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Price, L.T. (2015) Journalists' perceptions of nomenklatura networks and media ownership in post- communist Bulgaria. *Medijske Studije*, 6 (11). pp. 19-33. ISSN 1848-5030

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Journalists' perceptions of nomenklatura networks and media ownership in post-communist Bulgaria

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Abstract

This article discusses the role of the former communist party elite (the nomenklatura) in the Bulgarian post-communist media landscape in relation to media ownership and the origin of media outlets' capital. The spotlight is on Bulgarian journalists' perceptions examined through semi-structured interviews with a cohort of media professionals from the capital city, Sofia. The findings indicate that Bulgarian journalists are strongly interested in, and concerned with, the influence of members of the former nomenklatura and their informal networks on the Bulgarian media landscape and particularly on the way the media in Bulgaria have been owned and financed since 1989.

Key Words

nomenklatura, media, ownership, post-communism, journalists

Introduction

Despite 25 years of transition and seven years of European Union (EU) membership, Bulgarian media and journalists have seen their freedom of opinion and expression gradually deteriorate with Bulgaria sliding further down the Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index. As in other former communist countries, Bulgarian media ownership is strongly concentrated in the hands of powerful local media barons who see the media outlets they own as a convenient and relatively cheap tool for putting pressure on politicians and rivals with smear campaigns (kompromat) and blackmail. The effect on media outlets and investigative news journalism has been nothing less than catastrophic.

This assessment of the Bulgarian post-communist media and political landscape is based on the perceptions of several Bulgarian journalists from the capital city, Sofia. This

article discusses findings from 31 interviews conducted in 2009 and 2010 with Bulgarian journalists on one particular aspect of post-communist transformation: the role of the former communist party elite, the *nomenklatura*¹, in the process of transformation of the Bulgarian media system, and its perceived impact on media ownership².

Paolo Mancini and Jan Zielonka (2012) acknowledged the need for further research into phenomena that are not commonly found outside Eastern Europe. For instance, they note that oligarchs in post-communist countries appear very dissimilar to well-known tycoons elsewhere but their influence has not been sufficiently examined. Similarly, there is an evident lack of academic research on the factors behind the meteoric rise in the economic and political fortunes of Eastern European oligarchs and media barons, including in Bulgaria. Several scholars (e.g. Hall 1996, Letki 2002, Horne 2009, Ibroscheva 2011) have suggested that this process was facilitated by networks of former members of the *nomenklatura* as well as by former secret service collaborators. Both were instrumental in the governing and functioning of the communist state. The existence of informal³ yet powerful networks and their clandestine activities have allegedly shaped Bulgaria's post-communist political and economic development as well as the development of its media system. As the perceptions of journalists also suggest, the presence of informal networks, either remaining from communism or "upgraded" to include members of the new post-communist political and business elite, is an extremely problematic feature of the Bulgarian democratization process when it comes to unclear or hidden media ownership. The question of the origin of the funding with which media outlets were launched and financed after 1989 remains underexplored in the literature, and the views and perceptions of journalists add to our understanding of this complex issue. This article will attempt to answer the question: how, according to journalists, have *nomenklatura* networks, informal relationships and rules affected private media ownership in Bulgaria since 1989? To answer the question this article will outline the framework within which

¹ Lane (1997: 856-857) defines *nomenklatura* as a "list of executive and authoritative posts in state socialist society for which the *apparat* of the Communist Party had the formal right of nomination, veto and dismissal."

² For the complete study see Trifonova Price, Lada (2013) "Bulgarian Journalists and Change (1989-2007): Perceptions of Transformation of the Bulgarian Media System". Thesis. University of Sheffield.

³ This article adapts Grødeland and Aasland's (2007) definition of informal – something that is hidden and does not follow formal laws, rules or regulations.

the nomenklatura functioned during communism, and explore its activities and behaviour post-communism. It will then present the methodology of the research, including participants' details and data collection methods. Finally, the article will discuss the findings in relation to the role of the former nomenklatura in the post-communist Bulgarian media landscape.

