

Regressive Media Model: The Rise and Fall of Press Freedom in Bulgaria (2000-2020)

Exploring Journalistic Cultures in Post-Communist Eastern Europe

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DEDICATION

To my Mom and Dad,
For all they have done for me

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ABSTRACT

Global media system literature is still by and large heavily dominated by the idealistic comparative western-centered normative tradition, focusing on what media *ought to be* and how *it should* act across different cultural and political settings, instead of what it actually *is*. How is it *changing, where, and why*? This work suggests a shift away from the long tradition of overgeneralization, towards a more historically and culturally grounded analytical approach, that delves with the emergence of new media structures, institutions, and conventions, and evaluates their impact on media performance and public behavior. This study looks at the dynamics happening *within* a specific media system, trying to explain and predict the factors contributing to the phenomenon of interest- the experienced deterioration of press freedom and quality journalism. This inside perspective focusing on indigenous qualitative exploration of local journalistic and social cultures is a much-needed change of optics, and one global media theory has been calling for over the last decades.

The study introduces and tests the Regressive Media Model in a way of explaining media systems that have been certified to have a freer, more independent, more professional media system, engraved in the Western ideal of the Fourth Estate, but have over the recent years begun to regress- collapsing or backsliding or decaying, according to the literature, into different types of non-democratic, neo-authoritarian, politicized and overall – more repressed media systems. How is this decline happening? Why? And can it be bettered?

The proposed theoretical model is developed and tested here using the grounded theory approach and drawing on qualitative data from Bulgaria. The country notoriously stands as the European democracy with the lowest press freedom ranking, dubbed “the black sheep of Europe” and also “the worst place for press freedom, where it can prove dangerous to be a journalist”,

according to the annual press freedom index developed by Reporters Without Borders. Though constitutional democracy, the post-communist Eastern European state as the only EU member, categorized in the “red zone” in terms of press freedom, alongside dictatorships such as Turkey, Russia, and Belarus.

The proposed dissertation develops a theoretical model that helps understand the decaying media system in Bulgaria- once fast-tracking towards democratization and media independence in the early 2000s and currently experiencing an abrupt regression. The regressive media model as applied in this work could be used to draw a better understanding of the broader regional press freedom decline experienced in Eastern and Central Europe circa 2020. Simply said, the suggested exploration of Bulgaria and its press freedom disintegration is a pilot study with potentially greater implications for our broader understating of theories of press freedom and its experienced global decline.

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CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION

In both the United States and Western Europe, freedom of the press and the independence of the media from government have been long taken for granted. The United Nations' 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and its article 19 proclaims: "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference, and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers." In correspondence with the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States of America, press freedom has traditionally been defined in the Western mind as an absence of state intervention in media activities (Czepek & Hellwig, 2009). All EU-member states have adopted some variance of the commonly shared constitutional norm, providing similar safeguarding of media freedom and journalistic independence in their respective countries. While, at least on paper, the fundamental human right of free expression and access to a press free from government control seems to be greatly catered to and legally bound as a paramount element of a democracy, a common conceptual shortcoming exists; namely, the shared assumption in both political and press freedom theories that once established such fundamental freedoms are self-executing, they can only be perfected and refined, never questioned, or retracted. This approach prevails in global media system literature, too. Most categorizations of media systems worldwide- from the Classic Four Theories of the Press (Siebert, Peterson, Peterson, & Schramm, 1956), to newer models of media and politics (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2015; D. Hallin & Mancini, 2011; D. C. Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Herrero, Humprecht, Engesser, Brüggemann, & Büchel, 2017; Peruško, Vozab, & Čuvalo, 2020), these models are influenced by this reoccurring premise - categorizing countries or regions into

different models based on relevant criteria, or re-clustering different countries or regions under certain previously conceptualized models.

Though this approach has provided for our comprehensive and exhaustive understanding of how media operate across different nations and cultures, its analytical power is limited. This normative approach falls short in explaining or predicting, as media systems, similar to all other social systems, do not exist in a vacuum. They are not static; they change, evolve, and we can see them move from one model to another. This very dynamic of trans-modality is what this work aims to explore: the stage in-between the models. The importance of analyzing this stage stems from the understanding that new media realities need to be looked and theorized under a new more analytical paradigm, focusing on the why question. This work aims to investigate the nature of the widely warranted press freedom deterioration on a global scale and rethinks the notion of press freedom as a self-enacting democratic norm. The study introduces and tests the Regressive Media Model in a way of explaining media systems that have been certified to have a freer, more independent, more professional media system, engraved in the Western ideal of the Fourth Estate, but have over the recent years begun to regress- collapsing or backsliding or decaying, according to the literature, into different types of non-democratic, neo-authoritarian, politicized and overall – more repressed media systems. How is this decline happening? Why? And can it be bettered? These are the big questions informing the following investigation.

Purpose of the study

This dissertation rethinks existing normative global media system theories by suggesting a new theoretical approach- from prescriptive and idealistic normative critical theorizing of how things ought to be, to a newer analytical design focusing on the why question (Seethaler & Moy,

2017). The focus of this investigation centers on precisely *why* things are changing so dramatically with press freedom on a global scale.

In its recently published report “Democracies in Retreat” (2019), Freedom House registers a period of 13 consecutive years of decline for freedom of the press, not just among the usual suspects, Eastern Europe and Asia, but also for traditional press freedom champions such as Western Europe and even the United States, where regardless of the First Amendment, an increase in threats and verbal attacks against journalism is evident. The phenomenon of “Fake News” though a concerning media reality is also being adopted as a political strategy for overlooking and discounting any critical voices, taking the lead from the highest office in the free world- the US executive branch. As a result, a growing part of the popular culture now views journalists and news organizations with disdain and mistrust (the role of the industry into its own discrediting is not to be undermined, though this topic falls outside of the scope of this specific piece of scholarship). In such an ecosystem where “nothing is true and everything is possible” (Pomerantsev, 2014), cynicism and civic disengagement are common; misinformation and disinformation are widely spread, and the hardships for liberal democracy and professional independent media around the globe are burgeoning.

This study aims at addressing modern challenges before journalism and press freedom from a more cultural and historically grounded perspective as suggested in existing scholarship (Curran, 2011; Gunaratne, 2005). In doing so it will address another weakness of the normative media theories mainly focused on the relationships between the Press and the Government, and therefore overlooking the role of culture- the national audience, in a broader sense, the culture of corporate ownership, and mainly- indigenous journalistic cultures and their symbolic power.

This particular piece of work, therefore, will be informed by a cultural, qualitative, and historical approach to understanding the local professional community, the transformations in its professional norms, rituals, beliefs, values, and practices, and how those relate to the state of a national press system.

Focusing on the journalistic culture rather than the normative press-government relationship, the goal of this inquiry is to understand the meaning-making processes of news professionals faced by the ultimate pressure to reconcile the conflict between the state of growing political instrumentalization and the notion of the “fourth estate.” The fourth estate is the idea that “journalism’s first obligation is to the truth, first loyalty to the citizens, and its practitioners must maintain an independence from those they cover” (Kovach, 2007).

This dissertation work stems from the explicit understanding of media as fourth estate – the western normative ideal of journalism based upon three main pre-conditions: political tradition in the separation of power and appreciation for the rule of law; strong professional culture and shared ethical standards within the media community itself; and a popular demand – that is an active society that recognizes the value of a free and independent press. While this study is grounded in the western liberal conceptualization of the media as the Fourth Estate, recognizing the idealistic nature of this concept is also appropriate. Celebrated as an exemplar, as an epitome of excellency, the western model has oftentimes failed to live up to its proclaimed ideal (Curran, 2011; Fallows, 1997; Park & Curran, 2000). Western media model, specifically North Atlantic or Americanized media model (D. C. Hallin & Mancini, 2004, 2012) is widely documented to promote commercial forces privileging profit before public interest, which manifests in sensationalistic content and market driven journalism (Andersen & Strate, 2000; Barkin, 2002; Bogart, 2017; Gripsrud, 2000; Postman, 1985). Scholars have also identified the western

ideological bias in studying press freedom- namely undermining influences of commercial interests while amplifying those of government (Gunaratne, 2002). Thom (1999) coins the term “invisible censorship” to denote the “extent of press ‘restrictions based on what publishers are willing to print and what advertisers are willing to support’ in the western world (p. 31).

While acknowledging this seems appropriate and needs to be taken into account, still press freedom under the western media model remains widely recognized as more virtuous and estimable, at least in its narrow definition of lack of political interference and instrumentalization of the media by state actors (Czepek & Hellwig, 2009; George, 2012; Gross & Jakubowicz, 2012; D. Hallin & Mancini, 2011; D. C. Hallin, 2020; Lipman, 2010; Oloyede, 2005; Splichal, 2002; Voltmer, 2012). Western media also leads the rankings published annually by all organizations dealing with measuring press freedom such as Reporters without Borders, Freedom House, and IREX (International Research and Exchanges Board).

To paraphrase Winston Churchill and his famous utterance on the imperfections of democracy as the “worst form of government except for all the others that have been tried” (1947), no one pretends that the dominant western conceptualization of free press is “perfect or all-wise” as Churchill’s saying goes. For the scope of this work, it will be used as merely the worst form of press freedom except for all those the others that have been tried.

Problem statement

The 2020 World Press Freedom Index, compiled by Reporters Without Borders (RSF) to evaluate the situation for journalists in 180 countries, suggests that the next ten years will be “pivotal for press freedom” due to the combined effect of five converging crisis, pre-dating the global COVID- 19 pandemic (World Press Freedom Index, 2020). The study lists those overlapping crisis as follows:

- geopolitical crisis (the global rise of authoritarian regimes)
- technological crisis (tech companies challenging the business model of old media)
- crisis of democracy (massive polarization, lack of civic dialog, crisis of representation)
- a crisis of trust (affecting all places of authority, including the media, increasingly looked upon with suspicion and disdain)
- economic crisis (following the pandemic and due to transformations from post-industrial to tech-driven economy)

Though the latest Press Freedom reports feature Europe as still the most favorable continent for media freedom, certain European Union and Balkan countries have been blacklisted as displaying seriously oppressive policies towards media and journalists.

Bulgaria notoriously stands out for years now as the EU member state with the lowest press freedom index- 112th out of a total of 180 countries, dubbed “the black sheep of the European Union” (World Press Freedom Index, 2020) and also “the worst place for press freedom, where it can prove dangerous to be a journalist” (2019). Reporters Without Borders lists the post-communist Eastern European state as the only EU-member, categorized in the “red zone” (countries with difficult freedom of the press situation) alongside Turkey, Russia, and Belarus. The authors of the report, which is considered to be one of the main advocacy tools for free and independent journalism worldwide, write about the small post-communist Eastern European. They state:

Corruption and collusion between media, politicians, and oligarchs are widespread in Bulgaria. The government continues to allocate EU and public funding to media outlets with a complete lack of transparency, with the effect of encouraging recipients to go easy on the government in their reporting or to refrain from covering certain problematic

stories altogether. At the same time judicial harassment of independent media...

continued to increase. (Bulgaria: Black Sheep of the European Union, 2020)

Bulgaria's drastic democratic disintegration materialized during the past 20 years. In 2006 the country was still ranking 35th on the World Press Freedom Index (to compare, the US is currently ranked 45th). Within 14 years, Bulgaria collapsed 76 positions and is currently the worst place for journalists in Europe, where according to Reporters Without Borders, "it is now dangerous to be a journalist." If the nation continues its press freedom decline at the same pace (76 positions downfall in a decade) it will surpass North Korea in less than 10 years. Currently, the media freedom in Bulgaria are considered more compromised in comparison, not just with the rest of the EU, but also some non-EU Balkan members such as Serbia and Macedonia. In Europe, only Belarus and Russia score lower.

The former communist state seems, therefore, an appropriate case study for testing the Regressive Media Model (RMM) that might have implications for our broader understating of theories of press freedom. Drawing from a combination of phenomenological and socio-cultural discourse, this study will explore the experiences of Bulgarian broadcast journalists, who were trained in Western Principles of Liberal media systems (Gross, 2004) and are now facing growing media restraint, political suppression, and editorial censorship. Selecting the commercial broadcast journalism sector serves multiple purposes: first, exploring the most influential medium currently in the country (Raycheva, 2009), and secondly, as addressing the conflict presented by the very nature of market-driven journalism- serving the public or serving the profit? It is a particularly central dilemma in a media ecology where the press is "not close to politics *or* business, but to politics, *and* business- where business *is* politics" (Smaele, 2010, p.

58) and especially in Bulgaria, where “as a result of business pressures, journalists’ professional autonomy has been lacking” (Bajomi-Lázár, 2014, p. 80).

The study will trace historical developments at the beginning of the century and more recently, to compare and contrast different stages of media freedom in the country and theorize factors contributing to the rise and fall of press freedom and media independence. The proposed dissertation aims to develop a theoretical model for understanding the decaying media system in Bulgaria – one that was fast-tracking towards democratization and media independence in the early 2000s but is now experiencing an abrupt regression. Conceptualizing the regressive media model as applied in this work could be used to draw a better understanding of the broader regional press freedom decline experienced in Eastern and Central Europe circa 2020.

Significance of the study

Post-communist Eastern Europe is particularly susceptible to modern forms of illiberalism and neo-authoritarianism, due to its recent totalitarian history, concluded some thirty years ago with the collapse of the Berlin Wall. After the end of the Cold War, both political and media pundits looked at Eastern Europe with a great amount of interest, curiosity, and above all- big hopes and great expectations. It then seemed like the “Second World” had embraced a new future- fast-tracking into the promised land of liberal democracy, a market economy, open society, independent media, and respect for human rights. Three decades later, it is now clear that the enthusiasm generated by the Post-Soviet East and its *velvet revolutions* was rather premature and the region’s political system currently entertains a much gloomier construal.

While investigating the so-called Nations in Transit (29 nation-states from Central Europe to Central Asia that opted out of Soviet Communism in the 90s), the 2020 Freedom House report encounters “a stunning democratic breakdown” in all of the explored countries.

Actually, they argue, “there are fewer democracies in the region today than at any point since the collapse of the Berlin Wall” (*Nations in Transit*, 2020). Leading the democratic decline are the countries in Central and Eastern Europe, particularly the Balkans, which again- paradoxically, experienced the greatest gains after the collapse of communism in 1989. Furthermore, it can be argued that one way or another Unfinished Europe (Berend, 2015) has contributed to the global shift towards illiberalism and neo authoritarianism threatening the very core of democracies not just in post-soviet spaces but Western Europe and the US (Holmes & Krastev, 2020; Applebaum, 2020).

Adding to the global challenges, the current COVID- 19 pandemic is additionally undermining the already weaker democracies in the region. Authoritarian leaders tend to use such crisis to expand their power and silence their critics. An open letter from 500 former world leaders and Nobel Prize winners warned that COVID-19 has emboldened the would-be dictators and is representing a formidable “global challenge to democracy” (Ministers & Unesda, 2020). As competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky & Way, 2010) is being embraced as an acceptable alternative to liberalism and democracy on a global scale, an investigation into one of the main tenets of a vibrant democracy, namely the media and the press freedom doctrine, and particularly in one of the most distressed political systems in Europe, then seems to be a relevant and timely one. The importance of a free and independent media system for a functioning democracy and a vibrant public sphere is axiomatic. During profound political transformations and challenges the world is undergoing on a global scale, both politically and technologically, the role of journalists and media are all the more important (Jakubowicz & Sukosd, 2008).

While this investigation focuses on Eastern European media and politics, and more specifically in journalistic cultures experiencing growing political instrumentalization, expanding

its findings towards the wider political map of the world is intended and serves as a segue to future research and extended testing of the Regressive Media model in other settings, cultures and historical backgrounds. Simply said, the suggested exploration of Bulgaria and its press freedom disintegration is a pilot study with potentially greater implications for our broader understating of theories of press freedom.

Background of the study

The background section of this study discusses local conceptualization of press freedom and democracy, professional culture of journalism in post-communist Eastern Europe, as well as the local media ecosystem in Bulgaria after the collapse of communism and the profound political transformations that followed. Finally, it provides a list of key terms defined for the purposes of this research. This background is an important element in understanding current developments as captured by next chapters of this work.

Media freedom and democracy in Eastern Europe

Media freedom and political transformations are the focus of most of the research carried out in Eastern Europe in the late 90s. Existing research sees media developments in the region at that time as revolutionary while also acknowledging the fact that local news organizations and journalistic cultures had fallen short of both normative expectations as well as their level of professionalization compared to media systems of more advanced Western European democracies (Gross, 2002; Gross & Jakubowicz, 2012; D. C. Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Jakubowicz, 2007; Jakubowicz & Sükösd, 2008, 2014; Klimkiewicz, 2010; Paletz, Jakubowicz, & Novosel, 1995; Sükösd, Bajomi-Lázár, & Bajomi-Lazar, 2003).

Media systems in Europe vary greatly in level and quality of press freedom and media independence as other factors such as economics, culture, history, and social order come to

impact substantially the global media system. Growing concerns about government interference with press freedom have increasingly risen everywhere in Europe, and particularly in the Post-Communist Central and Eastern Europe, following EU-enlargement in 2004-2007. The process opened Old Europe to post-communist Eastern European countries, with small and not so lucrative media markets, affected heavily by monopolies and the traditional politicization of the media (Czepek & Hellwig, 2009).

The press freedom indexes published by Freedom House reveal that the gap between old and new democracies in terms of their media freedom conditions was significantly narrowed between 1993 and early 2000s- with media freedom largely improving in former communist states while remaining pretty static in the old ones. It is noteworthy, though, that since those new independent states were admitted to the EU in 2004 (the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia) and 2007 (Bulgaria and Romania), the status of media freedom has been paradoxically declining in eight of those 10 new democracies (Bulgaria, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovenia, and Slovakia), and improving in only two (the Czech Republic and Romania), according to a recent comparative analysis (Bajomi-Lázár, 2014). The process of press freedom deterioration in the region appears to overlap with the changing trajectories of democracy overall.

Today, the dominant conceptualizations of Eastern European democracies in the most recent scholarly literature vary from façade, backsliding, diminishing, reversed, regressive, lapsing, illiberal, decaying (Bajomi-Lázár, 2014; Berend, 2001; Camaj, 2016; Dobek-Ostrowska, 2015; Dragomir, 2010; Gökarıksel, 2017; Gross, 2002, 2004; Gross & Jakubowicz, 2012; Holmes & Krastev, 2020; Howard, 2003; Jakubowicz, 2007; Journalists, 2003; Kostadinova, 2015; Lauk, 2008; Mesežnikov, Gyárfášová, & Smilov, 2008; Metyková & Waschková

Císařová, 2009; Mueller, 2014). Some scholars go as far as describing the current political climate of the region as “velvet dictatorship” against a global backdrop of rampant demagoguery and populism (Ágh, 2017; Attila, 2016); while others portray the region as in a state of “illiberal counter-revolution” (Holmes & Krastev, 2020). Regardless of the label, the trend is irrevocable: in a relatively short period of time to a different degree, practically all countries who were “saved” by communism, have displayed overt regression from transitioning or even consolidated democracies into some forms of semi-authoritarian illiberal regimes some ceasing to be democracies altogether (Hungary, Poland according to Freedom House Nation in Transit 2020 report). It is notable that the rampant outbreak of modern authoritarianism is rooted in legal majoritarianism – that is to say it is not by revoking the constitutional norms that those new totalitarian leaders strengthen their power, but rather by abusing the formal constitutional order; by paying a “lip-service to the skeletal, majoritarian element of democracy” (Zselyke, 2020, p. 12), while capturing the state and its institutions by a one-party majority; by forming what some call “monopolies of power” (Michnik, 2013), in which “attacks on countervailing powers and civil society groups are being carried out in the name of the people’s will as expressed via the ballot box” (Rupnik & Zielonka, 2013, p. 26). Such majoritarianism is a common element of all formalized democracy in former post-soviet worlds of Eastern Europe, using rampant populism and oftentimes nationalistic rhetoric as powerful legitimizing tools for removing all checks and balances in place (Rupnik & Zielonka, 2013), or as the most recent Freedom House report describes it:

New neo-authoritarian leaders are now openly attacking democratic institutions and attempting to do away with any remaining checks on their power. This shift has accelerated assaults on judicial independence, threats against civil society and the media,

the manipulation of electoral frameworks, and the hollowing out of parliaments, which no longer fulfill their role as centers of political debate and oversight of the executive branch. (Freedom House, 2020)

These empirical evidences for the global democratic decline are well documented in the modern political theory, suggesting that democracies are fragile and can indeed die out – and not necessarily in turmoil or a military plot - but rather as Levitsky & Ziblatt put it: “with a whimper: the slow, steady weakening of critical institutions, such as the judiciary and the press, and the gradual erosion of long-standing political norms” (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).

While the lack of political tradition and mature democratic instincts in Eastern Europe is eminently grounded in its history and political culture, most recent civic uprisings in the region-- from Bulgaria, Serbia, Czech, Poland, and Hungary, to Belarus-- speak for social awakening. On the backdrop of coronavirus pandemic, lockdown measures, and infection spikes, mass street outpourings in many Eastern European states expressed the public outcry against corruption, election fraud, and suppression of individual freedoms and the media. With civic engagement on the rise, the third component – the journalistic community, its principles values, worldviews, and most importantly, the conceptualization of its professional freedom and role in society – remains understudied.

Professional culture of post-communist journalism

The classic Four Theories of the Press have dominated the global media system studies in the last 60 years. Arguably though, little has stayed the same in both the political map of the world as well as the global media systems during those years. The classic theory, clearly a child of its time developed during the Cold War ideological schism, focuses on a press-government relationship solely from a Western capitalist ideology standpoint, creating this “us versus them”

narrative and undermining to a great degree the implication of national cultures. Naturally it needs to be re-applied given the historical development following the collapse of the Berlin Wall, when the East-West schism ceased to exist. In the recent decades, many media sociologists have updated the Four theories calling for a more indigenous regional re-evaluation and conceptualization of national media systems and journalistic independence while accounting for local cultures and conceptualization of freedom and independence overall (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2015; Downey & Mihelj, 2012; Dragomir, 2010; Gross, 2008; Gross & Jakubowicz, 2012; D. Hallin & Mancini, 2011; Herrero et al., 2017; Howard, 2003; Jakubowicz & Sükösd, 2014; Mueller, 2014; Peruško, Vozab, & Čuvalo, 2013; Peruško et al., 2020; Peruško, Vozab, & Rašić, 2012).

While some literature accounts for the cultural and professional differences characterizing different media systems (D. C. Hallin & Mancini, 2004), professional communities and the local professional cultures of journalists in different parts of the world remain a relatively understudied element of media system scholarship. Therefore, one main theoretical insight this work pursues is conceptualizing a model for professional journalism in Bulgaria, as inferred by the lived experiences of local journalists. In the US this professional conceptualization dates back to 1923, when the American Society of Newspaper Editors published its guidelines on professional principles, called *The Canons of Journalism* (Editors, 1923). However, in new democracies of Eastern Europe such widely shared collegial standard has not yet been attained. Delayed professionalization in the region is attributed historically to the underdevelopment of mass circulation press in comparison with Western and Northern Europe, as well as the half-century suspension of independent journalism during the communist years (Bajomi-Lázár, 2014; Gross, 2002; Kostadinova, 2015; Lauk, 2008; Metyková &

Waschková Císařová, 2009), followed by opinionated politicized journalism in the post-communist environment characterized by a close overlap between political and media elites (Bajomi-Lázár, 2014; Dobek-Ostrowska, 2015; Gross & Jakubowicz, 2012). Television as a medium, in particular, was born in 1959, during the communist years and as a part of the one-party state propaganda apparatus, encouraging a climate of social obedience (Raycheva, 2009).

The process of media emancipation, professionalization, and self-regulation started in the late 1990s with the journalistic community in Bulgaria adopting a code of ethics reflecting Anglo-Saxon standards of journalism (Bajomi-Lázár, 2014). However, to this day, this code of ethics is disputed and with limited implementation as a shared journalistic norm (Raycheva, 2009). While ethical codes are not universal, most share professional standards such as truthfulness, fairness, balance, and providing all points of view, with respect for both the audience and the sources. Journalistic codes in the United States, in particular, are centered on the notion of “objectivity,” discerning between information and opinion, and the separation of church and state or providing a wall between the editorial and the business strategy of a medium. An attempt for internalizing those norms was made through processes of Americanization or globalization in the media in the region parallel to the wide privatization and opening of the local media market for foreign media conglomerates in the early 2000s (Dragomir, 2010; Gross, 2004; Stetka, 2012). Utilization of libertarian elements into a post-soviet media system results in a state of journalism defined by an Open Society report as, “objective, but selective,” meaning that what is published in the media tends to be professional and balanced, but there are certain topics that are absent from the public agenda if they do not comply with the commercial and/or political interest of the media owners (Television Across Europe, 2005).

The reversed trend in media ownership in recent years – international players leaving the market and restoring control into the hands of local oligarchs – has raised concerns about the professional conduct of journalists and the role of the media as an independent entity in this renewed market conditions. By testing the professionalization of journalism theories against the meaning-making processes and professional practices of journalists in Bulgaria, this work seeks to examine the role of individual journalists and the collective professional mentality in the declining press freedom in Bulgaria.

The suggested theoretical model aims to propel knowledge about global media systems away from years of overgeneralization and simplifications and abandoning the one size fits all approach. This study seeks to do so by qualitatively investigating the values and worldviews of Bulgarian journalists and how those relate to the notion of press freedom and the fourth estate. This study responds to the scholarly calls for more sophisticated, in-depth and historically and culturally grounded theorizing of the national media system in Bulgaria in its post-communist years.

Bulgaria: local media ecosystem and conceptualization of press freedom

A brief historical overview is appropriate here, as unlike some immature democracies in Africa and Asia, post-communist countries in Eastern Europe are widely accepted as part of the Western tradition. However, the two parts of Europe underwent very different historical trajectories long before the Cold War separation. Bugarič (2015) calls this part of Europe “land in-between” to describe its state of permanent flux between Eastern authoritarianism and Western liberalism. While in Western Europe the proclaimed period of Enlightenment and industrialization had laid the foundation for democracy and a free press as late as the 17th century, Eastern Europe was “frozen for centuries under three autocratic, mostly despotic

empires – Austria, Russia, and the Ottoman Empire – causing the region to fall more and more behind in its economic, social and political development” (Voltmer & Wasserman, 2014, p. 183). Bulgaria was allied with Germany in both World Wars, and then became part of the Soviet zone of influence, ruled for over half a century from 1946 until 1989 by the Bulgarian Communist Party, while opposition parties were prosecuted and eliminated (Bajomi-Lázár, 2014; Kitschelt, Mansfeldova, Markowski, & Toka, 1999; Spirova, 2005). Communist ruling in Bulgaria was among the most oppressive with the country being among the closest Soviet satellite in Central and Eastern Europe (Karasimeonov & Lyubenov, 2007), therefore there was no significant resistance and or influential dissident movements in Bulgaria, unlike in other countries such as Poland, Czech, Hungary or Slovenia (Kitschelt et al., 1999). Hence, intellectuals in general, and journalists in particular did not take the lead in promoting democratic changes in the late 1980s in Bulgaria (Bajomi-Lázár, 2014). Unlike the velvet revolutions in other countries of the region, the latest Bulgarian Totalitarian dictator was removed not by wide civic outpouring and street protests but rather by an internal coup within the Communist Party itself on November 10, 1989. In early 1990, the Republic of Bulgaria was proclaimed, and in May, the first free democratic elections were held. In 1991 The National Assembly proclaimed Bulgarian National Television and Bulgarian National Radio independent institutions, declaring free expression for all and abolishing the party-state monopoly of broadcasting (Bajomi-Lázár, 2014; Raycheva & Petev, 2003).

In the new constitution adopted in 1991, Bulgaria was set up as a parliamentary democracy with a majoritarian element and a unicameral parliament. Article 40 also granted freedom of the press and freedom of expression for all Bulgarian citizens: “The press and the other mass information media shall be free and shall not be subjected to censorship’

(Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria, 1991). The country has adopted a multi-party electoral system with a high level of electoral volatility. The president of the republic, although directly elected, has more symbolic power (Bajomi-Lázár, 2014; Casal Bértoa & Enyedi, 2010; Kitschelt et al., 1999; Raycheva & Petev, 2003).

In the mass media system, the late 1990s and early 2000s were times of profound changes and revolutionary transformations. Out of all democratic institutions, the mass media was the quickest to adapt to the new political and market realities after the collapse of communism in Bulgaria. The liberalization of the media system provided for decentralization and the emergence of pluralistic print and electronic media, and the upbringing of a profitable media market for the first time in the country (Raycheva, 2009).

Starting in the late 90s, foreign investors and transnational corporations flooded the newly freed promised land of developing third Europe (Dragomir, 2010; Journalists, 2003; Peruško & Popović, 2008; Salovaara & Juzefovics, 2012; Stetka, 2012; Štětka, 2013). Though the process did not follow a universal pattern, in some countries, such as Bulgaria in particular, foreign ownership ended up dominating print as well as national broadcasting by the early 2000s (Stetka, 2012). The newcomers' Western corporations were expected to provide both the financial injection and the professional know-how and management practices to open the commercial media markets, enhance standards in the region, and elevate it from state-controlled to independent media production (Gross, 2002, 2004; Gross & Jakubowicz, 2012; Lauk, 2008; Splichal, 2001). While the financial expectations were primarily fulfilled, the qualitative cultural transmissions were overshadowed by critiques of commercialization and tabloidization of news media (Stetka, 2012), while still keeping some troublesome habits from the past, trading quality

journalism and media independence for government protection and political favors (Gross, 2002; Sparks, 1998).

Marking some positive developments, as a full EU member state since 2007, there was a period in the early 2000s, when Bulgaria's independent media market was still flourishing, driven by media professionalization and adopting of the independent commercial media model. Car and Erjavec (2007) report positive developments in media and especially the unrestricted access of Bulgarian journalists to international sources of information. However, one of the major problems remains the "inability of its regulatory system to tackle effectively all the issues related to the political and economic independence of the media" (p. 74) and the "increasing self-censorship" driven by economic motives (p. 75).

