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Secrets, Lies and Journalist-Spies – the contemporary moral dilemma for Bulgarian media professionals

Introduction

The past, and its influence on the future, has intrigued scholars from the start of the transition to democracy in the former communist countries of Eastern Europe. Questions remain about the complex and hybrid nature of the on-going transformation process and factors that affect it. One of those factors, largely overlooked by researchers, is the impact of those “in positions of trust” (Horne 2009) – like journalists, editors and media owners with suspected links to the former communist secret service – on the development of the post-communist Bulgarian media system. Welsh (1996: 413) argues that coming to terms with the legacy of communism is a complicated process because it involves figuring out the effect of the communist past on current political culture. The process includes pursuing historical justice while at the same time evaluating the problematic role that the former nomenklatura¹ and collaborators with the secret services are alleged to play in the post-communist political, economic and media landscape. This paper will address the question: how do journalists perceive the role informers have played during and after communism? However, the focus is not so much on what journalist-spies did in the past but on whether these actions have influenced their professional behavior since the beginning of democratization in Bulgaria.

A wealth of comparative literature exists on transitional justice in post-communist states. Several scholars have proposed frameworks to explain why and how countries in the region have adopted or failed to adopt effective justice measures (e.g., Moran 1994, Welsh 1996 and Horne 2009). Yet, with very few exceptions, their focus is mainly on dealing with the communist past in relation to political and public life, largely excluding the media sphere. However, this lack of scholarly attention does not mean that the issue of the former

informers/spies in the media is not relevant or important. This article will aim to show that in many ways the paradox of the journalist-spy has become even more salient and urgent to understand since the end of communism in 1989. It will demonstrate that despite two decades of transition, interest in the topic has not diminished. On the contrary, journalists express a strong desire to know more about the legacy of the past in relation to the present media sphere in Bulgaria.

To address the question this article will introduce the context of informers in the Bulgarian media pre and post communism. It provides an insight into the broader process of decommunization taking place across countries in Eastern Europe by examining society's treatment of secret services collaborators. It then focuses on the significance of the introduction and implementation of transitional justice measures in the former Soviet bloc devised to deal with former Communist party functionaries and agents. The article will then outline the methodology of the research, including the design, sample and method of collecting the data. Finally, it will present and discuss findings in regard to journalist-informers in the employ of the former communist secret service.

Decommunization and transitional justice in Bulgaria

The process of dismantling the structures of the previous regime and replacing them with new democratic institutions is known in Eastern Europe as decommunization. This process in Bulgaria began shortly after the end of the regime and included two types of procedures: initially, criminal proceedings such as the trial and conviction of high-level communists like former party leader Todor Zhivkov; and later, screening procedures conducted on former collaborators with the security apparatus, eventually leading to the declassification of secret files for public inspection. Decommunization in most countries has included the adoption of

various forms of transitional justice, with Czechoslovakia ratifying a first-of-its-kind lustration law in 1991.

Welsh (1996) notes the existence of two opposing scholarly views on the subject of transitional justice: the first strongly in favour of legislative measures such as lustration to address injustices and conduct a comprehensive investigation of the past; and the second favouring a more lenient approach of reconciliation, with an emphasis on tolerance as a foundation of democratic society. Scholars generally define lustration as the legislative process consisting of excluding, vetting or purging former communist party leaders (or senior members of the nomenklatura) and agents with links to the secret services or state security from positions of state authority (Welsh 1996; Letki 2002; Szczerbiak 2002; David 2004; Williams 2003; Williams et al 2005; Horne 2009; Zake 2010). Therefore an important phase of lustration has been establishing meaningful disqualification procedures, namely legal measures to prevent discredited actors from the old party elite, and members of the former security apparatus, from taking key public and administrative positions in newly formed democratic institutions. However, Horne (2009) states that the legitimacy and legality of lustration have been severely contested, not only in the region but also internationally. Among the common issues that have fuelled controversy, according to Horne (2009: 345), are “mismanagement of secret police files, salacious accusations about political leaders, illegally publicized personal information contained in the files, questions about the veracity of information, and the proliferation of rumours about wide-scale bureaucratic vetting in many countries in CEE.” She claims that all of these factors have stoked fears in most countries across Eastern Europe that lustration was a new form of purging, or witch-hunt, disguised as transitional justice, that could ultimately harm democratization. Those concerns have been especially pronounced in Bulgaria, which is described by scholars as

“insufficiently” or “non-lustrated” (Letki 2002: 548) in comparison with countries such as former Czechoslovakia and Hungary.