Nomenklatura and informality

The former nomenklatura and its informal and clandestine networks cannot and should not be examined in isolation from the societies that they function in. Scholars (e.g. Grødeland and Aasland 2007, Roudakova 2008, Örnebring 2012) identify a common feature in the majority of post-communist countries: the existence of clientelism and clientelistic practices, patronage and informal networks/relationships in politics, business and the media. In countries like Bulgaria, for example, clientelism, patronage and informal relationships are seen by both scholars and society as a mix of several elements: features of national culture that existed before communism, habits acquired during communism and a set of practices that flourished during the process of democratization. However, the common concept of clientelism is useful only for painting a broad-stroke picture of the media-political nexus (Roudakova 2008). Previous research (Örnebring 2012) has concluded that the traditional political science definition of clientelism does not sufficiently explain the ambiguous and complex informal relationships characteristic of former communist countries. Örnebring proposes a broader understanding of clientelism, which includes the use of media as elite-to-elite and elite-to-mass communication tools, to establish the role of the media in the clientelistic post-communist systems of Eastern European countries. However, his study does not take into account the alleged problematic role that the nomenklatura and their informal networks have played in the post-communist media landscape with respect to how media are launched, owned, operated and used by the political and business elites.

Scholars have attempted to examine how former communist party elites and circles have “transitioned” and “adapted” to the post-communist media context in other post-communist countries such as Russia, Estonia, Poland and Hungary (e.g. Kryshtanovskaya and White 1996, Borocz and Róna-Tas 1995, Szelenyi et al 1995, Steen and Ruus 2002).

However, there is an evident lack of academic research on the place, status and role of the former nomenklatura in Bulgaria and their informal power networks/relationships. To complicate matters further, Ase Grødeland and Aadne Aasland (2007: 3) suggest that informal behaviour may not simply be a result of communism but “more deeply embedded in the national culture, shaped by historical events and social norms that are fairly resistant to change.” In other words, we must take into account the possibility that informal practices are a way of life rather than a coping mechanism adopted to deal with the restrictions of communism. Grødeland and Aasland (2007) argue that the presence of informality in post-communist countries can be explained by a combination of factors: national culture, old routines remaining from communism, and new practices adopted during the transition to democracy. Nevertheless, before exploring the status of nomenklatura after the end of the totalitarian regime in Bulgaria it is important to understand their place and role during communism.

Nomenklatura and party membership during Communism

The term nomenklatura evokes controversial meanings. Gil Eyal and Eleanor Townsley (1995: 723) note that “the very word “nomenklatura” evokes a host of dubious associations in East European political imagery: “the ruling class of the USSR,” “the new grand bourgeoisie,” “counter-selection,” “old corruption,” “networks of patronage,” all signifying the continued existence, albeit covert, of the past within the present.” They attempt to find out if this notorious group has been able to reproduce itself after the end of communism and their line of inquiry relates closely to claims about the destructive impact of the nomenklatura on the process of democratization in all former communist countries. Despite the fact that in all countries members of the nomenklatura were officially known, their precise status was far from clear. According to Eyal and Townsley (1995:723-724), under communism nomenklatura could be understood loosely as an “upper class” which is distinguished from other classes by its dominance and monopoly of access to elite positions⁴. According to Grødeland and Aasland (2007) one of the key

⁴ For David Lane (1997: 858) it is the dominant institution of authority: a governing elite, a social group holding positions of privilege and power, and a means of ensuring solidarity and loyalty. Lane, however, points out that the elite was fragmented and the *nomenklatura* was not a “unitary ideological class” (ibid: 860), and the notion of *nomenklatura* is wide and ambiguous.

features of communism was the organisation of society into two spheres: the formal, with its stringent rules and regulations; and the informal, essentially a circumvention of the existing laws and rules. Informality⁵ also offered citizens a way of coping with the demands of everyday life through building social networks (social capital), including friendship ties and patronage.

In Bulgaria, communist party membership was very valuable, not only for acquiring a high status in the party hierarchy but also for securing privileges that were unavailable to most people (Crampton 1994). For those who chose a career working for the party in a formal or informal capacity the rewards and benefits were considerable. The *nomenklatura* in particular were served by a comprehensive and multi-layered system of privileges (Kryshtanovskaya and White 1996), allowing them to have a better quality of life. The world of this elite constituted a different reality from which ordinary people were excluded⁶.

