

# Demythologising the ‘Russification’ of Bulgarian media’s treatment of civil society

*Analysis of the transfer of Russian mainstream news media’s cliches and rhetoric on CSOs upholding human rights and environmentalism to Bulgaria*

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The media's "relations with the state and society [in Eastern Europe ...] have nothing in common with the whole Anglo-American tradition that sees proper functioning of the mass media as a fundamental element of civil society and of the system of representative democracy."

(Trakhtenberg 2007, 122)

## § 1 Introduction — A reason to worry, and two to see it through

The challenge when writing a (hopefully) reasoned, data-centred and updated document on politics and society is to catch readers' attention. In fact, people read less today than they did twenty years ago (in the West: Bonnie Nichols 2004; Crain 2007; 2018; Ferguson 2020; and in Bulgaria M. Hristova 2012; Kamenova 2019). Thus, to attract readers from beyond the restricted circles of the fortunate few who edit and read this sort of publication for a living, researches need to be clear-cut, but not dry; dispassionate, but not impassionate; instructive, but not pedagogical.

This introduction tries to struck a chord with well-disposed readers by offering them three good reasons to heed, worry and, perhaps, look at things from a new perspective.

### ¶ 1 *Start fretting* — Democracy is dying, just behind the corner

In countries without an autochthonous liberal tradition, civil-society organisations (CSOs) meet enormous difficulties when they identify as “liberal and prodemocratic, which often merely means pro-Western” (Kopecky and Mudde 2002, xv). One of the explanations for the difficulties that CSOs meet in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union (FSU) lies in the unconscious popular perception that under post-socialist conditions, “life [was] characterized by the destruction of the very idea of the historical Project and thus exhausted [ ...] its own potentiality.” (Prozorov 2008, 217) In fact, the hyperbolic optimism of the early 1990s was soon replaced by the realisation that externally imposed, top-down political change in the former communist world produced “partial democracy” at best and, more often, nothing “but dictatorship” (Ovsiyenko 2011, 25–26; cf. Welsh 1994; 1994). Notably, the inhospitable nature of such an environment for pro-Western CSOs has surfaced in their inability to finance themselves through spontaneous, small-dollar donations and market transactions and the correlative dependence on State-managed and foreign funds (see Henderson 2000 on Russia; or Krasteva 2011, 88–89; and Vakhrusheva and Antonov 2018, 84ff on Bulgaria). Hence, the region has witnessed a perverting processes by which these CSOs have become the “highest-grossing business” in many disadvantaged areas (Krasteva 2011, 88) as they turned into “professional organizations” deprived of any “civic zeal” (D. Hristova and Kabakchieva 2012, 74).

However, these problematic aspects are not new at all (Marzec and Neubacher 2020). All the contrary, this disease has deep roots in Western liberal democracies' actions aimed at support the exportation of their political beyond its historic geographical borders. One needs not to go farther back in time than the 1990s and early-2000s, when the European Union (EU) and the *United States Agency for International Development* to the *International Republican Institute* and the *National Endowment for Democracy* begun showering CSOs in Eastern Europe and the FSU with money (Ottaway and Carothers 2000; McFaul and Treyger 2004; Åslund 2005; Åslund and McFaul 2006; Lane 2009; Mitchel 2009; Naumovic 2009; Petrova 2018).<sup>1</sup> Each of these external actors compelled local governments into establishing a legal framework not hostile to CSOs. But experience has since taught that “the ability of external assistance to promote plural and participatory civil society is limited” (Muskhelishvili and Jorjoliani 2009, 687). Once outer compulsions wanes, the fertile ground necessary to nourish a veritable societal transformation cannot be autarkically sustained for long.<sup>2</sup> Nor is the desperate need to attract donors the only the most evident symptomatic manifestation of a malaise the aetiology of which speaks volume about the nature of ‘civil society’ outside the Euro-Atlantic, ‘Western’ world. In fact, it goes hand in hand with some of the lowest scores for trust

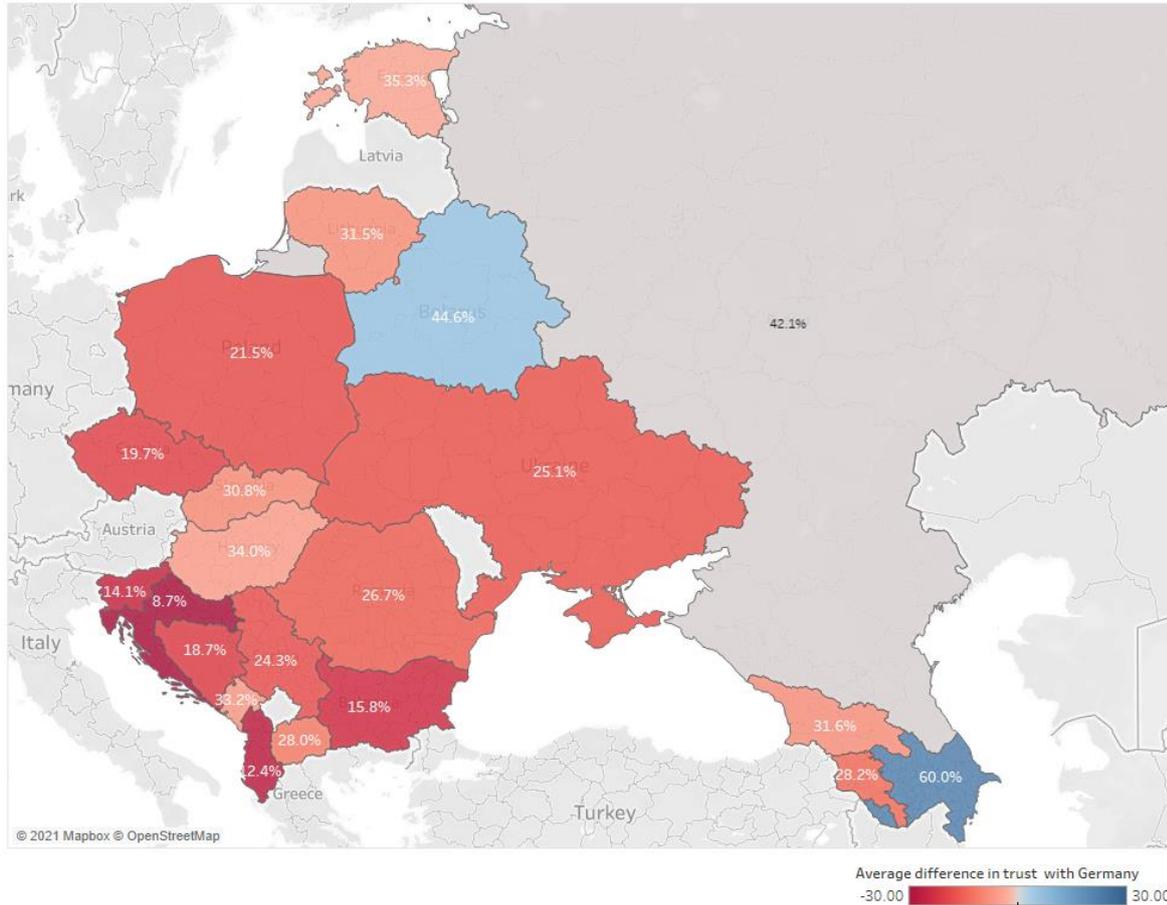
<sup>1</sup> That is not to forget to the role of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations' Solidarity Center, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce's Center for International Private Enterprise, Freedom House, the Open Society Foundation, and a number of other public and private organisations in the US and Western Europe (cf. also Conry 1993; Sussman 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Besides the anecdotal evidence reported by (Vakhrusheva and Antonov 2018), data shown by Telarico (2021a for Bosnia; 2021b for Bulgaria; 2021d for Montenegro; and 2021e for North Macedonia) also hint in the same direction.

in parliaments, governments, the police and, crucially, the media outside the post-colonial world (see Figure 1 below, below).

