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Media corruption and issues of journalistic and institutional integrity in post-communist countries: the case of Bulgaria

Introduction

Scholars and economists unanimously agree that in its various forms, corruption has a negative impact on public good, undermines all democratic features in societies and erodes the stability of legitimate institutions (e.g., Caiden, 1997; Girling, 1997; Karklins, 2002; Miller et al., 2005; Warren, 2004; Wilkins, 2010). Corruption is commonly defined as “the abuse of entrusted power for private gain” (Transparency International (TI) 2009, 14) or “the abuse of a public position of trust for private gain” (Girling, 1997, p. vii).

Transparency International’s Global Corruption Barometer (Ping, 2016) and Corruption Risks in Europe (Mulcahy, 2012) are just two examples of publications that regularly draw attention to the high levels of corruption in the former communist countries in Eastern and Central Europe. One in three citizens from that region describe corruption or bribery as one of the biggest problems facing their country (Ping, 2016). Bulgaria, a former communist state which became part of the European Union in 2007, is often classified as a high corruption risk country where resources and opportunities for corruption are plentiful, while deterrents and efforts against high-level corruption remain inadequate (Mungiu-Pippidi, et al., 2011; Mungiu-Pippidi, et al., 2013; Stoyanov et al., 2014).

In normative theory the press is entrusted with the important task of informing and educating the public of the harm caused by corruption, not being part of it (Pope, 2000). According to Voltmer (2013, p. 215) “corruption in the media has immense

implications for both journalistic professionalism and the prospects of democratizations.” Studies have shown that sociopolitical, historical, and contextual factors have significant influence on journalism practice and media corruption goes beyond journalists’ personal values and integrity (Yang, 2012). This paper will attempt to address four main questions: how does corruption manifest itself in the media and in journalistic practice, according to journalists in Bulgaria? What is the attitude of Bulgarian journalists towards media corruption and existing ethical codes of practice? Is the Bulgarian post-communist media capable of fulfilling its normative role as a check to corruption and as watchdog for society, according to journalists? Finally, what are the main factors that can explain the existence of corruption among individual journalists and whole media outlets?

The paper is based on semi-structured interviews with thirty-five journalists from a range of national and regional media outlets in Bulgaria. The interviews were conducted in 2009, 2010 and 2016 thus providing a valuable insiders’ perspective to the issue of media corruption. It starts by providing some brief context on the Bulgarian post-communist political, economic and media system, followed by a more detailed review of existing theory and studies on media corruption in emerging democracies, such as Bulgaria. The aim is to contribute to academic research concerned with the phenomenon of media corruption in transitional societies that continue to struggle with democratization. A better understanding of the nature of media corruption in Bulgaria can also aid the European Union in fine-tuning its efforts in supporting media freedom in Bulgaria and assist the press in strengthening the current system of ethical self-regulation.

Corruption in Bulgarian society and the media system

Explaining the environment in which Bulgarian journalists live and work is important in order to contextualise their views. The scale of corruption in Bulgaria is formidable. For example, in 2014 Bulgarian citizens admitted to being involved in approximately 158 thousand corruption transactions per month (Center for the Study of Democracy (CSD), 2014). Of those aged 18 and over 29.3% have participated in corruption transactions at least once (CSD 2016) while 41% believe that most MPs are corrupt and the government is not doing enough to fight corruption (Ping, 2016). Bulgarians have gradually grown intolerant of corrupt behavior since the late 1990s but they are still willing to participate in corruption when they need access to administrative services. Dishonest officials act as gatekeepers of public services that citizens are legally entitled to and provide them in exchange for bribes while public positions are used mostly for self-enrichment and personal profiteering (Antonov, 2013). The literature points to a widespread cynical belief held by a significant number of people in Eastern Europe, mostly due to the harsh realities of life: corruption is a necessary or even ordinary evil that helps you solve personal problems (e.g., Karklins, 2002; Tabakova, 2000; Warren, 2004). In Bulgaria power is concentrated in the hands of few political party leaders and large business conglomerates, “interlinked in a complex web of dependencies with former secret service and communist party elites, which still have privileged access to state resources” (Stoyanov, et al., 2014, p. 2). How does this affect the media?