Olga Kryshtanovskaya and Stephen White (1996: 717) note that during communism one of the significant privileges of the *nomenklatura* was “the granting of state property for private use, in money and special services.” Toward the end of the regime in the Soviet Union, for instance, members of this elite began to conduct, and make substantial profits from, activities that were strictly prohibited for others. Among those activities were joint enterprises with Western and other foreign companies, turning party assets into cash and foreign currency, the issuing of advantageous credit to members at low interest rates, and the lucrative sale of state property at nominal prices. In other words, the communist party made preparations for a market environment. Economic reforms before the collapse of the Soviet Union were completely under the control of the *nomenklatura* and to their direct material benefit. Despite their focus on Soviet Russia, Kryshtanovskaya and White’s claims can be applied to most communist states, including Bulgaria. The authors assert that the revolutions of 1989 were, in effect, a change of actors, in which the

⁵ Grødeland and Aasland (2007: 24) describe informality as “a set of unwritten rules subverting written rules and laws”.

⁶ Lane (1997: 857) notes that in the Soviet Union, for instance, the *nomenklatura* included all ‘leading’ posts in the communist economic, political, scientific and cultural bureaucracy. It included posts in the industry, parliaments, police, army, foreign affairs, science and culture. Lane cites Willerton (1992) who estimates the number of such posts to be up to 3 million in the USSR in the 1980s. While party membership can be viewed as a milder version of support for the regime, being a member of the *nomenklatura* was a “very direct regime support activity” (Steen and Ruus 2002: 231).

younger generation of the nomenklatura simply ousted its older rivals. The change also involved a redistribution of political power to a group of more economically savvy and pragmatic nomenklatura members, many becoming prominent politicians, oligarchs and media owners throughout Eastern Europe. Where the transitions were peaceful, the former rulers easily converted their political capital into economic assets and social status. (Steen and Ruus 2002)

Nomenklatura and new elites post-communism

Throughout Eastern Europe the demise of the communist system left an intricate, nationwide web of social relations that survived mostly as informal ties (Róna-Tas and Böröcz 2000)⁷. During communism, the loss of a position in the ranks of the nomenklatura usually meant an end to a political career but this changed in the years after the transformations began; former members remained influential members of national elites. Eyal and Townsley (1995: 745) argue that the new post-communist elites post-communism “are the inheritors of the social organization of the nomenklatura under Communism”. Eric Hanley, Natasha Yershova and Richard Anderson (1995: 662) also note: “the power of these individuals appears to be rooted not in the institutions over which they preside but rather in the personal networks that link them to other members of the old nomenklatura.” It is well known that personal connections were vital for the operation of the socialist economy and society as a whole. More importantly, however, the links established during the communist regimes became extremely valuable in the post-communist era too. Ivan Szelenyi and Szonja Szelenyi (1995) observe a general agreement among scholars in the region that the process of privatization in Eastern Europe in the early 1990s benefited the communist political class most, which remained

⁷ Holders of Communist Party offices were much more likely to end up in the new business elite. It was the combination of high education, managerial jobs under communism and their party membership that put functionaries ahead of others: what mattered were skills and networks. Those elites had a vital role in setting the informal ground rules of business while emerging as a “political force converting their money into political influence.” (Róna-Tas and Böröcz 2000: 224) Based on empirical evidence gathered in the early 1990s Róna-Tas and Böröcz (2000: 223) also state that “the business elite that emerged in postsocialist Central and Eastern Europe are today shaping their countries’ economies by wielding considerable power over the distribution of property.”

at the top of the class structure without many constraints. As they put it: the old guard was hardly in trouble in Eastern Europe (Szelenyi and Szelenyi 1995)⁸.

With regard to the former Soviet Union, Kryshtanovskaya and White (1996: 723), for example, compare the newly established Russian elite (by the mid-1990s) to a “three-layered pie”. Politicians and their circles of allies are at the top, continuously competing for power; in the middle sit the businessmen who provide essential funds for electoral campaigns, lobbying, newspapers and TV. The bottom, but very important, layer consists of the former security services whose role is to “maintain order but also act as a means of influence and contract enforcement.” (ibid) Similarly, the Bulgarian former secret services ensured that the revolution of 1989 posed no threat to the former *nomenklatura* and especially not to those who had served as spies and agents. Unlike in other East-Central European countries, in Romania and Bulgaria the political transition has been marked by the active role of the former secret services and their foray into the ruling and opposition parties. In Bulgaria semi-mafia structures were endorsed by the secret services and the state has not been able to deal with this problem. The privatization processes were in both countries manipulated in favour of powerful local actors while foreign investors were kept at bay (Andreev 2009). In the media sphere this is particularly visible: foreign investors did not arrive until the mid-1990s and a number of them have exited the market in recent years.