In 1992, shortly after the end of communism, the Bulgarian parliament passed a screening law – the Panev law, named after its author. The law banned former agents and senior party members from taking leadership posts in academia. However, as Welsh (1996) and Letki (2002) note, before the law was annulled for being unconstitutional in 1995, it was heavily criticized by the Council of Europe and human rights organizations like the International Labour Organisation (ILO) for its approach. ILO was opposed to the treatment of individuals based on their past associations per se, with insufficient regard to mitigating circumstances and their present activity (Williams et al. 2005). The consequent 1998 Bulgarian lustration act (the Administration Act) was annulled by the Bulgarian Constitutional Court and was again evaluated as largely “unsuccessful” by scholars (e.g., Sadurski 2005 and Letki 2002). By then there had been only 25 disclosures of the identity of former agents, and did not bring any major disqualification of actors neither in politics nor in other public positions of trust such as those in the media. According to some scholars, the reason for this lies partly in the unreliable files of the secret services.

Untrustworthy files

Moran (1994: 108) points out that, like its communist peers in Czechoslovakia and the German Democratic Republic (GRD), the Bulgarian Security Service kept comprehensive files on all informers. However, several authors have argued that the full extent and specific nature of the collaboration with the former state security apparatus will never be established due to missing or destroyed files in most dossiers. Welsh (1996: 417) states “it is well established that many of the files were destroyed after the fall of communism.” Bulgaria was

no exception; a great deal of the hard evidence had been removed or purposefully destroyed (Letki 2002).

What are the implications of unreliable files? The literature pinpoints three major issues arising from untrustworthiness of the files that are common in all post-communist countries:

1) Scholars note widespread fears of manipulation. Welsh (1996: 417), for example, states that in Romania the files of the security police were used against the democratic opposition. Similarly Hall (1996) notes major concerns in Romania, where those with access and not the “revolutionaries” were suspected of removing files from the Secret Service (Securitate). They were suspected of making copies of files that, it was commonly assumed, were used when needed. Accusations like this were plentiful in neighboring Bulgaria.

2) Concerns of possible blackmail of public figures and well-timed media leaks. Williams et al (2005: 28) observe that since so many documents were destroyed or removed in late 1989 in all former communist countries, there was no way of being certain who might use them to learn the identities of police collaborators. Therefore those in favor of lustration argued that individuals with past associations with the security services who later held important public offices were open to blackmail. Welsh (1996: 423) recognised this as a significant problem. In Hungary, for example, lustration was not so much “an issue of historical justice but of present accountability and transparency – of not allowing people subject to blackmail to be given power.” The issue of potential blackmail applies not only to politicians but also to those working in positions of trust. Journalists who had been the subject of dossiers could be manipulated and were assumed vulnerable to blackmail by the former re-organized secret services.

3) Ambiguous legal and ethical interpretation of the information in the remaining secret service files. An important question has intrigued scholars: just because names appear in the

informers' rolls, does it mean that people were automatically guilty of spying? According to Letki (2002: 542) lustration presents a problem in "that screening is based on evidence prepared by the secret service: the files are simultaneously 'over-inclusive', as not all people listed as agents or informers really collaborated, and 'under-inclusive', as the major agents were probably not listed." The difficulty in identifying specific acts that journalist-spies had committed so far back in time makes the job of distinguishing between perpetrators and victims all but impossible. In addition, many of the journalists from the region who were listed as informers have strongly disputed their involvement with the secret services and claim that they been subjected to politically motivated witch-hunts aimed solely at destroying their credibility and ultimately their careers. In order to better understand the moral and ethical dilemmas related to transitional justice for those in positions of public trust it is important to examine the role that media employees played during communism in Bulgaria.

Journalist-spies' role in the media before 1989

A number of authors have observed that the communist regime was harsh and allowed little scope for dissent (Hall 1996; Williams et al. 2005) or involvement from the public in political decision-making. Ognianova (1993) notes that Bulgaria was one the USSR's most loyal allies. This loyalty often saw policies from the Soviet Union directly transplanted in Bulgaria, including directives about the role of the media as an ideological propaganda tool in the hands of the communist party. Ognianova (1996: 158) also states that most journalists in Bulgaria were members of the communist party. During communism, journalism was perceived as highly ideological work that actively propagated the ideas and values of the party; most journalists were trained to follow this method during their education in the only existing journalism department at Sofia University. Hall (1996) argues that in Romania the political sensitivity of a media position and the relatively small number of people who were employed in the media, meant that many media employees were probably among the

Securitate's large network of 700,000 collaborators. Hall also claims that due to the highly totalitarian character of Ceausescu's regime, the very act of working in the media apparatus in that era required complicitous behavior. According to Zake (2010: 407) it is well known that during communism the intellectual class (intelligentsia), which included journalists, was a vital instrument of political propaganda and therefore it was deeply involved in the workings of the communist system. This class played a valuable role in the maintenance of the previous regime.