By the middle of the 2000s, a total of 115 television and 109 radio licenses had been issued in Bulgaria (Lazarov, 2005). The liberalization of the broadcast media in Bulgaria in 2000 saw the local advertising market at its infancy – the broadcast media ecosystem consisting of one big state-owned broadcast mammoth, with almost no advertising model, and multiple fragmented private players, in a small and not particularly wealthy Balkan country- population of about 6 million people, making something like 200 dollars a month per capita (National Statistical Institute). Some analysts argued the media landscape in this period was overcrowded with too many players competing for scarce advertising revenues (Popova, 2004). In 2000, the TV advertising market amounted to \$22 million US dollars. Data acquired by this study shows that by the time foreign media investors started to leave the market after the financial crisis in 2008, the money spent on TV advertising in the country has grown exponentially.

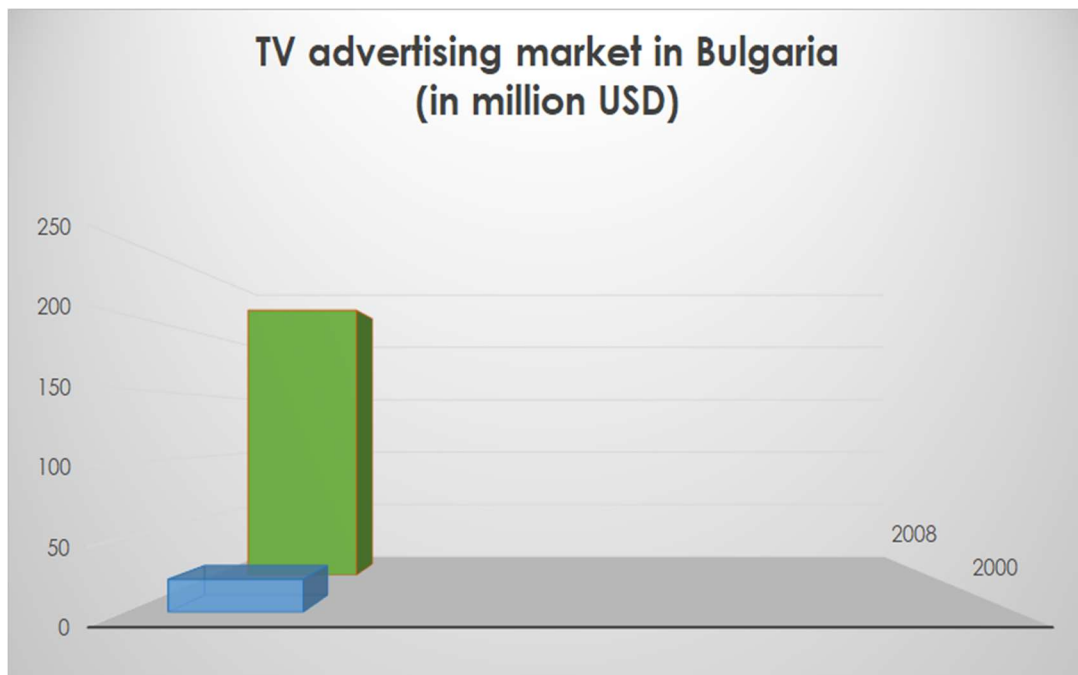


Figure 1.1 Bulgarian TV Advertising Market Dynamics 2000-2008

The first private commercial television channel, bTV, owned and operated by News Corp. was licensed in 1999 and launched in 2000. The second national private television station, Nova TV, owned by the Greek Antenna Group and later acquired by the Scandinavian media house MTG, was officially licensed in 2003. Unlike other countries in Europe, Bulgaria's public broadcaster BNT is not as strong and has been lagging in audience preference and influence ever since its private completion was introduced (Raycheva, 2009). An Open Society report suggests that some of the commercial operators in Eastern Europe managed to even fulfill the public service function better than the public broadcasters (*Television Across Europe* 2005). News Corp's bTV, in particular, is pronounced for successfully balancing the commercial formula with social responsibility (Lozanov & Spasov, 2008) by neutrally covering the political spectrum, providing a platform for oppositional voices as well as mainstream opinions (*Television Across Europe*, 2005). The commercial national networks, bTV and Nova, dominated both the media market as well as the battle for influence in a country where television is still the main choice for news and information (Statista Research, 2019). Therefore, journalists from those two main commercial stations are the participants in this study, as the study aims at historically evaluating the dynamics in the professional culture relative to the press freedom transformations.

Definitions of key terms

Press freedom: the right to publish the truth about the government (Splichal, 2002); "the ability of outlets and individual journalists to gather and publicize information they deem newsworthy, including government and political information, without constraint" (Bairrett Jr, 2015, p. 262).

Press repression, as the antithesis of press freedom: refers to the "existence of governmental or non-governmental restraints on the media, the absence of conditions to ensure the dissemination

of diverse opinions and perceptions to large audiences, or combinations of both” (D. H. Weaver, 1977, p. 156).

Media system: a set of media institutions and practices understood as interacting with and shaping one another, while embedded within wider social, political, economic, and cultural systems (D. C. Hallin, 2015).

Culture: “a set of patterns, beliefs, behaviors, institutions, symbols, and practices shared and perpetuated by a consolidated group of individuals connected by an ancestral heritage and a concomitant geographical reference location”(Jackson, 1998, p. 44).

Journalistic culture: the different narratives and manifestations about journalists, their roles and function in society, the principles that guide their work, the way journalists think and act; “the particular set of ideas and practices by which journalists legitimate their role in society and render their work meaningful” (Hanitzsch, 2007; Hanitzsch, Hanusch, Ramaprasad, & De Beer, 2019, p. 33).

Journalistic roles: generalized expectations that journalists believe society deems desirable (Donsbach, 2008); the tasks and functions that journalists embrace as a result of their professional socialization and the internalization of certain normative expectations(Hanitzsch et al., 2019).

Civil/ Open Society: in a democracy it is understood as the multitude of non-government associations and groups, designed to ensure pluralism and representation of different social voices in a community, ensuring against ideological monopoly and giving expression to individual or group interests (Dahrendorf, 2005; Popper, 1957).

Globalization: “spatio-temporal processes of change which underpin a transformation in the organization of human affairs by linking together and expanding human activity across regions

and continents” (Held, McGrew, Goldblatt, & Perraton, 1999, p. 14); in other words: “processes of complex interconnections between societies, cultures, institutions, and individuals worldwide, so making the world seem smaller and in a certain sense bringing them closer to one another” (Tomlinson, 1999, p. 170).

Americanization: a process, emanating from America, that impacts the norms or behaviors of non-Americans (Elteren, 2006); the influence the United States has on the culture of other countries, including language, media, pop culture, technology, economy, politics (Abdulrahim, Al-Kandari, & Hasanen, 2009).

Transition: an interval between two regime/stages of ruling, mostly referred here to describe transitional political system shifting from totalitarian and authoritarian regimes to democratic regimes, typical for the early twenty-first century in Eastern Europe (Di Palma, 1990).

Democratic Regression: a process of democratic decline, describing a trajectory of degeneration, a period of *lower morale* (C. Taylor, 2017) with societies moving away from democratic institutes such as rule of law, free elections, and freedom of expression; the incremental degradation or decay of the structures and substance of liberal constitutional democracy (Daly, 2017).

CHAPTER 2:

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter serves as a conceptual backbone against which a theoretical proposition for understanding Bulgarian journalistic culture would be made, using socio-cultural interpretivist tradition and a grounded theory approach. The following pages provide an overview of the scholarship informing this work, classified into four different subcategories of relevance, followed by the formalized research questions to guide the contemplated inquiry.

Eastern European hybrid political regimes- between totalitarianism and democracy

After the collapse of the Berlin Wall, both political, economic and media pundits were looking at Eastern Europe with a great amount of interest, curiosity, and above all- hope for the future of this *Land-in-between* – the unparallel territory between democracy and authoritarianism (Bugarič, 2015). The big question was whether democracy would come to be viable under the local conditions or will it prove to be a peculiar Western concept that cannot withstand the turbulences of Second Europe (Patterson, 1991). The 1990s were rather hopeful- marking the way for a period of clear Western liberal hegemony in Central and Eastern Europe/CEE/. It seemed like the Cold War was over and the former Soviet satellites had embraced a new future- fast-tracking into the promised land of freedom, a market economy, open society, and human rights. The adopted “carrot and stick” strategy seemed to be making a cogent case to support the ever-so-soft though rampant political transformations. Levitsky and Way (2010) write:

International influences took many forms, including conditionality (as in the case of European Union membership), direct state-to-state pressure (in the form of sanctions, behind-the-scenes diplomacy, and even direct military intervention), and the activities of emerging transnational actors and institutions. In this new context, the liberal democratic

model gained unprecedented acceptance among post-communist and Third World elites. Perhaps more importantly, the absence of alternative sources of military and economic aid increased the importance of being on good terms with Western governments and institutions. (p. 62)

Though this velvet glove approach seemed to be potent in a region marked by a long history of obedience to a higher authority, soon it was clear that the Velvet revolutions of 1989 have ended up in "velvet dictatorships" less than two decades after (Attila, 2016). While processes of imitation and internalization had led to formalizing of some democratic norms into constitutional wording in post-communist nation-states, the deeper cultural transformations ensuring genuine democratic embodiment in the newly freed world were far from being enacted (Bajomi-Lázár, 2014; Berend & Bugaric, 2015; Dobek-Ostrowska, 2015; Dragomir, 2010; Gökarıksel, 2017; Gross, 2002, 2004; Gross & Jakubowicz, 2012; Jakubowicz, 2007; Jakubowicz & Sükösd, 2008; Mesežnikov et al., 2008; Mueller, 2014; Paletz et al., 1995). Three decades later it is now clear that the enthusiasm generated by the Post-Soviet East was rather premature and the region's political system currently entertains a much gloomier construal. It can even be argued that one way or another *the Unfinished Europe* (Berend & Bugaric, 2015) had contributed to the global shift towards illiberalism and neo authoritarianism, threatening the very core of democracies not just in post-soviet spaces but Western Europe and even the US (Applebaum, 2020; Holmes & Krastev, 2020).

“What eastern European states are experiencing today is hardly a simple lapse in morals,” states Princeton University professor Jan-Verner Mueller in one of his most recent reflections on the region. He continues:

Nor are they returning to any previously known form of authoritarianism. Rather, something new is emerging: a form of illiberal democracy in which political parties try to capture the state for either ideological purposes or, more prosaically, economic gain. Some countries in Eastern Europe are moving toward a model of governance that resembles that of Russian President Vladimir Putin. Like Moscow, the governments of these countries are careful to maintain their democratic façades by holding regular elections. But their leaders have tried to systematically dismantle institutional checks and balances, making real turnovers in power increasingly difficult. (Mueller, 2014)

One of the region's leading historians, Ivan Berend, describes the political system of Eastern Europe as "form without substance", depicting the immediate exterior effects of the Europeanization, only leading to "shallow institutionalization" and mimicking the rule of law (Berend & Bugarić, 2015). As a consequence, essential institutions such as the judiciary, the civil service, anti-corruption commissions, the media, etc., have very superficial roots in these post-communist societies; civil societies are weak (Gross, 2004; Howard, 2003; Jakubowicz & Sükösd, 2008); electoral unpredictability is higher compared to the Western world, and political mobilization- lower (Dassonneville & Hooghe, 2011; Mair & Van Biezen, 2001; Tworzecki & Semetko, 2012). Some of those discrepancies are naturally grounded in history- after half a century of one-party institutional monopoly over all areas of public life, the separation of power and the check and balances in the Eastern world are undoubtedly not as robust as those in the West. Applied theories of political transition are too simplistic therefore to explain the developments in post-communist countries, suggests Bugarić (2015):

The history of democracy in the West (often a history of struggle, conflict and even violence) reveals the importance of a continuous civic and political struggle for

successful democratization. This aspect of democracy-building was almost “lost in translation” in the CEE context, where the process of democracy building was often portrayed and perceived as an elitist project based on the assumption that political elites knew exactly how to get from point A (failed Communism) to point B (idealized Western democracy). (p. 235)

As it had become increasingly evident that the new democracies differ substantially from their Western models, historians and political scholars have been long attempting at a more precise conceptualization of the type of ruling in the post-communist world. Façade, pseudo, backsliding, diminishing, reversed, regressive, lapsing, illiberal, formal, decaying, virtual– those and similar adjectives are widely used by the recent literature to describe the state of the democracy in the territories once dominated by the Soviet Communism; a territory aptly described as the “unfinished part of Europe” (Berend, 2001; Berend & Bugaric, 2015). Some scholars go as far as describing the current political system of the region as a “velvet dictatorship” against a global backdrop of rampant demagogy and populism(Ágh, 2017; Attila, 2016); others see it as “competitive authoritarianism” (Levitsky & Way, 2010). A rich body of literature features the region as in a state of hybrid regimes, questioning yet again whether consolidated democracy is even possible outside the Western space (D. Hallin & Mancini, 2011; Kleinstauber, 2010; Levitsky & Way, 2010; Peruško et al., 2020; Roudakova, 2011; Smaele, 2010; Voltmer, 2012).

While the dominant transitology paradigm saw the political change in Eastern Europe as a one-directional and irreversible evolution - away from authoritarianism and toward liberal democracy, hybrid regimes' preposition claims this model to be oversimplified. As reality is there are many disruptive occasions when the transition just halts, where the desired

transformations have been stalled (Roudakova, 2011, p. 250), as a result of this constant interplay between two main forces- order maintenance and order erosion that shape the very nature of hybrid regimes. This form of hybridity makes liberalism and democracy simply a fancy staging behind which authoritarian and totalitarian practices flourish. Many scholars had coined different oxymoron-guided terms to formulate a typology of hybrid regimes: “illiberal democracy” (Zakaria, 1997), “imitation democracy”(Shevtsova, 2007), “electoral authoritarianism” or elections without democracy (Schedler, 2002), “multi-party authoritarianism” (Linz & Linz, 2000). Seemingly antithetical those labels fit to describe the very core of a hybrid regime as something “halfway: no longer autocratic, but not yet fully democratic. Generally speaking, hybrid regimes have introduced some kind of competitive elections, but fail to deepen democratic governance beyond basic formal requirements” (Voltmer, 2012, p. 240). Those majoritarian elements of formal democracy are all the more fatal, as they’re used to delegitimize and silence the opposition, abusing the electoral process as a disguise for one-party dominance and in reality- weak institutionalization of the rule of law and civil liberties (Rose & Munro, 2009). Noteworthy, it is not by revoking the constitution that the neo-authoritarian leaders strengthen their power, it is by abusing the legal norms, by paying a lip-service to the skeletal, majoritarian element of democracy (Zselyke, 2020); while *capturing* the state and its institutions by a one-party majority, interpreting whoever wins the elections as the monopoly of all the power, with no check and balances, one-monolith super power provided with “authorization to cast off the constraints of the constitution or to revise it”(Rupnik & Zielonka, 2013).

One inherited problem for Eastern Europe’s transition to democracy stems precisely from the fact that the new political and social elites mostly derived from old communist elites (Gross,

2002). By combining elements of the preceding regime with elements of externally reinforced democratic ruling, what they produce is this peculiar gray zone between authoritarianism and democracy (Levitsky & Way, 2010). One of the best insider descriptions of the post-communist Eastern Europe still comes from the former Polish dissident and one of the most lucid minds in the former communist world Adam Michnik (Spiegel, 2013):

We are the illegitimate children, the bastards of communism. It shaped our mentality. A part of society in our countries would still prefer an authoritarian regime today. These are people with the mentality of Homo Sovieticus...Democratic elections are held, but then the victorious party devours the losers. The gradual coup consists of getting rid of or taking over democratic institutions. These people believe that they are the only ones in possession of the truth. At some point, parties no longer mean anything, and the system is based, once again, on a monologue of power...The democratic institutions are more deeply embedded in the West than in Eastern Europe. Democracy can defend itself there. Everything is still fragile in our countries, even two decades after the end of communism. (Spiegel, 2013)

Indeed, increasingly over the last decade, “authoritarianism is emerging as an attractive alternative to liberal democracy for a growing number of countries in Eastern Europe” (Freedom House, IREX, Reporters without Borders). Indeed, the majority of the independent states that came out of the collapse of the Soviet Union and their influence in CEE, remained nondemocratic after all (Levitsky & Way, 2010). In its 2020 report Freedom House recons that the “new neo-authoritarian leaders are now openly attacking democratic institutions and attempting to do away with any remaining checks on their power”, which then accelerates “assaults on judicial independence, threats against civil society and the media” (Freedom House,

2020).

But why is this happening? And why now? Sometimes, it is a cultural disappointment. People don't like the way their societies have changed. There is a part of every society that doesn't like the cacophony and noise of democracy and the arguments, that doesn't like the fact that democracies can't take instant decisions, the way autocracies can (Applebaum, 2020). There is also a price to be paid, democracy mandates constant work and oftentimes result in social fatigue. Holmes and Krastev (2020) examine how the Cold War schism between the totalitarian East and the Free West has shifted in the recent decades from a military standoff between two hostile systems into a peculiar dichotomy of “models and mimics”. The failed communist East had to imitate the successful liberal West. But imitation also has different levels. Communist China for example is borrowing technical means from the West while remaining true to its culture and indigenous values. Eastern Europe though employs a deeper level of imitation- imitating identities, striving to replicate everything western- the means, the culture, the lifestyle, the language, the institutions, the media, the business models. “The imitation of moral ideals unlike the borrowing of technologies makes you resemble the one you admire, but it simultaneously makes you look less like yourself,” state Holmes and Krastev (2020). Ultimately that deculturation tailgated with the unpopular political and economic reforms, requiring a lot of personal sacrifices and displaying the inequalities of capitalism to a society already scared by the inequality of communism, came with a prize. Furthermore, in many of the CEE countries (such as Bulgaria) the revolution had happened from within the ruling parties, as internal party coups as opposed to dissident activism that is typical for other nations such as Czech for example. This comes to illustrate that some segments of post-communist societies were predominantly undertaking these transformations to become richer not necessarily freer. All that and the

imposed transition naturally led to a powerful wave of Euroscepticism, and illiberal revolt. The years of imitation had transcended into a feeling of imposter for those eastern Europeans who were accepted, but not quite, who were members, but not quite, who, according to Adam Michnik was always left feeling like “second class citizens.”

Secondly, a common misconception has to be acknowledged- as strong as anti-communism might have been in some of the CEE states, is not necessarily a prescription for democracy, since local elites are lacking deep understanding and devotion to democracy (Gross, 2002). They understand power as singular dominance. Additionally, the collapse of communism and the gained freedom came with "certain aspects of mob rule, associated with disorder and corruption which lead to "disillusionment and fatigue" (Gati, 1996, p. 62). So, while anticipating better lives and dreaming about the European Union membership as a way to attain to the club of the wealthy, Eastern Europeans woke up to face their newly arrived freedom, but such that came accompanied by actually reduced quality of life and growing sense of insecurity. Or as Tismaneanu (2009) aptly puts it: “You might hate your cage, but it still gives you stability and predictability” (p. 30). The growing sense of socialist nostalgia and rampant populism and nationalistic wave in the region is the response to the sense of that lost cage, in addition to the lack of new values and a sense of belonging to replace it within the new surroundings.

Apart from the complex internal transformations, Freedom House suggests the following major outside factors that are greatly impacting the current state of affairs in the region:

- Russia’s aggressive foreign policy and attempts to re-establish its dominant influence in the region
- China’s new advances towards the region, including through economic expansion, technology, and surveillance. After decades of using liberalism and democracy almost

interchangeably, and privileging the libertarian ideology that only individual freedoms and lack of government interference provide for the best possible economic outcomes for the society, now China and later on anti-western leaders such as Victor Orban in CEE put all those assumptions to a test. Suggested that liberal democracy is only one option among others. Furthermore, they suggested it was incapable of accomplishing the first task of government, which is to defend the national interest. Alternatively, they suggested the value of the “illiberal state,” which would also allow the best economic performance, as shown by Singapore, China, India, and Turkey. Now having this idea that we can be rich without necessarily being free is taking on a bigger and deeper level of the eastern collective mind, which as established already, is not necessarily very attached to freedom as a sustainable social and individual value.

-A distinct lack of leadership on democratic governance from traditional champions like the United States and the nations of Western Europe and the UK (dealing with their internal crisis, such as Brexit). In fact, some politicians and parties on both sides of the Atlantic have taken cues from the illiberal populists of the Nations in Transit region, enabling and aggravating the broader democratic deterioration. Neither the US nor the EU has risen to the occasion to promote democracy in the region. Instead, they have legitimized Orban-type leaders and put pressure on the new vulnerable leadership of Ukraine in demands for personal favors, instead of establishing the rule of law and international order.

As a result, in investigating the so-called Nations in Transit (29 nation-states stretching from Central Europe to Central Asia, that opted out of Soviet Communism in the 90ies), Freedom House encounters what they call “a stunning democratic breakdown” in all of the explored

countries. Actually, they argue, there are fewer democracies in the region today than at any point since the collapse of the Berlin Wall (Freedom House, *Democracy in Retreat*, 2020). Leading the democratic decline are the countries in Central and Eastern Europe, particularly the Balkans (Bulgaria included) which- paradoxically, experienced the greatest gains after the collapse of communism in 1989. Three decades later, there are now only 6 (six) nations in that land in-between that are currently considered consolidated democracies, according to Freedom House (the Baltics- Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, plus Czech, Slovakia, and Slovenia). The former front-runners in the group Poland and Hungary are currently actually the sources of greatest concerns. They have now collapsed to the bottom of the table, alongside Bulgaria, which is the lowest ranking EU member country in the World Press Freedom Index, considered by Reporters without Borders to be the “black ship of the EU” (RSF, 2020). Appendix 1 lists the different characteristics of media and democracy and how they vary in different CEE states according to existing literature.

Same but different: spotlight on Bulgaria

Responding to repetitive calls against overgeneralizing and for a more concrete national theorizing with a historical and cultural grounding of media systematic theory (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2015; Downey & Mihelj, 2012; Dragomir, 2010; Gross, 2002, 2004, 2008; Jakubowicz, 2007; Jakubowicz & Sükösd, 2014; Mueller, 2014; Spasovska, 2011), this work aims to see behind this idea of the “average” post-communist nation and see the differences beyond the similarities, focusing specifically on Bulgaria. In recent years, the country has been highlighted in political and trade research for its placid but consistent democratic decay, proving the point that democracies today do not need to die in a bloody revolution or a violent military

coup, but rather “with a whimper: the slow, steady weakening of critical institutions, such as the judiciary and the press, and the gradual erosion of long-standing political norms” (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, p. 7). As the French philosopher sets forth in his classic work “The revival of Democracy” (Revel, 1993): “it is not sufficient for a post-communist nation to free itself from communism, it must also free itself from all the consequences of communism” (p. 148).

The existing scholarship is unanimous on the realization that the communist rule in Bulgaria was among the most oppressive regimes in Central and Eastern Europe (Karasimeonov & Lyubenov, 2007; Smilova, Smilov, & Ganev, 2010). A short historical note features Bulgaria joining NATO in 2004 and the European Union in 2007. Currently, the country is regarded as a hybrid regime, or a semi-democracy according to the 2020 Freedom House classification, scoring a steep decline in both electoral processes and independent media indicators.

Characterizing the political system of the country, Freedom House states in 2020:

Antidemocratic tendencies deepened, with media freedom steadily deteriorating, legislative changes restricting political competition and the entrance of newcomers, and the Chief Prosecutor’s Office abusing its power and violating the presumption of innocence. Additionally, major corruption scandals involving members of the governing coalition further eroded trust in institutions, and civil society organizations were subjected to attacks by politicians and government officials. (Freedom House, Bulgaria 2020)

Recently, many leading advocacy organizations for media freedom and democracy have been increasingly concerned with the country and its strong one-party political dominance of the populist conservative party GERB over the last decade, with explicit lack of meritocracy and silencing of the opposition, with party loyalists affirmed to all and every place of power

(Freedom House, Reporters Without Borders, IREX). This undisputed one-party dominance against the existence of a formal and skeletal electoral process, is seen as a typical characteristic of the hybrid new democracies, creating “a hegemonic public sphere in which the ruling party’s interpretation of the political situation prevails while oppositional views are marginalized and even delegitimized” with the ruling party possessing “unlimited access to the media agenda” and a “deep-rooted networks of clientelism”, making journalists “beneficiaries of the hegemonic system” and in that way- complicit with the dominant party and its agenda (Voltmer, 2012, p. 243). Recent developments in the country had further wreaked an already “frustrated and disillusioned democracy” (Stanoeva, 2017). The mass street riots against the ruling party and the prosecutor general in the summer of 2020 had voiced a growing public distrust towards the political elites of the last decade, but civic outcry did not suffice to produce a sustainable political change (Bratanic & Okov, 2020). While the widespread corruption has not been a secret for either Bulgarian voters or the European powerhouses in Brussels, the ruling party GERB (Citizens for European Developments of Bulgaria) manages to sustain both the political power at home and to trade the geopolitical support of its western supervisors. Paradoxically, the democratic decline and deterioration of the rule of law in Bulgaria has intensified after its EU accession and regardless, or even because of, the EU funding pouring into the country’s economy: for the 2014-2020 period, the Cohesion Fund allocated a total of € 63.4 billion in countries such as Bulgaria (€11.7 billion), Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. While some of these countries are scoring better in democracy and press freedom representation (such as Czech, Slovenia and Slovakia, and the Baltics), others, such as Bulgaria (the most corrupt country in the EU, according to Transparency International), are using the EU funds as a to elevate the level of

corruption from the low-level state clerks bribery typical for the post-communist structures, to a high-level political abuse of public funding, that remains unaddressed by judicial scrutiny (Pashev, 2011). Due to a lack of transparency, EU funding is also thought to be accommodated by the local government as a tool to grant state subsidiaries to supportive businesses and political friends and to put pressure over the slimming minority of independent players, including in the media (Dragomir, 2018).

Media capture- politicized pluralist media model explained

After half a century of direct government control, the Eastern European media sector was quick to pronounce itself free at the end of the last century, while remaining to this day largely dependent on the state (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2015; Dragomir, 2010, 2018; Gross, 2002, 2004, 2008; Jakubowicz, 2007; Jakubowicz & Sükösd, 2008, 2014; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2008; Schiffrin, 2017). Voltmer and Dobрева (2009) captured the process sensibly, indicating that with the collapse of the Berlin Wall, media in former totalitarian states “gained their freedom, but not their independence (p. 8).

Independent media is naturally seen as one of the four main sources of instability threatening hybrid regimes, alongside the electoral, legislative, and judicial systems (Levitsky & Way, 2010). While all the other democratic institutions, such as the new court system, the electorate, the parliament, the president, did not have predecessors in the communist era and had to be invented in the newly democratic states’ topography from ground zero following the collapse of the old regime, the media were not precisely newly crafted. Rather, they carried over the norms and power relations of the old regime, and not only on a structural level but also among individuals who were part of those institutions (Sparks, 2008; Voltmer, 2012; Voltmer & Dobрева, 2009). Voltmer states:

Numerous journalists who worked under the old regime remain in their position after the regime change, and the rules and practices they have been brought up with continue to guide their work. ...Surprisingly enough, even former opposition activists who fought for the freedom of expression and the press under the old regime frequently have difficulties dealing with the new media environment...they seem to assume that under democratic circumstances the media are their “natural” allies that should support their cause.

(Voltmer, 2012, p. 235).

While old totalitarian regimes had the comfort of exercising direct control over media exploiting it as merely a propaganda tool and a mouthpiece of power, the new leaders had to mitigate the downsides of that strategy- stripping news organization of any agency and credibility they might entertain with the audiences. It also provides an unpleasant window dressing for the world to see. Hybrid regimes, therefore, approach the fourth estate differently- it's part of their much-needed façade. To serve the purpose, media in formal democracies need to remain autonomous, at least to the outsider's eye. Or as Levitsky and Way (2010) propose: “In competitive authoritarian regimes, independent media outlets are not only legal but often quite influential, and journalists—though frequently threatened and periodically attacked—often emerge as important opposition figures” (p. 57).

The closer intertwines between political and media elites has often been criticized as still one of the main sins of CEE media systems, with Bulgaria being the frontrunner in that sense (Jebril, Stetka, & Loveless, 2013; Pfetsch & Voltmer, 2012). Bajomi-Lázár (2014) coins the term “party colonization of the media” to describe the politico-media dynamics in the region. (p. 19). That accelerates the levels of political parallelism while impeding institutional autonomy of the press. With the rapid advancement of the liberal media business model following the

privatization of the media in the 90ies, commercial pressure was added to the political one. That put the fragile media system of CEE under an even more ill-fated grapple- assaulted by both business and politics. As a result, depriving them further away from any opportunity to play its essential role in the public sphere- promoting accountability and civic participation and ensuring public control over the state activities. Voltmer (2010) portrays the unflattering position of the media in many new democracies- hanging on the right balance between extreme politicization (forsaking the notion of “speaking truth to power”) and newly adopted commercialization (instilling sensationalism); “criticized for remaining too close to political power to be able to act as effective watchdogs; political reporting regarded as too opinionated to provide balanced gatekeeping; while commercial pressures on news coverage often encourage an overemphasis on the trivial and the popular at the expense of serious and sustained attention to international affairs and complex issues on the policy agenda” (p. 137-138). The distinguished fellow of Russian Media studies Maria Lipman pushes this line of thought even further shedding light on the post-communist media and its failure to exhilarate democracy: “Media cannot generate activism, if such is not there...Independent media can only work if the public demands that government be held accountable...If the public is generally indifferent and atomized, independent media will remain politically ineffective” (Lipman, 2010, p. 163).

In the post-communist captured reality, media entrepreneurship is exposed to the combined pressure of both political and economic forces –system scholars describe as “paternalist commercialism” (Beachboard & Beachboard, 2006; Splichal, 2001; Stetka, 2012; Štětka, 2013). With no clear separation between media, business, and politics (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2015; Gross, 2004), media operations are “not close to politics *or* business, but to politics, *and* business- where business *is* politics” (Smaele, 2010, p. 37). Halluin and Mancini

use the term “instrumentalization” to describe the central role of “outside actors” consuming the control they have over the media to intervene in the world of politics (D. Hallin & Mancini, 2011). A rich body of literature sees media parallelism in CEE as simultaneously a product of and a reinforcement for the immature democratic conditions in the region described herein in section 2.1 ((Dragomir, 2010; Jebril et al., 2013; Peruško & Popović, 2008; Salovaara & Juzefovics, 2012).