According to Elza Ibroscheva (2012) controversial figures that had collaborated with the communist regime own some of the most influential Bulgarian media outlets. The former spies’ unique position in the media, for example, gave them unprecedented access to media resources like printing and broadcasting facilities, as well as access to substantial capital that was out of the reach of ordinary Bulgarian citizens. Cynthia Horne (2009:349) notes the widespread cronyism of the former spy network and its continued

⁸ Jasek Wasilewski (1998) analysed large samples of elites to determine what happened to *nomenklatura* groups in Hungary, Poland and Russia. He established that *nomenklatura* elites largely survived the dramatic political crises and regime changes that occurred in those countries. Only a few suffered “serious social or political demotion.” (Wasilewski 1998: 166) In Slovakia loose networks of industrial managers and former *nomenklatura* members did “extraordinarily well in the privatization process” (Gould and Szomolányi 2000: 54).

influence on Polish society as highly problematic: the richest Polish businessmen today had extensive contacts with the security services prior to 1989⁹.

It is important to stress that elite members of the communist nomenklatura controlled – either directly or indirectly – the vast majority of state property and enterprises as well as strategic government offices, at least at the start of the transition in Bulgaria. They operated personal networks that provided them with information, influence and resources resulting in a privileged access to the new market¹⁰. As Jozsef Böröcz and Akos Róna-Tas argue (1995: 755-756), the high degree of “informality-intensity” of East European post-communist economies makes informal social networks essential in determining economic outcomes. It was the existence of “widespread, extremely sophisticated and discriminating systems of informal networks of actors” that cut across the boundaries among formal economic institutions. Even if they were no longer active party functionaries, ex-cadres were said to reap the benefits of their insider knowledge and personal social networks by acting as intermediaries among key segments, institutions, and actors of the new market economy.

Horne (2009: 349) argues that throughout Eastern Europe “informal understandings and unwritten agreements between current political elites and former elites in positions of economic power have created widespread perceptions that the transitions were unfair and incomplete”. In Romania, for example those perceptions are “fuelled by the pervasive belief that the people who contributed to the previous totalitarian regime continue to obtain legal and business advantages, with 80% of Romanians polled thinking that corruption levels grew or stagnated even after joining EU [in 2007]” (Horne 2009: 363). Most of the research and literature discussing the transition and the influence of former

⁹ Some notable exceptions from the general pattern of nomenklatura elite continuity can be found in the rise of Central European and Soviet dissidents. Poland’s Solidarność (Solidarity) Movement, “a reform movement capable of destroying the totalitarian system” (Michnik 1998:97) produced the first non-Communist government of the Soviet Bloc. Its activists and charismatic leader Lech Wałęsa established themselves as a new opposition elite that came from “far down political and social hierarchies” (Hingley and Lengyel 2000: 5) and was previously distant from elite positions. Brier (2011) argues that dissidents such as Adam Michnik, Václav Havel, or György Konrád were members of communities of discourse that cut across the Iron Curtain. Many of those dissidents became prominent figures in the newly emerging democratic political landscape throughout Eastern Europe and did not belong to the ruling *nomenklatura* groups.

¹⁰ Dobrinka Kostova (2000: 200) found that people who were “key players in the old command economy” belong to the new economic elite in post-communist Bulgaria. However, throughout a nine-year period (1989-1998) there was a noticeable shift from a dependence on party connections to a reliance on “more diffuse political and economic power networks”. (Kostova 2000: 204)

nomenklatura networks on post-communist societies focuses on transitional justice (e.g. Welsh 1996, Letki 2002, Szczerbiak 2002, Williams 2003, David 2004, Williams et al 2005; Horne 2009, Zake 2010). The role of the former nomenklatura in the post-communist media landscape needs to be investigated, especially in relation to the origin of the funds with which private media outlets were launched or purchased. The majority of those who own media in Bulgaria, it is argued, consider it more important to own a media outlet as such rather than make a profit as this kind of media ownership is not profit-oriented but supports other political or corporate ambitions.