**Figure 1 In post-socialist societies, citizens are more mistrustful of political institutions, the media and CSOs than in the West**

Average share of respondents in selected countries who trust television, charitable/humanitarian organisations, the government, political parties, courts, and the parliament (label) and the difference with the same data for Germany (colour scale).



The maps show the average percentage of people who answered with “a great deal” or “quite a lot” to the questions on confidence in television (Q67), charitable or humanitarian organisations (Q81), the government (Q71), political parties (Q72), courts (Q70), and the parliament (Q73) during the seventh wave of the World Value Survey (WVS). The sample includes data from the European Value Study (2021) for Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Rep., Estonia, Georgia, Hungary, Lithuania, Montenegro, Netherlands, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Ukraine; as well as WVS data for Armenia (2021), Romania (2017), Russia (2017), Serbia (2017), and Ukraine (2020).

Map by: F. A. Telarico | Data source: (Gedeshi et al. 2021 Q67, Q70, Q71, Q72, Q73, Q81)

In a word, the US, the EU and local CSOs’ concerted attempt to transfigure post-socialist political communities in liberal citizenries ended up being a botched endeavour. According to some, the failed implant of liberal democracy and Western-style CSOs is due to those regions’ lack of “civilisational competence” (Sztompka 1993; 1996), “social capital” (Putnam 1994; 2000) or “civic culture” (Almond and Verba 1963; Telarico 2021c). Meanwhile, others blame the widespread distrust towards pro-Western CSOs in Eastern Europe “is a by-product of the disillusionment of democracy and public institutions” (D.

Pro-Western  
CSOs: the  
canary in the  
mine

Hristova and Kabakchieva 2012, 74) which has replaced the euphoria of the 1990s.<sup>3</sup> <sup>4</sup> But whatever the cause may be, this failure's direct relations with the lack of trust in the most respected – if not *revered* – institutions of liberal democracy is undeniable. This is the case because “rather than end-products of a thriving democratic culture [pro-Western CSOs] are de facto agents of democracy” (Kamat 2003, 65).<sup>5</sup> Thus, there is a connection between the fate of pro-Western CSOs and democratic “deconsolidation” (Mounk and Foa 2016; Foa and Mounk 2016; 2017; Diamond 2018) or “backsliding” (Sitter and Bakke 2019; Castaldo 2020).<sup>6</sup> Thus, the chances are high that if these organisations fail to live up to their *raison d'être*, then liberal democracy's implant will result in a premature abortion. In this sense, the case of the FSU's European part (Belarus, Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine) is not too dissimilar from that of post-socialist countries in South-Eastern Europe (SEE).<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, most of Central-Eastern Europe (CEE)<sup>8</sup> has managed to stay on the course set for them until the mid-to-late-2000s. Only after the Great Recession, as the environment became toxic for pro-Western CSOs, CEE countries have begun developing along trajectories diverging from Western liberal democracy (Manning 2004; Cornia 2011). Hence, Eastern Europe and the FSU show that the mistreatment of pro-Western CSOs is always indicative of a large woodworm eroding the trunk of liberal democracy. In fact, CSOs are merely the “canary in the mine” (McGann 2010, 12), warning for the demise of liberal democracy.<sup>9</sup> Actually, their failure anticipates the emergence of “authoritarian capitalism” (Scheiring 2018; Sallai and Schnyder 2021), “popular democracy” (Brusis 2018), and other illiberal political and economic regimes.

But why is this happening so visibly in Eastern Europe, and what is so special about *Bulgaria*?

## ¶ 2 *Look behind* — This is about history

The disarmament vis-à-vis the renewed triumph of illiberal forces has to be traced back in the 1990s, when the fall of real socialism instilled immense optimism in laymen, scholars, and activists. In effect, many of the people who felt the need to do something for their communities took the way of volunteering through newly established CSOs. As a matter of fact, the impressive real-socialist, cradle-to-the-grave welfare state had inhibited people's predisposition to volunteer for decades (Wolfe 1989; Etzioni 1994; Boje 1996; Zijderveld 1998). Yet, when this system collapsed a positive feedback effect appeared because people had started to believe that everyone was ‘entitled’ to many of those services (van Oorschot and Arts 2005; van Oorschot, Arts, and Halman 2005). Thus, during the crises of the 1990s, when essential services were not provided regularly anymore, many felt the need to reach out and help those who needed it the most (Rothstein 2001; Kuhnle 2003; Kumlin and Rothstein 2005; cf. also Giddens 2013). Overall, as this research helps to prove, CSOs alleviating the suffering of those in need have acquired significant legitimacy and established themselves as ‘complementary’ to the State (**Section 3**). However, there were also other types of activism in Eastern Europe and the FSU during the 1990s. For instance, environmentalist CSOs enjoyed renewed strength in the immediate aftermath of the fall of real socialism (Jancar-Webster 1993a; 1993b; 1993c). Lately, they have grown even more due to the increasing relevance and popularity of ecological campaigns (Botcheva 1996; Hicks 2004; Dalton 2015).

<sup>3</sup> All in all, a similar argument could be made also for the FSU, where many perceive CSOs essentially as a tool of the State (see Mendelson and Glenn 2002 for a critical overview).

<sup>4</sup> Also cf. James Richter's (2009) study of the Russian “Public Chamber”; Leah Gilbert (2016) on how the Russian State is “crowding out” CSOs with the official *Reports on the State of Civil Society in the Russian Federation* (Mikheeva et al. 2019; 2020).

<sup>5</sup> This definition is especially poignant for think tanks, the best-known segment of foreign-funded CSOs in the post-socialist world, operating as “experts of the transition” (Dostena Lavergne 2010).

<sup>6</sup> For more nuanced accounts of this topic see academic essays by Florian Bieber (2018), Antoaneta Dimitrova (2018), James Dawson (2018) and Eleanor Knott (2018) and the Author's own articles on this topic (Telarico 2020d; 2021g; 2021h).

<sup>7</sup> Henceforth, SEE indicates Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Montenegro, the Republic of North Macedonia, Romania, and Serbia collectively.