Media sociologist recently coined the term *state capture* to describe the phenomenon in which media independence is backsliding into direct government control, or alternatively- and more common in Eastern Europe, due to a large scale corruption and lack of financial transparency, both government and media end up being captured by vested economic interest intertwined with politics (Schiffrin, 2017). Those powerful capturers are defined as media barons, media tycoons, or simply local oligarchs. Behind many names their actions remain uniform and detrimental to media independence and pluralism- controlling the official political and media power from shadowy empires behind the scenes, leaving the appearance of normality, constitutionalism, and the rule of law as a façade (Media oligarchs go shopping - RSF, 2016). Romanian political scientist Mungiu-Pippidi (2008) defines that captured media exist to trade influence and manipulate information, as opposed to informing the public. This conceptualization fails to conform to the classic state suppression dynamics: where the government is the perpetrator and media- the victim. Instead, media practices are ranging from sheer disinformation to blackmail and smearing of political opponents, with media being used as “baseball bats”. Local interpretations of the “watchdog” function of the media mutate greatly- the press is used as an “attack dog” against foes, and a lapdog for political friends.

Power elites in competitive authoritarian regimes actively seek to suppress the media but in a subtle manner. Sustaining the democratic liberal market façade, they need a more sophisticated apparatus for eliminating checks and balances, while imitating the fourth estate. In their arsenal comes: “bribery, the selective allocation of state advertising, the manipulation of debts and taxes owed by media outlets, the fomentation of conflicts among stockholders, and restrictive press laws that facilitate the prosecution of independent and opposition journalists (Levitsky & Way, 2010, p. 59). Several authors use the concept of media capture to describe informal pressure on the media through the appointment of loyalists to top managerial positions in the former communist countries (Bajomi-Lázár, 2014).

Ultimately, in such conditions, media autonomy is largely dependent on the “individual journalists and their editorial management and media ownership, and the degree to which they demand their right to practice independent journalism” (Gross, 2004, p. 118). That was especially valid in countries like Bulgaria, which according to Splichal (2001a) has actually never experienced democracy and where the government still holds its preferential status in national radio and television with even the very fact that the process of licensing of independent national broadcasters has been decided in 1999 by a regulatory entity, directly appointed by the Prime Minister (Ivantcheva, 2000).

Same but different: Bulgaria’s troubled media system

For some time in the early 2000s, Bulgaria’s independent media market was flourishing, even though the reminiscences from the past were noticeable. Scholars note that initially, the Bulgarian media system was converting to democratization faster than other social structures, which for a while gave the media an unusually high level of legitimacy in the public eye (Milev 1996, p. 79), (Raycheva & Petev, 2003, p. 106). Raycheva (2009) maps the main steps of

decentralization and liberalization of the mass media in the late 1990s- early 2000s, parallel to the processes of democratization of the country: the emergence of a pluralistic press and commercial broadcasters; liberalization and legal regulation of the media, harmonizing the native legal framework with the EU's media regulation; technological advancements; economic developments, allowing for burgeoning market consolidation in highly competitive levels; social transformations characterized with audience fragmentation and elevating the standards and expectations for media and journalism; and professionally- a departure from the old media standards and introduction of new formats, styles, and liberal journalistic ethics, though mostly through Americanization and imitation (Ibroscheva & Stover, 2017).

The first private media to appear in Bulgaria were the party newspapers only months after the changes started, then came the liberalization and westernization of the press through international ownership influx. The first private radio was launched in 1994, with a strong emphasis on news and political programming. State television (BNT, found 1958 as part of Bulgarian Communist's Party propaganda toolkit) was reconstituted to public broadcaster in 1990-1992. Small local TV stations started appearing in the early 1990s (Bozhilova, 2019; Ibroscheva & Stover, 2017; Ivantcheva, 2000; Raycheva, 2009; Raycheva & Petev, 2003; Voltmer & Dobрева, 2009).

By the early 2000s, the broadcast media ecosystem in Bulgaria consists of one big state-funded broadcast mammoth, labeled public overnight (with almost no advertising model), and a fragmented private market with over 100 small local cable players, and about as many radio stations licensed (Bajomi-Lázár, 2014) in a small and not particularly wealthy Balkan country- population of about 6 million people, making something like 200 dollars a month per capita (National Statistical Institute). The media landscape at this period is overcrowded in the sense

that there were too many players for the size of advertising revenues (Popova 2004). In 2000, the TV advertising market amounts to less than \$22 million US dollars (Statista.com). This is when the first national private terrestrial commercial broadcaster is licensed. Amid unprecedented media attention and social concern focusing on the first ever private national broadcaster in the country, bTV, owned and operated by Rupert Murdoch's Balkan News Corporation, won its broadcasting license to create the first private national TV Network in Bulgaria. Within a year, bTV became the most popular channel among Bulgarian audiences, dominating the national air (Ibroscheva & Raicheva-Stover, 2007).

A period of commercialization and liberalization of the media pinnacles with the introduction of liberal commercial media model through bTV and expands with adding competition to the market, when the second private national player is licensed. In July of 2003, after a series of legal battles, Nova TV (New Television) was granted a national license. The station has started as a small local channel operating in the capital of Sofia in 1994, growing to the number two independent national broadcaster in 2003 (owned at the time by the Greek Antenna Media Group, owned by Greek businessman Minos Kiriakou) (Ibroscheva & Raicheva-Stover, 2008; Raycheva & Petev, 2003; Smilova et al., 2010).

Overall, Bulgaria has a well-developed transmission network and a vibrant broadcasting industry. Almost all Bulgarian households (98%) own a television set; a total of 203 TV stations are licensed, with the three national operators dominating the market- the public BNT, and the private bTV and Nova TV (Spassov, 2008). Audience analysis shows that in the late 90ies the state-owned BNT had 76% of the total viewership share, after the launch of bTV in 2001 the state television's influence crashed to 31% only, declining even further to 22 % by 2003 and 5-10 % by 2007 (Television in Europe, 2005; Bajomi-Lazar, 2014). Unlike other European nations,

with strong public broadcasters, the duel model in Bulgaria is shifted significantly in favor of the commercial private players, being not only the most popular and influential medium but also managing to fulfill a public service function mixing the commercial formula with socially responsible journalism, especially in the case of bTV (Car & Erjavec, 2007, p. 87; Lozanov & Spasov, 2008), Open Society Television in Europe Report, 2004).

According to media observers (Konrad Adenauer Foundation), Bulgaria's worrying downward trend in media freedom started in 2006, when the country was still ranked 35th in the RWB Index. Within 14 years, Bulgaria collapsed 76 positions down in the ranking – positioned 111th in the recent years, it was backlisted as the worst place in European Union related to press freedom, where according to RWB it is now dangerous to be a journalist. In the latest IREX Media Sustainability Report, several Bulgarian journalists quote the main reason for such collapse: media oligarchs and politicians controlling media coverage. Although the national media law meets European legal standards, judicial authorities do not always protect media freedom with their biased court decisions and unfair treatment of journalists (IREX). Next subchapter deals in further detail with local and regional cultural and professional conceptualizations of freedom and press freedom in particular. To end the note on the Bulgarian media system, it's worth summarizing the main reasons for the registered deterioration in the country's mediascape (Appadurai, 1990). At the heart of much of this pressure is money- the bleeding business model of traditional worldwide is all the more trenchant in smaller and poorer media markets (Bulgaria has a population of just over 7 million, compared to 38 million in Poland and 21 million in Romania, and with significantly less buying power compared to their Western counterparts). In a politicized media system, with Bulgaria being a byline name for "business parallelism (media owners involved in politics and other businesses

and strong linkages among media moguls, local political elites, and economic investors) (Örnebring, 2012; Zielonka, 2015, p. 24), such conditions inevitably bring trading with influence as a core business model in types of shrinking advertising. The disappearance of private advertising has also made the news media all the more dependent on this government money to stay afloat.

A significant decline was registered over the last several years parallel to the process of de-westernization and oligarchization of media ownership in which once international media businesses are being relocated into the hands of local media tycoons (Dragomir, 2010; Gross & Jakubowicz, 2012; Stetka, 2012). Starting the late 90ies foreign investors and transnational corporations had flooded the newly freed promised land of developing third Europe (Dragomir, 2010; Journalists, 2003; Peruško & Popović, 2008; Salovaara & Juzefovics, 2012; Stetka, 2012; Štětka, 2013). Though the process didn't follow a universal pattern, in some countries, such as Bulgaria, foreign ownership grew to dominate both print and broadcasting by the early 2000s (Stetka, 2012). After the financial crisis in 2008, a reversed trend transpired. Existing literature establishes a significant correlation between the absence of foreign ownership and the low levels of media freedom in hybrid regimes (Herrero et al., 2017; Kostadinova, 2015). When foreign entrepreneurs were leaving Bulgaria, they spoke openly of "widespread abuse of power" and "the close intertwining of oligarchs and political power, which is poisoning the market" (Novinite.com, 2010).

As foreign companies have pulled away from the media market, a process of localization and oligarchization of media ownership was instigated- first for the print media circa 2008, and eventually for electronic media sector following some political developments in 2013-2020. With the oligarchization and politicization of the media, interference by political and business

sectors in the work of individual journalists in Bulgaria is common, grounded in the country's recent totalitarian history (Beachboard & Beachboard, 2006; Journalists, 2003; Salovaara & Juzefovics, 2012; Stetka, 2012; Štětka, 2013; Wyka, 2010). Though by the beginning of the new millennium most journalists with a career under the old regime were already replaced by newcomers with greater professional esteem, owners and high-level executive loyalists linked to the old regime are still active (Voltmer & Dobрева, 2009).

Though the process of media capture and oligarchization of the economy, in general, was evident in Bulgaria since 2007, paradoxically, it is the European Union membership that made things worse. Spending 800 million euros every year for media promotion of its activities in the region, the EU practically ended up pouring money into the hands of capturers local governments, to be directly injected into supportive media, with no transparency over the selection processes in place (Dragomir, 2018). The role and effects of that subsidy are still to be evaluated by research, but journalists in Bulgaria had shared experiences indicating it can be used for editorial control (Dragomir, 2018).

Imitative Fourth Estates. Journalistic cultures and professionalization of post-communist media in Eastern Europe.

More than 100 organizations worldwide currently engage in measuring press freedom across different media systems. Three of those are global NGOs dominating the field are — Freedom House (U.S.), the International Research & Exchange Board (U.S.), and Reporters Without Borders (France). They all produce statistical indexes of press freedom, grounded in quantitative survey methodology. But press freedom — like any other democratic norm — is a social construct that emerges from collective negotiations over its meaning (Searle & Willis, 1995). Journalism as a broader context is a discursive institution on its own- it is a social

structure it has no “essence” but is rather a discourse- it exists because and as we talk about it (Foucault, 1980; Hall, 1997; Hanitzsch et al., 2019). It is therefore important that journalism as a discourse is not studied in a vacuum, but rather grounded in the social systems that it represents. In defining press-freedom, ideological abstractions intervene with specific endogenous meanings, philosophical traditions, world-views, and practices within a specific social milieu (Votmer & Wasserman, 2014). And since different cultures enter these debates with different backgrounds and underlying assumptions, emerging local conceptualizations will oftentimes stray away from the Western models. Furthermore, the very idea of freedom as individual autonomy and sovereignty is interpreted differently even within a homogeneous western context, all the more so in post-communist societies where it comes in contact with a collective mindset that respects and adhere to a strong authoritarian power, privileging the state of obedience versus the acts of resistance (Hofstede, 2001). Survival versus self-expression and collectivism versus individualism are considered opposing syndromes that are defining of national culture (Inglehart & Oyserman, 2004). The post-communist collective mindset falls into the survival-collectivist quadrant, consistent with the findings of such tendencies to be typical for poorer countries with demanding climates (Van de Vliert, 2007). It’s also been established in the cultural studies, that press repression is a symptom of a collectivistic survival syndrome, while individualistic self-expression cultures are more prone to privileging press freedom (Hofstede, 2001). Looking at the national ethnology, the desire for security before freedom and the lack of a strong democratic legacy and civil society shapes the cultural fabric of “homo sovieticus” (Michnik, 2013). This specific cultural DNA, unlike the Western individualism dominated collective mind, is suggested to be among the main reasons for the local failure of the exported Anglo-American model when it comes to individual liberties and press freedom. Jakubowicz and Sükösd (2014) propose that it

is a vital model but only for a stable society where both power elites and the public respect and holds press freedom in high esteem, as a major element of democracy. The independence of news organizations and journalists, therefore, is not an end in itself, but rather an enabling tool for citizens to take part in the democratic process and to in doing so to keep the social contract in check (Czepek & Hellwig, 2009). Furthermore, it has taken the Anglo-American system almost 200 years to reach its current stage of development, while post-communist hectic transformations had only lasted nearly two decades- and in times of permanent flux, simultaneously fighting legacies of the past while searching for successful ways of building up the political future grounded in the rule of law and vibrant civil societies. Another misconception is captured by Voltmer and Wasserman (2014): “Unlike the emerging democracies in Africa and Asia, post-communist democracies in Eastern Europe are widely regarded as part of the Western tradition... However, Eastern and Western Europe had begun to drift apart long before the Cold War divided the continent. While in Western Europe, the ideas of the Enlightenment and rapid industrialization gradually paved the way for democracy and a free press, Eastern Europe was frozen under three autocratic, mostly despotic empires – Austria, Russia, and the Ottoman Empire – causing the region to fall more and more behind in its economic, social and political development” (p. 183).

With the collapse of the Berlin Wall, post-communist cultures woke up to the historical opportunity to reclaim their democracies. And the way they went about doing it is through ‘imitative revolutions’ (Splichal, 2001). In the media realm, market liberalization and rapid influx of foreign investors have in a way paved the way for a more rapid transition- research has established a direct relationship between media ownership and press freedom in the region (Herrero et al., 2017; Kostadinova, 2015). Though some foreign proprietors learned to play the

“the game of political capitalism” (Sparks, 2014, p. 42) and to trade “political independence in exchange for government protection and political favors” (Štětka, 2013, p. 21), the overall understating captured at least among journalists in the region was that foreign investors were better equipped to sustain political pressure from local governments and to grant greater autonomy for newsrooms, contributing in such way for the democratization of the media in the region as a whole (Beachboard & Beachboard, 2006; Salovaara & Juzefovics, 2012; Štětka, 2013).

The rapid processes of professionalization also followed an imitative trajectory with a strong commercial focus that has shaped the media system in CEE of the early 2000s. In the western world and the US particularly the dominant conceptualization of journalism is grounded in the separation of powers and the notion of the Fourth Estate- that is media serves as a watchdog, as check and balances mechanism of the traditional three other branches of power- legislative, executive and judicial. It is therefore essential for the existence of preceptory democracy (Gans, 1998). This model assumes that media are “independent of the state and journalists are autonomous agents who represent the people” (Hanitzsch et al., 2019, p. 14). The US theorizing about journalism as a profession and a shared culture dates back to 1923 when after decades of social criticism and threats of government regulation of the journalism industry, the American Society of Newspaper Editors published its own set of professional standards, called The Canons of Journalism: commitment to truthfulness, clarity of information, responsibilities in forming public opinion, ethical standards in newsgathering, respect for the integrity of sources, among the shared professional conventions of the press. Journalistic codes in the United States also stress “objectivity” in reporting, a clear delineation between news and opinion, and a “wall” separating a newspaper's editorial and business functions (Editors, 1923). Though some of these ideas of the liberal democracy and specifically the major ones about

media independence and their watchdog function had crossed US borders and gained momentum in many parts of the world, local journalistic cultures interpret these norms differently, reflecting on differences between journalistic values and practices in different countries (Hanitzsch et al., 2019).

It is one of the purposes of this work then to examine the journalistic cultures of Bulgarian media using theories of professionalization of journalism as a backdrop to this inquiry. The conflict of interest locked in the very nature of the chosen market-driven journalism- serving the public or serving the bottom line is a central one for a media ecology where the press is “not close to politics *or* business, but to politics, *and* business- where business *is* politics” (Smaele, 2010, p. 58).

The attempted conceptualizing of professional roles and practices of journalism in Bulgaria will be informed by the three models of Journalism as introduced by Schudson (1999), suggesting journalists may assume advocacy, market, or trustee functions. The first describes the politicized partisan press, the second- commercially driven journalism of the popular press and broadcasting, and the third referred to the professional quality journalism that aims to look after the interest of the public in an independent way. Expanding on this, Christians, Glasser, McQuail, Nordenstreng, and White (2010) contribute to proposing four main roles of journalists: to inform (journalism as a messenger), to control (surveillance, watchdog function); to persuade (agenda-setting function), and to enact social change (preceptory or advocacy journalism, that falls in conflict with the objectivity norm and the standard of impartiality). Theories of professionalization will be used as well as a conceptual map for understanding the specific culture of Bulgarian news media, where the widely promoted moral imperative that “journalism’s first obligation is to the truth, first loyalty to the citizens, and its practitioners must

maintain an independence from those they cover” (Kovach, 2007) has been challenged by the local conditions as described in previous chapters. Jakubowicz (2007) and Gross (2004) for instance, argue that the type of journalism practiced by Eastern European journalists under the new professional system did not differ significantly from that of the old days- which is promoting their views or those of the political parties they support, succumbing to self-censorship and generally lack accountability with the audiences. “They [journalists] may perform a role approximating that of watchdogs, but not on behalf of society and the public interest, but the behalf of, and in ways dictated by, their masters, primarily reflecting power struggles and current (and changing) interests and alliances of particular power oligarchs” (Jakubowicz, 2007, p. 326). As noted in the literature, and consistent with theories of imitation, mimicking the western model of the Fourth Estates was part of a double-edged sword process- competing forces of imitating the new western prescriptions and imitating the past (Splichal, 2001). This work, therefore, wants to look at the steep press freedom decline in the region from a standpoint of lacking cultural transformations and the role of individual journalists in the dynamics captured by all press-freedom rankings. (Phillips, 2014) stated, “Journalists are not individually responsible for maintaining press freedom, but nor are they indivisible from the power structures that that [sic] they represent” (p. 65). Yet there is a big gap in literature evaluating journalistic roles, cultures and professional conventions, as they relate to the quantitatively captured disturbing media situation in CEE. Following the call more historically and culturally grounded regional evaluations of press freedom in a way of “taking ownership of an otherwise abstract and intangible ideal (Pfetsch & Voltmer, 2012, p. 81), this study wants to focus on precisely the interplay between media system, media culture, professional norms and individual journalists’ worldviews that shape up the media reality of the least free press system in European Union.

Same but different: press freedom in Bulgaria

Transformations of media systems in CEE have brought up a process of westernization of journalism but not necessarily homogenization of journalistic cultures in the region. Bulgaria in particular is stated alongside Serbia and Hungary to exhibit patterns distinctly different than those in other countries in the region, especially in terms of stronger perceived economic and organizational influence over the media (Hanitzsch et al., 2019, pp. 95-96).

As stated by Bajomi-Lázár, "Consolidation of media freedom in the society occurs only when there's an institutional support for that freedom, the media behave in a free fashion and the public is supportive of media freedom" (Bajomi-Lázár, 2014, p. 37). Expanding on this preposition, Bajomi-Lázár (2014) comes up with seven necessary conditions for media freedom to emerge and be consolidated in countries transitioning from authoritarian or totalitarian to liberal or social responsibility theoretic model (Siebert et al., 1956): institutional (the need for well-developed legal guardians for press freedom); behavioral conditions (politicians resisting their old habits to prosecute critical voices); attitudinal condition (citizens' attachment to free press as an imperative social value); the professional condition (increased professionalization and solidarity among journalists); the entrepreneurial condition (owners resisting the political pressure and protecting their business from outside influence); economic condition (richer economies with more developed media markets) and the external condition (geopolitical commitment to protecting democratic convention in the new EU members). This segment will use this framework to explore conditions for media freedom in Bulgaria:

-the institutional conditions- while initially the introduction of new media laws in Bulgaria in the 1990s had brought up a positive change and led to press freedom improving as measured by Freedom House (13 points increase in 2 years following the

first democratic Radio and Television Act, 1998) later developments diminished this achievement as the legal framework remained on paper only and institutions founded to safeguard the independence of the media (The Council for Electronic media founded in 2001) gradually developed into a government-appointed cushion- an instrument to the political status quo and not the media (IREX, (Bajomi-Lázár, 2014; Raycheva, 2009).

-the behavioral condition- the shared consensus between political actors that media freedom should be ‘the only game in town’, ensuing self-restraint of politicians when adopting and implementing media regulation was largely a foreign concept in Bulgaria. Partly, because of the most recent history of the media being born in sin and operating for half a century as a propaganda machine. Even after the democratization, actors from both media and political elites had expressed, including publicly the idea that “media had to follow the winners”¹, stemming from the widely shared authoritarian understanding of media as a mouthpiece of the government. Making an unfortunate situation worse, another distinction of the Bulgarian political landscape is the resuscitation of former communist agents of power into the new supposedly democratic conditions. As Bajomi-Lázár notes:

The former political elites of the communist era, including the former members of the secret services and in co-operation with organized crime, had successfully transformed their political power into economic power and now controlled huge parts of the market. Many of the new elites were either descendants or protégés of the old nomenklatura.

¹ The quote belongs to the BNT (Bulgaria’s Public Television) General Manager Asen Agov in the period 1992-93, who later served as a MP from the then ruling political party

Political and business interest groups formed a huge, but non-transparent network of varying alliances. (Bajomi-Lázár, 2014, p. 97)

- The attitudinal condition- suggesting that no press freedom will ever be possible unless it is citizens' firm commitment to media independence as a fundamental worth.

Stemming from conceptualization about Bulgarian civic and political culture, already discussed above, it comes as no surprise that there are very weak civic participation and democratic engagement among Bulgarian citizens, privileging obedience rather than activism (Gross, 2002). The absence of civil discourse in Central and Eastern Europe is widely recognized as a cause of "illiberal and often violent mobilization"(Dawson, 2016, p. 170).

Research has also established that Bulgaria is among the countries in the region with the weakest public sphere, where democracy is not grass rooted in the hearts and minds of its citizens (Dawson, 2016). Building capitalism has always been prioritized in Bulgaria before building a democracy (Krastev, 2007, p. 146) by both by the political elites, the electorate, and even the European observers, which for years turned a blind eye to the corruption and suppression on the press and the rule of law, at the price of the right-wing financial discipline, guaranteed by the governments in Sofia (Krastev, 2007). In terms of media trust, the public in Bulgaria is also undergoing a process of disdain and disappointment towards the media- while in 2008 news media was among the most trusted societal institutions (76% confidence), in 2008 the trust has shrunk with 63 per cents of Bulgarians perceiving media to be the victim of undue political or economic influences, and only 1 percent of the population believing the media in the country to be completely (Smilova et al., 2010)Konrad Adenauer Foundation, 2018; Alpha Research 2018). Despite the 20-year history of relatively free media in the country, the level of media literacy in

Bulgaria is low: it is the second-lowest in the EU, according to a 2009 study (Smilova et al., 2010).

- The professional condition- elaborating on the lack of professional tradition in the region, in which during the decades of communism many journalists behaved like ‘party soldiers’ rather than like ‘watchdogs of democracy’ (Éva, 2001). In Bulgaria in particular journalists and politicians though holding rather adversary views of each other, are still “also involved in a close - sometimes too close - a network of relationships that at times threatens the integrity of journalistic independence” (Dobрева, Pfetsch, & Voltmer, 2011, p. 189). The commitment to improving professional standards is evident, but the process is slow and oftentimes backsliding towards the imitation of the past (Bajomi-Lázár, 2014; Dawson, 2016; Dobрева et al., 2011; Gross, 2002; Pfetsch & Voltmer, 2012; Smilova et al., 2010; Splichal, 2001; Voltmer & Dobрева, 2009). Zankova and Kirilov (2014) claim that the media in this state are trapped by politicization and commercialization (p.126) while lacking collegiality and guild solidarity (Bajomi-Lázár, 2014). The general sentiment is that “as a result of business pressures, journalists’ professional autonomy has been lacking in Bulgaria and journalists have no voice in the media (but to) follow the policy of the newspaper or the television channel” (Bajomi-Lázár, 2014, p. 80).

According to a recent study, there are over five thousand journalists in Bulgaria, with record numbers of women representation on the job (over 70 %, compared to a global average of around 50%) (Hanitzsch et al., 2019). The authors of the study reflect on the existing conflict between reality and dream in regards to how journalists in the country go about their professional roles: “In transitional societies such as Bulgaria journalists’ sense of editorial autonomy might appear to be strong, while everyday practices reflect a very different experience” (p. 109). The

dominant roles Bulgarian journalists adapt according to the Worlds of Journalism 2019 study are interventionistic – seeing themselves as agents of social change and a source of support for national developments. That prevails in the collective mind of local reporters before their monitorial role: to inform and provide checks and balances for the places of power. Still, they don't envision themselves as promoters or collaborators of the government for the greater good, which is typical for Russian journalists for example (Hanitzsch et al., 2019; Slavtcheva-Petkova, 2017).

An Open Society report evaluates the overall state of journalism in Bulgaria as “objective, but selective”, meaning that journalistic content that gets published tends to be professional and balanced, but there are certain topics that are absent from the public agenda if they don't comply with the commercial and/or political interest of the media owners (Open Society, 2003).

- The entrepreneurial condition- especially critical in the case of Bulgaria, where immediately after the liberalization of the media market all other major TV channels landed under foreign ownership which is systematically changing in recent years characterized by rapid fluctuations in the market share of individual media outlets (Dobrev et al., 2011, p. 179). With foreign media investors appearing to be better equipped to grant editorial autonomy using credibility as a commodity, hence shielding the autonomy of their newsroom (Beachboard & Beachboard, 2006; Salovaara & Juzefovics, 2012; Štětko, 2013), the new developments of localization and oligarchization of media ownership are observed with nervous anticipation in the already blacklisted for its media freedom Balkan country (Reporters without Borders, 2019).

-The economic condition- as a general rule, the poorer the economy, the less money is spent on advertising, the lesser conditions for media independence (Sparks, 2012). This claim is supported by indirect evidence quoted by Bajomi-Lázár (2014): countries in the region with higher per capita GDP, such as Estonia and the Czech Republic performed better according to the Freedom House press freedom index, compared to those with lower per capita GDP. Bulgaria is among the countries with the lowest GDP in the region (6,325 US dollars per capita).

-The external condition - when political power is concentrated in the hands of a party or party coalition which tends to undermine and challenge internal checks and balances, external political actors may come to play an increased role in safeguarding media freedom. EU is therefore an important factor for potential improvements in the press freedom realm in Bulgaria. Though so far nothing much has been done, but providing the government with the stick and the carrot by placing millions of EU subsidies for the media to be directly distributed as it sees fit (Dragomir, 2018), the most recent publications suggest that EU interference might be nearing- with Brussels announcing an intention to be conditioning its funding for member-states upon the protection of democracy, free press and the rule of law (Damm, 2020). There is currently an ongoing debate as to whether there should be access to EU funds by member-countries that are not abiding by the principles of the rule of law. Limiting EU funding especially where it is being abused to fuel a corrupt system, rather than to harmonize it with the euro-liberal-ideal, could be of help and is one of the recommendations made by the Freedom House 2020 Nations in Transit Report.

Conceivably, the more of the above mentioned seven conditions are met, the greater the risk for a country's media freedom. In Bulgaria all 7 conditions are in the red-flag zone making the country a cogent case for exploring the deterioration of press freedom as it affects and is being affected by professional journalists and news organizations.

Theoretical framework- between the Four Theories and the Three Models. Towards national theorizing of Bulgaria's regressive media and declining journalism

Any piece of scholarship on international media systems inevitably goes back to the Four theories of the press and the way Siebert et al. (1956) differentiated layouts of media systems worldwide as they relate to political power (libertarian, authoritarian, social responsibility and soviet communism media system). Clearly, a child of its era the classic theory conceptualizes the world media ecosystem from a Western perspective. Some critics state that the work stems from a certain ideological groundings that then lead to problematic theoretical assumptions (Curran, 2011; McQuail, 1994; Sparks, 1998). Dominating the comparative media studies in the last forty years, the study is not without a reason one of the most cited pieces of media scholarship, but at the same time one of the most critiqued as well. Among the widespread critiques: as any piece of normative prescription, the study falls short in providing analytical insights about different media system types; it lacks empiricism, representing a rather idealistic model of what the press should be like as opposed to what it actually is in different parts of the world and why so; it's grounded in the outdated "us versus them" narrative of the Cold War schism, privileging the capitalist philosophy of both media and politics; it focuses on state- media relationship solely, neglecting other institutions shaping media system such as media ownership, market forces, local cultures- both of audiences and journalists themselves. With all those critiques widely addressed in the literature (Curran, 2011; Gunaratne, 2005; D. C. Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Jensen & Neuman,

2013; McQuail, 1994; Park & Curran, 2000; Sparks, 1998), it is still consensual among the scholarly community, that the Four Theories' main contribution to the field is introducing this concept of *a press system* and combining it with existing philosophies of politics; suggesting the idea that "the press always takes on the form and coloration of the social and political structures within which it operates" (p. 1-2).

This notion though theoretically substantial comes short of defining much less explaining or predicting the media systems of Eastern Europe and the transitional democracies following the collapse of the Berlin Wall. At the time when the scholarship was conceived, those parts of the globe were depicted in the Soviet Communism model (now pretty much extinct), but currently one can argue they manifest elements of all of the other Three systems, while its specific in-depth theoretical conceptualization is still to a big degree fallen prey to overgeneralization and lack of empirically grounded nation-specific research (Camaj, 2016; Gross, 2002, 2008; Jakubowicz & Sükösd, 2014; Lauk, 2008). The Four theories practically only describe what an ideal of a media system should look like under different political settings, but none of the four theories capture empirically the realities of a specific existing media system. That's one of the main lines of criticism and repetitive scholarly calls for "a proper burial" of The Four Theories (D. C. Hallin & Mancini, 2004) and for a more cultural and humancentric approach instead (Gunaratne, 2005).