Ognianova (1993: 159) asserts that there were "fringe benefits" from becoming a collaborator or spy, which included material rewards and promotions to top positions. This was especially visible in the group of selected individuals who had proven their wholehearted commitment to the party by attaining the rank of foreign correspondent. Their duties included practicing ideological journalism as well as gathering intelligence for the state and the party. In other words, it was well known that if you were a foreign correspondent, you were also a spy. This position, according to Ognianova, involved a moral dilemma for those journalists: if you accepted, you would potentially go on to have a successful and influential career; but if you refused, your chances of advancing or even staying in the profession were minimal to none. She argues that they had several choices in this situation: accept and live with their double role as a journalist and spy, or choose to quit the profession. Among the choices available to those journalists, Ognianova includes seeking political asylum in the West once there, and repenting for their mistakes; or rebelling against the system and going to prison while retaining their moral authority. However, it can be argued that those were hardly "choices" given the severity of punishment or persecution the secret services could bestow on the individuals involved or on their families. The tragic fate of the Bulgarian dissident and BBC journalist Georgi Markov, who was assassinated by the Bulgarian secret services in London, illustrates this point (see Hristov 2006). The severity of repression by the communist regime

is still a subject of intense debate in Bulgaria. Nevertheless, even if we assume that Ognianova is right that all journalist-spies were morally compromised, this still leaves open the question of the role of former informers after communism.

Spies and informers after 1989

The ethical right of journalists who were exposed as spies (or officially “agents,” “collaborators” and “informers”) to continue to work in the media after 1989 is highly controversial due to the nature of the allegations against them. On the one hand, they are asserted to have been instrumental throughout communism in serving the party. On the other, their special and privileged status allowed most to make a smooth transition to the new post-communist media landscape. Ibroscheva (2012: 12) states that it was their unique position as former spies that gave them “access to media resources, such as printing facilities, publication houses, broadcasting technology, as well as access to capital and financial means unavailable to ordinary Bulgarian citizens.” Such claims are strongly related to the idea about the influence of “bad” social capital (Letki 2002: 540) inherited from communism. By “bad” social capital, Letki implies clandestine networks of former members of the nomenklatura whose main goal was not only to preserve their high social status but also their material wealth gained under the old regime. The Czech Republic, Romania and Poland are given as an example of the nomenklatura dominating the newly emerging free market. Horne (2009: 349) states that economically, informal networks of former secret police officials continue to dominate economic activities. In Romania, for instance, the biggest factor predicting membership in the post-communist business elite was past membership in the communist elite. Bulgaria is another illustration of the destructive influence of nomenklatura social capital: “the lack of a ban on nomenklatura members and secret service collaborators holding positions in the banking system resulted in its breakdown” (Letki 2002: 540). Williams et al (2005: 28) report fears resonating throughout Eastern Europe of the covert

reactivation of old nomenklatura networks after communism with the goal of profiteering from the privatization of former state-owned enterprises. David (2004: 789) asserts that it was precisely the lack of lustration laws, or their poor application, that allowed people who were closely connected to the old regime to continue exercising influence upon new democracies and to capitalize on their social capital. Horne (2009: 358) summarizes this view well: there is a collective sense that the past actively affects the political and economic reality of the present. Scholars have argued that this point is entirely applicable to the Bulgarian media landscape. According to Ibroscheva (2012: 12) the still-secret past of the leading political, business, cultural and media elite in Bulgaria places serious doubt not only over their credibility as agents of democratic change but consequently over their “ability to advocate and promote a fundamental shift away from the corrupt practices of the communist elite into a new, untainted and therefore, entirely trustworthy leadership of democratic civil society.” Moreover, as the perceptions of journalists highlight, it brings to the fore the role they are alleged to play post-communism as a powerful and valued tool in the hands of the post-communist political and business elites, to fulfill personal agendas.

Journalists’ dossiers

The “insufficient” lustration process (Letki 2002) and the absence of a united approach to dealing with its communist legacy contributed to a twenty-year gap in allowing the public access to what remained of the previously secret archives of the former state security and the Bulgarian People’s Army. In 2008 the Dossier Commission² in the Bulgarian parliament released the files of journalists who held, or had held, senior and managerial positions in the former state broadcasters (Bulgarian National Radio (BNR and Bulgarian National Television (BNT)) and the national news agency, Bulgarian Telegraph Agency (BTA), since 1989. Of the 484 journalists born before 1973 whose files were checked by the Committee for Dossiers, 37 were exposed as communist-era secret agents. The press was quick to point out

that the list of dossiers was incomplete, with a noticeable gap for the period from 1989 to 2006 (Antonova 2009³). The partial information was due to a highly controversial amendment to the Dossier Act passed by Parliament in 2006, which allowed the records of those journalists who worked in the media prior to 2006 to remain classified. In 2009 the Dossier Commission exposed a further 101 journalists from 273 private media outlets as communist-era secret agents. Those journalists were still working in the media after 2006 (Antonova 2009).