Post-communist countries are shown to have higher levels of media corruption than countries with advanced democracies and well-developed journalism traditions (Yang, 2012). Like many others in the Balkans and South East Europe, the Bulgarian media system is characterized by a strong degree of political parallelism (Hallin and

Mancini, 2012). Bulgaria is classified in the Politicized Media Model, characterized by “politicization of the media, lack of transparency and the connection between political, business and media elites” (Dobek-Ostowska, 2015, p. 31). Hidden media ownership exemplifies the relationship between politics and business well. A prime example is Corporate Commercial Bank (CCB) and its largest shareholder Tsvetan Vassilev who assisted the notorious politician Delyan Peevski, to become “one of Bulgaria’s most powerful media barons, with enough presence to manipulate public opinion” (Antonov, 2013, p. 73; see also Smilova and Smilov, 2015). Media outlets are used to appease or blackmail politicians, switching alliances instantly “should the government in power change or not deliver on securing business for the media owners” (Stoyanov et al 2014, p. 35). Bulgarian oligarchic groups such as Peevski’s have reached an unprecedented level of direct political influence (CSD, 2016).

Successive governments have been more than reluctant to cede control over the public broadcast media, turning it once again into a valuable tool to gain political power and pursue political agendas (Broun, 2007). Perceived autonomy or freedom is one of the most basic working conditions for independent journalism (Weaver, 2015) and the Bulgarian media lack such freedom. There are several mechanisms of government control and censorship but one prominent example is the use of EU grants to buy media comfort (Stoyanov et al., 2014; CSD, 2016). The practice is described as a “selective subsidizing and legal bribery” (Antonov 2013, p. 95). For instance, EU funding earmarked for information campaigns is directed by the government to selected privileged media outlets. In essence those media receive state advertising in exchange for providing pro-government coverage (Antonov, 2013). Due to a sharp decline in advertising revenues since the 2008-2009 financial crisis,

most of the Bulgarian private media have become fully dependent on state advertising and PR contracts with government agencies, which severely curbs their independence (International Research and Exchange Board (IREX), 2014); CSD, 2016). By all accounts post-communist Bulgaria is plagued by corruption across a range of fundamental social institutions, such as government, judiciary, business and including the media.

What is media corruption?

There is no clear differentiation in the literature between the concepts of media corruption and cash for news coverage (Li, 2013). Scholars include a wide variety of practices under the umbrella term “media opacity”, which includes “any form of payment for news coverage or any influence on editors and journalists’ decisions that is not clearly stated in the finished journalistic product” (Kruckeberg and Tsetsura 2017, p. 34). Case studies that focus on corruption in media and journalism in different countries are extremely popular among researchers (e.g. Tsetsura, 2003; Tsetsura, 2015; Lo et al., 2005; Li, 2013; Onyebadi and Alajmi, 2014). According to Mancini et al. (2016) there are numerous ways corruption manifests itself in journalism and media. For example, a journalist might demand a bribe to keep a corruption scandal quiet. Journalists can also be part of wider corrupt networks that support and encourage corruptive behaviours and editors may accept payments from political actors before or during election periods or effectively ban criticism of major advertisers (Mancini et al., 2016). Media corruption normally involves direct or indirect payments and benefits (financial or other) for covering (or not covering) certain news and intentionally misleading audiences on behalf of the briber (Yang, 2012). The phenomenon is categorised further in the literature by the nature of the

behaviour and the scale: for example, individual envelope taking and institutional profit seeking (Li, 2013). The practice of envelope journalism, normally attributed to “a few bad apples” (Miller et al., 2005, p. 102) is generally regarded as relatively unimportant in comparison to institutional/organisational large-scale corruption where the institution itself engages in repeated/habitual corrupt acts (Ristow, 2010). There are no detailed case studies on media corruption in Bulgaria but scholars have noted instances of both individual corruption among journalists and institutional rent-seeking behaviour (Blagov et al., 2014; CSD, 2016). This paper will examine how media corruption manifests itself on individual and institutional level by examining the following categories that are most common in studies of media corruption in emerging democracies: direct payments (e.g. cash for news coverage, gifts/freebies) and indirect (e.g. hidden advertising/advertorials, smear campaigns).