Vicken Cheterian 2009 and Martha Dyczok 2009 – among others – demonstrate that in many post-communist countries oligarchs, politicians and even notorious crime figures emerged as the dominant elites and media owners, ensuring the visibility in the media of certain issues, parties and leaders sympathetic to their goals of long-term survival in a highly volatile environment. Unclear, non-transparent media ownership has plagued the Bulgarian media landscape from the start of democratization and the true identities of the owners of most media outlets are yet to be scrutinized.

Bulgarian journalists’ perceptions

This article is based on the findings of a larger study, which examined the perceptions, opinions and understandings of a group of journalists who were asked to reflect on the changes that have taken place in the Bulgarian media system post-communism. The study relied on anonymous semi-structured face-to-face interviews with 31 journalists from the capital city Sofia, most of whom are considered to be influential figures in the media sphere. (Table 1)

Table 1. Sample of interviewees

Broadcasting		Press			Web/online	Freelance/Former/ Semi-retired
Radio	TV	Daily	Weekly	Magazine		
6	6	6	5	1	2	5*

* 1 interviewee was in a managerial position (media group) but is a former senior journalist at the Bulgarian National TV (BNT) and also worked freelance.

The bulk of interviews (25) were conducted in 2010 after a pilot of 6 interviews took place in 2009¹¹. The majority of the participants (27) had direct journalistic experience in the media prior to the end of the communist regime in 1989. The oldest nine interviewees began a career in the 1950s and 1960s while eight others started in the 1970s. 18 journalists embarked on a journalism career in the 1980s while the remaining four participants began working as journalists post 1990. The common characteristic of the 27 participants is that they have worked continuously in the Bulgarian media since 1989 in positions ranging from junior reporters, editors-in-chief and senior TV/radio producers and directors. (Table 2)

Table 2. Age group and years of working as a journalist

20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60+	<10	10-20	20-30	30-40	40+
1	4	16	4	6	1	3	18	4	5

The interviews comprised 22 questions examining journalists' views and opinions on issues that the literature on post-communist media systems observes as common limitations to Bulgarian journalism during the process of democratization. In the course of the research an unexpected gap in the literature emerged on the former nomenklatura networks and their role and influence on the Bulgarian post-communist media landscape. Nevertheless, the findings of pilot interviews suggested that the issues of nomenklatura/former party elite as well as the problematic topic of the journalist-spy in the media appeared in answers to other questions. Using semi-structured interviews allowed a considerable degree of flexibility for both the researcher and the participants in exploring unexpected issues and angles that came up in interviews. One of the clear advantages of anonymous semi-structured interviews was that they allowed a wealth of information to be collected from a number of prominent figures in Bulgarian media

¹¹ Subsequently, in order to validate the findings, 5 interviews with well-known Bulgarian media scholars were also conducted, although their views are not discussed in this article.

without risking their identification, The protection of the identities of the 14 men and 17 women who took part in the study was unconditional.

Findings and discussion

The consensus among participants is that most Bulgarian media outlets were bought specifically to serve certain agendas and to represent particular political and business interests. Ownership of a media outlet is perceived as an important tool for exerting undue influence on politics, business and society. This is the main reason why non-transparent or hidden ownership is seen as hugely problematic by the majority of interviewees, who note the lack of an effective register of ownership for private media that clearly names the true owner of each media outlet. Several interviewees state matter-of-factly that the real owners of the bulk of private Bulgarian media are hidden behind offshore companies or behind “fronts”, such as lawyers. Serious worries are raised not only about the hidden owners of media but also about the true origin of capital that has financed new publications, cable and TV channels since the 1990s. There is a noticeable concern about the identities of the people who launch media companies, particularly about the “murky” and “dubious” role played by the Bulgarian Communist Party (BKP)¹² and the former nomenklatura, who are perceived as desperately trying to change their image and distance themselves from their repressive past.

