious loan practices first revealed by [Capital Weekly](#) (of the Economedica group). Later reports uncovered that an unusually high concentration of [government deposits](#) had been held by the bank. In 2010, a freedom of information request submitted by eleven editors-in-chief revealed that almost half the money, controlled by state-owned companies, were held on low interest current accounts at the CCB.

In 2014 both businessmen traded accusations over their role in the bank's collapse when a run on the bank saw the withdrawal of one fifth of the bank's deposits. Prior to the collapse Peevski's media had attacked the CCB's viability which may have contributed to the loss of confidence and subsequent bank run.

Until shortly before the bank's collapse Peevski's publications had portrayed Vasilev as a successful banker, a talented financial expert, and a generous philanthropist. By the summer of 2014 he was framed as "the banker robber" who had stolen millions.

A 2015 [report](#) by advisory company AlixPartners, hired by the state to investigate the CCB collapse and help recover its assets, revealed numerous red flags in how the bank had been run, which were ignored by management and oversight bodies.

It also revealed that the bank had provided close to 270 million lev (140 million euros) to two television stations – TV7 and BBT (associated with Vasilev and Peevski) – in financing and direct loans.

The CCB loans were instrumental for building Peevski's media business, a fact which both Peevski and Vasilev [publicly admitted](#) years later. Many other major print and online news publications - often adopting a pro-government line - had also been funded by the bank. Only after CCB's collapse, however, did the scale of the funding become public.

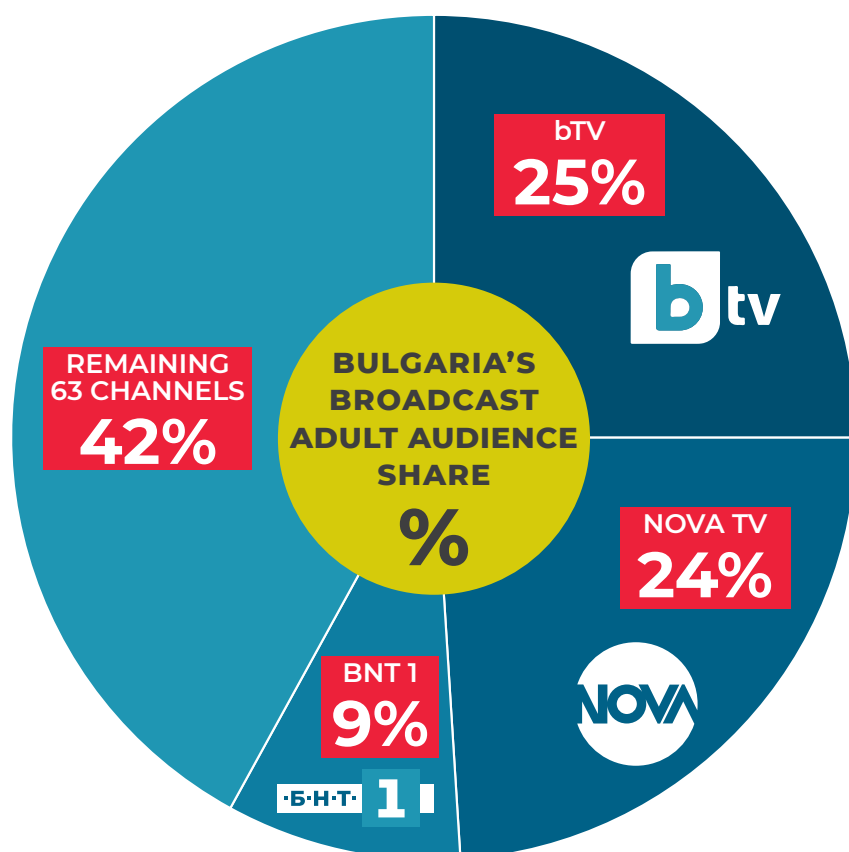
In 2014, documents leaked to Bulgarian media revealed that the bank provided close to 28 million lev (14 million euros) in loans to media between 2011 and 2012. The money was transferred through companies linked to Vasilev, which in turn provided the loans to three media companies owning some of the most popular publications at the time: GM Press, which owned shares in the daily Standart, as well as Intermedia, the publisher of several newspapers, including tabloid Show, and the site Blitz; Pro News Bulgaria, owned by journalist and editor Venelina Gocheva, which in 2014 acquired popular dailies Trud and 24 Chasa and the weekly 168 Chasa; United Free Media which published daily newspaper Presa and weekly magazine Tema. Unable to repay their loans, some of them, like Presa and Tema, closed shortly after the bank's demise, while the shell companies created to receive the loans were formally declared bankrupt.

A 2020 [report](#) by the Anti-Corruption Fund, a Sofia-based non-profit which specializes in investigating high-ranking graft, concluded that CCB made loans worth a total of 20 million lev (10 million euros) to offshore companies which were then reinvested in Bulgarian publications, including the online site Pik.

CCB's collapse has since become a symbol of the dangers of state capture by oligarchs and interest groups, exposing the corruptive close ties between politics and business in Bulgaria.

Out with the old, in with the new: media ownership transformation raises media concentration concerns

Chart showing Bulgaria's broadcast adult audience share:



Source: Data provided by the audience measurement company Garb, cited by media agency Media Club.