Direct payments – cash for news coverage, gifts/freebies

Direct payments involve cash paid specifically for content to appear in the media. The phenomenon is also described in the literature as “envelope journalism” (Voltmer, 2013, p. 208), “cash for comment” and “payola” in the United States (Miller et al., 2005, p. 52), “embute and chayote” in Mexico (Márquez Ramírez, 2014, p. 55); “soli” in Ghana, “gombo” in Cameroon (Skjerdal, 2010, p. 368), “zakazukha” in Russia (Kruckebergh and Tsetsura, 2017, p. 32), “jeansa” in Ukraine (Ristow, 2010, p. 9) and “red envelope” in China (Li, 2013, p. 300). On an individual level “envelope journalism” refers to the way the cash is handed to journalists in exchange for favourable or unfavourable news coverage, an event that is particularly widespread in transitional societies and an accepted part of source-journalist relationships (Voltmer, 2013). It is important to consider the institutions, or those who offer cash for news,

the context that allows the problem to flourish, and the inadequate media ethics training received by journalists (Onyebadi and Alajmi, 2014). Overall, cash for news coverage involves journalists purposefully producing biased or misleading content in exchange for benefits, which can affect the credibility of media, hamper the flow of information and interfere with the public's right to know (Yang, 2012).

Most journalists in the world today experience the modern and seemingly more benign version of bribery: the freebie (Keeble, 2008). This includes free trips, meals, small or large gifts, hotels, discounts, tickets, entertainment and junkets (Caiden, 1988; Sanders, 2003). In the literature often the blame for gift-acceptance is placed on the shoulders of individual journalist. The practice is explained, and sometimes defended, either by poverty, poor pay and financial insecurity of journalists (Li, 2013; Lo et al., 2005; Skjerdal, 2010) or by immorality, immature understanding of the role of the press in emerging democracies and cultural tolerance (Kruckerberg and Tsetsura, 2017). Freebies tend to be frowned upon in many countries in Europe and North America but in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, for example, the receipt of small gifts, trips and meals is perceived by the majority of journalists as acceptable (Lo et al., 2005; Li, 2013). In Kuwait, receiving and even asking for gratification, has become common practice in journalism, not because of poverty but as a result of poor ethics training, hiring part-time unqualified reporters and negligent attitude from media owners towards ethical guidelines (Onyebadi and Alajmi, 2014).

Indirect payments – hidden advertising/advertorials, smear campaigns

Indirect payments and influences are somewhat more complex than handing cash. There is a strong argument in the literature that those who accept and produce hidden

advertising are complicit in deceiving and manipulating their audiences and eroding the public's trust in media and journalism (Kruckerberg and Tsetsura, 2017; Miller et al., 2005; Ristow, 2010). Others argue that the diminishing borders between advertising and editorial content is dangerous for independent media content and a product of intricate mix of economic and ideological factors, which work behind the scenes (Harro-Loit and Saks, 2006). Advertorials and paid journalism form a significant part of media corruption in transitional societies where they are often used to further the interests of a hidden sponsor (Voltmer, 2013). A variation of paid journalism in Eastern Europe, and particularly Russia, is the so-called "black" and "white" public relations (PR). "Black" relates to illegal or unethical PR practices, including the formation of a negative opinion about someone or something, manipulative election campaigning and a wide range of informal practices that involve illegal payments to journalists and media outlets (Ledeneva, 2006). "White" PR on the other hand, is regarded as the opposite of "black" PR: an ethical and accountable public relations practice that achieves its goals in a legal and transparent manner. To complicate matters further, there is also "grey PR", which exploits legal loopholes or manipulates the law in order to influence elections through media coverage, for example (Ledeneva, 2006).

Smear campaigns are also classified as media corruption in studies because they are deliberate, "insincere pronouncements and the spreading of falsehoods in order to destroy reputations" (Miller et al., 2005, p. 10; see also Oates, 2013). In Eastern Europe they are known as *kompromat*, the Russian abbreviation for compromising materials that essentially means mud-slinging by journalists against political or business figures without giving the accused the chance to reply (Oates,

2013). They are often well-timed, in order to inflict most damage to the reputation of the person involved, resort to fabrications, innuendo, publishing rumours and deliberate spread of misinformation (Voltmer, 2013; Karklins, 2016).