Privileging the Western media model, Siebert et al. (1956) support the liberal assumption that freedom of the press is guaranteed if the news industry is free to discuss political matters without state suppression (Christians et al., 2010). Consequently, they don't come even close to reflect on the influential power of corporate capital and how it possibly affects press freedom and media systems as well, or the individual roles and symbolic powers of journalists and

professional communities within the process, much less the local culture and the audiences' influence. Besides the historical limitations of the theory (strictly speaking those are unavoidable for any piece of scholarship), a number of communication-specific assumptions of the time need to be revisited at the current momentum: the rather mechanistic one-way transmission model, the singular voice of the propagandist, the passive and atomistic audience, and the taken-for-granted context of the nation-state (Jensen & Neuman, 2013). All of these elements seem a bit archaic in the age of digital globalization and many-to-many communication through social media, and against the background of political and cultural controversies frequently transcending national borders.

With that in mind, different scholars have been proposing reevaluations and contemporary update to the landmark piece of comparative media system studies. The most prominent so far is the suggested Three models of media and politics by D. C. Hallin and Mancini (2004). Finding the four theory model to be somewhat outdated, they studied empirically through secondary analysis and aggregated data 18 nations from Europe and North America, adding into consideration not just existing political order and the role of the state with regards to the media, but also variables such as the structure of the media market (maturity and level of consolidation, the relative importance of print vs television within the media mix); political parallelism (the extent to which media are neutral/apolitical or instrumentalized by political power in different parts of the world); professionalization of journalism was considered for the first time in media studies (degree of autonomy, presence, and adherence to formal professional and ethical norms, public service orientation of journalism, etc.) With all the enriched instrumentation the authors propose three different types of global media system:

- Democratic Corporatist- North/Central European – mass newspaper circulation, historically strong party press, with a shift towards the commercial press, substantial autonomy of public broadcasting, strong professionalization and self-regulation; strong state intervention, but with production for press freedom, press subsidies in Scandinavia, a strong public broadcaster. Found in Austria, Belgium, Germany, Netherlands, Norway. Sweden, Switzerland
- North Atlantic- Liberal Model- medium newspaper circulation, neutral commercial press, fact-oriented journalism, strong professionalization, non-institutional self-regulation, market dominance, except for strong public broadcaster in the UK. USA, UK, Canada, Ireland
- Mediterranean - Polarized Pluralist model (low newspaper circulation, elitist press, advocacy opinionated journalism, weak professionalization, and instrumentalization; strong state intervention in the media). Found in France, Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain

Though empirically refined, the Polarized Pluralist model appears as a “catch-all category for media systems outside the Western world of established democracies” (Vltmer, 2012, p. 225). That brings the theory to limitations and issues with both inclusivity- clustering all non-western media systems together without accounting for the heterogeneous European media landscape, and exclusivity of Central and Eastern European states from the heroized model hence – the limited validity of attributing those countries to a certain typology (Czeppek & Hellwig, 2009; Vltmer, 2012).

Scholars from within Central and Eastern Europe have addressed the need for a more indigenous conceptualization of the regional press system (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2015; Peruško et al., 2013, 2020; Peruško et al., 2012). The main classifications that inform this work belong to:

- Peruško et al. (2012) suggesting that audiences and local cultures play an important role in the media system theorizing and putting to an end the East-West separation of the media. She suggests three models of the media in Europe: Eastern, Mainstream European, and Nordic. Interesting enough, though, those three models don't replicate the geography of Europe- for example, eastern post-soviet countries such as Czech, Poland, Slovenia, and Slovakia are clustered with established liberal media systems such as Austria, Germany, France, and even the UK who is considered among the flagship media system models worldwide. This study challenges the main proposition of the Four Theories and the Three Models – namely that the soviet past is the answer to all questions when categorizing media systems.
- Dobek-Ostrowska (2015) goes in depth in regional categorizing of different media models within Central and Eastern Europe. A quarter of a century after the collapse of communism, and with understanding totalitarian regime had different characteristics across Eastern Europe, and no two countries in the region experienced the same processes of transformation (Voltmer, 2012), she runs a secondary data analysis to validate a comprehensive theoretical model listing Four types of Media in Central and Eastern Europe.
 - Hybrid Liberal (The Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia, and the Baltics)- this type of media system is the closest Central and Eastern Europe gets to the Western Liberal Media model, characterized by strong commercialization, more

stable economies, and democracies, and a lack of or relatively weak politicization compared to other parts of the region

- Politicized Media Model (Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Romania, and Serbia) – weak markets, poorer countries, strong politicization, and political parallelism, the prevailing instrumentalization of the media
- Media in transition Model (Macedonia, Montenegro, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo) – the poorest parts of Europe, small and fragmented media market, lack of foreign media investments, instead the control over media is in the hands of political elites, journalistic autonomy is limited by business leaders and the government, weak democratic standards are accompanied by very low journalistic professionalism
- The Authoritarian Model (Belarus and Russia)- openly authoritarian regimes with centralized censorship and attacks towards individual journalists. This model aligns with the classic Authoritarian Rationale for the media from the Four Theories (Siebert et al., 1956)

It is interesting to note here that though unexplored by Dobek-Ostrowska (2015) at the time, the possibility of countries moving between stages or models is not one that needs not be undermined. Bulgaria is a classic example, deteriorating in recent years from Politicized Media second-tier Model to many of the characteristics of the Media in Transition Model. This dissertation will engage therefore with national theorizing of the Bulgarian press system responding to the need for lesser generalizations and more local conceptualizations of media and press freedom, from a historical and cultural perspective (Gunaratne, 2005).

While normative approach regarding media and democracy has provided important insights into the democratization of CEE and its media system (Bajomi-Lázár, 2014; Berend & Bugarcic, 2015; Dobek-Ostrowska, 2015; Downey & Mihelj, 2012; Dragomir, 2010; Gross, 2002, 2004, 2008; Gross & Jakubowicz, 2012; Howard, 2003; Jakubowicz, 2007; Journalists, 2003; Mueller, 2014; Stetka, 2012), it did very little to address the Why question- Why are the media systems in Eastern Europe so different from those in the Western part? Why are they so different between different states in the region? While early research in this area was focusing on finding commonalities between all post-socialist countries in terms of their transitioning media systems ((Sparks, 1998; Splichal, 2001), later the focus shifted to finding differences and the growing need to understand the diversity within the group of countries. Adding a qualitative cultural element to the understanding of a press system, currently being studied predominantly quantitatively especially as far as press freedom goes, is in line with the recent calls for a more humanistic approach (Gunaratne, 2005) and from the older normative-critical approach to media system theorizing, which aims at generalizing particular concepts of how media systems should function within society, to a newer analytical approach, which attempts to explain the emergence of and changes to media structures and institutions and their impact on media performance and audience behavior (Seethaler & Moy, 2017).

Moving Eastern European media studies from the descriptive to the explanatory modality is a significant paradigm shift and a promising development a step closer to generating a more prescriptive theory of post-socialist media – providing further knowledge of how when different elements of the system evolve the system itself reinvent itself.

Clearly, in investigating the changes in the media systems broader theories of social change could be employed- dealing with the philosophical matter of how exactly social change

occurs? One classic approach here is the **modernization theory**, seeing a change in a linear fashion – with societies transitioning from traditional-transitional-to modern (Giddens & Pierson, 1998). To inform our studies a range of other theories dealing with social change could be adopted: such as globalization, Americanization of the media (Elteren, 2006) as well as imitation theories (De Tarde, 1903).

With the influx of US-owned media in the region, the export of journalistic culture and imitative strategies put in place to resemble the desired model media system, have affected media production and distribution in the importing national systems. Americanization of the media could help explain the modern-day dynamics, adding one very missing variable to the Four theories preposition- the factor of media ownership. Findings about foreign ownership affecting directly press freedom (Peruško et al., 2013) in conjunction with recent finding about collapsing democratic quality and media independence in some of the CEE countries parallel to the processes of de-westernization and localization (oligarchization of media ownership) call for a deeper evaluation of the dynamics between those two concepts. By choosing the interpretivist paradigm of inquiry and looking into the lived experiences and emic data my research agenda is to propose a theory of media decline in CEE – evaluating journalistic norms and practices contributing to both the rise and fall of journalistic quality, particularly in Bulgaria (2000-2020).

The myriad of theoretical propositions that are brought up into consideration here as well as their multidisciplinary seek for expanding the "theoretical sensitivity" of the proposed work. Glaser and Strauss (1967) coined the term to denote the researcher's ability to make truthful connections between a rich foundation of theoretical knowledge and the data emerging from the field while using the existing theoretical framework to suggest “insight, direction and a useful list of initial concepts” (p. 40). Under the selected constructivist grounded theory paradigm,

generating theory and doing social research are seen as two parts of the same process- where collecting data and categorizing it into conceptual categories happen in constant interplay with comparing with both previous observations and existing scholarship, into formulating a new theoretical statement (Glaser, Strauss, & Strutzel, 1968).

This study brings cultural diversity to the frontline proposing a grounded theory approach to the Bulgarian media system and local professional journalistic cultures– as it affects and is being affected by the historical deterioration of press freedom indicators for a post-communist country. A recent World of Journalism study of over 20 thousand journalists in 67 countries concludes that regardless of forces of globalization, “journalistic culture is still articulated and enacted within national spaces” (Hanitzsch et al., 2019, p. 18). Hence journalists still operate within a political and social frame marked by national boundaries, not regional (Wasserman & de Beer, 2009), it only makes sense then that such are studied in the same setting they occur. In doing so this work aims to address several identified gaps in the existing literature:

- The lack of “concrete” bottom-up studies on Americanization focusing on journalism education, the international experience of local journalists, and the role of foreign consultants (D. Hallin & Mancini, 2011)
- The need for a better understanding of the new non-democratic and neo-authoritarian outcomes in Eastern Europe after the collapse of communism in a way to capture the full (rather than hoped for) set of alternatives open to post–Cold War transitional regimes (Levitsky & Way, 2010)
- The need for de-westernization of media system studies and avoiding the overgeneralization assumed by existing comparative normative theories with neglect to specific professional and social cultures and historical settings (Park &

Curran, 2000) as well as increasing the understanding of westernization from a native perspective, acknowledging the agency of the recipient countries to “accept, adapt and reject certain norms “(Hanitzsch et al., 2019, p. 12)

- The need for a “fresh view on the rise of ‘domesticated’ forms of journalism in new democracies as a way of ensuring the significance and viability of press freedom in different cultural and political contexts” (Voltmer & Wasserman, 2014)
- The lack of national/regional or comparative model or theory to explain how the media change in the transition and transformation from an authoritarian regime to a democratic one, and what influences these processes (Gross, 2002) and in addition, reflection to the new developments in CEE – how and under what circumstances are those transformations backsliding or reverse trajectories?

In responding to those identified shortcomings of comparative media study literature, this research will be guided by the following.

Research Questions

1. What are the shared professional conventions among Bulgarian broadcast journalists?
2. How is the professional culture of Bulgarian journalists changing parallel to the press freedom decline registered by Reporter Without Borders?
3. What are the main factors contributing to the registered decline of press freedom?

It is the primary purpose of this research to provide a complex social construct such as press freedom with a more local meaning within a transitional post-communist media system of Bulgaria, in a way of owning and internalizing this critical but otherwise abstract and impalpable idea (Voltmer, 2012). Focusing on the national journalistic culture of Bulgaria specifically- the

country with the fastest press freedom and democratic decay in Europe is a starting point for defining professional journalism in Eastern Europe and exploring the idea of “journalistic milieus” in the region, as suggested by the global Worlds of Journalism Study (Hanitzsch et al., 2019).² By doing so the researcher will also be extending on existing media system literature by introducing Regressive Media Model as a broader theoretical construct to be tested here and later- adapted, refined, and further advanced in future research.

² In the study including journalists from 76 countries the authors propose the idea of national theorizing of professional cultures, as defined in the interplay between values and practices in different countries and introduce the idea of “cultural milieus” – or neighboring cultures of journalists broadly sharing similar professional views. (p. 33)

CHAPTER 3:

METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study applies a qualitative design and grounded theory approach to addressing press freedom interpretations and the professional culture of journalists in Bulgaria. Qualitative methodology spurred a scientific revolution amid the twentieth century's cultural turn, a time before which the social sciences were heavily dominated by quantitative methodology borrowed from the toolkit of natural sciences and mainly concerned with investigating phenomena that are objectively observable and quantifiable (Brennen, 2017; Denzin, Lincoln, & Guba, 2005; Lindlof & Taylor, 2017; Patton, 1990; *The Sage encyclopedia of qualitative research methods*, 2008; Schwandt, 1994; Strauss, 1998). Gradually over the last decades, the scientific community has begun to accept the idea that when studying humans and their behaviors, beliefs, processes, and practices, a different approach might be needed. The interpretivist paradigm was developed as a way to understand why things are the way they, what types of interactions between different social actors interpret the manifested reality, and what motivates social actors for their behavior (Geertz, 1973; Schwandt, 1994). In other words, qualitative methodology is best suited to provide the tools needed for explaining "how people create what is distinctively human-civilizations and culture" (Christians & Carey, 1989, p. 355).

In general, qualitative research in the human sciences rests on the relativistic assumption that there is not one single tangible reality, that is independent of human perceptions. Rather, there are multiple realities constructed by human beings and their subjective experiences and

negotiations of the phenomenon of interest, who based on their “stock of knowledge at hand”(Schutz, 1970, p. 118), represent and interpret those experiences as a byproduct of their meaning-making processes, reflective of different ideologies, beliefs, perspectives or even stereotypes, which then in return construe their individual reality (Christians & Carey, 1989; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Krauss, 2005; Lindlof & Taylor, 2017; Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). The nature of this work calls for qualitative evaluation, as both press freedom and professional journalistic cultures are complex social constructs that do not possess universal meanings but are influenced by cultural traditions, historical experiences, and political values (Hofstede, 2001; D. H. Weaver & Willnat, 2012). It can be assumed that this is particularly the case in non-Western contexts and in emerging democracies, where a consensus about the meaning of basic norms such as rule of law and democracy has not yet been found (see Hallin and Mancini, 2012) and the construal of professional culture follows mostly imitative patterns (Splichal, 2001). Therefore, social norms such as press freedom and journalistic professionalism are not expected to be static, generalizable, and omnipresent but are rather continuously and collectively negotiated and re-created between individual actors and macro-level power structures (in the media realm those would be individual journalists and news media, the political establishment, audiences, etc.), expected to emerge into some specific historically and culturally grounded local meaning that is highly contingent on the specific local culture in which it develops, and hence likely to diverge in many respects from those conceptualized in the established western democracies (Berger & Luckmann, 1991; Searle & Willis, 1995; Voltmer & Wasserman, 2014; D. H. Weaver & Willnat, 2012).

Empirical research shows that journalistic cultures differ significantly around the world (Hanitzsch, 2007; Weaver, 1998). As Jakubowicz (2007) stated, the characteristic of the media in

post-communist states are specific to the culture, traditions, and conditions of the transformation and greatly differ from one system to another, even though they are locked in the same relatively compact socio-political area of the world. In recent decades many media sociologists have called for a more indigenous regional and national re-evaluations and conceptualization of national media systems and journalistic independence in contrast with the dominant comparative media system studies approach (Christians et al., 2010; Gross, 2008; D. Hallin & Mancini, 2011; D. C. Hallin & Mancini, 2012; Herrero et al., 2017; Peruško & Popović, 2008; Peruško et al., 2020). Scholars have also been calling for a more cultural and historically grounded perspective to post-communist media studies too (Curran, 2011; Gunaratne, 2005). Seethaler and Moy (2017) even suggest that a paradigm shift is needed- away from prescriptive and idealistic normative critical theorizing to a newer analytical design focusing on the why question- why things are changing so dramatically with press freedom worldwide.

This piece of scholarship attempts to respond to those calls and to forward media system knowledge into a more sophisticated and historically and culturally grounded theorizing of the national media systems. In this case, this manuscript seeks to focus on the media system of Bulgaria in its post-communist years, away from years of overgeneralization and simplifications abandoning the one-size-fits-all approach.

With journalistic culture at its focal point, this work grounds itself in interpretivism and its sociocultural tradition and symbolic interactionism- studying the relationships between micro-level, individual experiences and practices of communication, and micro-level structures that influence individuals' performance (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017). This approach is suitable for studying the relationship between journalists and their attempted professional culture and

practices in recent years and the broader multi-institutional structure of media and politics in a social environment that has been in a permanent flux over the last couple of decades.

In their recent study the *Worlds of Journalism*, Hanitzsch et al. (2019) describe journalism as a “discursive institution”, meaning that it has no “essence”: “it exists because and as we talk about it” (p.30-31). This is where qualitative investigation of specific journalistic cultures come to make a significant contribution, exploring the created native discourses by looking at not only how journalists understand their professional autonomy but also looking into how those ideas are put into practice (Faucault 1980, Hall 1997). Such discourses, researchers claim, cannot be understood in isolation; instead, they need to be explored in the sociocultural value systems dominant for a given society (Hanitzsch et al., p. 39).

The predominant methodological approach adopted in prior freedom of the press national conceptualization, the greatest segment of CEE media literature so far has been drowned upon aggregated secondary data analysis and overall – from post-positivist or normative comparative designs, focusing on quantitative methods, hence the overgeneralization. As Krauss (2005) suggests, quantification is limited in nature, looking only at one small portion of reality and depriving the phenomenon under investigation from some of its personal meanings and its context- both of those of critical importance for understanding complex social concepts. One of the limitations of this approach, focusing on using standardized survey instruments is that it remains unclear how respondents actually understand central terms that are used in the questionnaire (Votmer & Wasserman, 2014). To address those shortcomings, this work adopts a qualitative framework and long interviews as a method to become immersed in the phenomena studied, moving into the culture under investigation and experience what it is like to be a part of it (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017; Patton, 1990; Schwandt, 1994; Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007;

Tracy, 2010). Doing a qualitative interpretive study is appropriate because as Donsbach (2004) states most of the work journalists do is about perceptions and judgments; moreover, how they see and interpret reality is encoded in their work (p. 135). Hence, these responses are the product of their meaning-making processes and signifying practices (see Stuart Hall).

This study aims to understand the conceptual maps employed by journalists and their signifying experiences within the context of an unstructured press system and a democracy that is regarded as in a state of permanent flux over the last two decades. My conceptual framework involves exploring professional practices, principles, and emic experiences of journalists and their sense-making about their professional mission, ethics, and role in society (Dewey, 1933; Frankl, 1963; Krauss, 2005; Schutz, 1970). In addressing the cultural fabric of journalism and journalists lived experiences of press freedom or lack thereof, this work seeks to explore the professional conventions of journalism in Bulgaria as related to the vast transformations in the local media ecology in the period 2000-2020 – times of liberalization, and reconciling between the ideal of commercial market-driven journalism and the reality of growing democratic decay and backsliding totalitarian instincts from both the society and the political establishment.

Long in-depth interviews

To provide for a *naturalistic* description of participants' observations, in-depth interviewing will be utilized, as "social feelings are most fully expressed in actual situations and must be recovered unobtrusively" (Christians & Carey, 1989, p. 361). Long in-depth interviews are captured in the literature as a "notably unique methodology for getting under the surface of mundane experiences" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017, p. 222); also as one of the most powerful methods capable of taking us "into the mental world of the individual to glimpse the categories and logical scaffolding by which he or she sees a phenomenon" (McCracken, 1988, p. 25). This approach

provides a wide range of information and a deeper understanding of the phenomenon studied. Interviews are particularly well suited to understanding people's experience, knowledge, and world views; and for getting under the surface of mundane experience (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017). Interviews also enable participants to provide accounts that Scott and Lyman (1968) define as excuses or justifications for social conduct. According to Lazarsfeld (1944) the goal of the respondent interview is to clarify the meaning of respondents' answers (p. 40); to determine "what influenced a person to hold certain opinions or act in a certain way" (p.42); to "single out the decisive aspects of an opinion" (p. 41) and in doing so to grasp a more cohesive understanding of the complexity of one's attitudes, by decoding the "motivational interpretations" (p. 45), i.e. what contributes to a firm conviction, what motivates actions and beliefs. Accounted lived interpretations display an opportunity for the concurrence of multiple realities and the emergence of common characteristics to explain the phenomenon in question (Christians & Carey, 1989).

Data collection started in the summer of 2019 and continued throughout June 2020. The exact number of participants is determined based on the level of saturation and redundancy (Morrison, Haley, Sheehan, & Taylor, 2011). A total of 20 interviews have been conducted. Provided accounts have been codified and anonymized to ensure participants' protection. A detailed description of participants and the consent form used for this study are attached to this work (Appendix 2). A discussion guide was used by the researcher for moderating the interviews (appendix 2 B) as suggested by Patton (1990) and McCracken (1988): to "enable the researcher to understand and capture the points of view of other people without predetermining those points of view through a prior selection of questionnaire categories" (Patton, 1990, p. 22). To ensure credibility, members' validation is sought at the final phase of data collection.

Sampling

The researcher conducted 20 interviews with journalists, editors, and station managers from the two most influential TV stations in Bulgaria – the commercial national broadcasting leaders bTV and Nova. These are all private, commercial media launched after the political changes. The reason the researcher concentrated on these media is that they are all perceived to host a modern type of Bulgarian journalism as conceptualized after the communist years, and they are also perceived to have the greatest influence on public opinion and hence the democratic processes in the country. The majority of participants were selected based upon their experience with journalistic cultures in both TV stations and to be able to draw a comparison. An equal number of journalists-participants are representing exclusively one of the two news organizations (bTV- 6 and Nova- 6). All the rest have had experiences in both main channels, during different historical moments, and have been experiencing firsthand the decline of press freedom, registered by all the existing international indexes (Reporters without Borders, Freedom House, IREX, Committee to protect Journalism). Drawing from the “emic” of their “lived experiences” (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Lindlof & Taylor, 2017; Schwandt, 1994; Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007) this study pursues a phenomenology approach to pursuing the suggested inquiry. The exact number of participants was determined based on the level of saturation and information redundancy (Morrison, Haley, Sheehan, & Taylor, 2011). Definition of journalists for the purposes of this study has been limited to those who have at least some editorial responsibility for the content that they produce and earn at least 50 % of their income from paid labor for a news organization (Hanitzsch et al., 2019; D. Weaver, Drew, & Wilhoit, 1986). The participant mix ended up encompassing journalists from political, economic, social, cultural, and international beats. The participants were contacted by the researcher based on her prior

knowledge of the professional community of which she was part of for more than 18 years as a broadcast news producer in Bulgaria (1999-2018). Initial contact was performed via email or phone, and interviews were conducted either in person or via remote online technology due to the COVID- 19 pandemic interference with the fieldwork timeframe. All interviews with local media representatives were conducted and transcribed by the researcher in Bulgarian and afterward translated into English for the purposes of this study. Two non-native speakers representing international management/consultants were interviewed in English. Bulgarian was used as a first language for the complete research process, including the coding and analysis phase, with the researcher translating the quotes used in the analysis. Bulgarian is the researcher's native language, which makes the strategy suggested most appropriate. Prior communication research has established the precedent of choosing to analyze interviews in the original language they were conducted with the justification that doing so preserves the authentic meanings and the emic nature of the investigated phenomena (R. E. Taylor, Hoy, & Haley, 1996).

Grounded Theory Approach

This inquiry aims to develop theory from qualitative data as suggested by Glaser and Strauss and the Grounded Theory method they had introduced (Glaser et al., 1968). Their fundamental work, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, articulates a new course for qualitative research in sociology and beyond and leaves a lasting methodological standard that resisted the hegemony of quantitative methods and changed the status of qualitative research altogether. Grounded theory is celebrated for bridging the gap between the mid-century grand theory construction that failed to explain empirical phenomena (applicable to the classic Four Theory of

the Press discussed in prior chapters) and the failure of later narrow empirical quantitative studies to generate solid theoretical propositions (Glaser & Strauss, 2017).

The main distinction of grounded theory as a method is that it centers itself around an inductive qualitative inquiry, contesting the crisp divisions between data collection and data analysis, seeing them instead as two sides of the same process (Corbin, 2008; Glaser et al., 1968).

The grounded theory method then features generating theoretical value through a continuous and rigorous interplay between data collection and data analysis (Corbin, 2008; Strauss, 1998). As Tracy (2010) skillfully posits “a researcher with a head full of theories, and a case full of abundant data is best prepared to see nuance and complexity” (p. 841).

Acknowledging prior theories, therefore, plays a critical role in this methodological approach, as incoming data is measured against existing literature in producing novel theorizing of the investigated phenomenon (hence the exhaustive literature review provided in previous chapters).

Glaser and Strauss (1967) coined the term "theoretical sensitivity" to denote the researcher's ability to make connections between existing prior awareness and expertise and connecting it with emerging field data in generating a new theory. In this process, Glaser et al. (1968) claim “previous identified theoretical framework can provide insight, direction and a useful list of initial concepts” (p. 40).

Sources of data in this study will be considered the transcribed interviews with participants as well as field observations and additional document analysis (letters, emails, historical accounts, internal documentation made accessible, and media content). Data will be analyzed inductively, searching the interview transcripts for common topics and categories

(Childers, Haley, & McMillan 2018; Goetz & LeCompte, 1984) which then will be used to draw upon theoretical propositions.

Charmaz (2006) defines coding in grounded theory as consisting of two main phases—the initial or line by line coding phase, where the researcher gets immersed in the data and attempts to see it through the emic experiences of the participants and identifies the emerging patterns, and the selective phase, where the most significant or frequent initial codes are used to prioritize the large amounts of data into suggesting a theoretical value (Charmaz, 2006, p. 46). Those theoretical categories are defined by Corbin and Strauss (2008) as items with a higher level of abstraction, which, though less specific, possess a greater explanatory and/or predictive power. Strauss and Corbin (1998) and Corbin and Strauss (2008) refer to the first level of coding as axial coding that connects categories to subcategories (concepts) and the second level of coding as selective or theoretical coding (Strauss & Corbin, 2008).

For assessing the quality of a grounded theory, Charmaz (2005) proposes the following criteria that will inform this study: credibility (related to the researcher's familiarity with the topic grounded in deep and rich data from the field), originality (significant contribution of new insights on the studied topic), resonance (transferability of findings and to what extent findings resonate with the members of a particular community), and finally usefulness (how the suggested knowledge contributes to bettering the society). The researcher is convinced that the study suggested here meets those standards, additional rationale for which will be provided in the conclusion section. Bryant and Charmaz (2007) suggest that constructivist grounded theory assumes that both the research process and the studied world are socially constructed through actions, but that historical and social conditions constrain these actions. The constructivist version of grounded theory recognizes that the researcher plays an active and vital role in the

research process.

Reflexivity statement

Within the grounded theory research tradition, Creswell and Miller (2000) note the importance of researchers' acknowledging their beliefs and biases early in the research process to allow readers to understand their positions, and then 'bracket or suspend those researcher biases as the study proceeds' (p. 127). In a way of transparency, the researcher would like to acknowledge her own knowledge and perceptions of the phenomenon under investigation- having 18 years of experience as a journalist in Bulgaria. Engaged as both TV news reporter, producer, and news director throughout her career, the investigator holds ethnographic observations and prior participation in the local journalistic culture studied hereby. I enter this investigation being a white, middle-class woman, who had occupied a position of power in the field of my study and has experienced both the external and internal pressure affecting press freedom and professionalization of the local journalistic culture. Prior experience has enhanced my appreciation for press freedom and independent journalism as a core value which is to be considered as a preexisting belief that could affect the conducted observations. My previous involvement in the area has also facilitated access to the participants as well as made them more comfortable to discuss issues of professional and business sensitivity such as editorial policies and exercised external pressure with an "insider", with whom they could talk openly about their lived experiences. With that said, researcher's prior journalistic experiences and professional dealings striving to adhere to standards of ethical reporting had raised her awareness of checking aside opinions from data and subscribing to neutrality in reporting, which had enhanced her awareness of her role in the process and compelled her to acknowledge potential biases.

The researcher would also like to acknowledge her prior journalistic training is dominated by the commercial values of the western media model and more specifically the US model of market broadcast journalism. Having grown with the communist media model in my youth formative years, having studied Journalism and Mass Communication at The Sofia University during the infancy of the free press in my country (circa 2000), it's worth recognizing that I've gained by deepest understanding and my initial first hand experiences of what independent media should look and act like mainly from different US-led trainings and educational programs both at home and abroad. Hence, some privileging of the US commercial media models though inevitable (mainly for their greater independence from political intervention), does not amplify to a case of idealizing and undermining its overt shortcomings (such as extreme commercialism, leading to sensationalism and neglecting of the public interest). It's therefore important to establish that the researcher does conceptualize western media paradigm as inherently more autonomous from political interference at least, hence freer in the narrow definition of the First Amendment- independent from government. But she does not use The Western Model as an absolute ideal, much like it was celebrated in ideology of western dominated post-cold-war literature. The most recent experiences of the researcher with the current US media and politics (2017-2021) has led her to recognize on a more personal level that the favored western system as seen by the eyes of the outsider, is also more compromised when looked from within- both by its commercial directions putting profit before public interest, and also by the extreme polarization and politicization of the media and audiences in the post-truth realities.

Given the nature of the researcher as an instrument (McCracken, 1988), a process of bracketing will be designed to mitigate potential preconceptions that may taint the research

process that is being integrated into the dissertation research design. Bracketing is a self-reflective process, in which “researchers recognize and set aside (but do not abandon) their a priori knowledge and assumptions, with the analytic goal of attending to the participants’ accounts with an open mind” (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007, p. 89). Being reflexive in conducting bracketing in qualitative research is vital as its goal is to understand the views of the participants instead of manipulating them to fit our own. Also, bracketing helps the researcher to set aside prior research knowledge and findings he’s come across, as although prior knowledge is not a bias per say, it can influence the way researcher looks at their data and it can result into twisting the data to fit existing literature, which could be tainting to the original research intended. To achieve that level of intellectual emancipation here, the researcher wrote memos during the data collection and the analysis, which will be provided in a final epoche report to this work. Corbin and Strauss (2008) propose this method as a tool for checking out and recognizing the researcher’s own thoughts, understanding, and biases. The memos, as suggested by the literature, are intended as an “internal dialog” (p. 118) to be used in the analytical process to differentiate between participants’ accounts and experiences and the researcher’s reaction and reflections on those (Corbin, 2008).