In the past two years, the Bulgarian media market has gone through a major overhaul with an influx of new owners across print, broadcast and telecoms platforms. This has given rise to concerns about media concentration and apparently contradictory decisions by media regulatory bodies.

In 2019, Kiril Domuschiev, seen as loyal to the then government of Borissov, acquired the Nova Broadcasting Group, which included Nova TV and Netinfo Group, Bulgaria's biggest online media group, from the Swedish MTG Group.

The deal was approved by Bulgaria's antitrust body, the Commission for Protection of Competition (CPC), a year after the same regulator [dismissed a bid](#) from Czech investment group PPF. The CPC were concerned the deal would further strengthen Nova as an already dominant player. It cited "concerns for the deal's impact on competition" as a reason for denying PPF, but saw no such problems from Domuschiev's bid, leading many media observers to conclude that the decision was politically driven to favour a close associate of Borissov.

The sale had a major impact on the editorial operations of Nova TV and Netinfo. According to the Media Pluralism Monitor report, over the past two years, under Domuschiev, "the company has dismissed more than 60 people from different departments, including prominent anchors, reporters and editors".

Timeline of ownership changes of bTV and Nova Broadcasting Group 2019 to 2021



In May 2019 Hristo Hristov, executive director and shareholder of Netinfo, [accused the new](#) management of threatening to dismiss editors who opposed a new editorial line shaped to support Domuschiev's other investments and publish content featuring "dubious facts and accuracy".

Later in 2020, Domuschiev added [Kanal 3](#), along with several radio stations and music television channels, to their media holdings. Several months after she joined Nova TV in December 2019, the former owner and program director of Kanal 3, Iva Stoyanova, [was appointed as CEO](#) of Nova Broadcasting Group. Stoyanova had sold her 90% stake in Kanal 3 several months earlier.

In January 2021 however, Domuschiev [sold on Nova Broadcasting Group](#) to United Group, a media and telecoms provider in South-Eastern Europe. The day after the deal was approved, Stoyanova stepped down from her post, citing the change of ownership. One week later, another former senior manager at Kanal 3, Milyana Veleva, who was appointed as a news director when Domuschiev took over, also left the channel. Some observers say their departure signalled United Group's break with Nova's past and its highly partisan and conflict driven agenda.

United Group had already acquired Bulgaria's largest telecommunications company, Vivacom, in 2019 and completed its Bulgarian media spending spree with the purchase of [Vestnik Telegraf EOOD](#), [Peevski's newspaper group](#), resulting in an almost immediate end to [attacks against Peevski's critics](#) while maintaining the same style of tabloid journalism. Nevertheless such an extensive set of media acquisitions across print, broadcast and telecoms does raise serious concerns about media concentration.

"Which country would allow a company to own newspapers, television stations, and a telecom (company)?" Ognyanova asks. "How is this different from the risk of concentration when Kellner bid for Nova Tv?"

In 2020 PPF eventually secured ownership of a Bulgarian broadcaster, bTV, when its purchase of Central Media Enterprises (CME), which owns a number of broadcasters across Central Europe, was [cleared by the European Commission](#). PPF also owns the Bulgarian telecom operator Telenor.

Only months after the acquisition of bTV, news director [Venelin Petkov was dismissed](#) and soon after News Managing Editor [Gena Traikova also stepped down](#). Both journalists had worked for the television channel since its launch in 2000.

In explaining his dismissal, Petkov implied his employers had buckled under government interference.

"Those in power, especially in the last 10-12 years, have learned very well how to try to pressure completely independent private foreign companies, threatening to ruin their businesses," Petkov said during a media conference in September 2021.

While the sale of Peevski's print business [marked a shift in the Bulgarian media landscape](#), it is unclear whether and to what degree he has maintained his influence over the media.

The sale to United Group, which owns a Serbian television channel critical of Serbia's government, appears to be a positive development, signalling Peevski's exit from the media market. However, it is too early to assess the consequences of the recent shake up in media ownership particularly on editorial independence and media pluralism. There is obvious cause for concern about a level of concentration particularly across newspaper, broadcasting and telecoms which leaves considerable power in the hands of a small number of companies.

"These changes raise a very important question about media concentration – it might further distort the market and shrink media pluralism which is already at risk," said media analyst Spassov.

"It raises questions about the rules of the regulators which have approved these deals."

Summary overview of media owned by PPF and United Group by end of 2021:

MEDIA GROUP NAME	TELEVISION STATIONS	RADIO STATIONS	ONLINE	PRINT	OTHER
PPF	bTV bTV Action bTV Cinema bTV Comedy bTV Lady RING	bTV Radio N-JOY Jazz FM Classic FM Z-Rock	bTV.bg bTVPlus.bg btvnovinite.bg VOYO.BG LadyZone.bg Zodia.bg Bistro.bg Dalivali.bg bTV International	N/A	bTV Studios Telecom: Telenor
UNITED GROUP	NOVA NOVA NEWS Kino NOVA Diema Family Diema Diema Sport Diema Sport 2 NOVA Sport The Voice Radio&TV Trace Sport Stars Magic FM&TV	The Voice Radio&TV Magic FM&TV Radio Vitosha Radio Veselina	Vbox7.com Nova.bg Abv.bg Vesti.bg Dariknews.bg Sinoptik.bg Edna.bg Gong.bg Pariteni.bg Cbg.bg ohnamama.bg Play. Bg Grabo.bg	Attica Media Group: Eva Magazine Miss Bloom Magazine Grazia Magazine Newspapers: Telegraf Monitor* Match Telegraf Politika* Europost* Borba	Lenta Studio Telecom: Vivacom

*Europost was an English-language website notorious for replicating smear campaigns which has been closed since the United Group takeover of Peevski's company.