The presence of the practices described so far raises two fundamental questions that have been a subject to longstanding debate among scholars and relate to the role of the media and journalism in society. Firstly, does habitual participation in acts that have been described as corrupt and as bribery affect individual journalists' ability to be critical, impartial and objective? The literature holds different views on this matter. Many journalists believe that their professional judgement is not affected by payments or gifts (Skjerdal, 2010; Voltmer, 2013). Others see the influence of freebies on content as harmless most for the time but in some cases as failing the public due to a relaxed editorial scrutiny (Wilson, 2006). With regard to "envelope journalism" there is a strong agreement that its effects on media and journalism and society are overwhelmingly negative and far-reaching for journalism and society (Karklins, 2002; Ristow, 2010, Voltmer, 2013).

Secondly, does the presence of corruption in the media undermine the idea of the press as the Fourth Estate and watchdog for society? Most authors contend that the media can play a crucial role in the exposure and curbing of corruption (e.g., Karklins, 2002; Miller et al., 2005; Pope, 2000; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2006; Lambsdorff, 2007). This view suggests that the media's duty is to serve the public by holding the powerful to account and informing citizens, honestly and accurately, of any abuses of power that affect them. The press can also act to promote the idea of common good that may deter the adoption of corruptive behaviours (Mancini et al., 2016). Free and

independent media are seen as essential to preventing and keeping a check on corruption (Stapenhurst, 2000; Brunetti and Weider, 2002; Freille et al., 2007; Camaj, 2013). However, in the post-communist context limited research has shown that while the media can act as an anti-corruption instrument those instances are rare (e.g., Mancini et al., 2016; Hiebert, 1999; Tabakova, 2000). Most of the time media coverage of corruption is guided by a logic of instrumentalization, which means that reporting is affected by vested and partisan interests (Mancini et al., 2017). In other words, corruption is covered by the press when it “allows the media to pursue specific goals that often favor private interests over general interest and that polarize opinions.” (Mancini et al., 2017, p. 84).

Both bribery and instrumentalization of the media by private and state interests is problematic for journalism. Journalists’ perceptions of their roles and the norms that they follow correspond to the dominant values and belief systems of a particular society and its political and economic context (e.g., Hallin and Mancini, 2004; Weaver, 1998; Voltmer, 2013; Hanitzsch et al., 2016). As Mancini (2000) has pointed out, journalism does not develop in a vacuum. For example, in a culture where taking cash payments is an acceptable norm, journalists might not be immune to behavior which contradicts ethical guidelines (Onyebadi and Alajmi, 2014). Evidence from scores of countries shows that Codes of Ethics and ideas of good journalistic practice can either be ignored or misused (Harro-Loit and Saks, 2006; Lo et al., 2005). It has been noted that the self-regulatory mechanisms of the Bulgarian press are very weak and fail to address practices such as selling content to the highest bidder (Smilova et al., 2012)ⁱ. Therefore, it is important to explore journalists’ perceptions of unethical

and corrupt practices in the Bulgarian post-communist media that are said to severely challenge the role of the media as a watchdog for society.

Methods and design of the study

This paper is based on analysis of face-to-face in-depth interviews with a cohort of Bulgarian journalists. Anonymous semi-structured interviews with 35 journalists based in the capital city Sofia and in three major regional cities (Plovdiv, Varna and Vratsa) were employed as the method of collecting data. One-to-one discussion was deemed as the most appropriate method for collecting rich data as those who have lived under former communist regimes are “more accustomed to guarded speech and will speak openly only to selective individuals” (Braun, 2007, p. 205). The researcher followed an interview schedule but allowed participants to discuss other areas of concern. Of the interviewees, 29 were practicing journalists before the collapse of the communist regime in 1989 and continued their careers in the media without interruption, in positions ranging from junior reporters to editors-in-chief and senior TV/radio producers and directors.ⁱⁱ Six participants began working as journalists with the start of democratization in the early 1990s.