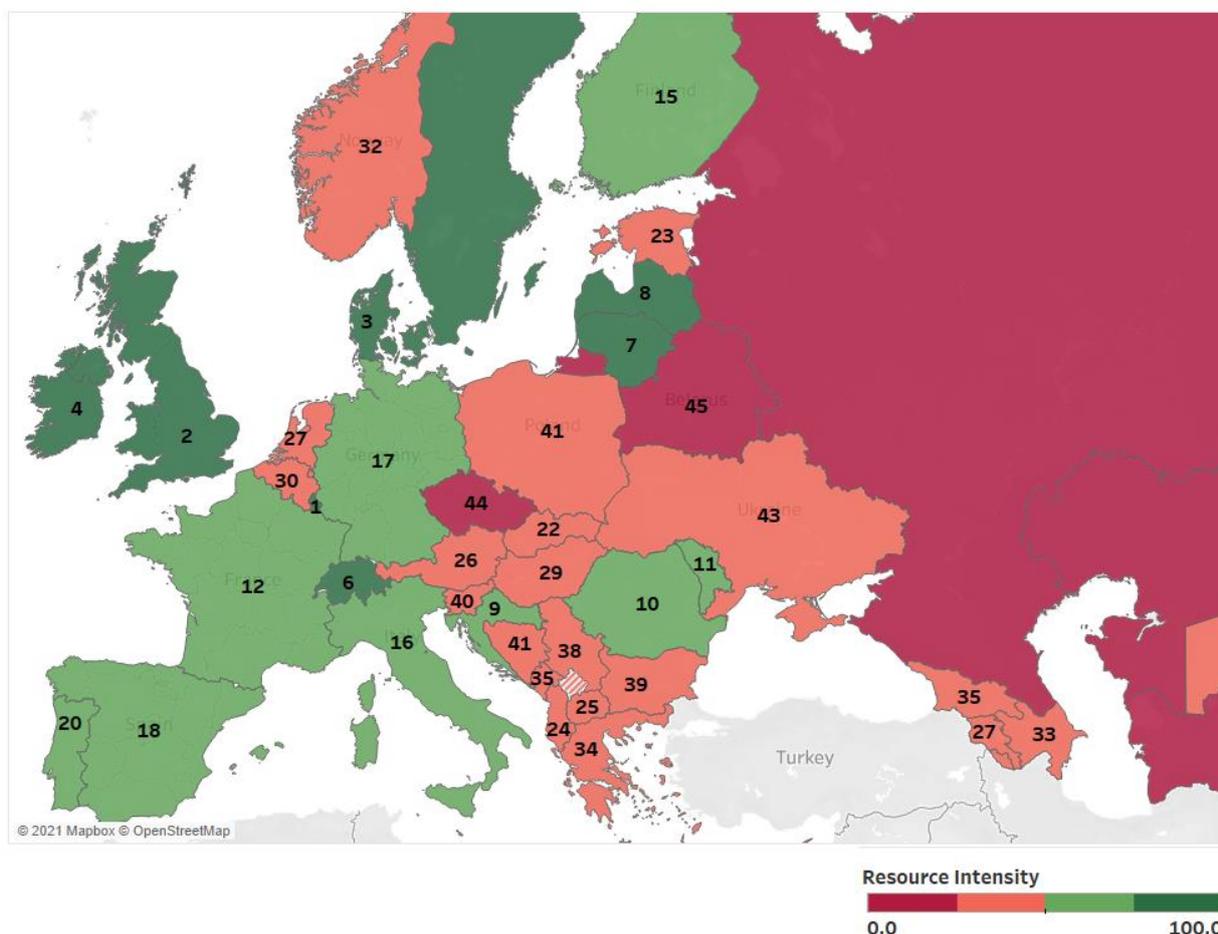
<sup>8</sup> Henceforth, CEE indicates Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia collectively.

<sup>9</sup> Prof. James McGann used this expression during several working meeting to which the Author took part in Spring 2021.

However, environmentalist movements have failed in making post-socialist economies greener, as proven by their continued dependency on traditional fuels and high energy intensity (Figure 2 on page 5, below).

**Figure 2a CSOs have failed in normalising liberal practices such as environmental protection in the FSE and most of Eastern Europe**

Energy intensity index for European and FSU countries (colour) and ranking in the region (label).



The map's colours show each country's standardised score (i.e., a ratio having the difference between the country's value and the dataset's minimum as its numerator and the dataset's range as its denominator) calculated on the basis of the 'resource intensity' component of SolAbility's Global Sustainable Competitiveness Index (GSCI).

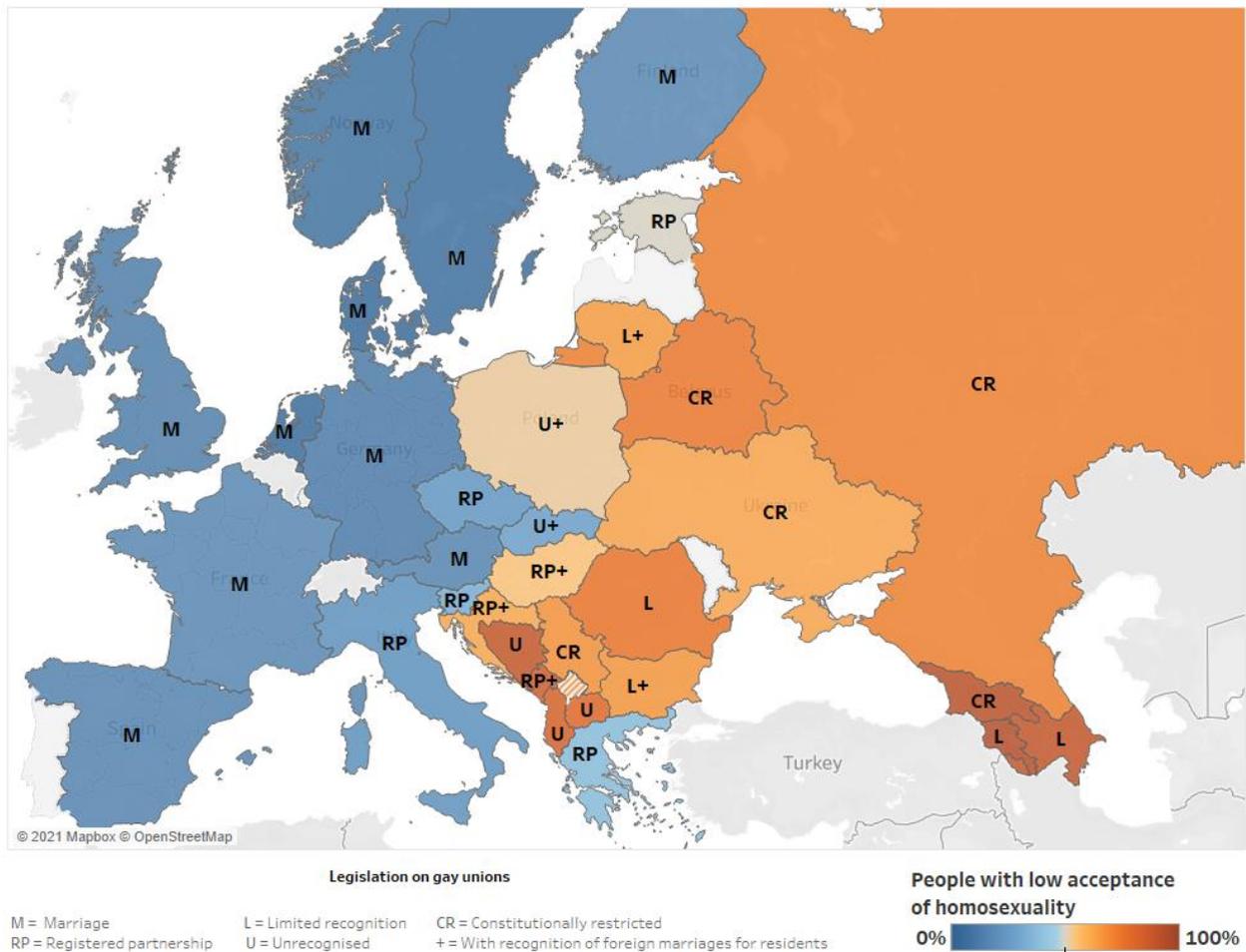
Map by: F. A. Talarico | Data source: (SolAbility 2020, 56–61)

Another chunk of activists started demanding rights connected to sexual orientations other than heterosexuality (so-called LGBT rights, see Godzisz and Viggian 2018). These latter organisations have been the even less successful in harnessing mass consensus amongst the masses in both Eastern Europe and the FSU. And this lack of results is manifest in both the high share of people with low acceptance of homosexuality *per se* and the legal framework regulating same-sex partnerships (Figure 3b on page 6, below). What many failed to notice until it was too late, is that some CSOs had made themselves easy targets for popular frustration by sustaining a frontal contraposition to established sets of values and ways of living (Mole 2016; Žuk and Žuk 2020). Crucially, they have antagonised certain sectors of the political elites as well as the Orthodox and Catholic clergy (Angi, Radu, and Teampău 2019). This is especially the case for LGBT-right advocates, whose insistence in organising marches (so-called *Gay Prides*) and other eye-catching events, undoubtedly contributes to explain why these CSOs have attracted more hostility than others (Aspegren 2019). And these instances of incompatibility between popularly

held beliefs and CSOs' democratising agenda have also a more political effect. In fact, illiberal politicians have become very popular (Szczerbiak 2019) by promising and then passing anti-LGBT and anti-feminist policies the repercussions of which eventually struck all sorts of CSOs (Mărgărit 2020).

