

There and back again? Media freedom and autonomy in Central and Eastern Europe

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Collusion between the press and politicians is not confined to western Europe. Central and Eastern European countries are also plagued by their own mini-Murdochs – and in these more fragile democracies, they represent an even bigger threat.



Putting the Gazeta Wyborcza together in Warsaw, Poland. Flickr/Marius Kucharczyk. Some rights reserved.

In August 2012, Bulgarian investigative news site [Bivol.bg](#) [22] published a story about alleged pressure exerted by the Prime Minister, Boyko Borisov, on the owners of two high-circulation daily newspapers, *Trud* and *24 Chasa*, to sell their shares to the competing publisher, the New Bulgarian Media Group. According to the article's sources, the Prime Minister personally threatened one of the two owners, Lyubomir

Pavlov, that should he not agree to the deal, he would end up in prison, as he was facing fresh charges for tax evasion and money laundering.

In any country with a free and pluralistic news media scene, information regarding the Prime Minister lobbying for private business interests, making threats and compromising the independence of both the judiciary and the press at the same time, would most likely evolve into a media scandal, particularly in the context of the US diplomatic cable from 2006 revealed by WikiLeaks a year ago, describing Borisov's media strategy as a combination of "payments for positive coverage" and "threats to those who report negatively on him".

In Bulgaria, however, both media freedom and pluralism appear to be in jeopardy these days, and the space for independent journalistic investigation is shrinking fast. While physical violence against journalists still continues to be a real threat, a silencing of critical journalism is more commonly achieved through ownership and economic pressures.

The Murdoch of the East?

These practices have recently been made even easier due to the financial problems faced by most media organizations, as well as in consequence of the process of gradual concentration of a large part of Bulgarian news media in the hands of one company – the New Bulgarian Media Group. Having emerged only in 2007, this company with a murky ownership structure and sources of financing has quickly grown into Bulgaria's most important media player, owning a number of national newspapers and cable television channels, as well as the majority of newspapers distribution network.

Formally headed by the controversial duo of Irena Krasteva, the former head of the Bulgarian State Lottery - lacking any previous media experience – and her son Delyan Peevski, who is an MP for the Movement for Rights and Freedoms, this media conglomerate has built a reputation for unscrupulously serving the government of the day: a fierce enemy of Borisov's party GERB before the 2009 elections, it became its biggest ally following the announcement of the election results, and has remained loyal to Borisov ever since.

Pointing to the company's aggressive price strategy – less politely labelled as dumping – and continuing horizontal expansion apparently backed by the government, many observers and journalists fear for the fate of the few remaining newspapers still outside Krasteva's empire, and raise concerns about a monopolization of the Bulgarian newspaper market, with serious consequences for journalistic independence.

Bulgaria is, however, far from being the only country in Central and Eastern Europe where media independence and autonomy are currently at stake, and where journalists are under twofold pressures from politicians and media owners, who are often interlocked in an informal power alliance, or even personified by one and the same figure. In fact, the last several years have witnessed a notable increase in the number of local business tycoons in many countries in Central and Eastern Europe who have acquired news media outlets, while being, at the same time, involved in local politics

– whether directly (as active politicians) or indirectly, through sponsorship or other type of party support.

A regional trend

This has been occurring very much simultaneously with the departure of many western media companies from Central and Eastern Europe, a process mainly (although not solely) caused by the impact of the global economic crisis on the media markets across the region from 2008 onwards. Seeing the advertising expenditures dwindling and their revenues plummeting, publishers like Bonnier, WAZ, Ringier, Mecom or Northcliffe decided to sell either some or all their assets in the CEE newspaper markets, thereby opening opportunities predominantly for local business elites who – with just a few exceptions – do not perceive the investment into news media as a means for making profit (and much less as a pillar of democracy) but rather as an instrument to serve their business or political interests.

Belonging often to the richest people in their respective countries, these business people certainly do not mind operating their media at a loss, at least temporarily, because their main sources of profit lie in other sectors – be it banking, energy business, coal mining, oil production or real estate. Although this might save some newspapers from extinction in times of crisis, there is usually a price to pay by the media for losing their structural autonomy, especially in cases when the owners have an interest in pursuing particular political agenda through their outlets.

Apart from Bulgaria, the crudest examples of political instrumentalization by media magnates arguably come from Romania or Latvia, where oligarchs like Dan Voiculescu (Chairman of the Conservative Party) or Aivars Lembergs (Mayor of the city of Ventspils) have become notorious for using media under their control to attack political opponents and divert attention from their own scandals.