The lists of names on the informers' rolls, published along with informer pseudonyms, showed that many journalists still held or had held prominent positions in the media. Prominent examples were the former editor-in-chief of 24 Chasa, Valeri Naydenov (under the secret pseudonym "Sasho") and Tosho Toshev, the former editor-in-chief of Trud, (under the agent name "Bor"). Crucially, they were in charge of the two highest-circulation and most-popular daily newspapers in the country for several years. Famous TV presenters, such as Kevork Kevorkian, Ivan Garelov and Dmitri Ivanov, who had been much-liked and respected by audiences prior to and post 1989, were revealed by the Dossier Commission as high-ranking agents.

Despite disputes over their accuracy, what the files and information released to the public clearly demonstrated was that most journalists who were listed as spies and were known for their privileged status in the previous regime, far from sinking into oblivion or leaving the profession, had developed thriving careers post communism. They were often in leadership positions as editors and deputy editors-in-chief, program presenters and commentators, and TV executives in charge of a much younger generation of journalists⁴. In the former state broadcasters, for example, the best-known TV personalities in Bulgaria, including Kevork Kevorkian and Ivan Garelov, continued to draw large audiences after 1989. TV programmes like Panorama, presented by Garelov, became the main platforms for political TV debate in

the early years of transformation. As Ibroscheva (2012: 20) notes, the long list of secret agents “reads like a “who’s who” of the Bulgarian media market today.”

Since the end of communism the role of media institutions across the former Soviet bloc has become increasingly important in the process of democratization while journalists have seen a dramatic change in their status, rights and responsibilities. The status of the media and media professionals perceived by scholars (see Jebril et al 2013) as influential factors in the post-communist social, political and media landscape underlines further the importance of understanding the paradox of journalist-spies. Elite and privileged journalists easily transferred to top positions in newly formed private media outlets, as well as public broadcasters, despite their suspected links with the secret service. In other words, they successfully preserved or re-established their place in society and in journalism as influential public figures. Yet this transition was facilitated by the new political elite, which ensured that the dossiers of journalists and others in positions of trust remained classified, and therefore clouded in secrecy and speculation, for nearly 20 years after the end of the communist regime. While the names of some journalist-spies were finally revealed in 2008/2009, questions relating to their role, status and responsibilities in the process of transformation of the Bulgarian post-communist media system are still being asked. The perceptions of a cohort of working journalists contribute to our understanding of this issue.

A study of views and perceptions

A larger study⁵, on which this article is based, explored the beliefs, attitudes, perceptions and interpretations of different generations of Bulgarian journalists with respect to changes in the media system after communism. Anonymous semi-structured interviews were conducted with 31 Bulgarian journalists, most of whom are key figures in the Bulgarian media field. The

interviews were conducted in 2009 (a pilot of 6 interviews) and 2010 (the remaining 25 interviews). (See table 1 for a breakdown of sample.)

[Table 1 about here].

Of the journalists interviewed for this research, 27 had worked in the media prior to the overthrow of communism in Bulgaria in late 1989. The length of time they had worked during communism varies, but five journalists had experience of working in the media during communism as far back as the 1950s and 1960s. Four started in the 1970s but the majority – 18 – began their careers in the 1980s. Four of the interviewees grew up during the communist regime while being exposed to and reading, listening and watching communist media, but were not old enough to work in the media at that time. Three were just embarking on a journalistic career in the early 1990s, while one started working as a reporter after 2000. (See Figure 1. and Figure 2. below for age groups)

[Figure 1 about here]

[Figure 2 about here]

Of the journalists interviewed for this study, the majority (27) have worked since 1989. Those 27 participants were full-time journalists in various positions, from reporter to editor-in-chief.

Since the academic literature is sparse on the topic of informers/spies in the Bulgarian media the author had not anticipated this would appear as a salient issue in interviews. For that reason, a specific question on the topic was not included in the interview schedule. However, the analysis of pilot interviews showed that the subject of dealing, or not dealing, with the communist past emerged in answers to other questions. None of the journalists were asked if they had been collaborators during the previous regime and only one openly stated that they had been, prior to the end of communism. The author was aware of only one other interviewee whose name had been revealed in the informers' lists but this participant did not

state this fact during the interview and was not asked directly to talk about their involvement. The author felt at the time that this could jeopardize the interview. Considering the senior positions of some of the interviewees, it was of utmost importance that their identities were protected and anonymity was reiterated throughout the interviews. The semi-structured interviews incorporated a set of 22 questions with the objective of exploring journalists' reactions to and interpretations of issues that the literature suggests have represented common limitations to journalism since the collapse of the communist regime in 1989. The main goal was for the subject to talk about their experiences without any fear of being identified, which could harm them. For example, identifying a journalist who was very critical of their media owner or their editor-in-chief could have an adverse effect on their careers. It should also be noted that all but one of the participants still work in the Bulgarian media.