There is a belief that just like in the former Soviet Union, the Bulgarian Communist Party had made preparations for its future survival. This quote illustrates the view well:

It was clear that what happened on November 10, 1989 was “directed” by the leading party or actually certain people and fractions within the party, who wanted to transform their political power, which was not enough for them, into economic power. So somewhere in the “laboratories” of the Secret Services, they created the model of the Bulgarian transition, the Bulgarian “democracy”, as we have seen it over those years. It was an orchestrated transition, which later impacted on the country's development and the model of democracy that was established here. (Senior producer in private TV channel)

Several participants assert that in the final stages of communism, the former nomenklatura made preparations for change by siphoning party funds abroad to secret

¹² Renamed Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP)

foreign bank accounts; this resonates with claims made in the literature. Following the collapse of the regime, those clandestine assets are believed to have been reinvested in private enterprises and used to purchase or finance media outlets. Many journalists claim that the capital illegally stashed away overseas was being poured back into new business opportunities in Bulgaria, especially in rigged state property privatization. These claims are supported by reports issued by organizations such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. At the time both organizations reported that Bulgaria's assets were being depleted systematically through dubious and non-transparent privatization deals (Everaert et al 1999).

According to several journalists control over media was part of the nomenklatura's carefully designed strategy to remain in power after 1989. Some participants even suggest that by allowing unprecedented freedom of expression and a variety of new publications, the former communist leadership ensured that the public would have an outlet to express long-held frustrations and grievances toward the oppressive regime, thus preventing violent repercussions. While seemingly far-fetched, such claims were not completely unfounded, especially in the case of the former Soviet Union. The literature suggests (e.g. Kryshtanovskaya and White 1996; Steen and Ruus 2002) that the communist party nomenklatura did not simply vanish but secured the economic and, to a large extent, political survival of the majority of its members. This, however, was achieved at the expense of ordinary citizens and has, according to several journalists and scholars (e.g. Hellman 1998), affected Bulgaria's process of democratization.

After decades of rumours, speculation about media ownership and half-hearted attempts at tracing the origin of the fortunes of some of the most notorious Bulgarian political and business figures with proven links to the communist regime, several participants express a strong desire for a thorough investigation. More importantly, however, journalists want to know how those fortunes have been deployed in the media since 1989. One journalist sums up the prevailing attitude when saying that there are only three main questions that should be asked about Bulgarian media outlets: "Where does the money come from, are they complying with professional standards and is there a conflict of interests?" (Senior TV producer in BNT)

Interviewees are clearly convinced that such pressing questions will not be asked by any Bulgarian government and nor will they be answered. Despite Bulgaria's obligation to fulfil its EU accession criteria, the prevalent secrecy and deception in media ownership have not been adequately addressed. The problem is exacerbated, according to several journalists, by the existence of complicated "networks of vested interests", which are concentrated and visible in the media. Several journalists claim that a number of media outlets were launched with the sole purpose of "laundering money" or "settling scores" with political and business rivals¹³. Other participants note that many newspapers do not follow the market logic in its usual sense (i.e., supported by income from advertising or a paying audience). However, such newspapers continue to be published year after year because informal political and business networks would like to have an outlet "just in case they need them at one point or another." Seemingly unlimited and highly dubious funding allows media to exist without making any profit, even if, as one participant notes, they are "haemorrhaging money."

The problem of unclear ownership and funding appears to have its roots in the early period of Bulgarian democratization. Journalists believe that in the early 1990s, despite some profound changes in the media landscape (such as the introduction of private ownership and a new language and style of press reporting), a clear continuity with the past existed, with senior media personnel retaining leadership positions. This, in turn, fuelled speculation by the general public and among journalists that they stayed in those positions to protect the former nomenklatura's interests and to facilitate its easy transition into capitalism. Such beliefs are supported by media experts. For instance, in one of its reports, the organization Reporters Without Borders (2009) states: "Bulgaria has evolved from a strong communist regime to a modern feudalism, but without any real change of actors. The former oligarchy invested massively in the privatisation of the Bulgarian economy at the start of the 1990s and took control of all the key sectors such as energy, construction, natural resource management, transport, telecommunications and

¹³ This claim poses a number of important questions – how does this affect the day-to-day work of journalists, what was the role of interviewees in this process, what are the precise mechanisms of ensuring journalists' compliance in those media outlets? While all these questions deserve an answer they are not the focus of this article. The discussion of journalistic work conditions, ethics and practices was excluded for the purposes of this argument.

real estate.”¹⁴ The situation in the media is similar, and according to the report it is not uncommon to find former high-level party and security officials or former intelligence officers managing media outlets.