Elsewhere, news media owned by politically connected businessmen have been suspected of serving as platform for political propaganda; illustrative examples might include dailies such as *Magyar Hírlap*, turned from formerly liberal into a right-wing newspaper by its owner, the Hungarian billionaire Gábor Széles, or *Diena*, an erstwhile symbol of quality journalism in Latvia under the previous owner, the Swedish company Bonnier, which sold it in 2008 to local real estate developer Viestrus Koziols; this move has quickly sparked an exodus of journalists fearing for their independence, who have later founded their own investigative journal *Ir*. (Incidentally, there was a similar story in the Czech Republic a couple years ago, when a small group of journalists left the weekly *Euro* in protest against politically-motivated editorial interventions by the owner, the richest Czech businessman Petr Kellner, and started an independent online daily CzechPosition.cz [23]).

But even those outlets belonging to proprietors with a reputedly “softer touch” to editorial policies, such as the coal baron Zdenek Bakala, the owner of a couple of Czech and Slovak elite newspapers, are reported to struggle with self-censorship when it comes to covering issues close to their owner’s perceived interests, and face the challenge of fighting twice as hard for the public trust, simply because of being permanently under suspicion that their coverage (or lack of it) is fuelled by particularistic motives.

Even if the above-outlined changes in media ownership and the following rise of owners-oligarchs do not characterize the entire news media scene in most CEE countries, and the approach of this kind of proprietors to editorial independence often displays notable differences, it is nevertheless still possible to draw a parallel between the process of changing media ownership structures and the recent development of media freedom in this region, as measured annually by Freedom House. For anybody expecting gradual progress in arguably one of the key indicators of successful democratic transition over the course of years, it might come as a rather daunting revelation that the majority of Central and Eastern European countries which have since 2004 entered the European Union nowadays display significantly worse scores on the Freedom of the Press Index than they did at the time of accession.

While the almost spectacular downgrading of Hungary's media freedom score (by almost 50 percent in just three years), reflecting the much-criticised media laws adopted by Viktor Orbán's right-wing government, has been given a lot of publicity on both national and the EU level, there has not been so much attention paid to other countries where media freedom has been on a steady decline for some time already.

This concerns most notably Latvia, one of the best performing new EU countries around 2004 in terms of media freedom scores, which has seen a drop by almost 40 percent since then, and is now moving uncomfortably close to the category of countries where media are classified as 'partly free' only. A few other former frontrunners of the region – Poland, Lithuania and Slovenia – have also fallen back notably, having seen their scores dropping by 20 to 25 percent since 2004. Romania, even though showing minor improvement over the past several years, still remains farther from achieving the 'free' status it had right at the beginning of the new century, while Bulgaria – needless to add – has most recently equalled its lowest ranking in over a decade, and continues to be labelled as 'partly free' as well.

Is regression avoidable?

Looking at the region as a whole, these tendencies paint a fairly bleak picture of the systemic conditions in which a significant part of Central and Eastern European news media operate today. After a period of gradual improvement, peaking around the time right before the EU accession, media freedom started declining again, with the 2011 average score matching the value from 1998. This clearly represents a setback for the hopes that EU membership would safeguard the protection and further extension of this important component of democracy, and points to the limits of the EU conditionality when it comes to maintaining achieved standards in the post-accession period.

In addition, the recent economic crisis has exposed the vulnerability of media markets in this region more than in any other part of Europe, often resulting in ownership changes and subsequent reduction in the structural autonomy of news media organizations, many of which became directly intertwined with business and political actors. Of course, there is still independent, quality journalism to be found in Central and Eastern Europe, particularly in more mature and affluent markets like Estonia, the Czech Republic or Poland, enabling the media to better withstand political or business pressures; this is also the case in some public service media, despite the budget cuts and dwindling audience ratings.

Elsewhere, however, accountable journalism is increasingly finding shelter on the internet, with personal journalists' blogs and investigative news sites (of which the above mentioned [Bivol.bg](#) [22] is an example) mushrooming in many countries. While offering space for critical expression and even anonymity, wherever necessary, these alternative platforms only rarely generate adequate revenues to ensure their sustainability, so despite their clear democratic potential, they still cannot be considered a full match for their mainstream counterparts.

Without resorting to any sort of gloomy predictions, it seems reasonable to acknowledge that the road towards free and independent press systems in this region, first entered upon in 1989, is indeed a long and windy one, and Central and Eastern European media might have just taken the wrong turn; hopefully not too late to find the right direction again.



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