CHAPTER 4:

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This dissertation delves into the world of contemporary issues of journalism and press freedom. To pursue that inquiry, I am adopting qualitative grounded theory methodology. The main purpose behind this theoretical methodology is to explore and develop a regressive media model by drawing data from the field via in-depth interviews conducted with 20 broadcast journalists in Bulgaria- a country with the most drastic press freedom deterioration in Europe in the last two decades. Bulgaria has fallen 75 positions in the Reporters without Borders Press 2021 Freedom Index over the last fourteen years. In this chapter I will present the findings that help explain how a media system can regress into a backsliding trajectory from a system geared towards autonomy and professionalism, based on the Western Liberal Model of the Fourth Estate, to the sharp present-day decay towards neo-authoritarianism, state capture and political suppression of the media. How did this happen? Why? And can it be mitigated? These were the primary questions guiding this work.

The findings will be presented here as informed by the suggested formal research questions in Chapter 2. The interviewing process was directed by the discussion guide provided in Appendix B. The participants' experiences were recorded and transcribed while anonymizing their identities for ethical concerns and in attempt to avoid associated risk of retribution. A list with respondents' professional roles and years of experience in the field is provided in Appendix A. The names and media outlets are protected and will not be released. Most interviews (19 out of 20) were conducted and analyzed in Bulgarian, which is the native language of participants and the researcher, and then translated into English for the purposes of this study. One interview was conducted and analyzed in English due to individual participant preference. The dataset was

coded and analyzed thematically using QDA software to uncover common codes and themes (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). I utilized NVivo 2020 version from QSR International to facilitate the process of data organization and summarizing the results. Three levels of analysis were conducted as suggested by the employed grounded theory method: (a) open line by line coding, (b) selective coding, and (c) theoretical coding (Corbin, 2008).

Grounded theory requires finding emerging themes from the empirical data, for which open line by line coding is of critical importance. Exploring the phenomenon from the point of view of the ones living it is at the heart of the selected method, which requires a very detailed coding to ensure that emerging topics are not omitted or downplayed. For doing that I used Nvivo for the whole coding process, starting with a very detailed line by line coding, where every code is pretty much a summary of each line of the interview transcripts, or at least each thought or idea expressed by the participants is coded separately. It is a time-consuming process, to ensure rigor and research quality. Later on, the number of these codes were minimized based on the emerging common themes. Eventually from the initial hundreds of line by line codes, a final list of 17 codes was created and organized into five broader thematic groups, by merging corresponding categories. The final list of inclusive coding is corresponding with the subheadings presenting the findings of this proposed work (Chapter 4).

Broader categories and overarching themes were identified in constant comparison between participants' testimonies and existing theoretical frameworks. Those encompassing ideas are presented here as building blocks of the suggested regressive media model to be developed further in Chapter 5, alongside a more applied segment with recommendations for improvements. This dissertation seeks to raise awareness and advance existing knowledge in

global media system literature pertaining to press freedom challenges and professional limitations experienced by journalists.

Journalism redefined: professional conventions among Bulgarian broadcasters (2000-2020)

Journalists across the world experience their professional virtues in different ways, even when they are trained under the same paradigm of universal values and principles such as truthfulness, pluralism, factuality, and separation of information and opinion. The dominant Western concept of the media as a Fourth Estate requires journalists to serve as an instrument for checks and balances for the other traditional branches of power- executive, legislative and judiciary (Hanitzsch et al., 2019). This understanding prevails in the modern rhetorizing of journalism and the formal journalistic education in Bulgaria, which was transformed to replicate Western models in the late 90s. The philosophical grounding of this idea lays in the classic liberal pluralist view of the media, in which independent journalism is considered an essential part to the creation and maintenance of a participatory democracy pledging the core principle of separation of power and providing a free public forum in a marketplace of ideas (Gans, 1998).

Uncovering the truth, asking tough questions, keeping power to account, providing checks and balances, being the watchdog of government- the classic concepts of the democratic liberal media model dominate the understanding of Bulgarian journalists as well, at least in theory, though political instrumentalization and politicization of the media is also widely recognized in the literature (D. C. Hallin & Mancini, 2004). When directly asked about the principles guiding their profession, participants in this study share a similar understanding of the basic principles and ideas as described in the classic Libertarian Theory of the Press- the media's purpose is to inform, entertain, serve as a gatekeeper, and a watchdog of power, but also make profit as a commercial entity (Siebert et al., 1956). Next on the local conceptual map of what

journalism should do come responses grounded in a more social responsibility paradigm- notions such as to give voice to the voiceless, be an agent of positive change, advocate for what is right, expose the wrongdoings, and be an intermediary between political power and the public interest. When speaking about what drove them to journalism, practically all participants describe idealistic notions using words such as: *save, life, society, people, for the better*, followed by phrases such as *ask questions, challenge power, tell the truth, be a mediator*. Interestingly enough, in the word cloud chart below capturing the most often used words in conceptualizing the vocation of journalism, the words marked in red, due to its most intensive use, form a sentence of its own: We. Save. Life. (of the) Society. Media. Can. Do. Good (for) People.

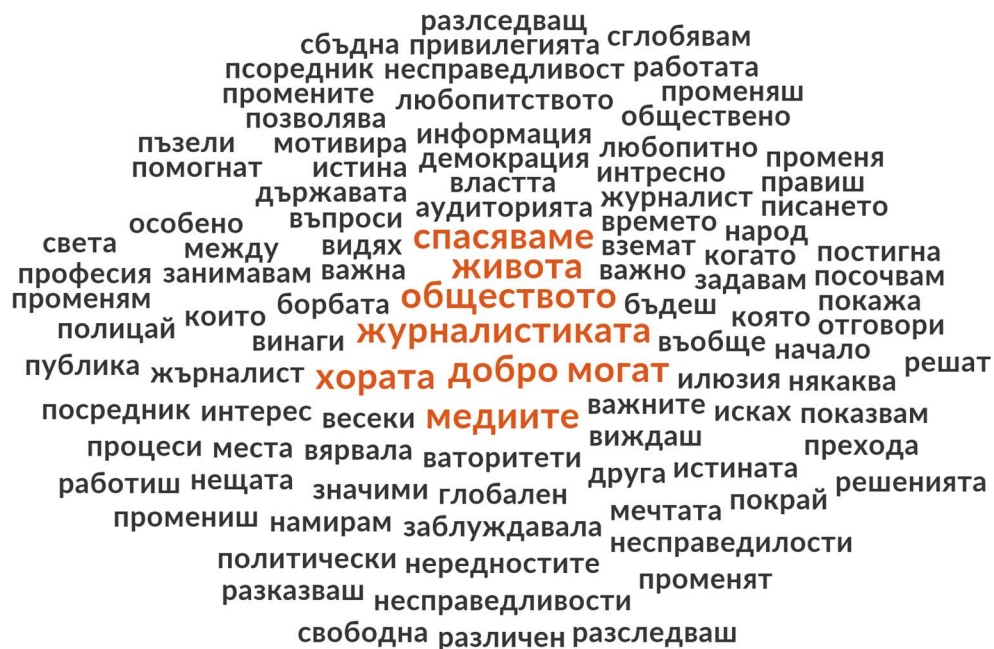


Figure 4.1 Word Cloud of Participants' Interest in Journalism

This witticism of this lexical pun is a thought-provoking starting point of this analysis- featuring the profound internal conflict in which Bulgarian journalists operate- a conflict between ultimate idealism and prioritizing virtues of journalistic excellence on a conceptual level, and acute acrimony when the discussion moves towards the practical realm of how journalism is actually being practiced in the country. This finding amplifies the established conflict in immature transitional democracies such as Bulgaria and Romania, where journalists' sense of editorial autonomy might appear strong, while everyday practices reflect a very different experience (Hanitzsch et al., 2019, p. 109).

Firm Ideals, flexible praxis

“Nobody is going to arrest me if I do proper journalism in Bulgaria, but what they will do is leave me jobless” says the chief editor of Bulgarian Bureau of Radio Free Europe in Bulgaria, Ivan Bedrov, in a recently published analysis of the challenges for journalism in the country (Davies, 2020). Journalists participating in this study echo that sentiment. Namely, it is now impossible, they unanimously believe, to conduct ethical journalism in the country, following the

professional conventions of independence, truthfulness, monitor of power and a forum for public criticism, with journalists allowed to exercise their personal conscience (Kovach, 2007). That assumption is especially strongly hold by participants when they narrow their focus to describing the current Bulgarian ecosystem in the realm of big traditional mainstream media, like in the case of this speaker:

P 9: It's not true that you cannot act as a true journalist in our current media reality. You can. But that aspiration of doing your job by the book can actually leave you jobless. If you're willing to take that risk, you can do a pretty decent journalism. For a while. Then eventually you become a former journalist.

The tensions in reconciling those two extremes- the dream (the ideal) and the rude awakening into a reality of complete incongruity, shape the professional culture of local journalists, marking it with despair, cynicism, low morale, occasional shallow and fruitless dissent, and an overall a system of obedience and compliance. There's an evident discord between rigidity of ideals and pliability of practice.

P13: I see my role as the intermediary- the mediator between those who call the shots and those whose interests they are called to represent. The ever-skeptical, dubious, wary go-between political power and the electorate. But the reality is nobody's happy with you when you keep the middle ground- remaining equally critical of both sides. Being in the middle is making you take strikes from all sides.

P 7: I came into this profession with the ideal to expose wrongdoings. To change things for the better. To speak truth to power. To be a watchdog, the eyes and ears of society. 20 plus year later with a career that was a dream come true, I left the field when I realized there's nothing I can change. The system was such that not only I couldn't change it, but

my best achievement was leaving it before it changed me. I reached a complete point of no return- absolute lack of purpose. I hated the job I used to love and dream about.

P1: Maybe because I launched my career at the exiting times when we buried communism and were so enthusiastic to transition to democracy, I saw journalism as a chance, a tool of activism. For a freer society, to change lives for the better, to serve the publics into figuring out how to launch this exciting new future. Well, needless to say I was up for a big disappointment.

The sense of higher purpose, putting forth a mission, a vocation; combined with the power that comes with that, have made new post-communist journalist in Bulgaria see themselves as bold and active participants in social transformations, maybe naïve to a degree, but definitely seeing their role as an agent of change.

P 4: Being a journalist is wanting to change. To act, and then to see the change that you've enacted, to see how your work can contribute to a positive development in society – that's the purpose of journalism. If I had made the life of even one person change for the better, and on a larger scale – for the society, than I consider my work successful.

While such an ideological component is a typical characteristic for politicized media systems and the partisan press, where a journalist is seen as more of an activist, then a messenger (Christians et al., 2010; Schudson, 1999), it is also dominant in many parts of Europe, where the social responsibility theory and the trustee function of journalism are more common. In the fragile reality of post-communist Eastern Europe, local journalists in Bulgaria did not seem prepared to translate the ideals they proclaimed into the reality of transitioning of the media system into the market media model with commercially-driven journalism of the popular press and broadcasting. The inevitable crush between the ideal, and the real world contributed to the sense of

disappointment, the discontent and even frustration with the way journalism is actually being conducted as opposed to how it's being envisioned as an ideal set of principles.

Rapid commercialization: the conflict between interesting and important

Another pivotal moment for Bulgarian journalism is navigating the commercial media model introduced in the country in the early 2000s, following a long state-dominated media industry. The American, and more generally, the Western commercial media model have prevailed in Bulgaria with the privatization of the national broadcasting system in early 2000 and the acquisition of the first private national TV network- bTV, owned and operated by News Corp. Though bounded by the local political conditions, the station was designed and set up following the Western model of commercial broadcasting. With all the trainings and through the work of American management and American TV consultants, the station managed to set the standard for new broadcast journalism in the country, launching a wave of imitation among its competitors (Lozanov & Spasov, 2008). The second largest station, Nova TV, was adopting the model to be able to effectively compete, before it was eventually acquired by MTG- a large Swedish media company in 2008.

With private competition and market-driven journalism came the tendency for hybridizing of the television format: mixing hard news and politics with infotainment, as well as privileging soft, human interest stories before political reporting; in other words- choosing the interesting before the important affected journalistic quality, as per the widely shared interpretation of “quality” to mean supporting “public interest” as opposed to “what interests the public” (Johnson, 2004; McChesney, 1999). Though some of the participants in those developments do not necessarily attribute later press freedom decline to the process of commercialization in the early 2000s, most share the belief that the news agenda and the news

values driving the media narrative were drastically changed due to prioritizing the “eyeballs on the screen”.

P 8: The influence of the commercial model turned out to be crumbling. The advertising budgets became the main media bible, not the content. Our mission statement was undermined to simply filling the time between two commercial breaks. Back then we didn't see it as a bad thing, naturally for journalism to be effective it needs to be able to reach the viewers. But privileging the bottom line before the mission to inform and shed light on difficult topics has played its negative role. Now, 20 years down the road, we see the results of making news a commodity

P 1: We lost the balancing act. Achieving ratings at the price of making a spectacle out of the news, instead of offering depth and purpose. Depth costs more, it adds value as well. It can generate revenues. It's just that spectacle can generate the same amount of revenue at a better cost. So, it's all about ROI (return of investment). We appreciated the commercial model as it was conceptualized as the only alternative to political suppression over media. It was a bit black and white- private investments make you independent from government. The better the money, the less power for political agents.

P 3: We didn't think about the downside of private monopolies, and the issue of sensationalism and commercialism, not initially. We were so concerned with the detrimental effects that the state-owned monopoly in our past- that's all we knew, that's all that we were afraid of. So foreign investment was endorsed by journalists, and not as a lesser of two evil, we simply didn't consider it evil.

While reflecting on the defects of the commercial media model, still some of the respondents acknowledge that commercialism played out a positive effect in the media as well-

showing potential to invalidate their historical politicization and instrumentalization for propaganda purposes. By clearly prioritizing the financial interest and by subscribing to fewer ties with local political interest, foreign ownership saw media credibility as the commodity- as actually the product that they are selling, which in return granted journalists and editorial managers a relatively high level of autonomy, at least from the political power, though increasing the pressure to deliver profit.

P 19: As a news executive back then our only priorities as stated by the foreign ownership was: you don't care about profit, you leave that to us. From their news operations they only wanted one thing and one thing only- credibility. They sold credibility and it was our job to get it. And the philosophy seemed simple- if we have credible news, we can make high profits. Without that credibility we cannot sell anything.

As a byproduct of prioritizing audiences for commercial gain in a post-communist culture and a momentum when audiences widely antagonized with politicians on both sides, came a moment of greatest press freedom, at least from political suppression. To gain the trust of the audiences, media had to prove they were really independent and willing to scrutinize power. That liberation was long anticipated in both media and society, so when it did happen it was ultimately endorsed as a step into the right direction. The pitfalls on that route were still to be discovered. In the years to come, the debate surrounding commercial media flows was growing, but still the majority of broadcast reporters participating in the study today follow the narrative that only strong commercial outlets can grant editorial autonomy and freedom to their journalists.

P7: I have no issue with commercial media. It required from us, as journalists to reach certain targets of viewership. But I don't see a conflict there- public service journalism doesn't do much service when there's nobody to watch it. And also, the viewership paid

our salaries, though through advertising revenues. I don't see a better model. What's the alternative- state subsidies. Been there, done that. I know from experience that commercial media allowed me to do free and independent journalism. The business was strong and protecting good journalism was actually part of the business model- that what was making the money. So, nobody wanted to kill the golden hen. Now, when media can no longer generate the expected profits, they fall easy prey of political influence. And I can tell you- now journalism is dead in Bulgaria. There are some small outlets, little islands of quality journalism, but they are funded by foreign contribution- through subsidies coming from foreign states, or international NGO. Quality journalism is no longer a sustainable business model and that's when all the issues are rooted. Not in the commercial footing of journalism. “

It is worth mentioning here, reflecting on the participants' experiences that broadcasting is historically the only media type that has not been funded by direct contributions of its audiences, hence the consumer of the provided media product is actually not committed to any financial investment supporting the production of the content they seek. This lack of direct involvement and participation in the supply and demand change positions the news consumer as more of a product, than a client. This is becoming especially troubling and detrimental to the media after the collapse of the traditional advertising-supported business model post the financial crisis of 2008 and with the prevalence of online advertisement on a growing number of markets. Hence, it is reasonable to believe that if quality journalism is no longer feasible to ensure the sustainability of traditional broadcasters as independent businesses, then one way to increase the investment of the end consumer with the quality of the product they receive is to have them have a direct contribution and control over its quality. That is in essence the crowdfunding business model,

which for now seems to prove ineffective for the expensive broadcast production, and especially in a smaller and less lucrative markets such as Bulgaria.

Though commercialism is clearly seen as a way for decreasing journalistic quality in Bulgaria, while protecting the journalists from direct political interference, there are voices defending the idea that producing content for the biggest possible audience and appealing to the mass demand is the only way to sustain autonomy and ensure businesses are strong enough to reject the chronic political pressure in the region.

P 9: I don't see the commercial journalism of early 2000s as necessarily sensationalist by default, nor do I see a correlation between prioritizing the rating later on and abandoning of professional standards. We were clearly looking to generate interest in news, yes! But there was definitely this understanding that we were to do that through making the important interesting, not the interesting important.

Discussing the conflicting perspectives of journalists on the doubtful advantages of commercialism, the famous Winston Churchill's utterance on the imperfections of democracy as the "worst form of government except for all the others that have been tried" (1947) can serve as a good point of reference. In the case of the politicized Eastern European media model, no one pretends that the dominant Western concept of free press as a commercial entity is "perfect or all-wise" as per Churchill's quote. It is merely the worst form of press freedom except for all the others that have been tried.

Based on the incoming data from the field, Bulgarian journalists conceptualize press freedom in the fairly narrow sense of the classic libertarian definition- independence of the media from outside political or state suppression. The power of corporate capital and other agencies remain broadly underrepresented in the collective mind of Bulgarian broadcast

journalists. Focusing on the clear potential demonstrated by the commercial media to counteract the “evil we know” as journalists refer to the political control over the free press, the negative consequences of commercialism and tabloidization of journalism remain in the periphery of professional concerns expressed at least by the majority of participants in this study. Here is one exception, as shared by P 1:

My first big disillusionment came when I realized that yes, media was free to serve as a fourth estate. But the reality was although nobody was stopping us, we didn’t really care much about it. We were all of sudden so busy covering crime stories and car wrecks.

Ratings were great, but I think that’s when we crossed the line. At least for me, I lost the sense of purpose, almost to the point of burnout.

Losing the balance between what viewers want and what they might not anticipate but need to know, straying away from the concept of journalism as “storytelling with a purpose” to just storytelling that serves the bottom line (Kovach, 2007), has been pushed forward by worsening economic conditions for journalism in the region after the financial crisis of 2008. It added pressure to produce clickbait-friendly content to cater to advertiser expectations, and difficulty reinventing a sustainable business model by turning free web content into paid subscriptions. Those global challenges for journalism have affected local processes, as highlighted in the following quotes from participants:

P 11: It is my belief that, unknowingly maybe, we caused part of our own issues ourselves- as journalists focusing on what’s easy to digest, we kept it maybe “too short and too simple”, “too edible”, so everyone will get it and want to come back for more. So much so that we lost one key audience- the intellectuals, so to speak, the most critical and active audience. We disappointed the very people who are our most natural allies. We

disgusted that critical segment of society, lowering our storytelling to the most hideous and the cheapest of taste.

P 13: Chasing rating points we compromised and neglected some topics that are important but difficult to tell in a 90 second format. We erred on the side of interesting and allowed for the dominance of inconsequential matters. Just because it rates. Not because it matters.

And while journalists recognize that negative effect of rating driven journalism, still the dominant sentiment towards commercialism in journalism is not as negative here as in many other parts of the world. Many Bulgarian journalists even see commercial journalism and the presence of foreign ownership in particular as still mainly a shielding mechanism in support of their autonomy and professionalism and against direct political interference in their work (more on that will be included later in this chapter).

Changes in media grammar

Prior to the Americanization of TV news, broadcast media in Bulgaria were still thought of as predominantly the realm of "the spoken" language. The lack of a commercial demand in a state-controlled media monopoly resulted in years of overlooking one of television's stronger assets- its visual appeal. Following the American model, BTV was the first station in the country to emphasize visual storytelling, both in terms of modernization of technology and raising the production quality and ending the long-lasting era of "talking heads" or "televised radio". The new visual interpretation met with some criticism of being too theatrical, too entertaining, too "American", was rapidly adopted changing the aesthetics of news on the market as a whole. With that visual revolution came along a tendency for hybridizing of television format- mixing hard news and politics with infotainment. The American "horse-race" model of journalism

surfaced not only in talk shows but also in election coverage, current affairs programming, and news, which was unprecedented for the market.

The news narrative on television has shifted *from dry reporting of factual accounts to storytelling*, introducing the importance of a *“human stories”*. The ratio between government officials and regular people’s appearance in the news was at the ratio of 1:20 (Lozanov & Spasov, 2008). Participant 19 noted:

“Yes, there was this incline towards as little politics as possible. If we were to cover a political topic it has to be translated into a human-interest story, written in a human language, with a real-life example, made into a nice package. So, political topics were kept to the minimum, human stories- to the maximum.”

That direction, though proposed in an attempt to democratize the media and leverage the power by giving voice to the voiceless, had served as a handy strategy to control the narrative by keeping certain conflicting political topics under the radar, when appropriate, and replacing them with inconsequential topics that gain salience in the public agenda. In pursuing political neutrality in the news, oftentimes concepts of political neutrality were replaced to a large degree by providing apolitical information. It is typical for private media, in an environment of inherent political suppression, to choose this as a coping mechanism- to focus on domestic topics, local crimes or celebrity affairs to avoid reporting on politically sensitive or controversial issues (Downey & Mihelj, 2012; Dragomir, 2010).

The profound changes in the media’s grammar experienced by the country and the region were so overwhelming, that for a while those rapid transformations pushed to the background the importance of the more philosophical discussion- not only how, but why journalists engage with production of broadcast news content. As a pushback against the very theoretical and outdated

formal journalistic education in the country at the time, modernization and professionalization of the field was conducted mainly through a wide range of international training and exchange programs, sponsored by either the media entities themselves or international non-profits supporting medial literacy and free press. While providing the much-needed skill-focused training for the industry that was thriving and needed the workforce to fill in the growing demand for news and information, participants share that those training opportunities fell short in contextualizing the skills and the professional standards established within the authentic historical and cultural framework.

P 19: The craftsmanship of the job was indeed in high demand- there was a new industry, and their new leaders didn't want to recycle the same old faces from the state television. So mostly the hiring stream went from newspapers or small half-amateur tv and radio stations. While we were given the same tips and tricks for how broadcast journalism feels and look like, the ethical and philosophical grounding were overlooked. Lost in translation if you wish.

Language and cultural barriers for international trainers were inevitable. Focusing on the journalistic skills rather than morals grounded in the specific local social and political situation marked the transformative processes to new modern broadcasting journalism in Bulgaria. The Western tools and techniques were easily adopted, while the bigger purpose of the fourth estate remained mainly a lip service.

P 8: We all received a unified set of means of expression- in a way of the format of the newscast, and the do's and don'ts for producing good television. In terms of ethical journalism and the capital J journalism training – everyone brought a different concept of that, based on where we're coming from. Me personally, I credit the fact that I was a print

journalist for learning how to do journalism. TV taught me how to do television, how to appeal to audiences through compelling text and visuals. It definitely tempered with the depth of my work- television is expressive media, depth and background are accepted in moderation. If at all.

P 2: With time, the system burns you out. You take so many hits trying to do what you believe in, that the disillusionment is inevitable. You catch yourself spending more time discussing the visual quality, the ratings, the eyeballs on the screen, and not the purpose behind the story. And the ideals that brought you into this field make room to this sense of fatigue, this “what’s the point, it’s not worth it” attitude. I know personally that I have divorced myself from the idea that it’s the purpose of journalism to actually help people make better decisions as citizens. For the biggest part of my career, I am practicing this craft – stacking shows. Not doing journalism.

P 8: Knowing what we know from our totalitarian history, it remains extremely important that journalists have this value system, this moral imperative, that their hearts are at the right place, so to speak. There are members of the news media that are particularly skillful but lacking any moral compass- those are the masters of manipulation. What drives you in this job is very important, the values behind the actions. It might sound naïve, but motives and values are number one on the conceptual map of journalism for me. TV Journalism doesn’t necessarily focus on those two.

Imitating the West: News with a human face in a copycat Fourth Estate

In such an environment, the imitation of the Western liberal journalism model against the backdrop of the turbulent political and social realities in the Balkans only allowed for shallow appropriation of the prescribed concept. Hence, local conceptualizations of press freedom as a

key element of journalism and democracy followed both imitative and idealistic patterns. This *copycat fourth estate*, established within a pretty politicized societal ecosystem, created the *illusion* of an ongoing solid process of modernization and professionalization of the media in place that though shallow in nature, seemed to be irreversible in trend. Journalists operating under the local conditions in both the early 2000s and in 2020 clearly see the differences. They unanimously acknowledge more press freedom was granted back then, but also – from their later perspectives- it was imitative and rather supercritical rather than internalized category, that defined and structured local media landscape both then and now.

P 13: We shouldn't idealize the media situation 20 years ago, just because it's now clearly worsened. The political influence over journalism in Bulgaria is not a new phenomenon, it was always present to an extent. What changed though is the political cycle. In the early years of our democracy media elites outlived the political regimes- the latter just changed every so often. While in the last 13 years, Bulgaria has had one ruling party. One man has had all the power. And that is a significant change of events. As for 13 years he managed to adopt full control over pretty much all social systems, including media.

P 7: One thing is certain. There was a time where I could clearly feel I can serve as check balance of power. Not only that. There was an editorial and internal pressure on me to be exactly that- it was a culture that we're very loyal too. I was left to operate completely under my journalistic principles and values. And it lasted for 5-6 years. Times where I felt free and where only limits were to be true to the facts. But I can clearly state there was independent media in Bulgaria in my career. Times where journalistic investigations used to cause real change. That said, of course powerful people called the station to

complain. But I had a team and I felt supported by my colleagues and by my management. They knew we had greater power than the politicians. And the currency was our credibility. That was all that was asked of us- to deliver credibility and public trust to the station. Period.

P3: Bulgaria clearly was in a position to catch up with western democracies in terms of press freedom. And honestly, I never even believed that was much possible. It's just that we as a society, as electorate, we're at a different stage of development. We're still very totalitarian by nature, it's engraved in us. And then there was this huge conflict- the notion that by definition the journalists need to be opposition to power, that they need to be skeptics, always critical- that concept was just barely established by foreign media trainers and consultants, before it got canceled. It was very short-lived and mainly lived on paper.

P1: We like to compare ourselves with older more established democracies, and maybe we shouldn't. We as an electorate need to spend time figuring out why we need free media. Do we need it? What for? Why should we care? And that's not an unconscious process. To recognize what is our own little personal benefit if we were to have free press. That's where I see the main difference, between them and us- the west and our attempting transitional democracies of the East. We lack democratic reflexes as a society, people don't defend their journalists. When there was a press freedom protest, I only saw journalists attending. It's the mutual alliance- the society needs to protect its journalists, and they need to prove with this work that they're worthy of such virtue.

While Americanization on the outside seems to have happened relatively quickly and successfully in the media, especially broadcast media through the ownership of the main

commercial broadcaster, the deeper cultural and professional transformations related to principles and values of journalism did not emerge as an act of simple direct adoption.

Imitating the West

The brave new world

- Investigative Journalism
- Fact – based reporting
- Objectivity / Official source bias)
- Soft news – humanizing the media narrative, sensationalism
- Infotainment
- Horse raise political coverage
- Fact paced and breaking news
- Emphasis on visual communication and "news with a human face"

Imitating the Communist Legacy

Blast from the past

- State control of the media privatization process
- State commissioners in the managing boards of private media entitites
- Heavy political content, especially on morning television
- Strong state regulation of broadcast media
- State/EU funding for the media

Figure 4.2: Imitative Tendencies in Bulgarian Media

As suggested by prior research in the region (Splichal, 2001), imitating the new/the West went hand in hand with imitating the socialist past, as depicted by the findings above.

While imitation of the West seemed to have been accepted as a common and unquestioned ideal among journalists from the post-communist generation in Bulgaria, the idealization of western media and politics is also evident.

P11: Western politicians have a much different understanding about the role of the media in a free society. Ours firmly believe that media exists to serve their interest and to show them in best of lights. And though this is probably not a Bulgarian phenomenon, clearly in the western culture politicians respect and appreciate the work of the media and of journalists.

P4: Politics and media here in Bulgaria are two faces of one actor. I've attended trainings in the USA- there there's this well-established professional distance between journalists and politicians. Here journalists are being intentionally kept at a hand distance by the politicians, that's how they get to control them and manipulate them, feeding them their own agendas.

P4: I've seen in the US, that quality journalism is of extreme importance there – here, it's all about manufacturing news. Just generating some sort of noise, this hearsay journalism. We have this fascination with the news flow, with no depth, with no context. American journalists are encouraged to seek and explore different perspectives, to provide diverse viewpoints. To dig deeper. And challenge authority and to beat the drum when uncovering the truth.

Apart from the perceived rather idealized nature of mainstream journalism in America, this “us vs. them” mentality reinforces models from the past. During the Cold War era, everything Western was associated in the collective psyche of the Easterner as being decisively better compared to everything local, where mimicking the Western world was showcased as the only way to modernization and progress (Holmes & Krastev, 2020). In that sense, the idealizing of the West is something typical for the early 2000s in all post-communist countries, surrendering in the last decade under the political pressure of far-right populist and anti-EU propaganda. When conceptualizing press freedom Bulgarian journalists see it as a combination of the following main elements:

- Operational independence from government – through private ownership and legislation to protect journalists
- Freedom to publish or broadcast according to a set of professional norms
- Freedom of access- limiting government monopoly over information
- Media being able to serve as a guardian for the individual freedoms against potential abuse of the state
- A smaller segment of participants interprets media freedom and the role of free media in a democracy as not just being able to publish and access information freely, but also to support a certain level of “critical publicity”- meaning to not necessarily take a critical stance against the power elites, but rather to participate in the public debate independently and without even considering the latter. To leave journalistic discourse untainted by the agendas of the political actors. To set the agenda driven by what’s important for their audiences to know, not what politicians want to tell them. This thin

minority is active in calling for mobilization of journalism as a power on its own, but their voices remain widely unheard in the dominant culture of passive obedience.