Informal arrangements remained intact and thriving, put in place solely with the purpose of advancing personal agendas. The continuity of actors in the media sphere, especially in the early years of democratization, combined with unclear press ownership created the perfect conditions for the nomenklatura to remain anonymous, yet powerful behind the scenes. Most media outlets in Bulgaria are perceived as “servants” or “weapons” with which to smear, attack, blackmail or intimidate opponents of the alleged owners and their informal political, business and in some cases criminal networks. This opinion illustrates the view well: “It’s a major problem because when someone tells you something, you have got to see who's telling you this, and when the ownership of the media outlet is not clear, and when you see biased publications in them and specifically against someone, not following basic journalistic standards, then you can be sure that the media are used as weapons”. (Newspaper reporter)

A similar trend is observed in Russia where, according to Cheterian (2009: 213), post-Soviet pluralism is the pluralism of the oligarchs and the media do not serve the public interest but instead act as the “voice of a very small fraction of the rich and politicized elites”. While several journalists concede to a limited degree of media freedom in Bulgaria, most express serious concerns about the fact that the political, business and media elites understand media freedom as a *carte blanche* to employ any method, without any restraint or responsibility, to promote private, political and corporate agendas. The majority of participants point out Bulgaria’s deteriorating media freedom scores awarded by organisations such as Reporters Without Borders, Freedom House and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Despite the diplomatic language of the reports, the interviewees understand the scores as a true reflection of the dismal state of media freedom in Bulgaria.

Journalists perceive Bulgaria, and especially the capital city Sofia, as a relatively small place with only “two degrees of separation” where politics and business are conducted on a basis of informal agreements and exchanges of favours. Media are an important part of

¹⁴ Report was written by Olivier Basille, director of Reporters without Borders for the Balkans and the EU.

this arrangement: they help the elites stay in power, some of the media that they secretly own include the most popular TV channels, such as bTV and Nova TV. Several interviewees insist that if the origins of the real owners' money were traced then it would become quite clear where and how they became so wealthy and could buy not only one outlet but, for example, a large chain of media outlets in print and broadcasting.

The questionable alliance between business, politics and crime figures has grown stronger over the years since the demise of the communist regime. The journalists believe that most oligarchs, wealthy entrepreneurs and politicians owe their vast fortunes and status to the former communist regime and its repressive secret service apparatus. The increase in clientelism in Bulgaria since 1989 shows that despite positive and constructive steps in the process of democratization, to a large extent the negative trends in the development of the Bulgarian media system are a result of political, economic and societal culture, deeply rooted in communism. Habits, informal rules and friendship networks are slow to change. However, it should be noted that despite a tendency to view this group as an ambiguous and faceless collective, journalists do not blame the former nomenklatura and party elite for all issues and problems that Bulgarian media struggle with. Far from making such claims, participants recognise that several factors, including newly emerging actors and trends in the post-communist media landscape, have contributed to negative developments in the Bulgarian media system. Anton Steen and Jüri (Ruus (2002) suggest that communist ideology is history which will not re-surface and this view is echoed by Bulgarian journalists. However, the recent communist past and elites associated with it are still perceived as powerful undercurrents in the political and media spheres. The scarcity of hard evidence tying former regime supporters to new rulers after the end of communism and to specific issues that stem from this alliance does not render these perceptions credible. Nevertheless, those views should not be dismissed entirely as they indicate a problem that has not been adequately addressed for many years.

Conclusion

The analysis of journalists' perceptions indicates a problematic omnipresence of informal nomenklatura networks at the start of the Bulgarian transition. Participants believe that

the “reformed” communist party elite that was privileged in the past preserved its immune status in the new post-communist political and business environment. To some extent scholars validate those perceptions¹⁵.