Participants were identified and recruited by the researcher, who is a former Bulgarian journalist, through purposive and snowball sampling to include journalists from different types of media: electronic, print and online. The common denominator for selecting participants was substantial first-hand journalism experience of the changes in the post-communist media landscape. The sample included: 12 broadcast journalists from all major public and private broadcasters; 13 from all main national print media in the capital, Sofia, and three from major regional cities; two from online media; and five freelance journalists

who have worked across a number of print and broadcast media. Most of the interviews (27) were conducted in 2010 after a pilot of four interviews took place in 2009, and an additional four interviews were conducted in 2016. The reason for conducting the additional interviews was to explore the situation in regional media, which was not addressed sufficiently in previous interviews. The bulk of the interviews were conducted in the capital city Sofia, where all participants from national media were based. During the interviews the majority of interviewees indicated that regional media functions in a slightly different environment with some unique characteristics, which prompted the researcher to speak to four regional journalists in 2016 and investigate further. Gaining access to participants and ensuring a high degree of trust between interviewer and interviewees was relatively straightforward for the researcher due to their background as a journalist. However, the researcher was fully aware that the content of the interview could have been affected by their identity and experience as a former journalist and took steps to ensure that personal experience, existing judgments and values did not affect the discussion. Field notes and observations were made after each interview. On the positive side the researcher's own expert knowledge and familiarity with the Bulgarian media landscape helped to validate the claims and information provided by the interviewees. Anonymity of the journalists was guaranteed before the start of each interview, thus allowing them to discuss freely, and without any fear of being identified, sensitive topics such as corruption, bribery, blackmail and collusion. The study obtained ethical approval and interviewees quoted in this paper are identified by position and type of media in order to avoid any potential risks of the participants being identified, and their careers jeopardized.

The interview schedule consisted of 22 questions drawn from themes from the literature that indicated the emergence and establishment of certain trends in post-

communist media systems since 1989, and specifically in the Bulgarian media system. The questions aimed to explore how journalists view and understand the changes taking place in the post-communist media. While the focus of this paper is on media corruption, the discussion extends to other problems such as professional ethics, media ownership constraints, political and corporate interference, and financial dependency that are closely related to the problem of media corruption. As scholars have argued, any analysis of media corruption should consider a range of corrupt acts not only on the individual but also at the organisational and even societal level (Gronbeck, 1989; Yang, 2012). The discussion of corruption also requires context, nuance, and multiple points of view to be scrutinised (Wilkins, 2010). As a source of triangulation and validation, the researcher conducted interviews with five well-known Bulgarian experts who have observed and researched the Bulgarian media landscape for many yearsⁱⁱⁱ.

On the one hand, corruption (individual and institutional) is a controversial and sensitive topic, and as Voltmer (2013, p. 209) notes, its exploration requires sensitivity, allowing the respondents to “save face” when sharing their experiences. On the other hand, strong personal beliefs do not necessarily equate to true or accurate beliefs so the possibility that the individual has reached the wrong conclusion must also be taken into account (Miller S. et al., 2005). The researcher was aware of this and took care to verify and fact-check claims made by interviewees by using variety of primary sources such as news papers and reports.

Findings

All participants acknowledge the existence of a wide variety of corrupt acts in the Bulgarian media sphere that have evolved since the process of democratization began more than twenty-five years ago. Most of the interviewees describe the phenomenon of media corruption broadly as a set of immoral or unethical practices that constitute violation of professional, moral, ethical and institutional journalistic norms. Journalists clearly distinguish between individual and organisational types of media corruption. The most problematic types of corruption in everyday practice that were identified by the participants are summarized in Table 1 and will be discussed in more detail in the following paragraphs.

Individual corruption	Institutional/organisational
Engaging in so-called “black” Public Relations (PR) (21)	Accepting state advertising and private sponsorship in exchange for withholding criticism. (35)
Arranging paid interviews/guest appearances (11)	Publishing hidden advertising (21)
Writing paid-for articles – news items, interviews and special features (24)	Blacklisting/avoiding certain topics (23)
Accepting cash-in-hand, gifts and other perks such as trips and associated expenses (35)	Conducting systematic and orchestrated smear campaigns on behalf of hidden sponsors (11)
Exchanging personal favours with sources (28)	Blackmailing political and business actors (5)

Table 1: Types of corruption. (The numbers in brackets indicates the number of participants who mentioned the issue.)