Interpretations of some sort of voluntary abandoning of the critical function of the media dominate in collected data from the field, as highlighted in this statement:

P 9: Media refuse to act as media- they abandoned factuality in favor of emotional discourse. They abandoned questioning in favor of transmitting and perpetuating certain messages. That has made authorities very lazy- lacking any sort of immunity towards all basic forms of journalism. If you ask a question now, much less a critical one, its considered media aggression.

The acquisition of media by local political and business barons, placing the editorial control into the hands of people who have no journalistic history and/or training are both parts of a long-lasting process of subduing of independent media and silencing of journalistic quilt in the country. All of these factors speak in support of the widely raised concerned in Bulgaria that one of the main totems of democracy in the country- the institute of the right to be informed, is heavily damaged.

Living the press freedom collapse. Changes in professional culture of Bulgarian journalists

“I am gutted, bullied, smeared, attacked, intimidated. I quit. Journalism was my dream career all along. Today I know one thing for sure- journalism in Bulgaria is something I do not want to do ever again,” shared from a News Anchor & Reporter, 20 years of experience. Following the trajectory of Bulgaria’s press freedom downfall as registered by Reporters Without Borders (fig. 4.3), this study looks at the emic experiences and the meaning making processes of journalists in Bulgaria. Establishing how the professional culture of journalism itself has been affected by

those transformations will provide further insights into conceptualizing of the Regressive Media Model.



Figure 4.3: Press Freedom Dynamics in Bulgaria (2002-2021), Captured by Reporters

Without Borders

The longitudinal Press Freedom Index, supported by Reporters Without borders indicates the sharpest press freedom deterioration in the country occurred between 2007-2013, which paradoxically follows the nation's acceptance into the European Union in 2007- a milestone event in the nation's history. This milestone celebrated Bulgaria's proclaimed Western aspirations and the strategic orientation of the post-communist state towards ideals of liberal democracy, free market and independent media, widely unquestioned at the times. Still, around the same time one of the main tokens of the much-desired social transformation- free and autonomous media started to follow a regressive trend. One of the possible explanations captured by research is the more relaxed monitoring processes over democracy and the rule of law enforced by the EU over the new member states upon acceptance compared to the very strict international scrutiny the countries were put through for years during the enlargement process. Another factor supported by research is the European and other public funding allocated directly through the government into media outlets with a complete lack of transparency, trading capital for political influence (RSF, 2021).

The second negative wave is registered around 2013 following the times of powerful anti-corruption civic uprising in the country. The outcry was sparked by the appointment of 32-year-old media mogul Delyan Peevski as the chief of the country's national security agency. One of the richest Bulgarians (personal wealth estimated at 1.5 billion BGN as per official data), Peevski had occupied different low and middle level government positions throughout his career,

before becoming a member of the parliament in 2009. While being in public office, he managed to create a shadowy media empire with concentration of ownership in print, online, and broadcast media outlets, as well as establish a monopoly over the printing industry of the country (RSF, 2016). While the sources of his wealth and funding of his media machine remain largely non-transparent, the oligarch has expanded his media monopoly to 80% of the print media, adding some major acquisitions in the broadcasting industry directly or through proxies. Most recently, reports revealed he reportedly sold his media outlets; however, his influence over the media continues to be problematic (RWB, 2021). Precisely half of the participants in this study are journalists with much experience in the market who had been part of the industry in those turbulent years and have perspectives on both of those experienced waves of the sharp press freedom deterioration.

From outside pressure to internalizing the suppression: a culture of pandemic self-censorship

The concept of the very institution of censorship is shifting within the local journalistic culture- while immediately after the transition to democracy it was mainly considered a tool in the hands of governments to suppress the spread of information, ideas or opinions, now the main editorial censorship as experienced by journalists comes from their legitimate editorial managers.

P 10: I have had occasions in the past for the mayor of Sofia then, now prime minister of the country, to just pick up the phone and tell me he didn't like how I reported on him and to demand changes. You can neglect that of course if you have your management by your side. But when he calls your management and they accept the demand and pass it down the chain of command, it's a whole different ball game.

P 13: What was called censorship before now has the poetic name – editorial policy.

There's no fighting that. It's a trap. If the prime minister calls you and tells you do this or

don't ask me that, you can protest. It's a direct violation of the basic journalistic standards. It's not so black and white though when it's your own news director acting in support of the government and telling you that you need to follow the editorial policy.

Business decision is also how they call it.

In negotiating political control over news coverage, news directors often use pseudo-professional arguments such as balance of opinions, equal time and space, all points of view, etc. All of these professional norms can and are being abused to take independence away from journalists and to influence their conscious decision-making.

P 9: Censorship today is being legitimized with arguments that try to sound professional- why don't you do some more digging, let's make sure we got all our facts right, let's wait for the official investigation before we launch ours. Waiting is one of the favorite tools- you wait for editorial approval forever, and then for interviews and information for about the same amount of time. At the end of the day, you have a story, but then your editor tells you it's no longer timely so they cannot air it. And that's how you kill a story.

Professionally.

The so-called "pseudo-balance" is another new norm established in the local professional culture, which mandates that journalists need to not just provide a platform and an opportunity for as wide a variety of viewpoints on a particular manner as possible, but also guarantee ~~the~~ that all shareholders will actually take advantage of that opportunity. The "refuse to comment" standard is no longer sufficient – if one side is missing, the story gets killed. That naturally gives a lot of power for politicians and other powerful figures to take advantage of those editorial regulations and, in a way, control the media by refusing to talk to them. This and other examples, such as false equivalency and balancing facts with false statements, are often in the field.

P 14: They give you the greenlight for even the most sensitive of topics- sure, go ahead, do the story. But then they give you an impossible task down the road- like make sure you have an interview with this person that everyone knows never gives interviews. But sure- go find him, and we will air your piece.

P 4: Once I had the same impossible task, but I decided to push back. I found that person who normally is impossible to find, and I asked my questions. She walked away, refusing to answer. I asked again, she kept her silence again. All on tape, on the record. Still, that was not good enough for my editors. Somehow it turns out I had to have some sort of super-power to make people talk to me, to be able to have a story air. And I did have a solid story, documents, sources, everything. But in that process, it didn't seem at all like mu producers and news director were on my team, on the contrary.

P 14: Sometimes they hide behind professional arguments, but sometimes they lose patience. My news director for example told me directly that I am too aggressive, and he gets a lot of complaints and I had to take those seriously. It was our new editorial policy, he said, to be more “cooperative” with the people we interview, to provide them the comfort to have their voices heard, and not to attack them. Well, I am a political journalist. I interview politicians, so how about afflict the comfortable, I asked. Just a change of editorial policy, he said. So now we're pursuing positive developments only. No exceptions.

The course taken by the two main TV stations in the country-replacing the traditional value of watchdog journalism with this new type of lapdog journalism, suggesting a more friendly, positive approach between media and politics-- is a powerful tool for controlling the media while sustaining its professional façade and its formal editorial autonomy.

P 13: I can imagine that there are still people from the ruling class placing calls to journalists and directing them what to do. But I can also imagine with a greater certainty that there's simply no longer a need for them doing so. The self-censorship is now self-executing. It's now an editorial policy if you wish. Bulgarian media had abandoned their critical function of scrutinizing the public debate, of exercising skepticism towards all places of power. And it had done so to a large degree completely voluntarily. “

For that transformation to take place, change of editorial newsroom leadership was instrumental, tailgated by replacing most of the highly regarded, prominent TV journalists with newcomer loyalists. The process started in 2017 at Nova TV and continued in 2020 at bTV. Change of ownership was definitely a vital part of the transformation, but more importantly in the words of the participants, were changes of the business model advancing a new recruitment philosophy in the media and modifications to the concept of editorial independence and professionalism overall.

P 5: Media was taken by businesses close to power which then installed their sympathizers to key editorial positions. Those people who are not recognized by our community, still manage to multiply their incompetence. A circle of organizations was created, I don't want to call them media outlets, they act like media organizations, but are actually specializing in smearing campaigns and similar hit jobs against political or business opponents. Against voices of dissent in general.

The depicted abolishment of talent and professionalism in favor of ardency and obedience is a significant change of the culture experienced by the majority of participants over the course of their careers. They all speak about this change in different terms, but the dominant understanding is captured by one word- “podmiana,” meaning a replacement, a substitution, a trade off, but

with an implication for compromising worth in the process, a professional downgrade of a sort. The word stays for replacing something of essence with something that imitates--on the outside only-- journalism by name. Participants also talk about “podmiana” in terms of the sudden dismissal of a whole generation of broadcast journalists- the role-models in the industry.

Silencing voices and chilling effect – a culture of isolation and obedience

The continuous ousting and silencing of prominent professionals with track records of high standards in the business, supposedly under outside political pressure, is a phenomenon dating back to the early years of the new Bulgarian broadcast journalism. The first cases could be referenced to 2005-2006, affecting both bTV and Nova. The changes in the recent years are mainly in the volume and the speed of the purge. Over twenty well-established journalists with solid careers and wide recognition in the country were let go or fired from the two main commercial stations over the last five years. That created a chilling effect but also opened up a generational gap and a niche for a new type of reporting.

P 20: I have no idea who the role models are today. The fact is most of us- the labeled role-models of modern Bulgarian broadcasting, we do not actually work in the media currently, or we're pushed to work in fringe media, let's put it that way. So, what do we model this new crop of journalists? ...Unfortunately, I discovered that having someone as a role model is not enough...If you admire someone, try to emulate them or try to do the same or try to do something better, or, you know, equally courageous. But they don't emulate. That's the problem.

New generation journalists, on the other hand, express disappointment with the reality they are entering – pointing to the lack of support and resources, including financial, to help them better do their job. The lack of backing up from their direct managers when they want to develop more

in-depth journalism or work on a more sensitive topic is mentioned unanimously as particularly discouraging, as well as not having enough time to invest in the quality of their work. Lack of training and collaboration with more experienced colleagues who could serve as mentors and confidants for younger reporters is also an issue.

P 4: Very often I feel fearful to do investigative pieces. My station won't give me the time and the resources I need to be confident in my facts. So, there's a huge time pressure on one hand, which is detrimental for serious investigative journalism. And also, if I get it wrong, nobody's going to have my back. Well, in this situation, I would rather do fluff stories that won't hurt me in a long run.

P 14: I see how the rookie reporters are given no time to breath much less think. They fast track from one press conference to another, producing content for social, web, tv and even radio at the same time. They don't have the time or the space to go deep on any of the issues they cover. They're overworked. And that's not just a strategy to save money. The around the clock routine is a deliberate tool- it gives you a lot to do, but no time to think. That's the core of their training- the counts, the deadlines, the numbers. Human automation. And that's done purposefully, to slow down critical thinking.

P 2: Younger journalists work for the count; they don't have the passion to reveal. They're packers and stackers. And I don't blame them- it takes some time to get your head around the technicalities and with growing expectations to work on multiple platforms. I believe it's the duty of their more experienced peers, their producers, their editors to set up a higher standard for them.

P 16: Our profession has devolved tremendously- good journalists have left the field on one hand- people who I had admired professionally, and who had set up an example for

me, they're gone and forbidden. On the other hand- ok let's welcome younger generations. I am the younger generation. But I can admit that for many of my cohort this job is just a stage that would make them popular.

This conflict between “old quality journalism” generation vs the new “fast food” automated journalism is one of the main features of the current professional culture. Clearly, in this dichotomy nobody wins, not journalism and clearly- not audiences. The old dogs are dismissed and alienated, and the rookies-incomers do not get the training or the resources that would allow them to achieve their potential.

P 20: They lack the stamina to become journalists. Journalism is a tough profession, which takes a specific type of a mindset. Just like any profession. You cannot become a doctor if you cannot stand the sight of blood and bones, so same with journalism, you need specific qualities, a specific stamina to withstand the pressures of the profession. And there are still kids who can do this. The problem is that they're few and far between, and you have to really dig to find them. It's harder to find these gems now than it was 10 years ago or, or 20 years ago, these three regions combined.

The generational gap is not uncommon phenomena in the local media reality. After the collapse of communism, the old generation was again sacked due to ideological reasons. Now the same seems to be happening with the former rookies- now experienced professionals- facing early retirement and being pushed away in a clandestine marginal media. While in the past the rationale behind this type of reduction in force was to cut the umbilical cord of the propaganda and preventing a possible pollution into the new media system, now the same reversed process is evident- the value proposition of the media in a country with a backsliding democracy is changing and new people are needed again to serve the new purpose.

De-professionalization – a culture of cronyism

With the process of commercialization of the media in the early 2000s also came a movement towards extreme competitiveness among journalists on the market. The competitive trait overtook the culture, resulting in lack of collegiality and solidarity among journalists as a profession. Instead, the identification with a brand prevailed. This absence of community in a field that is inherently individualistic-centered has multiplied the sense of loneliness and cynicism, resulting in a collective psyche of journalism that is incapable of mobilizing and counteracting on a community level.

P 20: We worked in a very strong competition between media outlets and journalists. And that's excellent for journalism, and for society because more wrongs get exposed. But in such a competitive environment, the last thing you want to do is be friends with your competing reporters and journalists, you actually fight with them, for topics, for stories. So, you don't kind of conspire with them against the bad system. Because first of all, we don't see the bad system. And second of all, you're not supposed to fraternize with the enemy if you will. So, all of a sudden, you have a professional group of highly individualistic people, who cannot really get together as a team because they are more competitors than colleagues. And when news organizations are gradually taken over by individuals or entities that start controlling everything that these people do- these two factors together kind of prevent the unification of journalists, their ability to come together. It still mostly a group of individualistic, egomaniacs, if you will, who are doing their best to shine in their profession. And it's difficult for them sometimes to even talk to each other

This adversary collegial culture, as referenced by participant 20, prevented journalists from being able to unite and mobilize in support of their collective professional integrity, making yet another avenue into how commercial culture can be used and abused by outside actors playing the divide and conquer strategy within the media realm. Additionally, the call for unity is impeded by the existing duality of media entities in the market- the separation between independent, supposedly free or appearing to be free commercial and professionally-driven media organizations, and those who are known as “media-baseball bats” – entities masqueraded as media, but in reality, operating as spearing or propagandist tools controlled by the government- either directly or through a network of proxies with strong connections to power.

P 20: It's very difficult to work for one of these media and then be a colleague to someone who works for an independent media and all that. That's, that's an issue it's, it's impossible.

With time, this system of competitiveness is replaced by a system of nepotism and loyalism, as mentioned by participants.

P 20: That's the problem of the whole society, not just the journalism profession- this unfortunate transformation rooted in the prevalence of nepotism and loyalism. The lack of basic values in society that basically undermine any profession and every profession, not just journalism, because when your main drive to put a manager in a certain position is to have a person to support your every move and to basically obsequiously follow you and obey you...That's a recipe for disaster. And practically all of the professions in this country are undergoing the same detrimental process where junior people in, in this case, in the newsroom, feel like they're only little pins who are supposed to do what the their manager says, they're not supposed to have initiative, and they are not supposed to even

think of what they're supposed to do. They're just supposed to be doing when somebody's telling them. And that, that is an issue. In such cultures obedience becomes the main value and being agreeable is the only merit. Questioning power is decisively discouraged and so is the mere urge to ask questions- the fundamental drive of journalism. This creates a system of nepotism and undermines meritocracy. In a system that promotes not the most talented but the most complacent, speaking truth to power is not encouraged, not in the newsrooms and clearly not in the public arena. Direct state capture of the media causes a broader course of de-professionalization within media organizations. With passage of ownership from professional media entities into the hands of local oligarchs with no prior experience in media business and the appointed management of loyalists with questionable professional merit. Since in these conditions the bottom line is no longer a function of the professional conduct of the business operation, the business was striving not for talent, but for yes-persons on key positions indoctrinated to follow the editorial line. Journalism is no longer needed as a commodity in this unconventional media business model. On the contrary – it's actually quite useless and oftentimes poses a liability for the negotiated transactions between politics and media.

P 12: In the last maybe five years I had witnessed vast deterioration of our trade. There was always an element of prostitution to it, that no one want to talk about it. There were always people who would step over professional standards for personal or career advances. But it seemed to me those were more of an exception. Now it's the rule. I am afraid it's a recruitment strategy- the business prioritizes people who're willing to do whatever it takes to be successful. That's all that's needed- loyalty to the brand and listening to your news director.

P 14: It's a complete changeover. The stars of broadcast journalism are gone, and the workforce is flooded with young people whose main quality is that they're energetic, mobile, flexible and ready to respond to every request.

P 13: Those are people who lack skepticism. They're not critical in their reporting. They're all good people. It's just that that's the mode they follow. They haven't seen any better. In the last years those are the only examples you can see on television.

P 3: My young colleagues are more compromising; they have different priorities. They want to be on air. To be successful and to do it fast. Most of them enter this job with the aspiration to be anchors. That wasn't the case when I was choosing this job. This generational change made the field even more susceptible to outside influences. The only cause and motivator are the rapid success and the success is defined as being on TV, preferably the number one station in the market.

The issue currently identified by Bulgarian journalists as bigger than simply censoring certain speech or questions that are critical or skeptical of government. It's a suppression at a deeper level- the ability and the right to think and debate without even considering political power, in a free marketplace of ideas, is being attacked and denied. In the absence of this critical publicity, media fall short to serve as discourse institutions amplifying voices of descent or underrepresentation. That downfall creates a culture of passive obedience internally in the professional community, and a culture of silent and disengaged publics looking at both politics and mainstream media as a coalition of suppression, rather than an outlet for liberation.

Additionally, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic seized a significant portion of the public attention and can be used as a good disguise for all sorts of threats against press freedom and the public's rights to know. The health crisis naturally appeals to the instinct for more safety before

freedoms and authoritarian leaders inevitably take advantage of those instincts, enacting an information model with one dominant point of view- that of the government and of the health authorities appointed by the government. The effects of this quarantine over journalism in a setting of already compromised journalistic integrity and imperiled professional moral imperative are yet to be evaluated.

Regressive media model- analysis of factors contributing to press freedom decay in Bulgaria

The current analysis identifies three main clusters of attributes defining the current professional culture of journalists in Bulgaria and contributing to press freedom deterioration in the country: external factors relevant to the political and economic context in which media operate; internal factors of the journalistic culture; and broader socio-cultural factors pertaining to the society and audiences. Those components, described in further details below, contribute to the understanding and initial theory of the Regressive Media Model.

External factors influencing Regressive Media Model (RMM)

Totalitarian legacy. Acute Political transformations

The vast political transformations in post-communist Eastern Europe over the last three decades and the generated democratic fatigue in the country as a result of oftentimes controversial reforms leading to more inequality and a sense of lost traditions/identities, are clearly seen by local journalists as one key external factor influencing the current portrayal of the media system in Bulgaria. The largely unruly period of numerous perpetuating crises following the collapse of the Berlin Wall contributed to a state of affairs where the country had to simultaneously reinvent practically all of its state and social systems. Those profound commotions lasting throughout the 90s and into early 2000s inevitably shaped local media and

journalistic cultures. Under the proclaimed democratic consensus in the early 2000s, the newly-freed media was seen as the most trusted and glorified institution of the new Bulgarian democracy (Smilova et al., 2010). Undergoing many social and political crises and disturbances, the latest data show that two decades later, only 1 percent of Bulgarians believe their media system to be free and independent from political influence (Alfa Research, 2018). Not just media reliability, basic democratic instincts by far were, naturally, vastly deficient in both the media and the society after half a century of communist abuse. That inadequacy, at the end, seems to have prevented the local media from fulfilling their prescribed role of a pacesetter and a champion of the much envisioned and idealized Bulgarian transition to a new and freer social order. The new generation of journalists entering the market with the processes of privatization of the media were mostly in their early twenties at the time, selected mainly by the criteria of young, bright, and untainted by the previous regimes. The recruitment model in the new private commercial media attempted to eliminate faces from the past, actors with a history with the old way of doing propaganda journalism, at least on the operational level of active practitioner journalists. The new scheme did preserve, however, some of the old faces in higher executive roles (Sarelska, 2020). As invigorating as this attempted purifying of the field might sound, it also came at the price of flooding the market with inexperienced, and to a degree, naïve young actors, who though not hampered with the vices of the past, were also inept and rather gullible to act against a political reality that was pretty much controlled by the rules of the past.

P19: We were so young, such rookies, especially as it comes to the politics of media. We were trained in the craftsmanship, but not the real art of war that was going on in the media terrain. We had to reinvent broadcast journalism and that had taken us all, but it also distracted us all from keeping an eye on the real purpose behind it- media ethics,

journalistic morals, the public service side of the job. We were bold and we believed we knew better than the old dogs, who were part of the regime. Well, that lack of memory for what it was probably helped the industry get off on the right foot, but sadly it failed us. Our lacking historical knowledge and experience in the old system was a double-edged sword. We didn't know what we're up against.

Though some journalists do acknowledge the disproportionate role and responsibility placed on their community, still many feel responsible and blame themselves and their peers for falling short to protect and maintain professional journalism in the country.

P3: We're all to blame. Nobody is innocent. Active participants, decisions makers, bystanders. It's not politicians' job to safeguard our freedom of the press. We failed that. We, journalists. By being part of this reconstruction of the past. Even when not mindfully doings so. We should've known better.

That reflection and the blame game is rather disproportionate though, as the broken model displayed in Bulgaria entails not just a fragile media system, but also weaknesses in basically all democratic institutions recovering from communism. The stalemate was in the very nature of having state structures largely dependent on the watchdog function of the media to be bettered in serving the electorate and at the same time - media largely dependent on democratic instincts and the rule of law to cultivate and sustain strong professional and ethical groundings. All of those systems were in flux, and none were able to support the other.

P 3: It's a classic Catch 22- no strong media unless strong democracy, no strong democracy, unless strong media. This is where Bulgaria's media drama is encapsulated. I know it sounds like the chicken or the egg type of dilemma, but this is where we are.

P8: There's no way for a society to be active and aware, to be vibrant and rebellious if you wish, when that same society has been decapitated numerous times in our recent history. Deprived from its brightest minds- people attached to the values of liberty and democracy- they were literally executed during the totalitarian regime. Communism had zero tolerance for intellectual diversity and nuances. Everyone who didn't fit the mold, was sacked. Stripped from their dignity. So as of now Bulgaria's only elite is the elite of the socialist apparatus. We have nothing else left. And nothing to expect therefore.

Another common aspect of the local politico-media relationship attributed to the communist legacy is the lack of professional distance and institutional detachment between journalists and politicians. This peculiarity is evident and considered among the essential characteristics of the Regressive Media Model by the vast majority of participants in the study-

P 11: During my journalistic training in Western Europe, I was taught that the relationship between a journalist and a politician by nature is an adversarial one. To my dismay, that's not what I came to witness once I returned to be a journalist in Bulgaria. Here, journalists were happy to signal in any way possible that they're friends with certain powerful figures- they act friendly, posting private comments on Facebook, liking their activities, posting photos of having friendly gatherings. Being friendly with the political power is what makes you a successful journalist, not one who oversteps professional ethical boundaries.

P 10: This intimacy between politicians and journalists is a self-serving relationship for both sides- media gets access to behind-the-scene information of a kind, but politicians use that channel to promote their own agenda. In reality, there's no gatekeeping, and it's the journalists abandoning their function to filter information, for the sake of being first.

Without even thinking twice how that “scoop” is actually turning them into a mouthpiece of power, if not for the fear of political repression, like it used to be during communism, then for the commercial profit of the media. For the sake of being first.

P4: Oftentimes we, as journalists, operate in service of the institutions, rather than the people. The PR teams of the government- they get to call the shots. We just try not to damage our relationships with the PR people. They can make or break you; they got the power. If they decide to boycott you, you risk being out of touch. I speak from experience- I have been more demanding with some of the PR people of the institutions I am covering, and it didn't end well for me. Well, for a while we didn't get any information sent our way, and all the good pitches were sent to our competitors.

P2: I've seen it firsthand- being sent as a field producer to a special sit down with the chief prosecutor of the country. Very powerful figure, one of the most powerful probably, in our Constitutional order at least. So, I was shocked to see the journalist, a colleague of mine, who was conducting the interview being overly friendly, on first names and even nickname basis with the interviewee, taking him over the questions and negotiating which should and shouldn't be asked. No professional distance whatsoever. Another phenomenon is this mailbox journalism, these days called “free binder” journalism. It is when external players, such as the prosecution or the police, or the judiciary - law enforcement in general, provides selected journalists with those binders with information, a drafted journalistic investigation of a kind, designed to smear certain political opponent. That's the newest pseudo investigative journalism here. And pretty much the only kind left. Well-prepared state orchestrated smearing campaign presented as journalism.

De-westernization/Localization of media ownership

While the close power-distance relationship interferes with the ethics of journalism, participants in the study also share an understanding that a significant shift of business model occurring circa 2010 also played a critical role.

P 20: Freedom of speech is a function of media ownership. If the media ownership does not support the work of independent journalists within the rank of the company, we cannot speak about freedom of speech. If there are topics which are off limits for that specific media, even if it's just one topic, we cannot speak about freedom of speech. Journalism department by rule should be an independent entity within the company, which is only subject to the rules and principles of the journalistic profession. And of course, by the law of the country, but no pressure from politicians, advertisers, or anybody else should come to threaten the work of the journalists. Unfortunately, that's not the case in Bulgaria today.

With multinational media giants massively fleeing the market after the 2008 financial recession to focus on more lucrative businesses, the media ownership in the country and in the region in general was surrendered into the hands of local or regional tycoons. Some call them media barons, other use the term oligarchs (Dragomir, 2010; Gross & Jakubowicz, 2012; Stetka, 2012). Concurrently, a significant decline in press freedom has been registered over that same decade that followed the processes of de-westernizing and oligarchizing of media ownership in the country.

P9: Everyone was affected by the 2008 market crash. It's just that we got affected detrimentally. And the reason for that is our advertising market is just so small, that media, particularly national TV Networks were suddenly at a state where they're more

profitable if used for political purposes, rather than as a commercial entity. Simply said, it's the better business model- staying close to the government, providing them comfort gets better paid than selling advertisements based on viewership. It's just as simple as that- serving the government in our country provides endless business possibilities. The opposite is also truth.

All throughout the first decade of the new millennium (2000-2010) with the acquisition of the first private national broadcasting license in Bulgaria by News Corp, and the following liberalization and commercialization of terrestrial broadcasting in the country, foreign ownership was used as a shielding mechanism against political suppression. That was widely recognized by the local and American management of the first private national TV Network in the country- bTV. The commercial media model as applied in Central and Eastern Europe actually showed great potential to invalidate the traditionally profound government interventions in the media of the region.

P3: The period of foreign ownership by the big commercial TV stations was a time of a much more civil and professional tone of work. There were rules, and those were the professional rules of business and journalism. Or business with journalism- I guess you can call it that. But part of the business model was that local politicians had fewer instruments to interfere. The corporations were just bigger than them. Then when corporations fled the market, our leaders knew to never repeat that same mistake again. So, they made sure the control was passed into the hands of their puppy dog local businessmen. And now the connections between the big local business and the big politics are as clear and evident as ever. Not just media business, no business is viable unless the state can tolerate it.

P1: It's always better if the media ownership is foreign. Then news leaders are more protected, less succumbing to the power and the pressure of the state. When the ownership is in the hands of local businessmen, their buttons can be easily pushed-through regulative pressure, and even for the mere fact that local capitalists do not possess the democratic instincts of their western brethren. Local entrepreneurs know the power lays with the state. Unlike American capitalists that are powerful enough to influence the political power. Rich people in Bulgaria know that government can make or break you. So, they play along.

In support of emerging data from the field, prior research also claims significant correlation between the absence of foreign ownership and the low levels of media freedom (Herrero et al., 2017; Kostadinova, 2015). By clearly prioritizing the financial interest and by subscribing to fewer ties with local political interest, foreign ownership in Bulgaria saw media credibility as the commodity- as actually the product that they are selling, which grants journalists and editorial managers a relatively high level of autonomy (Sarelska, 2020). With foreign venture capitalists implementing the American model of putting news at the center stage of the operation, making money was adopted as a restraining mechanism against making political favors, which is oftentimes how leaders in immature democracies understand the role of the media. Not only corporate management but journalists have also spoken in favor of foreign ownership as a defense mechanism against local interest, mainly political, but commercial as well. By “fighting the devil we know” line of thoughts, the dangers of commercialism, as displayed in the classic commercial liberal media model, were greatly undermined and remain widely unaddressed by local journalists.

P 3: Foreign investment was endorsed by journalists, and not as a lesser of two evil. We

simply didn't see the evil, focused to stay vigilant against the only devil we know- the government.

To demonstrate the correlation between ownership and press freedom, in 2003 when Reporters Without Borders started tracking press freedom globally, Bulgaria was positioned 34th out of 180 countries worldwide. Over the next several years, Bulgaria moved from 34th to 46 to 51st. Currently, with localization and oligarchizing of media ownership in place, with multinational companies leaving the market after the financial crisis of 2008, Bulgaria is now ranked 112th out of 180 countries.

P5: Media entities are being captured through economic means. And it's happening out in the open- the ownership is clear and transparent. We know now who owns the media. And it just so happens that all new media owners seem to like the government. We've seen the model in Hungary, where media owners declared loud and clear: we're merging into a pro-government conglomerate of over 200 private entities. Therefore, behind the pretext of editorial independence they choose to be openly loyal to the government, and in support of it. Which on its own turn practically monopolizes the market and destroys every competition. That's going to happen in Bulgaria too. Here, ownership is already placed in the hands of government loyalists. And second, the quality and professionalism of the journalistic teams deteriorates accordingly.