**Figure 3b CSOs have failed in normalising liberal norms such as LGBT rights in Eastern Europe and the FSE**

Share of respondents with low acceptance of homosexuality in selected countries (colour) and degree of non/recognition of partnerships between people of the same sex (label).



The map's colours show the percentages of people who manifested a "low" acceptance of homosexuality according to Wezel's dichotomous classification of value sets. The sample includes data from the European Value Study (2021) for Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Georgia, Hungary, Lithuania, Montenegro, Netherlands, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, United Kingdom, and Ukraine; as well as World Value Survey data for Armenia (2021), Romania (2017), Russia (2017), Serbia (2017), and Ukraine (2020).

Map by: F. A. Telarico | Data source: (Gedeshi et al. 2021 I\_HOMOLIB; Lipka and Masci 2019)

CEE vs SEE

For obvious reasons, international condemnations have been particularly strong against those who pursued this agenda in Poland (Ost 2016; Muiznieks 2018), Hungary (Tóth 2015; Méró and Piroška 2016; Bershidsky 2018) and the rest of CEE (e.g. Matveev 2018). In fact, initially these countries showed more receptive to Western liberalism, also due to stronger ties with the West during the Cold War and the several centuries of common history with Western Europe through the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Bogdanor 1995; Gautier 1998; Meyer et al. 2020). Meanwhile, scholars and analysts have ignored or downplayed the extent to which the same phenomenon has been happening in post-socialist SEE. In fact, due to their subjugation to the Ottoman Empire, these areas have missed on a large chunk of Europe's cultural transformations in the Modern and early-Contemporary ages. Therefore, it is true that

there was a time when “new CSOs [were] established at a sometimes alarming rate” (Garbutt 1997, 9; quoted in Mendelson and Glenn 2002, 192) in SEE, and even the FSU. But SEE was only slightly more open to Western-liberal models than FSU, and much less than CEE (Ramet and Wagner 2019; Sedelmeier 2019; Telarico 2021c). Together with economic backwardness, cultural affinity with Russia and/or the heredity of the Yugoslav Wars, this legacy hampered the expectation of a democratic breakthrough in these countries (Ivanov and Tooze 2007; Galgóczi 2016). Therefore, it is interesting to shed a light on this under-researched area of Europe in order to provide another piece in the puzzle of its “endless transition” (Asenov 2019). In order to, it is useful to look at how CSOs are perceived in Bulgaria as one of the only three SEE countries to be a member of the EU.

Nevertheless, a final question remains to be solved in this introduction: why to look at news media?

### ¶ 3 *Realise the manipulations* — How the media shapes perceptions of CSOs

A step back is necessary to understand how the news media fits into this conversation and, more important, why it is interesting. In fact, most laymen and social scientists today would argue that liberal democracy is irreconcilable with anyone’s undue privilege to sway and control people’s thinking (Cheminant and Parrish 2010, 80). Yet, that the “conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses [...] is a logical result of [...] our democratic society” (Bernays 1928, 9) is a known fact. Therefore, since the 1930s it has been clear that in massified democracies, much power rests with whoever is in charge of the instruments apt to manipulate “a crowd perpetually hovering on the borderland of unconsciousness, readily yielding to all suggestions” (Le Bon 1895, chap. 2 para. 1) by exploiting the deepest “instincts of the herd in peace and war” (Trotter 1921). These ideas, resonates powerfully in newer researches — albeit in a different, more refined tone. Significantly, “changes in media consumption [can] contribute towards an economically significant reduction in” the incumbents’ “vote shares” (Knight and Tribin 2019, 35). Therefore, the media play a crucial political role in disseminating news as long as there are venues to channel the crowd’s preferences, such as elections (Ansolabehere, Behr, and Iyengar 1991; Oxley 2011; Jones 2011). And history has repeatedly proved that this contrivance of sway and counter-steering works also if election are unfair or uncompetitive — as it was the case in Ukraine in 2004 (Åslund 2005; Åslund and McFaul 2006) and Belarus in 2020 (Kubilius 2020; Walker 2020). Still, there must be, for small it may be, some free media to make this mechanism work.

Going back to the topic of this research, these insights are essential. In fact, CSOs figured above essentially as agents of democratic changes, whose activities are often supported financially and technically by the countries in which liberal democracy is the established regime. Namely, in Eastern Europe and the FSU, CSOs acted against entrenched political elites, in favour of more democratic opposition forces with the aim of establish rights and enfranchising certain groups (often minorities). In sum, their main activities “are practically as old as society informing people, persuading people, or integrating people with people” — which is nothing but “public relations” (Bernays 2013, 23). Hence, it is not a coincidence that successful CSOs have generally been able to create strong synergies with like-minded media<sup>10</sup> in order to spread their messages. Actually, the media play a key role in enabling CSOs to carry out their public-relation mission — or, vice versa, in sabotaging it.

In the last few years much of the debate has shifted towards internet and social media (Miller 2020a; 2020b; 2020c; Shehata and Strömbäck 2021). And this is not unreasonable, given that sometimes newer channels are more effective in motivating people to take to the streets (Boulianne, Koc-Michalska, and Bimber 2020, 654). Nevertheless, to inform, persuade and integrate people CSOs need to move beyond episodic mobilisation and towards systematic campaigns. In Bulgaria, this cannot happen through social

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<sup>10</sup> On this aspect see David Anable’s (2006) analysis of the NGO-media nexus in Georgia during the ‘Rose Revolution’ or Ray Jennings’s (2009) study focusing on the case of Serbia’s ‘Bulldozer Revolution’.

media because their users do not trust them. According to Eurostat data (Figure 4 on page 8 below), slightly less than three in five Bulgarians use social media, and only slightly more than a third trusts them. Whereas virtually everyone regularly accesses a television, and seven in 10 trust it as a news source. Moreover, printed media are the second-most trusted news source in Bulgaria. Thus, mainstream news media remain the main source of information for a large majority of the population.

**Figure 4 In Bulgaria, traditional news media dominate in terms of both reach and trust as sources of information**

*Panel A:* Share of respondents who declared being “users” of the indicated media (size) and degree to which they trust them as sources of information (colour).

*Panel B:* Beliefs relating to fake news as a danger for democracy.