As well as gathering responses to the formulated questions, choosing semi-structured interviews permitted flexibility and openness to reflect and explore any other relevant issues and angles that came up in discussion. This is how the issue of journalist-spies emerged. Another important advantages of using semi-structured interviews as the technique for collecting data, was the depth of the information gathered, which in this study was provided by a number of well-known Bulgarian journalists. Among them 14 were men and 17 women.

Findings and discussion

There was some disagreement among interviewees when they reflected upon the role of informers in the media before and after the end of communism.

Many of the participants in the 60+ and 50-59 age group, whose professional careers spanned several decades, argued that during the communist regime journalists in senior positions, or those trusted with access to classified or so called "sensitive" information, had very little choice but to be Communist party members as this was almost obligatory for the profession.

Many journalists suspected that there were secret service collaborators among their ranks, as there were in all workplaces, but they did not know the full extent of this collaboration. The dominant perception was that those who did not cooperate were immediately dismissed from the state media and faced hefty consequences. Only one participant openly stated that their function as an agent was reporting on senior foreign visitors to the news agency, describing in detail what the visitor said and what questions they asked. For this participant, refusing to cooperate meant going back to hard labor – reinforcing steel on a construction site. Nevertheless, the interviewee expressed strong frustration with the inability, felt at that time, to desist becoming an informer. Other possible consequences of refusals included imprisonment, a minimal chance of finding any work in the media, as well as the risk of exposing family members to a similar level of punishment and restrictions. In other words, those who had witnessed what the regime was capable of, pointed out that it was inevitable that some journalists would choose cooperate fully with the demands of the secret service or their personal and professional lives would be severely affected. This perception is illustrated by Journalist 11⁶, who explained an elaborate process of coercion and a feeling of having absolutely no choice but to become an agent for the secret service:

I was an agent too. How could I not be? [...] You had to do it. And all this is still in the archives, but the point is, there was no choice, no choice in this matter.” (J11, former journalist from the Bulgarian Telegraph Agency)

Most participants, across all age groups, highlighted the repressive nature of the communist regime in Bulgaria, which as the literature also suggests, coerced and put journalists under substantial pressure to cooperate. A few journalists recall regular mass dismissals of journalists: the so-called chistka, translated roughly as “clearance,” which took place every two to three years. The newspaper Narodna Mladez (People’s Youth), for example, had its

entire editorial team replaced for a mistake that was published in one article: “That's why people didn't dare do anything,” explains J28, a former senior editor in a news agency.

Perceptions like this indicate at least two possibilities. Firstly, those who agreed to spy deliberately chose to ignore the moral issue of becoming spies in order to preserve and advance their careers. Secondly, due to the repressive nature of the regime, it is also possible that journalists who decided to collaborate genuinely believed that they would suffer personally if they did not. Scholars have argued that a significant value of the collaboration with the secret services lay in the person's complicity, which placed bounds on potential dissident behavior (see Hall 1996). In other words, forcing people to be agents was another way to control media employees and ensure they followed the party line. Ognianova (1993: 159) briefly mentions a group of journalists that dealt with the demands of the intelligence services through “passive resistance.” They avoided certain sensitive topics and chose safer beats that did not compromise directly their personal, moral and ethical values. J18 states that it was common for many journalists to look for alternative ways to work within the strict boundaries of the ideological frame:

Of course we always knew which issues were subject to more special restrictions or were taboo. And everyone, according to their own conscience, either avoided them or used moderate language when commenting. [...] But within the knowledge, conviction and practice that we had I can say that we tried to be ultimately honest with ourselves and our listeners. (J18, senior radio journalist)

What this participant recalls is another difficult personal dilemma that many journalists faced: what to do with the sensitive information they had and whether or not to practice self-censorship. For example, those who worked on international news and spoke foreign languages, knew what was happening abroad in much more detail than the rest of their

colleagues. Some, like J18, knew before the Soviet news agency – TASS – officially released details about major international crises in the 1980s such as the martial law in Poland and the Chernobyl nuclear reactor meltdown. Releasing all foreign-sourced news, regardless of its perceived magnitude, to the wider public before the official TASS confirmation was, according to several participants, an act with significant ramifications – not only for the journalist personally but also for the whole media organization. This is where the conflict between their personal, citizen and professional conscience lay; to dare say something or not, as described by this interviewee:

In radio there was the advantage that no one was physically standing between you and the microphone but at the same time the consequences of any action were very clear.

(J18)

Many chose to toe the line, motivated partly by fear, due to the highly sensitive nature of the information, especially anything that concerned state and national security. In those cases following the rules to the dot was of an utmost importance. For instance, some commentaries had to receive up to ten signatures of approval before they were broadcast. However, J18 remembers an interesting paradox. During the complicated period of change in the late 1980s – the Perestroika – Bulgaria and the Soviet Union were perceived to have “a very particular relationship.” The Bulgarian party leader Todor Zhivkov was not a favourite of the then-Soviet-leader Mikhail Gorbachev, and Zhivkov had contrasting views on Bulgaria’s place and participation in the process. For this reason the Bulgarian National Radio, for example, was allowed to air some controversial views and information that could not be heard in any other countries of the Eastern Bloc.