Change of the business model – politicization and instrumentalization of the media

The westernizing of the Bulgarian media was driven mainly by commercial incentives- the financial interests of the foreign companies investing in the newly established media market. Prior to that moment, there was no private entrepreneurship in Eastern European media. Naturally, this new territory was identified as a potentially profitable niche, and investments

followed quickly expanding from market to market. The newcomer global media conglomerates easily ended up winning the ratings war and began dominating the advertising market distribution. Politically, the investments seemed well protected, as the region had widely proclaimed their new political orientation going into the EU and NATO as categorically envisioned national prerogatives. Modernization and professionalization of journalism were therefore a rather forced process- originating from outside commercial pressure, rather than a grassroots movement, grounded in the need for better and more independent journalism. Unlike other Eastern European nations, Bulgaria did not have many journalists-dissidents, nor was the intelligentsia pushback against communism ever as evident in the country as other states in the region such as Czech, for example. Local journalism prior to the collapse of communism was obedient, state-controlled, with extreme levels of overlap between political and media elites. Those old models and dynamics had surfaced in the recent years due to both the global crisis in the business model, experienced by traditional media worldwide, and the local consequences of that trend- the accelerated change of ownership from international giants to local actors or regional players. More importantly, according to news executives in Bulgaria, is the fact that the state had found a mechanism to suppress advertisers and independent media owners through regulatory and administrative pressure (confirmed by the Reporters without Borders 2021 report), as well as to influence the only rating measurement agency on the market.

P 20: The way to control a private business is to threaten their profits. You, as a controlling agent, find a way to tweak around the control of the money flows that makes the difference between gain or loss. And in our case, someone, either the prime minister or people close to the prime minister, doing business together have found a way to control the rating system, which is the currency of the advertisement market of television,

and also web and radio. So, if you control that it doesn't really matter anymore how good or how bad a program is? What matters is the person who tweaks the dials to decide to punish you or to reward you. This is how merit in this business no longer matters, trust of the audiences no longer matters.

By placing both the cash flow and the currency of the market under control, what is achieved in the Bulgarian broadcasting industry is a complete monopoly of power originating from the state and capturing media elites.

The decline of revenue due to restructuring of the advertising market with the rise of high-tech companies and online media consumption that plundered Bulgarian media is clearly not a local phenomenon. It had affected the local media market more severely due to its relatively smaller size and how lucrative it was.

P 9: The problem we have here is that traditional news media, even broadcast news, is no longer a good business around here. That's of course far from a local phenomenon. We just don't have our local Jeff Bezos ilk of patrons who will buy a legacy media due to sentimental values. Our magnates are neither as rich nor as educated. And clearly- none of them has any sentiments whatsoever about democracy and its core values such as freedom of the press.

Bulgaria's population is a little under 7 million, compared to 38 million in Poland and 19 million in Romania, for example. The size of advertising markets in comparison is as follows: \$560 million for Poland, \$241 million for Romania, and \$109 million in Bulgaria (Statista, 2021). Bulgarian consumers also have less buying power than their Western counterparts. All these conditions have amplified the revenue decline for local independent media over the course of the last decade. Bulgaria, therefore, is not a unique case study for ongoing media market

transformations but is rather a case study of a country that is headed downward on the scale of this global negative tendency affecting media in other places. This unique position also contributes to the appropriateness of the country for the initial testing of the suggested Regressive Media Model.

EU funding and state subsidies into the media

Additionally, the registered decline in private advertising has made the news media more dependent on government money to stay afloat, and the government coincidentally found itself with more money on their hands to use as direct government subsidies to the media, due to the generous funding coming from the EU taxpayers to help modernize the new member states following the enlargement of the EU into Eastern Europe in 2004-2007.

Parallel to the processes of the decline of the advertising revenue for traditional media, the purchase power of the state increased through the money poured into the local economy by the European Union. The EU investment into all new member states is designed as a powerful global reparation instrument to bridge the gap between the two Europes, separated during the Cold War. Research had already established, though, that the billions of euros, collected from the European taxpayers to help new member-states catch up and rebuild their economies, are currently being used to feed the tremendous level of systemic corruption in post-communist countries (Dragomir, 2018). For the 2014-2020 period, the Cohesion Fund allocated a total of € 63.4 billion in countries such as Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia. While some of these countries are scoring better in democracy and press freedom representation (such as Czechia, Slovenia, Slovakia, and the Baltics), others are clearly using the EU funds as a state subsidiary to support the local businesses of their political friends and to put pressure over the

slimming minority of independent players. Such processes of state interference and concentration/oligarchizing of ownership is especially notable in the media businesses. Bulgaria alone is scheduled to receive approximately 12 billion euros for the current period, which in proportion is measured to a one/fifth of the country's annual GDP.

P5: The so called "EU communication programs" are practically nothing short of state subsidies for the media. It's a huge part of the issue. The so-called separation of church and state is merely an illusion- even big media players cannot make that proper distinction between money and content. For small local media, those state subsidies are not a hefty addition to the budget, it's their only budget.

P 12: There's a tremendous overlap between church and state- some of those contracts make funding directly conditional on editorial conduct of the media. Public institutions of power use the European taxpayers' money to get a veto clause on editorial content. You act against the local political interest, you lose the funding, and you're legally responsible for violating your contract. From there journalism is over. You're not the fourth estate, you're simply a contractor of the only estate- the government. Regional or national.

The abuse of the EU funding as state aid distributed solely by the government's discretion is mentioned in the Freedom House's most recent report, where the advocacy organization suggests making that funding for Central European countries conditional on their respecting of democratic values, media freedom and the rule of law. Without correctional mechanisms, this investment policy enacted to bring Eastern Europe closer to the Western democracies paradoxically serves the very opposite end- as a deteriorating factor for one of the most intrinsic tokens of those democracies- press freedom and independence of the media.

P 7: The market principle is no longer valid for Bulgarian media. The correlation between media quality leading to audience trust leading to high ratings leading to good profits is now broken. Now media trade political influence only, and money is provided directly or indirectly by the will of the government. EU funding is the direct mechanism, pressure over advertisers and control over the supposedly independent rating measurement system is the other.

Critics have already blamed EU for giving populist Eastern European leaders the “rope with which to hang the West” (Holmes & Krastev, 2020). In much the same way, the EU seems to be contributing to the detrimental implications of Bulgarian media, behind the pretense of actually supporting it. The exposed abducting of public European funding for local political agendas is happening with a silent consent from Brussels, busy with more pressing issues such as Brexit, Russia’s invasion in Ukraine, and more recently- the global COVID pandemic. A distinct lack of leadership from traditional democratic champions including the United States had also taken a toll. In such an environment of global complicity and collusion with the process of profound democratic deterioration, or as Freedom House calls it most recently – a stunning democratic breakdown, in all major social and political structures on an international scale, the internal transformations within the local journalistic culture only add to the intensity and the endurance of the Regressive Media Model.

Internal factors influencing Regressive Media Model (RMM)

“Although press freedom is enshrined in its constitution, Bulgaria risks becoming a country with no one to exercise it.” The flag is raised by Pavol Szalai, the Head of the EU Desk at the Reporters Without Borders (RSF). The concern is voiced at a special 2020 Conference called by the global press freedom advocacy organization to spotlight the growing distress for

journalism in the poorest and most corrupt EU nations. The press freedom tracking organization calls for Bulgarian journalists to mobilize and to bring their professional issues to the forefront of the public debate ahead of the country's 2021 general elections. The appeal solicited is not covered by either of the main broadcast news media covering the event. The encouraged debate was bounded to limited social media discussions between some of the most active representatives of the guild- many of them already former journalists- fired, terminated, outed or voluntarily abandoned the profession due to the growing professional disconnect between the principles and the reality.

A culture of compliance. Can a Lapdog become a Watchdog?

This lack of activism and the absence of collective mobilization in support of integral professional causes are among the strongest and longest-lasting characteristics of local journalistic culture.

P 14: This conversation for the press freedom situation is held more on social media by former journalists, than it is in my newsroom by acting reporters. Me and my colleagues do not talk about it, we have no energy to change it. If we talk about changing something it is how to find a way out. Everyone wants out. There's zero resistance- we might nag in private, secretly. But out in the open everyone is in agreement.

P 3: There's no collective reaction. Yes, a lot of people experience discomfort, they don't like what they experience as journalists. A lot of people complain about not feeling comfortable on the job. But the only resistance is actually – quitting the job before they get you fired. That's what I decided at least- I left after they fired some of the most prominent and pronounced team-members. With no explanations.

P 2: It's been years since I last remember a newsroom discussion – formal or informal about the purpose behind the craft and the ethics of journalism. And that wasn't always the case. In 2013 I was part of a group of journalists leaving the station we worked for because of censorship. We just refused to take it. We left and moved to the next station. Well, when the same problems followed there, we reacted with lesser intensity. They fired the core of the newsroom, our head of news including. We knew why, we knew things will get rougher after that, as the station was getting captured by the government. We talked about it, in private. But nobody quit. I tried to fight it. And was moved to a different job.

The power to sack every critical voice, including the most powerful prominent journalists creates a sense of limitless power for the people making the calls- corporate and editorial managers. At the same time, the lack of professional and public pushback as well as the limitations of the market, where there is simply not enough free media to accommodate all silenced journalists, reinforces a culture of compliance. The lack of professional activism and the profound detachment of journalists from the very professional underpinnings that define their trade- speaking truth to power, devotion to facts and loyalty to citizens, is explained most often by this sense of fatigue and despair as a result of trying to protect those values in your professional dealings but feeling alone in that and facing obstructions that simply seem unconquerable. A vast majority of participants speak about a lost sense of purpose, a burnout, a weariness of values, an overall disappointment that the mission of journalism is at all to be realistically achieved in the local setting. This sentiment was particularly aptly put forth by one of the participants who after 20 years of an impressive career as one of the most recognized broadcasters on the market, was let go following a huge smearing campaign against her on the

pro-governmental media parallel to internal editorial attempts to silence her skepticism towards the political power:

P7: The mission is achieved- I don't want to do this anymore. They didn't just fire me. They managed to have me quit – they broke my resolve. After all the effort and pressure put into making me quit, I don't want to do this job anymore. It's about MY motivation now- I don't see the point, I don't want to be a journalist. I've reached to the top of this business and what I found there is this sheer futility. It's dangerous, it's turbulent, it's cruel. And I just don't want to live this way anymore. I don't want to cause this to myself or my family. And no- I have no desire to fix this. I don't believe in it being fixable. That's how meaningless and grotesque everything felt for me at the end.

The massive wave of journalists forced out of one of the two main commercial TV stations- Nova, circa 2007-2018, following a transition of ownership in the company, from the Swedish multimedia company MTG into the hands of one of the local oligarchs in close connection with the government, was mentioned on some of the press freedom tracking reports as a deteriorating factor, causing a chilling effect among the professional community (RSF, Press Freedom Index, 2020). Some of the journalists affected by this repression were interviewed in this project – both before and after their dismissal. It is noteworthy that out of those eleven participants in the study who did face termination or were forced to leave their jobs due to political reasons, only four remained in the news industry, moving to smaller, independent organizations. The majority of journalists ousted from the big broadcast media were never approached by the competition, regardless of their high-profile careers in the field.

The dismissal and the blacklisting of some of the most prominent voices creates a chilling effect for the survivors, share some of the participants:

P 2: When they sacked one, and not just anyone, but the most powerful one on the team, the ones staying became quieter. They don't demand professional decision making by their editors, nor do they act as a critical voice on air. And that's faced with no reaction whatsoever – not by the professional community. We all keep our voices down. Instead of storming out and saying out loud the kind of abuse we're facing as journalists and that we refuse to take it anymore. No, we are silent. Why do you think that is?

Well- fear. Or a complete disbelief that's somethings bound to change. It so not either or, actually. It's both.

P 14: Everyone's talking about this fear factor. Fear of being fired. I don't think that's real. Who was ever fired? Actually, it happened only to the most emblematic names of our profession. People whose names meant something in our journalism indeed, at least for my generation, yes, they were brutally dismissed. But all the rest have nothing to worry about- they haven't really done anything worthy of prosecution. So, when such people tell me they're self-censoring themselves because of fear- come on, give me a break. Nobody's even going to bother censoring you. You first have to dare produce something worth censoring. That I don't see I the last years after the big wave of dismissal.

Regardless of some variance of interpretations, self-censorship is another very firm element of how Bulgarian journalists see their own professional culture.

Self-censorship- quitters and traitors

Practically every participant talks about experiencing a level of self-censorship and the ongoing transformations in the area of editorial control- from outside political pressure of the early 2000s, and the prime minister personally calling journalists to demand a certain flattering

spin to their coverage, to a more subtle way of influence- through either the news management, or the higher executive power. All attempted control results in a big wave of self-censorship by journalists who do not feel supported in their own newsrooms and prefer to act preemptively- and sway away from potentially conflict-charged topics.

P 3: I can imagine that there are still people from the ruling class placing calls to journalists and directing them what do to. But I can also imagine with a greater certainty that there's simply no longer a need for them doing so. The self-censorship is now self-executing. It's now an editorial policy if you wish. Bulgarian media had abandoned their critical function of scrutinizing the public debate, of exercising skepticism towards all places of power. And it had done so to a large degree completely voluntarily.

P 3: Self-censoring is when journalists start to doubt themselves more than they do political power. I've caught myself doing it - thinking before I ask a question or accept a certain topic on the rundown- is this worth the fight I have to go through with my news director? Is it that important? Will it be such a big issue if we omit a certain topic to spare ourselves a potential conflict with your boss or the owner of the media? The very fact of that thinking process in place – considering the comfort of the corporate interest in your work as journalists, is a big issue for journalism in on itself.

The conflict between the editorial line and individual journalistic conscience is a key element of a regressive media system. Regardless of what drives the corporate agenda - be it commercial or political interest, or a combination of the two as is the case in transitioning Eastern European democracies - the consequences for ethical journalism are detrimental. Allowing journalists to follow their conscience and personal moral compass is a key element of the virtue of journalism (Kovach, 2007). With news being the core business of pushing boundaries and having difficult

conversations, the experiences of Bulgarian journalists suggest those are being broadly hindered within the local journalistic culture itself. The self-censorship as a mechanism of self-restraint and self-silencing of one's own discourse has all the more destructive results when engraved in an institution loaded with the symbolic power to make sense of all surrounding political and cultural narratives. The lack of that internal freedom leads to changes in the very apparatus of journalism, the way they approach, negotiate and frame reality, and their overall symbolic social roles: gatekeeping, agenda setting and meaning-generation.

P 2: I can see us going back to the Aesopian language typical for media in communist systems. In the last 10 years I have grown up to be a big adopter of that figurative, allegorical speech. When I first started catching myself drawing from that stock of knowledge from history- the coded language of journalists who did not own their freedom to speak in a matter-of-fact manner, I knew we were in trouble.

P 10: As a news producer I would try and copy edit something – just put it in more direct terms, for clarity and comprehension, and the reporter would argue against it. This ubiquitous fear of what can be said and how, and whether it might upset the power, that is the source of the profound self-censorship in your job.

P 14: It's not a written rule- but everyone has this gut feeling- they know what can be said and what better be avoided. Even experienced journalists have moved away from hard topics into easier beats- as a reporter you can always control the depth of your work. Well, the times require that you don't dig deep. You know that if you do, you're going to be left alone- with no support from your direct management. So better do as little as possible, the line of now resistance. And then you go home. And live from paycheck to paycheck.

Table 4.1 Journalist Groups

Journalists falling into the “Quitters category”	Journalists falling into the “Traitors” category
P 10: “I quit the job that I considered a vocation, but it’s now dying. I cannot change that. So. I am saving myself.”	P12: I saw it happening in front of my eyes- many of my colleagues sold their souls for money. Their ethics and their professional dignity. And sold it cheap. Choosing their mortgage before their professionalism.
P17: “Journalism I had to do especially in the recent years, is not what I wanted to be doing. So, I choose my dignity- instead of just conforming to just staying for the paycheck, I would rather quit than feeling ashamed for the way make my living”	P 11: There’s some sort of pretend resistance. But it’s just a lip service. Everyone saves themselves, not the profession. So, our professional culture is a reflection of all of us- this is who we are. If we were more consolidate as colleagues and many more people fought the fight it might have been different. They can only fire us one by one, not together. Well, we make it easy on them- not mobilizing and uniting as a community.
P 3: I surrendered. I cannot change the system. I can only leave it. I know many blame me for this. But there is no middle ground- you either succumb and you stay, or you succumb, and you go.	P 2: We’ve made too many compromises. I know colleagues who proudly declared- nobody forbid me anything, I am left to work
P 8: The reality of today is such that it’s only adequate that I am no longer a journalist. Yes, I give up. I have no mission. I am not a rebel.	

Table 4.1 continued

It's selfish to think it this way- journalism cannot be my personal necessity. But social needs are something very different- people anyways no longer trust the media and I have no desire to ask questions at this point. I am saving myself. Saving the culture is impossible.

P 13: I feel no regrets. I didn't give up on my profession voluntarily – I was sacked, and nobody took interest in what I can do, regardless of my award-winning journalism for over 20 years. I honestly think I should've left sooner, seeing where things were headed. I regret staying, I don't regret leaving.

P 7: Yes, I am a quitter and a proud one. I was firm when I was part of a team, when my editors had my back, when I knew I was working for my audiences and that was the shared value in my newsroom. Now the shared values are not the kind that I can subscribe to. After all the smears, the threads

completely free. It makes me wonder- what have you don't that has afflicted someone. You can be completely free to do the kicker story or the weather report. And that's what many reporters who don't see a problem with our press freedom are mostly doing.

P 15: If I know I will have to lean low, I try not to take the story on the first place. I know I will not change the system. And I have given up. Now the only fight I fight is for the stories I sign off with my name, I don't want to taint my name. To do that I simply choose stories that will not face interest from a higher office. I do things only if I am sure they'll fly under the radar.

P 18: If everyone leaves, the station will shut down. But that's not happening. There are always new people wanting to come to replace the ones with the strong holdings of professionalism.

P 6: All the fights I fight, I have honestly

Table 4.1 continued

and physical attacks including, the goal is achieved. They made me back out. I have a purpose outside of my job and that's my family and I can no longer put them and myself through this. And I don't accept to be bullied for that choice.

P 8: I" don't want to be a hero. I want to do my job professionally and with dignity. If it doesn't fly- I am no masochist. I call it a quit.

won. For example – I was asked to cut a soundbite just because it was critical to the government and change my script to soften it a bit. I refused to do it. And told my producer

– have someone else do it. and have someone else voice over the story. It can't be me. So that's my way- I don't participate.

-But the harm is done...

-Well, everyone decides how to do their job.

At least it's not my responsibility

P 4: Very often I feel fearful to do investigative pieces. My station won't give me the time and the resources I need to be confident in my facts. So, there's a huge time pressure on one hand, which is detrimental for serious investigative journalism. And also, if I get it wrong, nobody's going to have my back. Well, in this situation, I would rather do fluff stories that won't hurt me in a long run.

P 6: We as reporters wonder on a daily basis if what we're working on is going to be ok. But not ok for our audiences, ok for someone who's got the power and the control of what's ok to be said in the public arena. That's the end of journalism. As it is our job to push boundaries and go after things that are not ok. Once you start wandering- who's going to be offended by my publication, you're dead as a journalist. I am afraid we're there.

As a result of intense editorial control and reflecting on the close relationship between media and politics in Bulgaria, the prevailing understanding among local journalists is that there is no location for practicing journalism, at least in the area of traditional mainstream broadcast media. In dealing with this belief system, journalists choose from two different mechanisms, joining one of the two groups, labeled here – Quitters and Traitors. Either way the exercised editorial pressure perceived as unprofessional and serving outside interests seem to be effective in eliminating voices of dissent- through either assimilating them or marginalizing them.

A culture of fear and despair

In talking about dealing with the immoral and corrupt nature of the editorial control experienced, journalists in Bulgaria often share their fears and despair. One of the participants reinforces that notion using a mental health metaphor to capture the state of suffering in the local state of journalism:

P 1: In an ecosystem where journalists are experiencing a lack of freedom of their speech, they are in agony. I call it journalism on anti-depressants. A journalist faced with censorship and suppression inevitably loses the sense of purpose for their job. And as

humans we all need this sense of purpose, and a sense of accomplishment and achievement of our full potential. When you lose that moral, you become empty. It's hard when this depressive tendency can be seen on a group level in a professional community, which I believe is the case in Bulgaria.

The main risk as experienced by Bulgarian journalists, according to incoming data from the field, is the possibility of losing your job. The majority of participants share the sentiment when talking about the need to force them to compromise their professional and moral compass. The fear of state repression and prosecution also exists- mainly present in terms of fear of being smeared on pro-governmental media as well as being subjugated to institutional bullying. One journalist mentioned a perpetuating tax revision initiated by the state and though nothing wrong was found, the ongoing investigations were routinely exposed on the pro-governmental media aiming at character assassination and attacking the credibility of an independent journalist. Physical attacks are much rarer in Bulgaria. "Journalists don't get killed around here, journalism though is being assassinated on a daily basis," states one of the local support groups for former journalists created on social media.

P 8: I still am not unhappy that they don't physically murder us in this country. Maybe we are mediocre enough, so not such drastic measures are actually necessary. But that is not necessarily bad. I don't believe in measuring professionalism and freedom in the media by the numbers of assassinated journalists. That's a whole different level of low that I hope I don't live to see.

Still, one of the journalists interviewed for this project shared having had two of their personal cars set on fire by an unknown perpetrator- the violent acts (in 2013 and 2015 respectively) were investigated but never prosecuted. Another participant reported on a repetitive automobile failure

with supposedly intentional cause according to independent experts, but she never filed a police report for either of those incidents.

“There is always fear, to this day when I get into my car for a second, I can have this picture in my head- what will happen when I start the engine. It’s a subconscious panic, but it’s there all the time. Sometimes It grows to a sense of paranoia. But I feel it when I get into my car, not when I do my job,” shares the reporter-victim of arson.

P 7: I was afraid. That’s why when faced with tremendous challenges for myself and my family, I just left. If I knew that I had a community behind by back, that if I speak up ten more will speak up with me and say: It happened to me too. That it might’ve been different. If I knew we could be five, ten, twenty people pushing back. But I felt alone. I had to think about saving myself.

A culture of isolation and lack of collegial solidarity

The sense of isolationism is a common experience among journalists, not just for those sacked due to political pressure in Bulgaria. Active practitioners talk about it as one of the main shortcomings of the professional culture. After years of severe commercial competition, the market has raised a generation of young journalists who perceived their peer first a competitor, an adversary, and then, if at all, someone who shares the same professional interest and could be therefore considered an ally.

P 20: You have a professional group of highly individualistic people, who cannot really get together as, as a team because they are more competitors than colleagues. ...It still is mostly a group of individualistic, egomaniacs, if you will, who are doing their best to shine in their profession. And it's difficult for them sometimes to even talk to each other.

The lack of professional solidarity and an active journalistic guild is regarded as one of the main obstacles before the much-needed professional activism.

P 15: We, as journalists, do not support each other. If someone falls, it's an opportunity for someone else. A niche to be taken.

P 5: If you're a factory worker and you get fired illegally- there are unions to protect you. When our most top names were sacked- yes huge reaction on social media. But that's not activism. That's lip service. It just reduces the social pressure with no effectiveness whatsoever.

P 8: In all these years as a journalist I never felt part of a community. I never saw togetherness among colleagues standing up in a support of a principle. A cause powerful and fundamental enough to erase our individual differences and to squeeze our egos to the side. When I ask hard questions, oftentimes I get my fellow-journalists even more irritated than the speaker. They avoid conflict, don't want to engage.

The defined fundamental values and principles of Western Liberal journalism such as the Fourth Estate remain at a very superficial level due to existing historical and systematic conditions. An important Western concept such as a journalist as a *watchdog* is seen as anything from *a lapdog*- promoting patriotism and goodness of the local regulations and government, **to attack dog**- with the media being used to pursue the agendas of different political interests. As journalist Scott Shuster states, "American influence is most profound among broadcasters as foreign broadcasters only needed to turn their tv on to see how to do the news American style" (Hachten & Hachten, 1996), but acquiring American Face doesn't seem to suffice for superseding the Totalitarian soul.

Factors of the broader social culture influencing Regressive Media Model (RMM)

“We are the illegitimate children, the bastards of communism. It shaped our mentality.”

Adam Michnik, Polish Dissident

Even three decades after the collapse of communism, the scars of the repressive system over the collective mentality in Eastern Europe are evident. Democratic norms and institutions are very fragile, and attachment to individual freedoms is not as strong of a social norm as in societies with more mature democracies. As Adam Michnik continues with his famous quote from 2013: “The democratic institutions are more deeply embedded in the West than in Eastern Europe. Democracy can defend itself there.” Experienced democratic decline and a wave of competitive authoritarianism on a global scale (Levitsky & Way, 2010) contribute to a wave of political polarization, rampant populism, misinformation and disinformation on the rise and culmination of audiences distrust towards the media worldwide. The competency of modern societies to counteract such circumstances is questioned in even the most stable of political settings. In the case of traumatized post-communist Eastern Europe, the social context seems even more unsettling.

Civic disengagement and audience (dis)trust

As far as press freedom and freedom of the speech goes in Eastern Europe, communist legacy dictated that engaging in public discourse is at best futile if not a directly dangerous venture. The historic tendencies of silencing certain groups eventually led to self-silencing and

civic disengagement in the broader social context, the same way years of state-enforced censorship has resulted in self-censorship and dissolution among journalists in Eastern Europe. Trust in traditional media has declined to an all-time low in many countries around the world, and Bulgaria is certainly no exception. This trend is especially daunting though in post-communist immature democracies, where media's critical role in promoting democratic discourse and civil participation is all the more central. That role is particularly challenged in the current climate of fake news, misinformation, and disinformation, coupled with the information wars that are unfolding in Eastern Europe, fueled by Russia and other forces trying to regain their traditional influence in the region. Compromised trust in practically all institutions of democracy in the region - the media, the government, the judiciary and the rule of law, brings about growing public disengagement and cynicism, supporting the phenomenon of passive audiences (Jebril et al., 2013).

Bulgarian society is experiencing a significant distrust in mainstream media, alongside all the institutions of power in general (Eurobarometer, 2019). A recent study indicates that only 1 % of Bulgarians find media in the country to be completely independent (Konrad Adenauer Foundation, 2018). While it has been greatly established how the lost credibility in the messenger has affected the quality of the public discourse, this study focuses on how the social stigma over the media affects journalism. Lack of public support on behalf of audiences and activist groups has been among the main discouraging factors in the words of participants.

P 3: The big part of why journalists are so passive originates in their firm belief that they will not be granted any public support on behalf of their audiences, nor their professional community.

P 7: Maybe it's our fault as journalists that we never actually made our editorial struggles so public, to appeal to their support in that way. But yes, what I can say with certainty, that if I believed there are woke thinking members of the audience, of the society who really needed the type of journalism I was going after, I probably wouldn't have quit journalism. The lack of public support adds to the sense of – why am I doing this. It's too hard. And nobody cares about this anyways.

Part of the issue of not actively seeking public support, journalists admit, lies in one of the core principles of journalism. Reporters are trained to never make their work about themselves. “You're not the story” is the professional standard they hear every step of the way in both training and practicing their careers. So, when journalism in Bulgaria actually became the story, it seems like there was nobody prepared or willing to tell it to the world.

P 11: We did this to ourselves. We alienated those very people who potentially would act to support us- the brightest, most intelligent social circles. We lost their trust. They just don't like us- they think we're too conformist, and we are. We have been closing our eyes for social issues – we were not there for our audience, so it's no surprise now our audience is not here for us.

Different interpretations surface as to what amplifies audience distrust in the local media setting. Immediately after the changes to democracy, the media in Bulgaria were among the most trusted institutions. Up until 2008, still the majority of the population declared they would rather trust the media, despite the general understanding that captured lack of transparency in media ownership (Smilova et al., 2010). Journalists in the current study talk about a phenomenon they refer to as “a television republic”- meaning the power television used to have as the go-to institution for solving people's problems. Before the courts, before the local authorities, people

would trust the media to come to their rescue should they face a dispute, especially with the state or other powerful agents. Those were the early years of the new independent media. While many media representatives believe that it is the historic deficit of democratic instinct and attachment to freedom in the very cultural fabric of society that causes the recently experienced audience disdain towards journalists, others in the community disagree.

P 2: Individual freedoms in our part of the world are not as appreciated by society.

Freedom of the speech does not represent value for our people, except for maybe a very small segment of society. People do not see the relationship between the work of media and their own personal bettering of their lives. They don't believe that they can enjoy more freedoms and live better if they had stronger media.

P 3: Our society does not deem press freedom important. People don't see it affecting their life. Whether it is because of the immature democratic traditions, or because the trust in our media is so eroded, and people prefer to believe that media deserves what it gets- the mistreatment and the restrain over their freedoms, I don't really know. What I do know is for sure our society does not support their journalists. And journalists know it and act accordingly- almost in spite of their audiences.

P 1: The average Bulgarian did not get wealthier in the democracy. He didn't feel a change for the better in his everyday lives due to free media coming into the picture. Nor did he feel the benefits of the EU and all the NGOs now operating on the ground. So, then he hated all those new modern western institutions. He started to call journalists derogatory names, and there started the blame game. Journalists were criticized for being too yellow, too sensationalists, too focused in ratings and making the bottom line. And this is also not a Bulgarian phenomenon, per se. But in Bulgaria it came in our young

formative years- as a society. It just hit us harder. We just were less prepared to deal with this.

P 8: I don't believe the audience distrust is a measure of a passive and non-democratic culture. On the contrary. It's the only possible way for our publics to act out. It's an outcry. I believe it to actually be an act of social crusading. And we're not big on revolt. You should not expect that from a society which has been repetitively decapitated – our brightest minds were literally exterminated during communism. So our modern revolt comes in this passive form, at least on the outside. But I think the public distrust towards our professions is the most visible manifestation of the societal riot- people are more inclined to believe pure lies on social media but not the official source. That's a typical characteristic for the totalitarian regimes. And that's what our media system experiences today. Before it used to be – if it wasn't on the TV News, it didn't happen. Now everything is more believable than what is said on the TV news. And because of this huge distrust towards our trade, it doesn't really matter if you put all the efforts to be faithful to facts. Nobody believes you anyways.

This interpretation of public distrust as a discourse- as a reaction against long-lasting power abuse on behalf of the media, finds its natural continuation in the phenomenon of echo chambers- or isolated audiences. Both of these phenomena combined add up to the regressive tendencies in the media.