*The United Group announced the closure of Monitor and Politika as the report went to press in March 2022 citing economic issues including the impact of the pandemic, and digitization of the market.

Sources:

www.btv.bg/za-btv

united.group/operations

Ownership on paper

Legislation adopted in 2010 requires print media to register their owners with the Ministry of Culture. While on paper the law aims to shed light on who controls the media, the details registered are rarely verified and the Ministry of Culture lacks the resources to enforce the rules. In what Peevski claimed was an effort to solve this problem, in 2018 he and other MRF lawmakers introduced a bill obliging all media, including online sites, to disclose their sources of financing, including direct state and EU money. In theory this improves transparency of media ownership by declaring their funding, however in practice it actually targets those media which receive donations from readers or grant funding while broader transparency requirements are poorly enforced. For example, the listing of bank loans, from which some media were notorious beneficiaries under the collapsed CCB, were excluded from this law.

“The goal of this hollow law, masked as an effort to promote transparency in the media sector, was to harass independent publications,” Georgieva said. “For a small media like us, it’s an additional bureaucratic burden which takes time and effort.”

According to the 2020 Bulgaria country [report](#) issued by the Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom, serious deficiencies remain in the media law and the Centre considers a lack of transparency over media ownership to be a “medium risk”. “There are legal provisions requiring disclosure of ownership details, including the ultimate owner, of the media service providers. In practice though, many outlets do not comply ...

Although transparency of information collected by public bodies was improved in 2020, data on media ownership is still not fully provided to the public,” the report states.

The Bulgarian media market has also seen a boom of media outlets directly owned and controlled by political players, including several broadcast channels. For example, Alfa TV and SKAT TV act as propaganda for two marginal far-right parties which until recently were represented in Parliament. BSTV, launched in 2019, is owned by the Socialist party.

“It’s another type of controlling media. It’s a dangerous phenomenon which offers unbalanced news coverage and leads to further polarization in society,” Spassov, the media analyst, said.

Market distortion and the abuse of EU communication funds

The misuse of government advertising funds has been well documented as a key tool by governments to exert influence over editorial lines and to advance media capture. In Bulgaria the debate swirls around the alleged misuse of EU funds to finance media allies.

In 2019 the monthly magazine [Club Z revealed](#) that between 2007 and 2019 Bulgaria distributed over 58 million lev (29 million euros) to media from communication budgets promoting EU-sponsored programmes. In May 2021 [Club Z further reported](#) that over just four years - from 2017 to 2021 - the state distributed another 10 million lev (5 million euros) through direct contracts with 11 television and radio stations.

Distribution of the funds is mostly controlled by the respective ministry, such as agriculture, infrastructure or tourism, which pick and choose which media to advertise in. The Club Z reports only refer to contracts signed by ministries and do not include funds distributed through PR agencies or other intermediaries, which are not publicly available, suggesting the total sum involved may be much higher.

Journalists and experts warn that EU funds are not being distributed in a transparent way and do not follow clear criteria. The money is often allocated without a public tender or competitive process. The media are not obliged to disclose the EU funds they receive, which makes following the money extremely difficult.

According to the 2021 Reporters Without Borders (RSF) [report](#), “the government allocates EU and public funding to media outlets with a complete lack of transparency, with the effect of encouraging recipients to go easy on the government in their reporting”.

The European Commission’s 2020 [Rule of Law Report](#) also criticized unregulated state aid to the press:

“Distribution of state advertising expenditure is not based on clear and nondiscriminatory criteria.”

Following public criticism and new EU requirements, a few years ago the then government introduced new measures to limit the amount of money that could be contracted directly to media broadcasters to 30% of the annual communication budgets. However, no further commitments to establishing criteria to ensure the fair and transparent distribution of funds to credible media were made, leaving the system open to ongoing abuse.

Besides EU funds, advertising budgets could also be used as a bargaining chip between big businesses, the state, the media and even organized criminal activity involving bribery and extortion.

In May 2020 Vasil Bozhkov, a fugitive tycoon also sanctioned under the Magnitsky Act, posted [a photo of a hand-written memo](#) signed by himself and Kiril Domuschiev in July 2019, outlining an agreement for Bozhkov to invest 20 million lev (10 million euros) of advertising in Nova TV over ten years. In return, Bozhkov would receive the “full support” of the National Gambling Commission, which regulates the gambling industry, in which Bozhkov was a major player. Bozhkov claimed that the deal had been set up by Borissov and then-Finance Minister Goranov. Domuschiev, the then owner of Nova TV, [described the release of the memo](#) as a “manipulation”, but did not deny its authenticity.