It should also be noted that not all journalists who worked during communism were spies and informers. While most were communist party members it did not stop them from taking

pleasure in small acts of rebellion and finding ways to outwit the system. This was highlighted by several participants. Among the most common was the popular method of using the language of Aesop's fables. As an example of such tales about animals some interviewees gave the texts of the prominent Bulgarian author and satirist Radoi Ralin, who criticized the communist regime in his famous book of epigrams *Luti Chushki* (Hot Peppers), and also in his poems and novels. Ralin's epigrams became infamous for their rebellious content and most people who lived during communism learned them by heart, especially this one: "Silent but still heard! You'll have a full gut if you keep your mouth shut," which was published beneath a cartoon of a pig, whose tail looked very much like the signature of the Communist party leader Zhivkov.

For many the key issue, however, was not so much about what a journalist collaborator did in the past, but establishing whether or not what a person did affected their professional actions post-communism.

Old habits die hard

Cepl (1997: 231) states that habits are very hard to break, especially if they have become so deeply ingrained in society due to the length of time the previous rules were in effect. This argument epitomizes the perception of many journalists that their colleagues who worked during communism found it hard, if impossible, to unlearn old habits. Just as they had served the party and the regime in the past, it was assumed logical for them to do the same after the end of communism. The old guard, several of whom were the subject of dossiers, were also thought to carry on serving the re-structured secret service. Among the most commonly cited characterizations of collaborators in the interviews was "compromised," a word used by several participants to demonstrate their adverse attitude towards journalist-spies. Other descriptions of those who had collaborated include "infected with the virus of the previous

journalism,” “opponents of change” and “saboteurs of Bulgaria’s democratization efforts.”

This indicates a belief that what people did during communism has affected their actions afterwards. For example, former agents were blamed for negative trends in the Bulgarian post-communism media landscape, such as the absence of a journalists’ guild, as this quote shows:

There isn’t a journalism guild because there were so many policemen, servicemen, agents of secret services in the guild, whose only mission was to destroy or to prevent the creation of such a guild. Even in the newspaper Demokratsia,⁷ which was published by the Union of Democratic Forces, there were at least twenty agents of the Secret Services, including the deputy editors in chief. They made sure a guild does not exist up to this day. (J14, editor-in-chief of daily newspaper)

In a similar example, some journalists expressed opinions that Demokratsia employed journalists who were informers, and suggest that they were “inserted” there on purpose by the secret service, as this opinion demonstrates:

When we look at who were editors-in-chief of Demokratsia then⁸ and their now-known connections to the secret service, we could start thinking about the possibility that those people were infiltrated there on purpose. What kind of content they allowed, how they channelled opinions, what was their task exactly? Those are philosophical questions that one day we will need an answer for. (J5, director of private TV channel)

However, despite several similar accusations, no one specified who the guilty journalists were and what exactly they were guilty of. Labels such as “compromised” carry the danger of ignoring different individual circumstances and more importantly do not recognise the documented existence of different levels of involvement with the secret services. As noted

previously, journalists were aware of several types of collaboration, some more serious than others. As the literature demonstrates, it has been extremely difficult to formally establish the exact level of personal involvement due to the untrustworthiness of the files. It can be argued that participants' assertions that many journalists who were on the informer rolls took on senior positions after the change in the system is accurate. However, there is no specific evidence to support the claims that journalists have intentionally sabotaged the democratization process in Bulgaria since 1989, nor that they had been infiltrated/inserted on purpose by the former secret service to continue serving as agents. It is possible nonetheless that the perceptions of journalists are based on the revelations that in the early 1990s the functions of the journalist-spy remained the same: to spy on any activities and people that might be seen as a threat to the state (Dermendzieva 2014⁹). While those claims may be authentic, they need further investigation.

The perception that all informers were “opponents of change” can to some extent be explained by the well-documented fact that during communism journalists were an essential part of the old communist elite with close ties to the nomenklatura. As scholars emphasize, in all post-communist countries, including Bulgaria, former re-organised nomenklatura networks have prospered since the end of communism.