Individual corruption – small scale bribery

The interviewees generally distinguish between two common types of “hidden PR”: “black” (negative and unfavourable coverage) and “white” (getting positive/favourable coverage). The latter is viewed mostly as ethical, but only if it is transparent in its paid placement and distinguishable from editorial content. For some of the interviewees “black” PR is a broad term that includes a number of informal corrupt activities that have an impact on the professional relationship between journalists and their sources, for example politicians. Politicians are said to use PR agencies as a front to pay journalists without handing them cash directly. In other words, they use a mediator to pass the envelope, coining the term “hidden PR”. Some PR agencies contact certain journalists on their books, to offer them guest appearances from senior political figures. In exchange the journalist receives cash as well as the benefit of high viewing figures. To the audience it may seem like a legitimate appearance but behind the surface it is not, as this quote shows:

All they have to do is agree on the interview and what will be said. All agreed and paid for but the audience does not have a clue about this. (Senior TV producer, private TV channel).

In other examples PR agencies can have an official contract with a media outlet to publish a series of news articles that are not identified as paid-for. Politicians and corporate actors can pay individual journalists for positive features in the press or to publish “made to order” (custom) interviews. Those, according to

interviewees are distinguishable by the following characteristics: presenting someone only in positive light; not asking any inconvenient questions; avoiding or glossing over controversial issues; and interviewing people outside a journalist's usual beat. This quote illustrates the practice of envelope journalism that ensures favourable coverage on regional level:

With certainty I can tell you what happens in our city. Journalists get paid cash in hand to conduct interviews, to invite certain people in their programmes and to ask them pre-approved questions. This goes on outside the official contract and agreements [...] sometimes it is cheaper to buy journalists than to pay whole media outlets. (Senior regional correspondent)

According to some interviewees, the most corrupt journalists are those who enjoy expensive cars, watches, clothes and lavish lifestyle, which is in stark contrast of the low salaries of most media workers. Election periods are noted as specifically rife for media corruption. Many participants describe elections as gold mines and an opportunity to make money for cash strapped journalists. This quote summarizes the practice:

[Politicians] go around with suitcases full of cash to pay people on different levels – from the reporter, the journalist, to their boss. In most cases they get paid in cash. [...] When elections are close the whole media environment gets excited because they know what is coming to them. (Former editor-in-chief of national daily newspaper and current freelance journalist)

However, as well as on individual level this also happens on institutional level. Whole media outlets can benefit financially from elections if they choose to, as this Editor points out:

We have had people come to us and offer us money so that we don't write anything negative against them during election periods. That has happened often with political actors who are worried, and have a reason to avoid media coverage, to insure themselves against any potential criticism. We are fortunate

to be able to refuse such offers but I doubt others do (Editor-in-chief, regional online news media)

While none of the interviewees admitted to accepting envelopes with cash, some stated that they and their colleagues have accepted small gifts such as food and drinks, free flights, and hotels. An interesting example is provided by an editor who distinguishes between different types of gifts: some are “committing” and others “harmless”:

Yes, it [the freebie] has always been there but media have different rules and judgements. Some of them are willing and able to accept any kind of gifts. Very often it is electronics or payment of trips with the expectation to write certain stories afterward. Our journalists are not allowed to accept anything if a company or institution presents them with an expensive gift. They must return it, or refuse. At Christmas we receive whole series of advertising materials – notebooks, calendars, sometimes wine and chocolates. Those type of things are acceptable, but the others are not.” (Editor-in-chief, daily national newspaper)

In common with professionals from other countries, Bulgarian journalists largely do not believe this to be hugely problematic and believe that accepting small and insignificant gifts has little effect on their professional judgement or the content they write. However, the dominant culture of favour exchange is seen as problematic. For example, many political, corporate and public figures are close friends with reporters and instead of cash or gifts they may exchange favours, as this interviewee explains:

For example, a friend might ask for a favour. I’ve done it too. It’s like trade – they say “can you write about this thing and in exchange we’ll do this for you, or give you something else” for the paper, for example or just a quote when I need one. This happens, we are people and those are the circles we move around in. I mean you’re not committing a crime, you’re not writing a bad story about that person, and you’re not hiding some big truths. But sadly, you have to live with the fact that you’ve written this insignificant story about someone and that puts

professional and emotional pressure on you. (Editor-in-chief, online news media)

Institutional/Organisational Corruption

The participants believe state advertising is the key to understanding the issue of institutional media corruption. Receiving such advertising enables the media to exist but essentially ties its hands and silences any criticism of those who provide the advertising. According to many interviewees, the practice has become endemic since Bulgaria joined the EU in 2007 because the money often comes from state funds earmarked for publicity from EU projects. The following quote summarize well how the practice works on a national level:

The state gives you money officially, say one hundred thousand for advertising. This helps you to sort out your budget and to exist. You return the favour by being accommodating, you don't probe further, you don't investigate so there is an effect on content. [...] As an advertiser, the state buys comfort. This is a type of financing and not a direct cash exchange [...] There is a steady maintenance, even with what looks like small sums of money – five thousands for one newspaper, five thousand for another, but on a regional level those are resources that help you survive. (Editor-in-chief, national daily newspaper)

And on a regional level:

It is all done for very small sums of money, for which colleagues are ready to serve the local authorities without questioning them and without any criticism. This turns local municipalities into a destructive institution when you say something as it is or when they don't like what you have written. We have serious conflicts with the local administration simply for trying to do our jobs properly and expose abuses of power. (Editor-in-chief, regional online media)

The main reasons given by participants for the media's willingness to accept payments/financing from the state include: the dire state of media budgets, especially

those of small regional outlets; big drop in paper circulations; fierce competition with online media; and a small advertising market in Bulgaria that is shrinking even further. Two regional editors noted that if local media dare to expose corruption in their municipalities this has a severe impact on their financing. For example, those who investigate are cut off from access to local state advertising, which is a major source for their funding. On some occasions private advertisers are warned by local authorities not to place adverts in critical newspapers as in this example:

We have always been critical of the local authority and they have a grudge against us. One week I had several of our regular advertisers call me to say they will not be renewing their official contracts and will not be placing advertising in our paper. This was despite us having worked together for years. When I pleaded with them, they said they could help us but with unofficial payments so no one knows. I had to refuse these offers, move to smaller premises and let some staff go. (Editor-in-chief, regional media)

The dominant perception among interviewees is that official payments are bribing whole outlets with state advertising on a national and regional level and can be an excuse for the owner to ban or blacklist topics that may jeopardise the payments. However, a few interviewees noted that if money is not forthcoming, some media have resorted to blackmailing and threatening local authorities or businesses with unfair negative coverage, for example. It must be highlighted that while political and corporate agendas are blamed for endorsing corruption, several journalists reflect on the fact that they might be partly responsible for the existing environment, as this journalist pointed out:

There were periods when all of us made sure to make a new government comfortable and avoid big horrible stories about improper privatisation, for example. If we had started looking into this earlier and not waited years [...] then we might have prevented some of it. But at that time it was very comfortable to be quiet, receive some kind of privileges from the government and so on. (Editor-in-chief, online news media)

As for the 2004 ethics codes that some media have voluntarily signed up to, there is still high doubt among most participants about the applicability of the rules. This is mostly due to the fact that a large number of media outlets refused to accept it and adopted their own in 2013. However, most interviewees render both nice on paper but meaningless in practice. Nevertheless, some stated that the codes are a small and important step toward achieving a working mechanism for self-regulation of the press.