The influence and power of such extended and fluid networks of political and economic actors, including semi-mafia organizations, is precisely what journalists are concerned about. What participants and scholars agree on is that the continuity of informality, including clientelistic practices, patronage and friendship networks have lasted despite attempts at transformation and establishment of democratic institutions. Most participants believe that the communist legacy has partly endured into post-communism through the still-functioning (yet sophisticated) covert networks of former party and secret service officials. This “unholy alliance” is seen as impacting adversely on the establishment of the post-communist Bulgarian media system straight from the beginning of the transformation. Hidden media ownership and the unclear origin of funding that was (and still is) used to launch and finance media outlets are especially problematic. The former nomenklatura are seen by many as being at the root of those problems.

The dominant model of governance, now firmly entrenched in Bulgaria, breeds nothing but disillusion, apathy and cynicism toward the state, erodes trust in institutions and crushes faith in the ongoing process of building a democratic society. Using interviews with Bulgarian journalists, this article has demonstrated an existing belief that nomenklatura networks are partly responsible for the bleak state of media freedom in Bulgaria.

At the onset of changes sweeping through Eastern Europe, Antony Levitas and Piotr Strzałkowski (1990: 415) warned:

the transformation of the nomenklatura into a class of capitalist owners could be devastating for the prospects of Polish capitalism. As we have noted, there is little reason to overestimate the

¹⁵ For example, Kostova’s (2000: 205) empirical evidence gathered from surveys and interviews with top members of the economic elite in 1990, 1994, 1998, reveals that “being employed in the public sector under state socialism while at the same time pursuing some private activity was a frequent path to business elite positions in the 1990s”. In the 1990s property was redistributed among survivors of the old communist elite and those who entered the ranks of the economic elite post-communism. The 1990s were also marked by considerable changes in formal institutions but also a consolidation between the old and new elites. While party membership and involvement declined dramatically, participation in “diffuse political networks” occurred (Kostova 2000: 207).

entrepreneurial talents of the apparat, and where there are talents, many of them have been used for years not to maximise on markets, but in the corridors of state power. Allowing the nomenklatura to acquire state property en masse makes it extremely likely that all the worst forms of socialist clientelism will be perpetuated within the framework of a very lopsided and stagnant capitalism.

When writing about the process of decommunization in Eastern Europe, including disqualification of actors complicit with old regimes, retribution and restitution, Claus Offe (1997: 93) sums up a widespread argument for adopting transitional justice procedures such as screening laws. He argues that “the people in question, their attitudes and competence, and the networks of solidarity existing among them, would constitute a threat to the orderly functioning of the new democratic regime if they were allowed access to important political, administrative or professional positions”.

Needless to say, such warnings by scholars were disregarded. The process of decommunization and transitional justice was mostly slow and ineffective in Bulgaria. There is little doubt that most journalists perceive the members of former nomenklatura and their allies, the secret services, as a threat to the Bulgarian democratization process, as well as a corrosive influence on its media system. While those perceptions seem exaggerated at times and lack detail, the evidence presented by scholars supports the views of participants on the adverse impact that unaccountable forces such as the secret services and semi-mafia structures have on crucial democratic reforms (Andreev 2009). Without any doubt, new “entrepreneurs-cum-mafiosi” have generated large private returns while maintaining partial economic reforms at a considerable cost to society (Hellman 1998: 233). This negative influence extends to the Bulgarian media sphere. The pressing concerns expressed by journalists specifically about the media relate to: a) hidden media owners’ unscrupulous use of their position to “launch assaults” and pose limits on media freedom in order to advance their personal, corporate and political ambitions and b) the origin of capital used to launch or purchase media outlets, especially by former nomenklatura members and their links with the secret services.

The evidence demonstrates that non-transparent media ownership is the result of the legacy of the communist past and of the lingering habit of directing and controlling the media combined with the introduction of private ownership post 1989 and the effects of

rampant or so-called nomenklatura capitalism. A mix of old and new political and corporate cultures manifests itself in sophisticated methods of employing media outlets as a vehicle for political and business agendas. According to participants, twenty-five years after the revolution of 1989, it is high time that questions about the origin of capital with which media outlets were founded, their owners and the role of the former nomenklatura were addressed. Further research is urgently needed to explore the precise composition of old and new elites, taking into account the role of the former secret services, their informal relationships and the makings of the post-communist oligarch. In combination, these phenomena have proved lethal to Bulgaria's continued efforts at democratization and building a transparent media system.

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