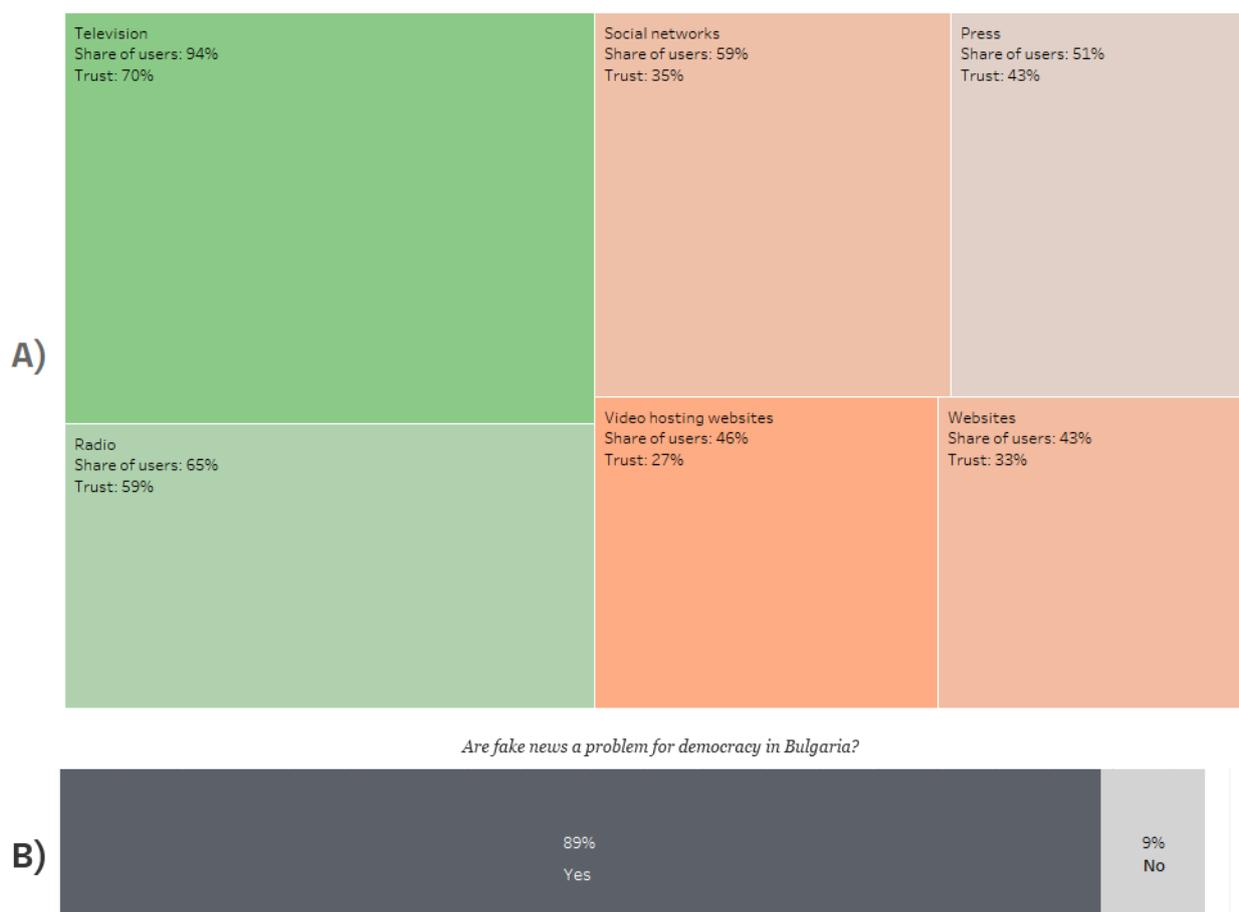


Chart by: F. A. Telarico | Data source: (EUROSTAT 2018, 38–49)

Eastern Europe's media landscapes

This preference for more established media is not a bizarre Bulgarian peculiarity. On the contrary, this is the norm in most of Western Europe too (Matsa 2018). But in most Western European liberal-democracies, the media landscape is quite variegated or, at most, oligopolistic.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, in these countries State-owned media constitute an effective counterbalance to massive, private concentrations (EBU 2020a). On the contrary, the media market in Bulgaria and most of Eastern Europe exhibits strong monopolistic tendencies (Williams, Collin, and Heyeckaus 2005). Worryingly, many governments in Eastern Europe are following the steps of their colleagues in the FSU by limiting the ability of foreign capital to support local news companies (see Matsa 2018 on the little-studied case of Czechia; and Anabel

<sup>11</sup> The most extreme case of media oligopoly in Western Europe is Italy, where there is a strong concentration of ownership in the press and a virtual duopoly on broadcast media (see Padovani 2007).

Hernandez 2021).<sup>12</sup> Not to mention the immense pressure under which several CEE and SEE governments have put State-owned media (see Bayer 2021 on Slovenia; or Bedrov 2018; Stoyanova 2019; Blagoev 2021; and Prashkova 2021 on Bulgaria's public broadcaster).

Against this background, analysing how established, mainstream media describe CSOs is fundamental. Only if they manage to get enough coverage, most of which positive, will they be able to inform and persuade the 'crowd'.

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<sup>12</sup> Russia's 'foreign agents' law being the most famous of such examples (Prokscha 2021).

## § 2 Theoretical framework — A tripartite model

Assuming that the preceding introduction has managed to stimulate the reader's interest, this section introduces the theoretical underpinnings of the research. First, the general theoretical framework behind the interpretation of this the final results is presented (¶ 1 ¶ 1 below). Then, this model's is leveraged to highlight why one could expect Bulgarian media to adopt Russian media's cliches and rhetoric on CSOs. To do so, the following paragraphs will explore and compare the key features of Bulgaria's and Russia's political systems (¶ 2 on page 12), civil societies (¶ 3 on page 15) and the media landscapes (¶ 4 on page 18).

### ¶ 1 An iron triangle model of public-opinion steering

Essentially, this framework builds upon the considerations exposed in the first section to systematise and simplify the relations between the main actors involved in CSOs' activities. Due to its schematic nature, this framework is applicable to both liberal and illiberal democracies. In fact, the latter belong to a wider category of "hybrid regimes", in which authoritarian political leaderships coexist with a façade of check and balances (Zakaria 1997; David and Levitsky 1997; Mazepus et al. 2016; Knott 2018).<sup>13</sup>

At its core, the theory presented here draws on the notion of "iron triangle", which emerged in the study of private interests in US politics (Freeman 1958; Cater 1964). The term is usually intended to indicate "a political relationship that brings together three key participants in a clearly delineated area of policy-making" (Adams 1981, 24). In the current case, however, rather than an area of policymaking, the triangle focuses on the "unseen mechanism" of public-opinion steering whose operators "constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power" (Bernays 1928, 9). Thus, the graphic representation of the model offered in Figure 5 (on page 11 below) locates the public over the barycentre of the triangle. The three vertexes of the figure identify three key actors trying to sway the 'public' in their favour through various means: political elites (both in power and in opposition); media owners; and CSOs.

As the legend hints, there are a variety of reasons for which these three entities may benefit from persuading the public. The public provides political elites with electoral support as well as money in the form of both voluntary donations and, for governing elites, tax compliance. Vis-à-vis CSOs, the public provides not only political support, but also human capital (as staffers and volunteers) and money in the form of donations. In addition, it provides the media with human capital (as employees) as well as money in the form of advertising and selling revenues, donations, and subscriptions.

In order to obtain these resources, each of the key actors tries to persuade the public that it is acting in its best interest. To this end, political elites can promise or, if in government, enact specific policies (including those implying transfers of money) besides operating a non-mediated form of persuasion (e.g., rallies, social-media messaging, direct propaganda). Meanwhile, CSOs can operate only through the provision of human capital (i.e., voluntary activities such as street cleaning, social services, pro-bono consulting, etc.) and similar direct messaging. Finally, the media can operate any sort of direct persuasion, from the subtlest to the most explicit, as well as claim to offer the public a channel to voice its concerns.

However, the emphasis put above on the relations between media and CSOs suggests that there is more. In fact, the three key actors also interact with each other. For instance, political elites can promise the others favourable policies and the transfer of public money and, in addition, operate direct persuasion on CSOs. In exchange, besides support and networking (i.e., the revolving door), it can get the media's acquiescence as well as human capital and expertise from CSOs. Meanwhile, the media and

<sup>13</sup> For more on failing democratisation processes and hybrid regimes see below as well as Albert P. Melone's (1996; 1998) studies of Bulgaria and, amongst innumerable others, Lilia Shevtsova (2001), William A. Clark (2004) Perry Anderson (2007) and Anders Åslund (2007) on Russia.