Discussion and conclusion

The notion of a corrupt media outlet, owner, editor or reporter exists relative to the established notion of what uncorrupt media and journalists are believed to be – namely truth-seekers, whose job it is scrutinise, expose abuses of power and hold those in power to account. This is certainly an ideal role that many journalists from Eastern Europe and Bulgaria were encouraged to adopt as soon as communism collapsed. However, the views of journalists presented in this paper indicate that harsh economic reality, financial dependency and careless attitude towards ethical guidelines prevent the Bulgarian media from acting as an independent check on corruption. As scholars have noted, media organisations in fragile democracies without self-sustaining financial mechanisms are a soft target for regimes that can manipulate them for selfish agendas (Carrington and Nelson, 2002). The practice of using state advertising as a bargaining chip for favourable coverage has deprived national and local media of their critical voice. Both literature and findings clearly demonstrate that corruption in Bulgaria is widespread and this is seriously affecting the way media and journalists work. The corrupt environment can be traced back to the top of the political, corporate and media pyramid. The findings corroborate previous research on post-communist countries where “intricate web of connection

and interaction between elites and news media makes the elites' control or influence over news coverage for political or economic purposes relatively difficult to resist on the part of journalism practitioners" (Yang, 2012, p. 206). The analysis of Bulgarian journalists' views points to a muzzled post-communist media that is very vulnerable financially and a soft target by political and corporate forces determined to control the public agenda. The majority of journalists and outlets are forced to focus mostly on economic survival and are coerced to sell content in exchange for much needed income.

Corrupt practices appear to penetrate all levels of the journalist hierarchy – from junior reporters to editors-in chief and owners – posing further threats to already-low ethical and professional journalistic integrity and ethics. While media corruption, including the offering of payments and exchange of favours, is perceived by the interviewees as a very negative practices, individual corrupt acts are noted as hard to prove with tangible evidence. However, the allegations from most interviewees that they know of journalists who have taken money is troubling, partly because cases of alleged envelope journalism are never investigated by the authorities and rarely probed by journalists themselves. Existing ethical codes do nothing to discourage or prevent corruption in the media or to promote ethical behavior. For most participants, it is clear that when the media become complicit in corruption, there is little possibility for them to act as a check to those in power and scrutinize their actions. The main factors that seem to explain media corruption in Bulgaria can be summarized as follows: the prevalence of society-wide systemic corruption; a political and journalistic culture that is tolerant of corruption; close inter-elite relationships that involve media owners, editors and journalists; media's strong

dependence on state advertising and private sponsorship; lack of solidarity and agreements between media with regard to ethical codes and norms; and the low pay of journalists in Bulgaria. The findings corroborate the claim that media corruption is caused by complex political, economic and cultural factors that go far beyond journalistic morals and integrity (Yang, 2012).

While this research is limited because it's based on the views of a small cohort of Bulgarian journalists, interviews with Bulgarian media experts validated those perceptions. Unless systemic corruption and the environment in which media operate is targeted with adequate anti-corruption measures, there will be little opportunity for the press to act as watchdog and expose corruption. A huge variety of activity is perceived as media corruption and the ways of dealing with it are correspondingly diverse: there is no "magic bullet" solution to problems that were discussed in this paper. Efforts to combat corruption in society have lost momentum, but Bulgaria still needs urgent institutional anti-corruption measures that put media and journalists at the heart of this battle. Further cross-national research is also needed to investigate the complex relationship between politics, business and media in all post-communist societies in order to aid their democratization.

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- i In Bulgaria, no fewer than nine versions of a code of ethics for media and journalists have been created since 1990 but no mechanisms or incentives exist to make the current two that are in operation work. Recent media wars in Bulgaria resulted in a split within the publishers' union resulting in a refusal of a large number of media outlets to sign the voluntary ethics code that was adopted in 2004 with help from EU experts (Smilova and Smilov 2015). As Bossev and Cheresheva (2015, 20) state, the country's press and online media are regulated by two ethical committees, each adopting their own code. The first is only recognised by a small part of the media while the other, which includes 80% cent of publications, "is practically inactive".
- ii Positions of journalists: Senior (Editor/Deputy Editor/Director): 18; Middle (Senior Reporter/Columnist/Presenter/Correspondent): 11; Junior (Reporter): 1; Freelance: 5.
- iii The names and positions of the experts at the time of the interviews were : Georgi Lozanov – Chairman, Council for Electronic Media (CEM); Orlin Spassov – Executive Director, Foundation Media and Democracy; Ognian Zlatev – Managing Director, Media Development Center; Lilia Raycheva – Lecturer at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" and member of Council of Electronic Media; Nikoleta Daskalova – Research Analyst, Foundation Media and Democracy.