Bozhkov was a major advertiser in two of the most watched private channels - bTV and Nova TV - and his allegations of racketeering and abuse of power against Borissov’s cabinet reveal how media may be used to negotiate illegal backroom deals between the government and alleged criminal networks.

A few days later Borissov called bTV “Bozhkov TV” in an attempt to discredit its reporting of the scandal and other running stories critical of the government. At the time bTV, part of Central European Media Enterprises, was 75% owned by the US company AT&T.

In January 2020 parliament voted to exclude all private businesses from the national lottery operations, damaging a major part of Bozhkov’s business empire.

REGULATORY CAPTURE AND THE MEDIA

Public service media

On September 13, 2019, for the first time in its history Bulgarian National Radio, BNR, broadcast up to five hours of dead air. While BNR's management cited technical problems for the broadcast interruption, the unprecedented radio silence occurred a day after Silvia Velikova, a long-time journalist and host at BNR, was informed her [programme would be suspended](#). Unofficially, she was told the decision was a result of her critical coverage of the controversial bid by Ivan Geshev to be the country's new prosecutor general that had sparked street protests.

In response, dozens of journalists protested in front of the BNR building in the centre of Sofia holding banners reading

“Say No to Censorship at BNR”

and

“Who Took BNR Off Air?”.

Within hours Velikova was reinstated and Channel Director Nikolay Krastev resigned. The then Prime Minister Borrisov denied any involvement in Velikova's removal, and claimed that he had personally called the head of the radio “to fix this disgrace”.

A few weeks later the Council for Electronic Media, CEM, [ousted](#) BNR's Director General Svetoslav Kostov after only three months in office.

While attempts at silencing critical voices have plagued the radio's recent history, Bulgarian National Radio, and the commitment of its staff to resist censorship, [remains a beacon of hope for many](#), partly because many politicians do not view radio as important. 18 percent of Bulgarians listen to BNR on a weekly basis, which ranks sixth among media outlets with the highest weekly reach in print, television and radio according to the [Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021](#)⁷.

By comparison, BNT ranks third reaching 47 percent of viewers and as a result is a much higher priority for politicians to control.

The same year BNT was also embroiled in a row when the CEM appointed Emil Koshlukov as Director General. Koshlukov had previously worked for Alfa TV, a television channel of a nationalist party, and was considered close to GERB and Borissov.

Koshlukov joined BNT at the end of 2017 as a programme director and since then has been accused of engineering the departure of several prominent journalists considered “inconvenient”.

“BNT still has a long way to go to return to some sort of impartiality and its mission of a public broadcaster after a prolonged period of support of those in power,” said Orlin Spassov, the media observer. “Koshlukov was installed to present the work of the ruling party in a positive way.”

.....
⁷ See appendix for more of the Reuters rankings

People wave the Bulgarian national flag during an anti-government protest held in front of the Parliament building in Sofia, Bulgaria, 20 July 2020.

Photo by EPA-EFE/
VASSIL DONEV



In 2020 a wave of anti-corruption protests engulfed the country. Thousands took to the streets to demand the resignation of Borissov and Prosecutor General Geshev. On multiple occasions, demonstrators also gathered in front of BNT, demanding Koshlukov's departure, angered by what they saw as deeply slanted news coverage of their protests. At the beginning of 2022 the parliamentary committee on culture and media launched an inquiry into Koshlukov's appointment as BNT's head. His term expires later this year.

While the two public service media (PSM) are supposed to be editorially independent, according to a [report](#) by the Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom,

“the formal legal procedures for the appointment of the director-general and management boards of the PSM do not provide adequate guarantees for independence from government or other political influence”.

For years media analysts and experts have criticized the politicization of media regulators and financial supervision bodies which also take part in media regulation.

The Council for Electronic Media

The Council for Electronic Media, CEM is responsible for appointing the director general and board members of each broadcaster. While formally the CEM appears to be transparent in its decision-making and its website features an archive of their statements and decisions as well as meeting minutes of their hearings, it is often criticized for a lack of independence.

“Regulators are heavily politicized, a factor that colours their decisions time after time,” Spassov said.

The CEM consists of five members each serving six-year terms. Three of the regulator's members are appointed by Parliament and two by the President. While it is an independent body on paper, the appointments process exposes it to political manipulation that makes members beholden to their political supporters.

In 2019 GERB cemented its dominance over CEM when the Parliament approved Galina Georgieva's appointment, resulting in four of the five members having been nominated directly or by people close to GERB. During the parliamentary debate, opposition lawmakers opposed her candidacy by saying it would give Borissov and Peevski control over the regulator.

"It's painfully apparent that public interest is not a priority," Ognyanova, the media observer, said in reference to the regulators, adding that integrity and expertise should be the leading criteria in their nominations.

The formal selection criteria for the CEM include Bulgarian citizenship, higher education, and experience in the fields of broadcasting, communications, media, law or economics. Yet in practice very few candidates actually have relevant expertise. While Betina Zhoteva, the current chair of CEM, has years of experience in journalism, her impartiality is in question having worked as both a spokesperson and a public relations specialist under several GERB governments.