P 13: Objectivity is a dying concept- the audiences now want fan-based journalism. If you're equally distanced from both sides, with no fear of favor, you have no support. Period. Audiences today need someone who tells them what they want to hear. Truth or not- actually it's only natural for people to dismiss uncomfortable truth. Now they can

find their comfortable version and have the version of the truth that suits them. So, looking it like that, I genuinely believe that journalism of the kind that I preach is something that the audience needs. Or maybe they need it. But they don't want it.

The absence of public support seems especially discouraging for journalists trying to keep their commitment to professional conduct and ethical reporting. When prompted to discuss the specific type of support they imagine society can award them or what audiences can do in demanding quality journalism, participants mention speaking up in support of silenced voices, looking to support, including financially, news media that value factual ethical reporting, and sharing quality reporting, as well as putting mindful effort in increasing one's own media literacy and diversification of news media sources.

P 19: When there was fake GMO cheese on the market years back- that was sold to consumers for cheese, but was full of artificial flavoring and had no cheese in it whatsoever, it wasn't the industry that gathered up to fix that. It was the manufacturers of real cheese, whose quality product was threatened to remain with no market because of fake but cheap substitutes. And it was also, and with the largest voice- the consumers. They just wanted to eat real cheese. Not sure they care so much about the real news. It came free to their house for so long anyways. So maybe we need to find a way to monetize what we have- journalism. The real thing. Not simply eyes on the screen."

Audiences' disaffection with journalism and the apprehension for financially supporting news media is slowly showing a tendency for improvement with part of the top broadcaster on the market managed to launch a small independent crowdfunding project, experimenting with mini pay for quality journalism. The financial support is still extremely limited, though, negatively affecting the production quality of the initiated programming. Nevertheless, experimenting with

audience-supported news media is a step into the right direction. At least in the eyes of the participants, audience-supported news is the only hope for reinstating the role of the media as a watchdog of power and of news as an actual public service.

P 17: We were told many times that freedom of the press is only granted to those who own one. Well- now our viewers do. So, let's see if they need it.

P 12: The audience? I don't think they care. It's our mentality here- Bulgarians start crying for independent media only when they personally need one- to help them with the everyday injustice that we all face in this country

In addition to being late in adopting crowdsource unconventional funding for the media, Bulgaria is also behind in promoting media literacy and digital citizenship (Freedom House, 2019; IREX, 2020).

P 16: Our audiences don't make the difference between quality and click-bait. Between journalism and propaganda. Even fairly educated groups of our society are not knowledgeable about it.

P 5: You know how they say every nation deserves its government. Well, same with media. The media quality in a commercial media system is reflective of the needs of the society. If there's a demand for fair, free and factual journalism, the marketplace of ideas will supply such. It seems like Bulgarians currently don't have that pressing need. Same way they don't seem to urgently need separation of power, independent judiciary, and anti-corruption policy.

According to participants, socio-cultural support for free media can also come from improving journalistic education and professional training, training for politicians on the workings of a free press in an open society, as well as a profound reform in the general education system putting

media literacy and other social skills at the centerstage of the curriculum, introducing relevant concepts and issues of the evolving modern world.

CHAPTER 5:

CONCLUSION

This study discovered a wide consensus among Bulgarian journalists about the conditions influencing the severe press freedom deterioration in the country, as registered by Reporters without Borders and other organizations protecting journalism and free speech. In summarizing those findings, the study suggests the following Regressive Media Models as a theoretical instrument that can be applied to understanding press freedom limitations in the country and the main determinants playing into the limitations.

Regressive Media Model. Summary of Key Finding

The regressive media model as captured by this pilot study among Bulgarian broadcast journalists consists of the following major components:

1. External - applying to power structures outside of journalism that are influencing the professional roles of journalists and the media system as a whole. These are conditions from mainly political and economic nature in which the media system operates.
2. Internal- considering transformative processes stemming from within the local journalistic culture itself, including level of professionalization, collective ethics, different mechanisms for editorial control, and the lack of togetherness in the community
3. Socio-cultural component- capturing the broader social context in the nation and the interactions between people, ideas and institutions, in this case- the role of audiences and other actors representing civil society, as well as the indigenous characteristics and social conventions relating to press freedom and individual liberties in general.

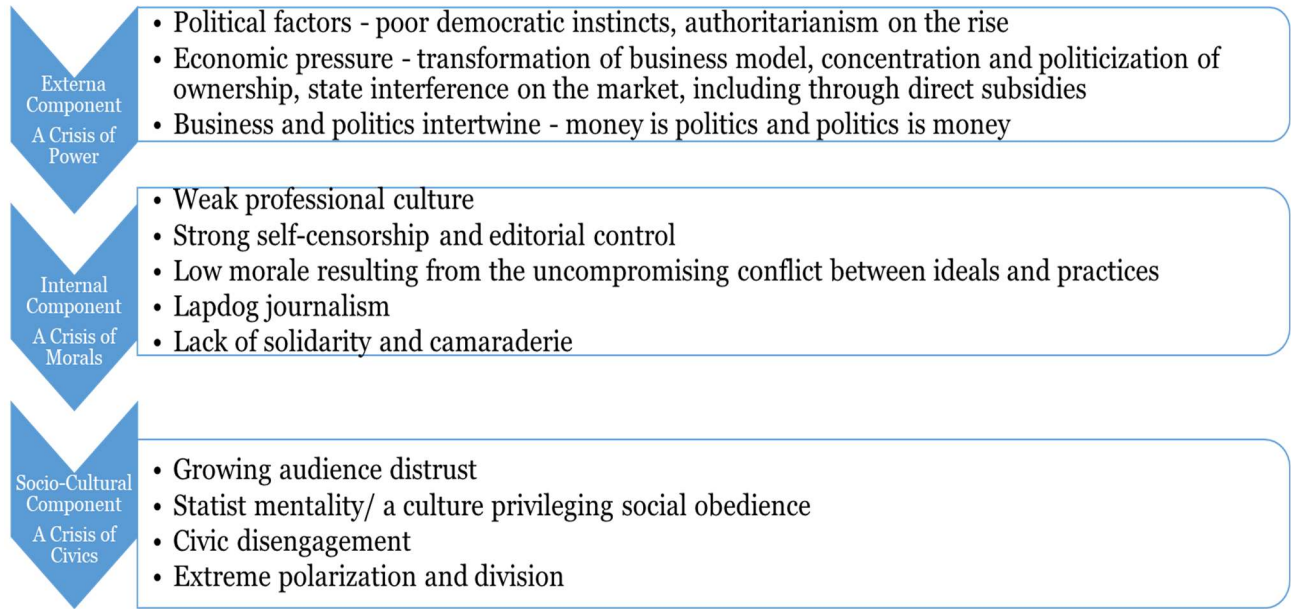


Figure 5.1 Regressive Media Model

In the explored media environment, fundamental democratic values such as press freedom, separation of power and media independence were introduced rather abruptly with the initiated commercialization and westernization of local media ecosystem in the early 2000s. The change of direction in both the business model and actualization of journalistic practices was set forth as an outside influence- through ownership transformation and international training at the dawn of media privatization in the country, as opposed to internalized dissident movement reflecting a societal craving for freedoms, as was the case in other Eastern European countries. The lack of historical grounding and inherent social significance for those democratic norms led to shallow imitative appropriation. Instead of viewed as the bedrock of democracy, media was prioritized as a commercial entity, and the adoption of fundamental values of the fourth estate was simply mimicked for purely marketing purposes. The democratic façade in the world of politics translated into imitative fourth estate in the realm of the media. This study raises the broader question of tokenizing press freedom to serve all types of political and commercial purposes, while stripping it from its deeper internal values that are instrumental for a democracy. Simply said the Bulgarian case study demonstrates how press freedom can be hijacked as simply a label or a lip service, with no real practices in place to substantiate its merit.

Undue political and economic pressure over Bulgarian media and the interplay between business and politics is at the main driver of the dramatic downfall of press freedom registered over the last 14 years, a process parallel to the one-party ruling established in the country by the conservative leadership of GERB (the monopoly ruling party since 2006). At the heart of much of the pressure experienced by participants in this study is money, and in the local context of Eastern Europe money is politics and politics is money. Especially after the financial crisis of 2008, it's becoming more and more difficult for the media to survive by attracting

advertisement. When targets cannot be met financially, in the money-making bundle comes politics – trading influence is becoming the main business model. Government’s pouring the EU money in the media outlets it deems sympathetic, following the principle “finance our friends and silence our enemies”. Unfortunately, the disappearance of private advertising has also the side effect of making news media particularly dependent on government money to stay afloat. The same pattern of state centered consolidation and concertation has happened in the newspaper industry circa 2008, now broadcasting is following the same path.

To make a difficult situation even worse, the current COVID-19 pandemic and its projected economic consequences are threatening to double down on the critical conditions for the commercial media in the foreseeable future, forecasting journalism in the mainstream media to keep going down in defeat, controlled by state supported oligarchs.

In the post-communist tradition, press freedom plays out as more of a fetish than a lived reality- it is talked about with high esteem but executed lamentably due to a lack of deep internalization in both the society and the professional community. The Bulgarian example demonstrates how press freedom could be superficially embraced as a lip service, adopted on the look of it, but used simply for its commercial appeal or its brand-promoting value. Without really being instrumentalized as a beacon of democracy fulfilling the public service role of the media into making the electorate freer and more self-governed.

Jakubowicz and Sükösd (2014) had already stated that the export of the Anglo-American model and its press freedom conceptualization to the region of Eastern Europe had failed for several reasons. This is the model suitable for a stable democracy and even there we see it struggles in the recent years of growing populist illiberalism. Yet, it has taken the Anglo-American system almost 200 years to reach its current stage of development, that was being attempted for

automatic adoption in the post-communist world. Where democracy is new and fragile, experimented for the first time merely three decades, against the backdrop of permanent social and political flux and time of profound and simultaneous transformations in every realm of social life.

Recommendations

When discussing possible improvements of media environment in the country, local journalists talk about change in journalistic education, change of the recruitment model focusing on professional qualities and way from current prioritization of loyalism and nepotism, and change of the business model- suggesting a greater transparency in ownership and audience metrics, as well as empowering the investment role of audiences through crowdfunding. The latter is a lagging process in the region due to market limitations and media literacy deficiency, preventing local publics to realize the importance of the media for the bettering of their social being, as well as the state of emergency reached by the native media system. Media literacy education and funding is in that sense an important recommendation for improvement, suggested by this study, as it could influence the broader social context of the phenomenon and support the challenging reconstruction processes needed within the media system itself.

Another major area for improvement is mobilizing the professional community to act like a movement unified by common professional goals, rather than competing atomized individuals focusing on their individual careers and in doing so, focusing on the money-making power of commercial media entities. Shifting the focus from businesses to communities is seen as a potential tool for putting the ethics at the center stage- for both journalists and publics. The table below summarizes recommendations for improvements in a regressive media system, as suggested by this study, and supported by sentiments of participants.

Table 5.1 Recommendations for Improvements and Sentiments of Participants

Recommendations for improvements	In their own words: Justification by participants
EDUCATION	
• Reform formal journalistic education- adding relevance and practical skills to respond the needs of newsrooms, as well as student media and internship and practicums to provide education on the job. • Combine contemporary ethics and philosophy of journalism conceptual classes with skill-focused classes providing for the merge of ideal and praxis of journalism at a college level • Modernize journalistic education to reflect the evolving nature of the industry • Offer a combination of skill-focused practical training,	P 11: Journalism education needs to be reinvented. Someone needs to lead that change. The vast majority of journalism professor currently in Bulgaria have practiced journalism in the communist era, it at all. They were part of a corrupt system. We need new education leaders. People coming with their international training and degrees from abroad could possibly benefit the system.

Table 5.1 Continued

grounded in ethical journalism and the standard of “no fear or favor” • Extend journalistic education to K-12 level, and start designing a media literacy curriculum aimed at pre-college level students as a general educational standard	
MEDIA ORGANIZATIONS	
• Prioritize media autonomy to sustain the credibility of your organization, try to minimize political influences in favor of independent commercial operations grounded in legitimate business principles and the interests of the audiences • Clearly state your political orientation (if you have such) • Establish a clear protocol for communication and editorial regulation- who can tell reporters what to do, how is their professional conscious protected,	

Table 5.1 Continued

how is journalism ethics being guaranteed • Protect journalists from political pressure and encourage independence from illegitimate editorial pressure • Recruit standard editors and internal ethical boards – respected experienced professionals who can defend professional standings within and outside of the organization • Overall: professionalization and self-regulating of journalism is needed. A lot of the transformative effort post communism had been directed into technical modernization and imitation of the western models, and not enough emphasis and resources were placed on deep long-term qualitative transformations of the authentic local professional	
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Table 5.1 Continued

culture. Defining an agreed upon professional convention for journalism in the country is long overdue.	
PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS	
Consider introducing the institution of press ombudsman or standards editors as per existing model in other European countries (mainly in Scandinavia). The role of the news ombudsmen as defined by the Organization of News Ombudsmen and Standards Editors (ONO) is to Promote the values of accuracy, fairness and balance in news reporting for the public good, and to assist media organizations to provide mechanisms to ensure they remain accountable to consumers of their news.	P 19: We have been competitors for so long, we had forgotten that we're colleagues before

Table 5.1 Continued

• Encourage collegiality and promote professional standards among journalistic community horizontally- between editorial teams and newsroom, shaping a professional community across different media • Monitor and report cases of suppression against journalists and provide legal support • Promote crowdfunding and educating society about the benefits of supporting independent journalism • Exposing the financial streams from government or through EU funding towards non-ethical media entities and raising awareness for ethical journalism and its role in a society • Providing legal and financial support for journalists – through	that. We need to protect our professional interest as a guild, otherwise we become an easy prey to commercial and political interests P 1: My hope is people will move to smaller independent online media, that will be publicly funded or maybe supported by donors without vested interest. Only public funding can actually encourage public interest in the media, after all. P 5: The only way for independent media to flourish is by cutting the dirty money streams towards the propaganda websites. Journalists cannot deal with that, it's now in the hand of the judiciary and other independent agencies. Supposedly independent. Journalistic organizations can only bring that topic to the center stage and demand action.
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Table 5.1 Continued

crowdfunding or stimulating strong public model journalism funded by EU sources, directed and controlled by the community, not the government(for example EU had announced launching of a 60 million euro program for independent investigative journalism, placing its distrubution in the hands of the state is deeply contradictory).	
JOURNALISTS	
• Step away from competitive to collaborative mode • Be firm in sustain professional and moral groundings- including within your newsroom. Reach for support when under pressure – professional organizations, colleagues, the publics	P 15: This is the fight to be fought in the newsrooms, in our owners’ offices. It’s not for the government to set us free. They don’t need free media. Our riot needs to be in front of our news directors and CEO’s. P 8: I am a veteran reporter, but I can tell you- I know young journalists who’s moral

Table 5.1 Continued

• Make effort to bridge the generational gap- seek communication between the ousted role models and the incomers rookies, introduce the mentor-mentee model for increasing professional ethics and determination for quality journalism among young generations • Unite and mobilize in protection of professional principles and against editorial control infiltrated through advertising or ownership • Refuse overstepping of professional standards even under internal managerial pressure, use publicity as a defense mechanism even when insure in the result- do not hesitate to go public with any cases of outside pressure. • Consider the power of social media for defending professional standards	is at the right place. And I believe they can be successful even in these circumstances if they stay true to the profession and its principles. How far can they go? That's another issue. But everyone needs to put their best effort and not complain about the external limitations. P 8: Social media is an outlet; I do have close to 40 k followers of my professional accounts. Which for our market is 1 rating point. It's something. These people want to follow me to see how I see the news. We as broadcast reporters are used to undermine social media- but that's in the past. Even while I was on TV I could see people are
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and ethical norms on an individual level • Nurture solidarity with your colleagues – they can fire one, but not everyone.	watching less than before. Audiences are moving to social and so should we.
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Summarizing the findings from this study, it seems at this point that that little will improve without a significant change in attitudes on the ground- both within institutions of political power and within journalistic community, and also and also as importantly- outside diplomatic or non-governmental support, mainly at the EU level. With local government demonstrating a clear lack of interest in improving press freedom conditions, and to respect its international obligations, it needs to be limited externally including through conditioning the European subsidies on the rule of law and media independence of the country, as has already been suggested by both European commission and Reporters without borders repeatedly. An independent and pluralistic national commission or press ombudsman institution, chaired by a well-known international human rights figure and consisting of Bulgarian and international experts, seems a relevant instrument for improving freedom of the press in the country by being tasked with drawing up concrete recommendations.

Though journalists experiencing the most unfree media system in the European Union naturally are not at all optimistic about possible improvement of the situation, it can be anticipated that years of government attempts to vilifying the media, though sometimes successful, can result with time in actually energizing them, as well as their audiences. And in doing so, causing a wave of dissent and civic awakening. In the meantime, it is the job of each journalist to keep their work grounded in facts and promote journalistic excellence even in challenging markets and political circumstances. Much the same way as traditional media in the US experienced what's called the "Trump bump"³ (Abramson, 2020), Bulgarian independent media can try to find a way to mobilize

³³ A wave of growing support and increased loyalty on behalf of the audiences, including in ratings and readership, in the time of the most vigorous attacks against the media, inserted by the former president Donald Trump and his "enemy of the people" narrative,

against the agents of power that is clearly working to destroy them and strip them from their mission, and their power, not without insiders' participation to a degree. Beyond the political climate the study shows that broadcast media and journalistic culture itself had played a role in the public's eroding trust by reminding complicit to the political and commercial forces diminishing their professionalism and independence.

Some participants in this research see opportunities in the future generation of journalists granted there is a change in higher education, and also in the historical transformations of the field – especially the new business model related to crowdfunding and paywalls or mini-pay.

P 20: There's always hope. There's bound to be a shift in the opposite direction. It cannot always be terrible. Things will shift. And the reason why things are about to shift are, first of all, the old model is not necessarily dead, but dying. It's going to agonizing for a while, but change is coming. Second of all, there are way too many people out in the field who are young and active, and who still have a lot to contribute. There's going to be a new model, which would allow the audience to gain access to important stories dug out by professional journalists who do not necessarily work for mainstream media. And we are going to see this happening more and more to the point where the old dinosaur school either have to reform and adapt or completely dye out because nobody's going to watch them. And a group of people, like me, we are already planning into moving in that direction. Just watch, watch, and enjoy or join and contribute.

P 6: We're hitting rock bottom every day. So hopefully there will be a counter-reaction at some point. I believe that at some point people will get angry, or our professional community will get angry, I am just hoping for a turning point.

Journalists traditionally perceive themselves as agents of change. In this study including when talking about the ideals that brought them to the job the majority of participants mention the desire to make a positive change, to change the world for the better. Paradoxically, those agents of change are captured at the end of this study as stripped from their power, left unable to change even their professional culture, much less the world. Those same activists are seen here hoping for the change to happen to them from the outside- led by the legislation, the political will for better press conditions or the social reactions towards the abuse that's is being exercised towards press freedom for years. After years of commercial and political experiments with the media in Eastern Europe journalists are really left at this state of being "agents of change that cannot change anything" (Spasovska, 2011, p. 149), hoping on a change from the outside.

P 14: I am hoping something will happen, something will just explode. And something new and big and true will be built on the ashes of the old corrupt system. I know it's a naïve outlook, but that's the only one I have at this point.

The contribution of this work in adding qualitative data to the press freedom rankings currently dominating press freedom studies, is in adding the soul to the data as per the quote by social scientist Brene Brown. Through focusing on culture and emic experiences and meaning-making processes of journalists, this work proposes a new theoretical model for looking at the regressive media systems with a potential to be re-tested and re-applied in different cultural and national settings. I see this as particularly worthy topic in this historical momentum of both media and democracy put under attack on a global scale- even in countries traditionally seen as frontrunners of freedoms and liberties. With the current challenging climate for journalism and with traditional media between a rock and a hard place around the globe, naturally the worst deterioration is visible in the weakest of media systems. But with this said, the need for in-depth

studying of press freedom, as one of the fundamental democratic totems, on an even broader international scale, is all the more important.

Should Bulgaria continue with its press freedom deterioration at the same pace as in the recent decade, it will be equivalent to North Korea in less than 10 years. Signs for such developments are evident on a larger scale in Eastern Europe and the Balkans. This is far from a regional problem only. In the global media environment of misinformation and disinformation, growing distrust and disdain towards the media and authoritarian political being on the rise could have broader implications not just for the vulnerable post-communist world, but also the West, and even the United States. Political pundits have already noticed the reversed contagious imitation – after years of more or less successful imitation of the West, former Eastern mimics are now becoming the models within Western culture (Applebaum, 2020; Holmes & Krastev, 2020). In a much more global and interconnected post-Cold War World, the illiberal counter-revolution stemming from the East had already significantly affected the political order of the West (2016 US presidential election, Brexit and the crisis in Ukraine being some examples among many others). But while western media are experiencing the harsh struggle of protecting what's important before what's interesting, of fighting for “the big stories” for humanity in the flooding ocean of clickable content, the fight for Eastern European journalists is radically different. It is a matter of survival. It is about endurance of not simply quality media, but any media for that matter, that is defined as separate from government and is equipped to serve as opposition of political power instead of its ever-subordinate propaganda mouthpiece. It is a struggle to prevent journalism becoming simply an extension of political power in the realm of communication. Degrading from even imitative fourth estate to a direct subsidiary and a lip service to the only estate in a new-authoritarian state.

Democratization in general, including of the media, was for the longest time looked in the Post-Cold- War literature as a linear, one-directional process- a progressing trajectory from authoritarianism to freedom, from state-controlled to independent media (that was at least the dominant Western understanding), without provisioned backsliding. But the post-communist world had clearly demonstrated that history can go backwards, and this work maps those reversed process in the area of media freedom. By doing so it fills an existing gap in the literature, responding to a continuous call for a change of paradigm in media system studies in general and its post-communist branch in particular. Scholars have called for a shift from prescriptive and idealistic normative critical theorizing to a newer analytical design focusing on the why question as is the nature of this inquiry and also grounded in indigenous regional and national re-evaluations of media system literature.

Limitations of the Study

As with any research, this one also needs to acknowledge the limitations coming with the selection of the participants and the method of inquiry. This pilot study conceptualizes proposed Regressive Media by testing in in one country and one type of media platform only- broadcast journalism in Bulgaria. Some differences could be expected if the sample is to be expanded to print and online journalists, and also by expanding to not just national but local journalism in the country, which is also severely affected by press freedom state and financial suppression. Adding non-traditional journalists such as bloggers, vloggers and other types of social media content creators or citizen journalists could broaden the picture and suggest a less traditional approach to dealing with press freedom limitation, as well as an illustration of how journalists operate in the same level of political suppression, but outside of the influence of the commercial forces. The selected sample excluding online media representatives and journalists from small, independent

projects inevitably skews the picture towards the mainstream media. And though it is still most influential in the country, some digital convergence of the sample could be considered for future research. Another limitation to be considered is that though the study sample includes journalists from different level of editorial structure and with different level of experience within the media market, it excludes media owners. Soliciting such opinions would have likely provided for different perspectives on how press freedom deterioration happens in the country, as well as if it is happening at the levels captured by press freedom advocacy organizations. That dimension was outside the scope of this study.

Future Research

Empirical research shows that journalistic cultures differ significantly around the world (Hanitzsch, 2007; Weaver, 1998). The characteristic of the media in post-communist states are specific to the culture, traditions, and conditions of the transformation and greatly differ from one system to another, even though they are locked in the same relatively compact socio-political area of the world (Jakubowicz, 2007). Regressive media model is to therefore be tested in different cultural and national setting- initially in other countries of Eastern Europe and ultimately in Western democracy to see how it will evolve in contact with different historical and social realities. Adding a quantitative component, insights captured by this study could be re-tested and expanded with a survey design study to perfect the model by testing it on a larger sample, expanding the pilot population to not just broadcast journalists. Considering that independent online news media are starting to grow though at a slow pace in Bulgaria and Eastern Europe in general, a possible extension of this research to include less traditional media in the new century would be within the scope of a future research agenda.

Adding to the global hardships, the current COVID-19 pandemic is posing additional challenges in the most vulnerable systems. Authoritarian leaders and aspiring dictators could use the health crisis to expand their power and silence their critics. Reporters Without Borders just issued a warning that journalism is entering a decisive decade. This divisive approach is one direction this line of research can expand going forward - into updating press freedom theories and implications for journalists and media quality from a qualitative insider's perspectives.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A
Appendix
Descriptions of Participants

- P1- News Producer, vast experience in TV, worked in radio and print as well, over 20 years of experience overall
- P2- News Producer, Morning show producer, worked in both major TV stations, 16 years of experience, only in broadcasting
- P3- News producer, Executive producer, experience in broadcast mainly, both national TV stations, prior experience in radio and print, 20 plus years overall in journalism
- P4 – News Reporter, Investigative Reporter, 10 years of experience, only in broadcast journalism
- P5- News reporter, news producer, news anchor, 17 years of experience, only broadcast journalism
- P6- News reporter, worked for national and smaller cable outlets, 9 years of experience in broadcast journalism altogether
- P7- News Reporter, Anchor, Editor, over 22 years of experience in broadcast media only
- P8- News Reporter, Investigative Journalist, Host, 27 years of experience, in both print media and as a national broadcaster
- P9- News reporter, investigative journalists, TV host, over 22 years of experience, in broadcasting only
- P10- News Producer, over 15 years of experience, both in radio and TV
- P11- News reporter, producer and TV Anchor, award winning nationally recognized journalist, with over 13 years of experience
- P12- News reporter, 15 years of experience, started in print, last 8 years on national TV
- P13- Journalist, commentator, news reporter and TV Host, over 22 years of experience, television news and current affairs only
- P14- News reporter, Award winning Investigative Journalist, TV Host, over 16 years of experience, Television only
- P15 – News Reporter, 5 years of experience
- P16- News Reporter, 5 years of experience
- P17 – News reporter, 16 years of experience
- P18 – News Reporter, investigative journalist, more than 15 years of experience
- P 19- News Producer, News Reporter and Anchor, served as middle level editorial management position at a national level at both main commercial stations, over 18 years of experience
- P 20- News anchor, reporter, producer, and former news executive, over 20 years of experience

APPENDIX B

Discussion Guide

Why journalism? What motivated you into choosing this job? Short bio/icebreaker.

Describe to me what it is to be a journalist in Bulgaria at this moment of time?

What were the biggest changes in journalism during your career?

How did you understand press freedom?

How is press freedom being practiced in your career by you, your colleagues, your editorial management?

Describe the culture of Bulgarian journalist as you've lived and experienced it.

Can you try to think of examples of how limited press freedom affects other areas of social life, how?

Have you been subjected to outside pressure or censorship? How about self-censorship?

Talk to me about limitations of press freedom as experienced in your career- where do they originate and how are they being communicated to journalists?

How do you talk to your peer- journalists about experiences with suppressed press freedom- guide me through those conversations?

What facilitates press freedom deterioration in Bulgaria? Describe factors that have affected your work the most.

What are the potential improvements in the industry that can contribute to consolidating and advancing press freedom in Bulgaria?

APPENDIX C

Consent Form

Regressive Media Model: The Rise and Fall of Press Freedom in Bulgaria (2000-2020)

Exploring Journalistic Cultures in Post-Communist Eastern Europe

INTRODUCTION

The participants are invited to participate in a research study exploring the Freedom of the Press in Bulgaria.

INFORMATION ABOUT PARTICIPANTS' INVOLVEMENT IN THE STUDY

Participants will be asked to participate in in-depth interviews with a researcher, one on one, both face-to-face and or/ over remote technology. Participants may decide not to answer a specific question and will be granted the right of sharing only what they might feel comfortable with. The approximate amount of time needed for an interview varies, but the general frame is 1 to 2 hours/interview, plus an option for a follow-up interview over the phone for clarifying additional information, with an expected duration from 30 minutes to 1 hour.

Audio recording will be used for face to face interviews, with the recordings being destroyed after downloading them to a transcript. That will happen within 5 days of the conducting of the interview and recipient will be informed about the later. From that moment forward the participant will not be personally identifiable, all the collected data from his interview will be attributed to a coded pseudonym. Participants will be consulted for the conception of the pseudonyms attributed to their data.

RISKS

Most research involves some risk to confidentiality and it is possible that someone could find out you were in this study or see your study information, but the investigators believe this risk is unlikely because of the procedures put in place to protect your information.

BENEFITS

You may not directly benefit from your participation in this research study. The research aims at establishing the problems arising for journalist from the limitations of the free press in Bulgaria. Knowledge could be beneficial to journalistic community, society and democracy in trying to capture effective practices in dealing with this issue.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The information in the study records will be kept confidential. Data will be stored securely and will be made available only to persons conducting the study.

CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Darina Sarelska, at dsarels1@vols.utk.edu and 865-249-3411. If you have questions about your rights as a participant, you may contact the University of Tennessee IRB Compliance Officer at utkirb@utk.edu or (865) 974-7697.

PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed your data will be stored and used in the research only upon your written approval.

CONSENT

I have read this form, been given the chance to ask questions and have my questions answered. If I have more questions, I have been told who to contact. By completing this interview, I understand that I am agreeing to be in this study. I can keep a copy of this consent information for future reference. If I do not want to be in this study, I do not need to do anything else.

As a primary investigator, I hereby confirm that a consent process was properly conducted and the participant was informed about this consent form, he or she was also given opportunity to ask questions and receive an answer, as well as he or she was given a copy of this consent form. To ensure all of the above, I hereby sign this document:

PRIMARY INVESTIGATOR:
SIGNATURE:

VITA

Darina Sarelska is originally from Bulgaria. She is born January 28, 1978. After receiving a master's degree in Communication from Sofia University, Darina participated in a number of professional exchange programs and trainings in journalism and broadcast media in the USA. In 2021 she pursued her Doctor of Philosophy in Communication and Information degree at the University of Tennessee. Darina Sarelska has a professional background in broadcast journalism: in Bulgaria she worked for more than 18 years as a reporter, producer, executive producer, and a news director on a national network level. Her most recent position is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Broadcast Journalism at Western Illinois University. Her research interests include press freedom, international mass communication, mass media in transitional societies, quality journalism, social media effects on journalism and visual communication. Her native language is Bulgarian, and she speaks English and Russian.