Spectrum of applicability

Repurposing the notion of "iron triangle"

The public's resources

The three actor's tool to manipulate the public

Sidelong exchanges amongst the three actors

CSOs can exchange support and establish a network too. For example, CSOs may suggest sympathisers to buy newspapers and watch channels that pursue a compatible agenda. In addition, CSOs can provide the media with their expertise; whereas the media can offer to channel their messages (see Akboga and Arik 2020 on how these synergies operate in Turkey).

**Figure 5 The iron triangle explaining the outcomes of attempts at manipulating public opinion in relation to CSOs and their activities**

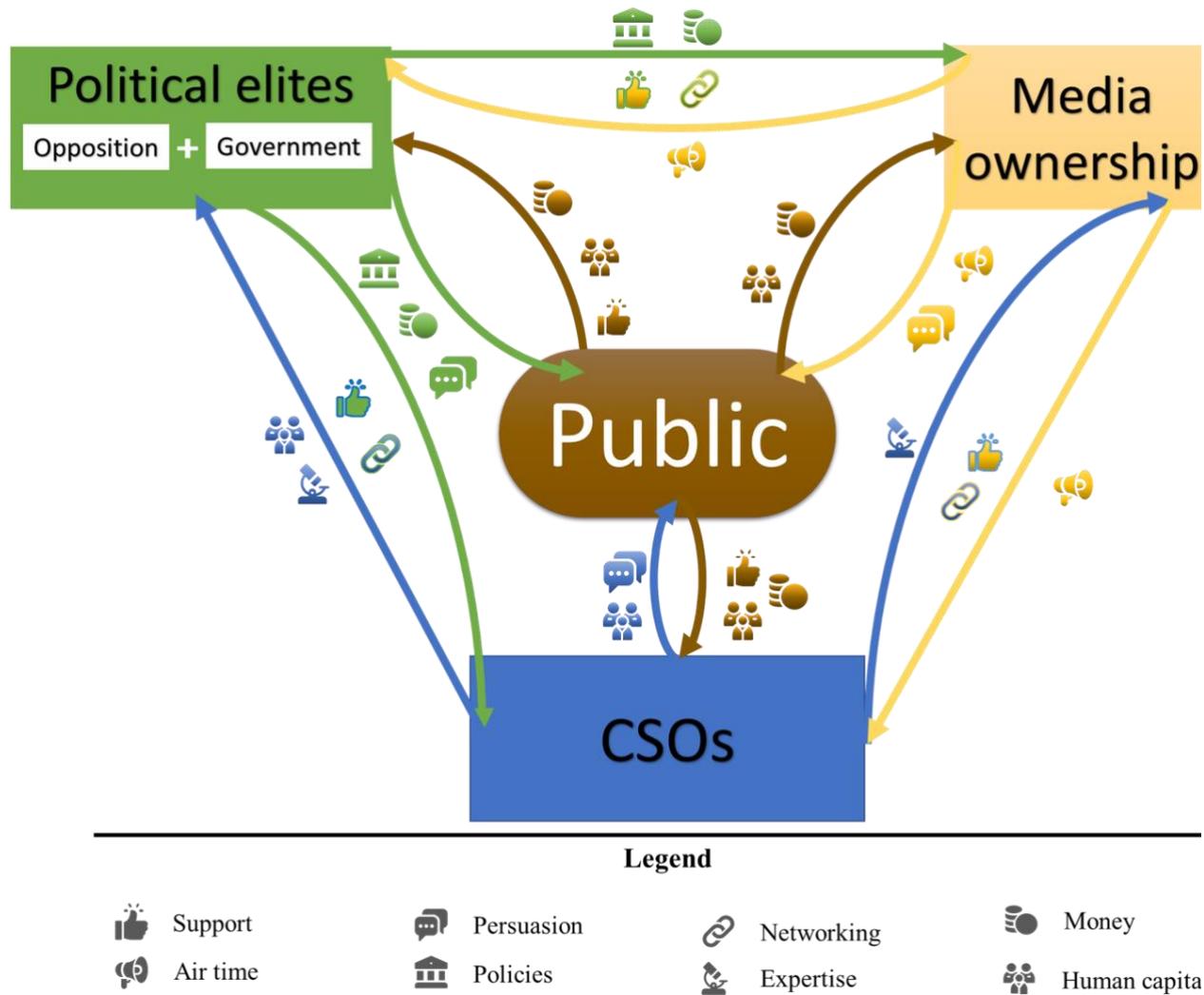


Diagram by: F. A. Telarico

For simple it is, this model allows to interpret complex interplays. For instance, it can explain policies' feedback effects on the availability of an actor to engage in exchanges with political elites. In order to do so, it would be sufficient to assume that each of the exchanges' term can have an either positive or negative impact on the counterpart.<sup>14</sup> Obviously, this unadorned model excludes many facts of real life. For instance, it does not try to account directly for the factors which can influence an actor's willingness to interact with another. This is relatively innocuous in the case of political elites, because the category consolidates governing and opposition leaders. However, it omits important information — e.g., on the structure of media ownership. Moreover, it does not allow to expose directly the equilibrium of power between different factions within each vertex. Not less importantly, the model does not try to account

<sup>14</sup> This scheme offers itself also a quantitative formulation, which could not be exposed in this text. In any case, a complimentary qualitative description of the concrete contexts in which the triangle is immersed remains necessary for the analysis's results to be interpreted correctly.

Extensions and limitations

directly for the ways in which one actor can leverage its relations with another one in dealing with the third.

## ¶ 2 Political elites: A race to the bottom with a clear ‘winner’

Arguably, in light of the iron triangle of public-opinion steering, the similarities and the differences between Bulgaria’s and Russia’s political system are key. In fact, the set of relations showcased above suggests that these features play a role into explaining why some Bulgarian media would adopt their Russian colleagues’ approach towards CSOs. Inevitably, such a comparison has to start from the collapse of real socialism, an experience similarly traumatic for both countries’ populaces and elites, and its preconditions (cf. Sharlanov 2009 on Bulgaria; and Werth 2012; or Figes 2015 on Russia).

In many ways, the premises from which Bulgaria and Russia started were somewhat similar. Since the end of the Second World War, both countries had lived under their respective communist parties’ heavy-handed rule. Until the late 1980s, neither of the two regimes had managed to effectively lessen of the command-and-control approach towards economic management. Nor had they allowed constructive forms of dissent to emerge without being stifled almost immediately. However, already before that fatidic 9 November 1989, when real socialism lost its existential struggle, some differences begun to emerge. In fact, when Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in Moscow, he begun to bring about unprecedented reforms: the *glasnost*’ and the *perestroika*. Meanwhile, the Bulgarian Communist Party managed to reject any such change. Famously, those who were asking the long-standing General Secretary of the party, Todor Zhivkov, whether “the party will stay the same, or should the party have done something” got used to the reply “dear comrades, we have decided to wait until the end and see [pause] and in the very end, should it be necessary, to do a perestroika” (Zhivkov 1987). Possibly, this divergence can be explained by the different geopolitical and geoeconomics fundamentals of the two countries. In fact, being one the two world superpowers, the USSR was involved in a diplomatic and military competition which aggravated the elites’ perception of the effects stemming from over twenty years of systemic underemployment (Porket 1989), repressed inflation and economic stagnation (Nutti 1986; Bléjer and Cottarelli 1991) Meanwhile, with its eight-million small population kept under control by a combination of national communism and police-state oppression, a backward economy highly dependent on Soviet raw materials and dollar-denominated foreign debt (Telarico 2020c) and due to its relative unimportance in Soviet – and, therefore, NATO – war plans (Telarico 2019; 2020a), Bulgaria felt less the crisis’s bite less (at least until the debt crisis of the 1980s; see Vachkov and Ivanov 2009).