Media observer Ognyanova is concerned about backdoor deals between political players to call the shots in the supervising bodies. "When a political party can bargain with the other political parties and appoint regulator members this way, it's a powerful instrument to secure control over the regulators," she said.

Weaponizing of the financial supervision commission

While the Financial Supervision Commission, FSC, is a government body responsible for ensuring the stability of the banking system, its decisions can often have a vital impact on the media market.

In 2015 the FSC imposed a total of 80,000 euros in fines on Economedica for a series of reports primarily devoted to problems in the banking industry following the 2014 banking crisis, labelling the journalism as market manipulation.

Two journalists received fines of 2,500 euros each for refusing to reveal their sources. In 2014 the state regulator went further by demanding that Galya Prokopieva, managing director of Economedica, name her sources for a status update regarding the banking crisis posted on her personal Facebook profile.

The media group saw these decisions as a blatant attempt to punish it for its exposures of banking corruption.

The FSC also fined Zov News 50,000 euros and demanded the sources for its reporting of the run on the First Investment Bank in the summer of 2014, as the public panicked to remove their deposits from other banks after the collapse of CCB.

The fines against Zov News and most of those against Economedica were eventually quashed on appeal. Nevertheless these indicate that the FSC has been used by the state to silence inconvenient journalists. "Such cases have a chilling effect on all journalists," Alexander Kashumov, head of the legal team of the Access to Information Programme Foundation, said.

LEGAL HARASSMENT AS A TOOL FOR INTIMIDATION

The fines imposed by the FSC are not the only attempt by state institutions to silence journalists.

Over the years the family of Galya Prokopieva has been subjected to multiple tax audits and financial inquiries which they see as another attempt to silence them. No violations were found.

Galya Prokopieva likened the orchestrated persecution of Economedica to the “lonely tree in the woods which the lightning always strikes”.

“We have been a target of constant harassment and oppression on so many different levels. We face a wall of institutions which act against publications rather than protect their basic human rights,” she said.

Economedica's legal woes weren't an issue only for their journalists but also for the group's publisher. In 2017 the Commission for Illegal Assets Forfeiture [seized assets](#) and froze bank accounts belonging to Ivo Prokopiev, Economedica's co-owner. A year later Prokopiev was charged with money laundering over the privatization of a mineral plant in 2013. As part of the investigation, prosecutors conducted searches of his company's offices. In the spring of 2021 a Bulgarian court [acquitted Prokopiev](#) and the other defendants “due to absence of a committed crime”.

In a separate 2017 case, Prokopiev was charged, along with former finance minister Simeon Dyankov and economy minister Traicho Traikov, for attempting to defraud the state budget by 20 million leva (approximately 10 million euro) with the sale of shares in a utility company. The prosecution alleged that Prokopiev aided Dyankov and Traikov by giving them “advice” during a public meeting.

Local and international media watchdogs [expressed concern](#) that the charges were politically motivated and accused the authorities of institutional harassment of Prokopiev and his media group.

In the summer of 2020, after three years of hearings, the Specialized Criminal Court drew the trial to an abrupt end, [acquitting](#) Prokopiev of all charges.

The media group estimates that over the past decade it has been subject to dozens of legal proceedings, including against individual journalists.

“While not directly attacking his (Prokopiev's) media business, this is a clear attempt to choke freedom of speech,” said Kashumov.

Vexatious lawsuits, or SLAPPs, used to silence critics

Bulgaria's courts usually rule in favour of journalists in defamation cases. Despite this, legal threats and libel charges have become another powerful tool to intimidate investigative reporters and further stifle press freedom.

“While lawsuits are not the only tool used to intimidate and discredit journalists in Bulgaria, they remain a serious threat to investigative journalism,” states a [recent report](#), conducted by the non-profit Index on Censorship, on how vexatious lawsuits are used to intimidate journalists.

Some recent cases raised concerns.

In December 2021 Sofia City Court sentenced Stoyana Georgieva, the editor in chief of Mediapool.bg and its former journalist, Boris Mitov, to pay 60,000 lev (30,000 euros) in damages for defamatory claims.

Kashumov, who is also the publication's lawyer in this case, described the ruling as a "significant blow to press freedom" in the country. "The amount of the compensation, along with the trial expenses is disproportionately high and could have a chilling effect [on the media] which equals censorship" he said.

Three years earlier Svetlin Mihailov, a former head of the same court which delivered the verdict, brought a case against the publication for a series of stories which ran in 2018, outlining widely known information regarding some of his past rulings and personal wealth. At the time, he was running for a second term and the background, already published by other media outlets, was relevant to the coverage of his campaign.

In 2019 the court also froze the publication's bank accounts and the personal accounts of Georgieva and Mitov for a total of 110,000 lev (55,000 euros). According to Kashumov such a sanction has a "double chilling effect", as it is almost twice as high as the compensation administered by the court.

"We are a small media outlet and freezing the accounts could easily impede our work," Georgieva said. "It amounts to legal harassment."

Mediapool.bg is appealing the verdict.

In 2019 Rossen Bossev, then a reporter at Capital Weekly, was convicted of libel in a case brought by Stoyan Mavrodiev, a former chair of the FSC after Bossev claimed Mavrodiev was associated with a money laundering scheme for drug trafficking profits and of using his position at the FSC to penalise the newspaper.