Carefully orchestrated change

Several participants directly stated that the changes in Bulgarian society and the media immediately after 1989 were “orchestrated,” “directed” and “commandeered” by members of the former Communist Party nomenklatura and the secret service. Journalist-spies were implicated in facilitating this change. The following quote illustrates this view:

It was an orchestrated change and those who did it [...] prepared everything in advance. One of the main decisions was to let the media “go,” no matter what, so that

people could vent steam through the media and not on the streets. This is absolutely certain because nowhere else in society could such freedom could be found, even anarchy. But simply, the journalists remained the same; they didn't change overnight. All editors-in-chief were “signed off” i.e., the State Security and all other leadership approved them. (J28, former editor in the Bulgarian Telegraph Agency)

Several journalists also suggested that the events of 1989 were under the direction of people and factions within the Communist party, who saw in the process of perestroika a good opportunity to transform and expand political power into economic power. Thus the “secret laboratories” of the Secret Service, according to Journalist 26, created the unique and ultimately flawed model of Bulgaria’s orchestrated transition. Those views coincide with scholars’ observations that networks of former nomenklatura have had a strong impact on the process of democratization in several Eastern European countries. The lack of effective historical justice measures have seen, as Huntington (1991: 228) states, “the discredited groups associated with the authoritarian regime re-establish their legitimacy and influence.”

One of the most problematic aspects of the post-communist media landscape in Bulgaria is believed by participants to stem from the unclear origin of capital that has supported the mushrooming of new media outlets since the start of democratization. Journalist 8 sums up this view:

Up to this day, everything connected with the origin of capital with which the media were launched, the personal biographies of the people that manage them and their links to State Security, is unclear. (J8, TV producer)

While there is widespread cynicism and doubt that this will ever become clear, many journalists express a strong desire for transparency and accountability.

In many former communist countries, including Bulgaria, the process of adopting transitional justice measures lost momentum and the records of journalists were not opened for nearly 20 years after the end of the communist regime. Journalist 6 expressed disappointment, in this example:

It's a shame that the records were opened 20 years later. It should have happened much earlier. It should have happened in 1990 because if at that time we knew that the most popular journalists were connected to the secret service then we could have explained their strange behavior much more easily. (J6, radio producer)

The “strange” or unexplained behavior related to being “extremely biased” and “openly taking sides,” acting as a mouthpiece of political parties and their ideologies. This perception can be explained by society’s well-documented fears that public figures could be subjected to blackmail by those who had access to their files. Some interviewees expressed the view that while the secret service records of all journalist-spies were kept closed for the general public, the political elites in power since 1989 have had access to what remains in the confidential files in the archives, as well as to the files that were deliberately removed. There is a belief among interviewees that politicians and their close business associates had the opportunity and the means to selectively blackmail and manipulate journalists in order to fulfil their personal agendas by threatening to reveal their past involvement with a repressive apparatus.

This quote illustrates the view well:

In the 90s there were organisations for influence on the media, the so called “brain trusts,” which were simply people who gathered compromising facts about journalists and then went to bribe them. [...] Some of them work for the secret service. They put pressure on reporters and you can't understand why they're behaving in such strange way. (J29, journalist from daily newspaper)

The perception that certain journalists were “inserted” on purpose, or allegedly “infiltrated” by a repressive and clandestine organisation such as the secret service, points directly to the perceived significant influence of informal political and economic networks, often with the participation of the former nomenklatura suggested by the literature.

Forgive and forget?

Looking back, most representatives of the generation of journalists who started in the late 1980s and early 1990s – those in the age groups 40-49 and 30-39 – perceive continuity in the media sphere as highly problematic. Firstly, despite strong suspicions over the years, the professional reputation and status of several of their superiors, including editors in chief, deputies, directors, editorial board members, top presenters and owners, remained unharmed. Secondly, for the majority of participants it was problematic that the post-communist elite was either unable or unwilling to deal with, to borrow from Huntington (1991), the “torturer problem” – namely devising and implementing a transparent, consistent and effective process of transitional justice measures with participation from the public in order to close the books on the past.

Very early in the transformation process of post-communist countries, Huntington (1991: 228) concluded that “the popular support and indignation necessary to make justice a political reality fade; the discredited groups associated with the authoritarian regime re-establish their legitimacy and influence. In new democratic regimes, justice comes quickly or it does not come at all.” His words resonate strongly in the perceptions of most participants. For them, despite early hopes for openness, constructive debate and accountability, justice came either too late or still has not come, which in practice confirms Huntington’s hypothesis. The attitude of “forgive and forget” appears to have taken firm hold in Bulgarian society.

Conclusion

According to Znepolski (2008), the legacy of communism in Bulgaria is very much present and unresolved more than two decades after the collapse of the regime. His claim can easily be applied to the alleged role of informers in the media. Firstly, their precise and individual, rather than collective, involvement needs to be accounted for in order to try to understand the impact of certain journalists, media owners and publishers on the current media landscape in Bulgaria. However, as stated, unreliable evidence may never allow this to happen. The lack of political will to deal with the past is even more problematic. Some scholars have argued (see Ognianova 1993) that emerging democracies should not rely on journalists with a past and present record of deceiving audiences. The concerns of interviewees about the perceived ambiguous role of journalist-spies after communism, stem from the fact that several of those journalists successfully remained in the ranks of the media and cultural elites that has shaped Bulgaria's process of democratization.