Despite these differences, the two communist parties went through a similar auto-golpe, at the end of which ‘reformed’ communists kept occupying most apical posts (see Prodanov 2012; and Werth 2000; or Telarico 2020b on Russia). However, the two countries’ path of post-socialist extrication are very different (cf. Ramet and Wagner 2019). In fact, despite the abovementioned reticence to reform the system, Bulgaria experienced a relatively smooth political transformation in a (rather malfunctioning) democracy (Melone 1998). Foremost, the country managed to avoid the sort of ethnic conflicts which tore apart former Yugoslavia and experienced only short-lived radical-nationalist mobilisations (Telarico Forthcoming; for a critical appraisal, see Rechel 2007). Moreover, the grave crisis in winter 1995–1996 – familiarly called *Videnov’s witner* – stemmed from the difficult transformation into a free-market economy more than anything else. On the contrary, Russian elites failed in bringing about a real political transformation (Åslund 2007) and in building a functioning market economy (Riasanovsky and Steinberg 2011, 611–30). First, under Yeltsin the country went from being an emerging democracy to regress into a hybrid regime with uncompetitive elections (Cockburn 1993) and serious suspects of state capture (Kotz and Weir 2007, pt. 4).

**Figure 6 Politically and economically, the post-socialist transformation manifested in rather similar ways in Bulgarian and Russia**



\* Data for the 1996 Presidential Election in the Russian Federation and the 1990 contest for the Constituent assembly in Bulgaria.  
 †Data for the 1996 Presidential Election in the Russian Federation and the 1992 Presidential Election in Bulgaria.

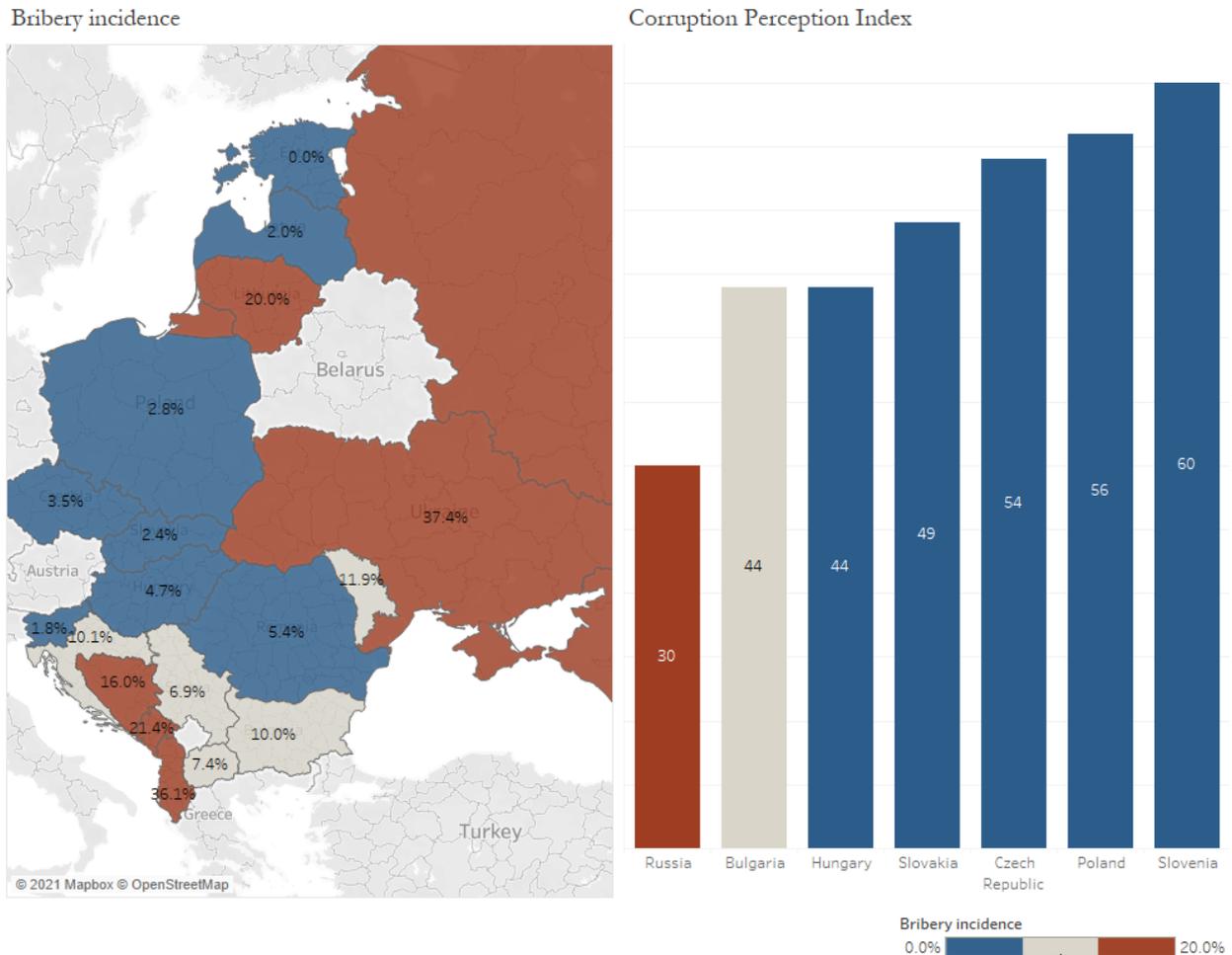
Charts by: F. A. Telarico | Data source: (Russian elections: Nohlen and Stöver 2010, 1642; Bulgarian elections: Caramani 2017; Panel B: WB 2021a; 2021b)

As a result of these events, and innumerable others that happened in the meantime, democracy in Bulgaria is still a half-baked success. Whereas in Russia it was, at best, a disenchanting failure. If anything, the former is now a member of the EU; albeit the second unhappiest and the poorest on average (EUROSTAT 2019; 2021). Politically, the country has suffered from the marked concentration of power – and, arguably, its distortion – under the party of former Prime Minister Boyko Borisov (Indzhev 2013; Andonova 2020). Nonetheless, since summer 2020 Bulgarian opposition parties are polling strongly and they are likely to form a coalition government in one way or the other after two hung parliaments (Telarico 2021h; Raichev 2021; Manolova 2021). On the contrary, Russia is now lingering somewhere along the thin borderline between a hybrid regime characterised by paroxysmal levels of fecklessness (March 2009; Treisman 2011; N. Petrov, Lipman, and Hale 2014) and a fully authoritarian one (Ostrow, Satarov, and Khakamada 2007; Pomerantsev 2013; Motyl 2016). The only form of opposition possible are those arguing for a different conduction of *internal politics*. However, virtually no one proposes a systemic change rejecting Russia’s current super-power aspirations and the sacrifices it imposes in terms of personal freedom and military expenses (M. Katz 2012). Even the very Alexey Navalny idolatrised by many in the West does not contest this core tenant of Putin’s foreign policy (Patalakh 2018).

Comparing the present political regimes

**Figure 7 Corruption is the predominant feature of the political-economic regime of Bulgaria, Russia and other post-socialist countries outside CEE**

Incidence of bribery in the entire Eastern Europe (colour, both charts) and perception of corruption (bar size) in CEE, Bulgaria, and Russia.