While not disputing the facts, the court still ruled the comments were defamatory and imposed a 500 euro fine. The judge, Petya Krancheva, refused to recuse herself despite the fact that Bossev has previously published stories exposing alleged deficiencies in her work. The conviction was [condemned](#) by both Bulgarian and foreign free media advocates.

Over the years, journalists from Bivol, an online investigative platform, have complained of legal harassment and police interrogations because of their investigations of banks and fraud. At the end of 2021, a Bulgarian company brought a libel suit against Bivol, seeking an unprecedented one million lev (500,000 euros) in damages. If Bivol loses the case, it could be forced to close.

The situation for local journalists is even tougher. In 2018 Emilia Dimitrova, a reporter based in Gabrovo, a small town in Northern Bulgaria, investigated allegations against a city official of using her position to send patients to a private nursing home owned by her daughter. The official filed a libel complaint and demanded 10,000 lev (5,000 euros) in compensation, a trial which the official later lost.

"They [local journalists] have very limited resources to receive proper legal aid and support. Even if they eventually win the trial, the proceedings might take years," said Spasov, the Varna-based journalist.

THE DARK AGES OF REGIONAL JOURNALISM

While on a national level the state of journalism might look grim, it is even worse for local publications. Bulgaria, in line with the global trend, has seen dozens of local media outlets fold in recent years despite their essential role in communities outside Sofia. The financial crisis in local journalism has exposed it to ever more political and economic pressure.

“Local media have been almost entirely dismantled. The few ones who still dare to do actual journalism are struggling to survive,”

said Spasov, the Varna-based journalist who believes strong ties with the city authorities and businesses are a matter of financial survival for most media. “Businesses in the countryside cannot make money if they don’t rely on public tenders. In many small towns the state and the city are still the biggest employers,” added Spasov.

“It is even more difficult to reveal the truth at the local level, where the media is almost entirely dependent on the city authorities and local businesses,” said Ognyanova.

Over-dependence on public advertising and funding weakens their editorial independence. Local news becomes driven by the mayor’s interests rather than the public’s.

A [series of investigations](#) by Spasov between 2013 and 2015 reported that the authorities in ten cities across the country had spent close to 3 million lev (1.5 million euros) to fund local media in exchange for “media services” in an attempt to secure friendly media coverage.

The town of Vratsa in northwestern Bulgaria, one of the poorest in the EU, paid 650,000 lev (325,000 euros) for media services between 2013 and 2015 from a total budget of 130 million lev (65 million euros).

“City authorities can spend around one percent of their budget to secure a hundred-percent friendly coverage,” Spasov said in an interview. “Those who strive to do actual journalism are often subject to continuous political and economic pressure.”

When Spasov launched [Za Istinata](#) in 2017, it took him a while to find local correspondents. “Libel lawsuits are a strong instrument to pressure and intimidate local reporters. Many I spoke to didn’t want to join the publication because they were afraid of legal retaliation”, he said.

SMEAR CAMPAIGNS

The use of smear campaigns through media and online trolling to attack critics and divide the journalism community is an increasingly common feature in countries experiencing media capture.

In Bulgaria the campaign against George Soros and the work of his Open Society Foundations took off in the summer of 2013 when Peevski's media attempted to discredit months-long public protests against Peevski's [appointment](#) as the head of the State Agency for National Security by labelling demonstrators as "sorosoids". The label is now used to tarnish a wide range of NGOs, critical journalists, and politicians who demand rule of law and defend minority and human rights.

The media outlets owned by and otherwise tied to Peevski have created a kind of parallel Kafkaesque world, where his enemies are behind the country's corruption and media woes, while their owner is portrayed as an advocate for human rights and media freedom, and a generous philanthropist for charitable causes. Through this form of "mirror propaganda", those who expose corruption are presented as criminal masterminds.

"In the media sector, there are media apparently created for the purpose of spreading disinformation, propaganda, and smear campaigns," said Ognyanova. "There are media especially created (or captured) to be an instrument of power or an instrument of pressure."

In 2017 Peevski's newspapers launched a campaign to wage a "war on fake news" and to "stop disinformation, manipulation and lies". Claiming that Peevski is a "target of fake news" himself, his papers attacked critics pushing for reforms, and labelling them as servants of George Soros, the liberal American billionaire. Independent and investigative journalists were framed as part of the "fake news factory" or "media of the oligarchy" and labelling critical voices as paid mercenaries or enemies of the people.

During the November 2021 election campaign, attacks against EconoMedia and its publisher Prokopiev also intensified. Senior members of the MRF party accused Prokopiev of orchestrating the sanctions under the Magnitsky Act. "Media wars entered a new dangerous phase. When a political party openly attacks a media group, it's a clear sign that the integrity of democracy is at stake," said Spassov, the media analyst.

The deterioration of media freedoms and media standards and the capture of media by vested interests has resulted in the long term erosion of trust in the media. Less than ten percent of Bulgarians say that media in the country is independent, while only one percent think it is completely independent, according to a [2018 survey](#) conducted by Sofia-based polling agency Alpha Research.

"Attempts to tightly control the media are slowly forcing publications to abandon their true mission and independence. This leads to self-censorship and reluctance to do any investigative reporting," said Spassov.