Many journalists and scholars still believe it is extremely important for society to find a resolution to the issue of informers and spies because it is fundamental to the way Bulgaria has been governed since 1989 and to the mechanisms of power. The media in post-communist countries have played a central and pivotal role in establishing and representing the new power elites responsible for political governance as well as media policy after the collapse of communism (e.g., Znepolski 1997; Dyczok 2009; Cheterian 2009; Gaman-Golutvina 2009). This in turn relates to the argument that the media, post-communism, have become as equally important a force as politicians. As Jebril et al (2013: 7) note: "during the transition period, the media may set the agenda for political debate, offer alternative interpretations of the on-going events, and create support for emerging political parties." If, as Ibroscheva (2012: 22) argues, the people who had been part of the structures of the secret service enjoyed privileged "access to information, state infrastructure, and in many cases, a

large influx of money, which incidentally served as initial capital to start many of the current media outlets,” then the media’s role in the process of democratic transformation can indeed be viewed as “compromised.” Instead of being resolved in the public consciousness a long time ago, this issue – and several others related to the influence of nomenklatura networks – is still hanging in the air. This serves as solid proof for many journalists that the media is not really free or willing to discuss the past when it has so many implications for the present and more specifically for the current political, business and media elite. However, the findings indicate that many journalists are outspoken about the mistakes of others, but they are reluctant to reflect on their own activities post-communism.

In February 2014, in a call to the nation, the Bulgarian President stated that “continuously and tenaciously, reasons and means are sought for the files of the communist service to remain unread, so that the truth can be manipulated, as this is convenient for some.”¹⁰ He calls for the archives of the secret service to be accessible for the public directly so that there are no more speculations surrounding state security in society and its role in society can be understood. The President described the lack of unambiguous assessment of the crimes committed by the communist regime as the “biggest failure” (ibid) of the Bulgarian transition.

The perceptions of journalists summarised in this article illustrate that the issue of former and alleged current agents in the media sphere is not going to go away as long as those who had profited from the system remain unidentified and unpunished. Its continuous presence in the Bulgarian public sphere has bred nothing but speculation, rumor and disillusion among those who work in the media. Despite the fact that dossiers of journalists were eventually opened to the public, journalists believe this was done too late and was not accompanied by a constructive debate in Bulgarian society, precisely along the lines that Huntington outlined in the early 1990s: should there be punishment or should society attempt to find means for

reconciliation? It appears that the majority of the new political, business and cultural elite of post-communist Bulgaria had decided from the start that society should forget. A debate and resolution, according to most, still needs to happen in order to fully understand the present process of democratization in Bulgaria.

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¹The term is defined by scholars as the members of the communist political elite (see Szczerbiak 2002)

²The Law for Access and Disclosure of the Documents of Affiliation of Bulgarian Citizens to the State Security and the Intelligence Services of the Bulgarian National Army, known as the Dossier Act was adopted in December 2006. The Dossier Commission was established in April 2008, following the Dossiers Act.

³ Antonova, Vesislava. 2009. “С микрофон и пагон: Записки по българските медийни досиета” (translated from Bulgarian: “With a Microphone and an Epaulet: Notes on the Bulgarian Media Dossiers.”

http://www.capital.bg/biznes/media_i_reklama/2009/08/07/767346_s_mikrofon_i_pagon/
(accessed February 10, 2014)

⁴ According to a report issued by the organisation Reporters Without Borders (2009) it was not uncommon to find former high-level security officials or former intelligence officers managing media outlets in Bulgaria. http://en.rsf.org/IMG/pdf/rsf_rep_bulgaria_en.pdf
(accessed September 5, 2014)

⁵ Price, Lada T. 2013. “Bulgarian Journalists and Change (1989-2007): Perceptions of Transformation of the Bulgarian Media System.” Thesis. University of Sheffield, UK

⁶ For the purposes of this article, and to preserve their anonymity, all journalists are identified by a number from 1 to 31. Quotes from interviews with journalists correspond to the same number, i.e Journalist 11=J11

⁷ Demokratsia translates as Democracy.

⁸ The interviewee is making a reference to the early 1990s.

⁹ Dermenzieva, Maria. 2014. “От ДС до ДАНС: реорганизации вместо реформи (и все с политически цели) (Translated from Bulgarian: From DS to DANS: Reorganisations Instead of Reforms (always with a political agenda).

http://www.dnevnik.bg/analizi/2014/02/16/2238500_ot_ds_do_dans_reorganizacii_vmesto_reformi_i_vse_s/ (accessed February 18, 2014)

¹⁰ According to editorial: “Плевнелиев призова документите на бившата ДС да станат публични” (translated from Bulgarian: “Plevneliev Calls for the Documents of the Former State Security to Become Public”).

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