"It will take years to restore trust in the profession and attract editors and reporters who follow and respect the basic principles of journalism," said Prokopieva.

Marius Dragomir, a media observer and director of the Center for Media, Data and Society, a research centre at the Central European University, says that “politicization of media is so deeply entrenched that change of ownership won’t change it overnight.”

At the same time, journalists are concerned such smear campaigns might also make it harder for newsrooms to retain and hire reporters. “I’m fortunate to work with people who don’t succumb to this kind of pressure, but such attacks could easily force other reporters to switch careers”, said Georgieva.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In recent years the Bulgarian media market has gone through a seismic change. Two of the leading television networks have changed hands, and some of the local media oligarchs appeared to have exited the industry.

Now is a time of uncertainty. These changes could signal a pivotal moment for the media sector in the country, but we cannot yet tell in which direction the pivot will take us. Some of the media observers interviewed see these as positive developments while others are concerned about the longer term impacts of further media concentration by powerful transnational corporations. Moreover, can the government clean up corruption and end conflicts of interests between media and politics, and ensure there is no return to the Peevski era or the emergence of an equivalent in the future?

This report has attempted to cast light on the systemic and chronic problems that have been polluting the media environment for decades. These include:

- While the deterioration of press freedom in Bulgaria mirrors the process in other CEE countries, Bulgaria has its own model of media capture. Control of the media sector has gone hand in hand with efforts to influence and control state institutions, or advance state capture by corrupt vested interests. For over a decade many outlets were in the hands of powerful oligarchs who provided government propaganda in return for undisclosed favours.
- The lack of transparency over media ownership has enabled media capture and provided a cover for corrupt relationships with the government.
- The level of corruption and the involvement of organized crime, as suggested by the Magnitsky Act, is particularly virulent and detrimental to the Bulgarian media scene.
- The misuse of state resources to fund and to punish media through advertising funds or banking loans has helped finance a pro-government media bubble.
- The independent media not governed by oligarchs have survived under intense political and economic pressure and have remained a thorn in the side of the forces of corruption.
- This report has shown how the GPO and FSC have been used to target independent media for their efforts to expose corruption.
- The use of the media to smear and discredit independent journalists, rival politicians and public critics has eroded trust in all media, further damaging the public's confidence in the news industry and the political culture.
- Meanwhile the public media have been severely compromised by an appointments process that enables the government to fill the governing board with its allies.
- The dependency of regional media on city governments and businesses has stifled press freedom and helped turn parts of the country into independent news deserts.
- While press freedom has significantly worsened in the past decade, there are still pockets of vibrant independent publications striving to provide public interest journalism.

- New media owners investing across platforms and across borders might alleviate some of the problems encountered by the previous generation of media owners. However, concerns about media pluralism and concentration and the longer term impact on press freedom are acute.

With a fresh government in power promising to root out high-ranking graft, there is a window of opportunity to introduce reforms that restore and uphold media freedom. If the government is serious about tackling corruption it will need to ensure a vibrant, independent and public-interest journalism.

There is no silver bullet. Strengthening journalism and restoring trust in media in a country where independent journalism has been under attack for years will not be easy.

Regrettably the new government has been slow to address a strategy for media reform. At the beginning of 2022 Prime Minister Kiril Petkov made a start when he promised to publicly reveal a list of media which have received state funding.

“The state does not have the right to interfere in independent media,” he said during an [interview](#) with the bTV.

“We aim to make it very clear and transparent how Bulgarian media is being funded. From now on, all the public funds spent on media should be publicly known.”



*Kiril Petkov, Prime Minister
EPA-EFE/VASSIL DONEV*

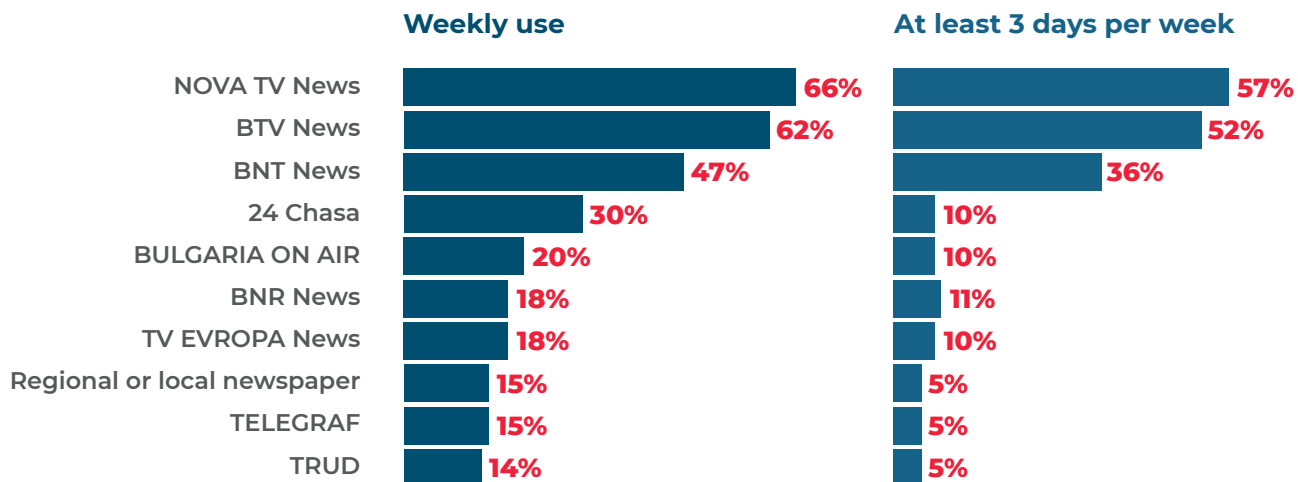
The abuse of public funds is one central element, but as this report has demonstrated, it is but the tip of a very deep iceberg. The new government must prioritise media reforms that protect the public right to information and guarantee media freedoms. We recommend the following:

- Media ownership rules must be strengthened and designed to safeguard media pluralism by limiting cross-media ownership in print, broadcast and telecoms. The true owners of all media, their associated business interests and their political connections must be in the public domain. Media must not be registered in offshore shell companies that conceal the real owners.
- Strict criteria for the fair distribution of government advertising funds (including EU funds) that prevent political interference in the allocation must be applied backed up by full transparency of the distribution of all government funds that media benefit from.
- Additional safeguards against conflicts of interest should be strengthened to prevent media owners benefiting financially from government contracts in other industries that they may have investments in
- The political independence of public service media must be guaranteed through strengthened safeguards to protect the independence of the governing bodies and through sustainable funding. This includes ensuring a depoliticized appointments process that ensures only qualified, competent and neutral members are appointed to governing bodies.

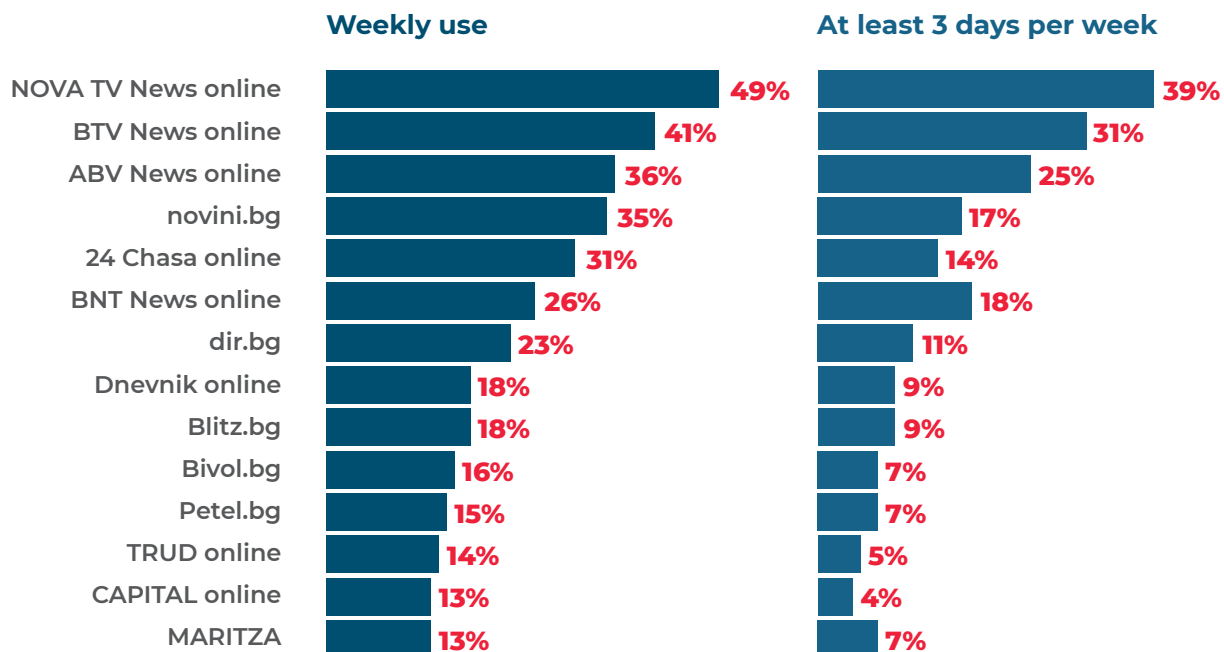
- Similar safeguards must be strengthened when it comes to regulatory bodies that directly, as with licensing regulators, or indirectly, as with competition regulators, impact media pluralism.
- The independence and neutrality of public prosecutors and judges must also be ensured along with the introduction of anti-SLAPP legislation that can protect journalists against vexatious lawsuits designed to prevent public debate on public interest matters.
- A national programme on the safety of journalists, in line with the European Commission's recommendations to strengthen the safety of journalists and other media professionals, must be established that strengthens actions to punish violent acts against journalists including by the authorities.
- The government should support the European Commission's efforts to develop a strong European Media Freedom Act that can help protect media pluralism and independence across the continent.

Appendix: Media outlets with highest weekly reach:

Weekly reach - offline TV, RADIO, PRINT



Weekly reach - online





International
Press
Institute

MEDIA CAPTURE IN BULGARIA:

HIDDEN ALLIANCES
AND VESTED INTERESTS