The Corruption Perception Index aggregates the results of several international surveys on the issue of corruption. The indicator ‘Bribery incidence’ equals the percentage of responding entrepreneurs who expect to be requested at least a bribe during the year according to the World Bank.

Map and chart by: F. A. Telarico | Data source: (Transparency International 2020; WB 2020)

However, for divergent the two country’s political regimes may seem, they look much more similar from a political-economy point of view. In fact, neither of the two countries as an actually functioning market economy. To mention one factor, state monopoly in key sectors inherited from the real-socialist era keep existing either de fact or de jure in both countries (see the numbers in Telarico 2021f, fig. 2 for Bulgaria; and cf. Abramov, Radygin, and Chernova 2017; or Kotz and Weir 2007, pt. 4 on Russia). In Moscow as in Sofia, entrepreneurs with personal links to governing political elites fare much better in terms of getting favourable legislation and protection for various types of sanctions, accessing State-managed funds as well as adjudicating public tenders and obtaining advance payments on them.<sup>15, 16</sup> Overall, the prevalence of corruption as a political-economic tool of governance in both countries

<sup>15</sup> On Bulgaria there are a handful of valuable sources in English: Sandra Emerson’s (2006) all-encompassing book, and some scholarly articles (Pashev 2011; Chiru and Gherghina 2012; Bezlov and Gounev 2012) — including one dealing more specifically with media corruption and issues of journalistic and institutional integrity (Price 2019).

<sup>16</sup> For Russia, cf. works supporting the description of Russia as a kleptocracy such as Mark Galeotti’s (2018a; 2018b), Karen Dawisha’s (2015, xi–xiv, 315–50), Johanna Granville’s (2003) useful literature review and others (e.g., Lansky and Myles-Primakoff 2018).

constitutes a strong feature of both countries' political regimes. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that some of the basic mechanism through which Russian and Bulgarian (governing) political elites try to persuade their respective publics – as well as their aims – should not be too different (cf. the theory of non-democratic regimes' sources of legitimacy exposed in von Soest and Grauvogel 2015).

### ¶ 3 Civil society in Bulgaria and Russia: Attempting to go beyond stereotypes and biases

In order to understand the role CSOs play in the complex political-economy of public-opinion steering, a few definitions are needed. Thus, this paragraph first introduces a novel definition of civil society explicitly. Then, it moves on to detail the reception and evolution of CSOs in Bulgaria and Russia since the fall of real socialism.

#### ¶ 3.1 Defining 'civil society' as a process

Originally, 'civil society' indicated the sphere mediating between private life and politics (cf. Pelczynski 1984, 197–227). Successive extensions have included non-violence, self-organisation, autonomy from the State and the markets as defining features of 'civil society'. However, the term was meant to describe a set of interrelated socio-political changes that took place in Western Europe and the Euro-Atlantic area (Dunn and Hann 2004). Therefore, "most studies of civil society are mainly normative, both in their conceptualization and in their theoretical assumptions." (Kopecký and Mudde 2003, 1) This simple fact has led to a number of hardships for the anthropological and sociological literature on the topic. In fact, oftentimes social scientists tend to act like

Western social engineers who try to install Western-like civil society in non-Western context [...], they are often preoccupied with studying and advancing the emancipatory dimension of various forms of social mobilization and organizing, while they tend to neglect [...] the workings of non-Western equivalents of civil society.

(Kubik 2005, 120)

Therefore, "neoliberal" models of civil society (Cellarius and Staddon 2002), which have unwittingly incorporated a number of contextual elements, make the notion inapplicable to diverse post-socialist contexts (Kopecky and Mudde 2002). In this sense, it can be misleading to shackle civil society to the mantra of non-violence and/or civil resistance (as, e.g., Calhoun 1992; Bermeo and Nord 2000; and other works written in the spirit of Habermas 1962). In fact, post-socialist Europe and SEE in particular have been the cradle of several organisations that went "from voting to fighting and back" (Mochtak 2018). Ignoring these cases makes it "easy to conclude that such tribal atavism" has no place "in an increasingly interconnected 'capitalist' world [...] transcending the antagonism and parochialism of old borders." (Mudde and Eatwell 2002, x). Moreover, approaches such as Marzec's which posit "not being part of the state" (2018, 6; who builds on insights by Bermeo and Nord 2000) as a precondition of civil society can be misleading. If anything, the hyper-politicisation and the spirit of *partiinnost'* of real socialism (Joravsky 2016) survives under different conditions, so that

[Civil society] organizations can combine different functions such as service provision with exerting political influence, and therefore that dichotomous understandings of civil society organizations are not helpful if we are to understand local civil societies.

(Jacobsson and Korolczuk 2017, 10–11)

In order to rinse traditional definitions from any such element, this research relies on the studies of two intellectuals: the philosopher Antonio Gramsci and the social scientist Robert Michels. The former theorised that elites can exert power either as consensual hegemony or as coercive domination (Gramsci 1947, 233–38). Meanwhile, the latter proved that he "who says organization, says oligarchy" (Michels 1915) following what George Orwell (1949, 148) labelled a pattern that "has always reasserted itself, just

as a gyroscope will always return to equilibrium, however far it is pushed one way or the other.” Against this background, civil society appears rather as a “process” (Kaldor 2003, 585) than a ‘fact’ of social life characterised. Essentially, civil-society as a process (CSP) consists of the consensual participation in an organisation and the collateral acceptance of its power structure. Ultimately, CSP’s provides these collectives – in which individuals organise voluntarily – tools to contest, co-operate with, and fight against the power and standing of any institution and organisation.

CSP as a family resemblance concept

Undeniably, bridging the immense differences between the different contexts to which CSP wants to apply is not easy. Nevertheless, the interrelatedness between CSPs across border emerges clearly through the *family resemblance concept* (as applied in Bauerkämper 2003).<sup>17</sup> As Figure 8 (on page 17 below) shows, a concept is defined by adding more traits to its specifications. Most commonly these are necessary but not sufficient traits (e.g., civil society is all of the following: spontaneous, non-violent, and non-partisan). Hence, the higher the number of traits being considered, the more concepts are narrowed down. In logics, this operation is termed ‘intersection’ or ‘AND’ and indicated as *Civil Society*:  $\{x \wedge y \wedge z\}$ . By contrast, family resemblance operates by joining sufficient but not necessary traits (e.g., civil society is either  $x$  or  $y$  or  $z$ ). Hence, higher the number of traits being considered, the more concepts are broadened. In logics, this operation is termed ‘union’ or ‘OR’ and indicated with ‘ $\vee$ ’. Evidently, CSP’s definition implies both that a basic necessary but not sufficient trait (its being a consensual process amongst autonomous individuals) and a number of sufficient but not necessary ones. For instance, as long as there is a consensual process of interaction amongst autonomous individuals ( $x$ ), civil society may be non-violent ( $y$ ) or violent elsewhere ( $\bar{y}$ ); imply non-partisanship ( $w$ ) or entail active participation in elections ( $\omega$ ), etc. — in logical notation: *CSP*:  $\{x \wedge (y \vee \bar{y} \vee w \vee \bar{w} \vee \dots)\}$ .<sup>18</sup>

Civil society as CSP is a relative notion

Finally, CSP provides a collection of historically determined tools for social interaction and collective action. Thus, the concrete result and the reach of CSOs must be contingent on the discursive and material practises characterising the “dominant political culture” of each community (Lipset 1960; Frenzel-Zagorska 1985; Telarico 2021c). Coherently, this forbids assuming that civil society necessarily carries with itself a specific set of values as if it was the socio-ethical equivalent of a viral vector. On the contrary, pro-Western CSOs, are not representative of CSP tout court. Rather, they are a subspecies which can – and often does – coexists with CSOs rejecting those same values.

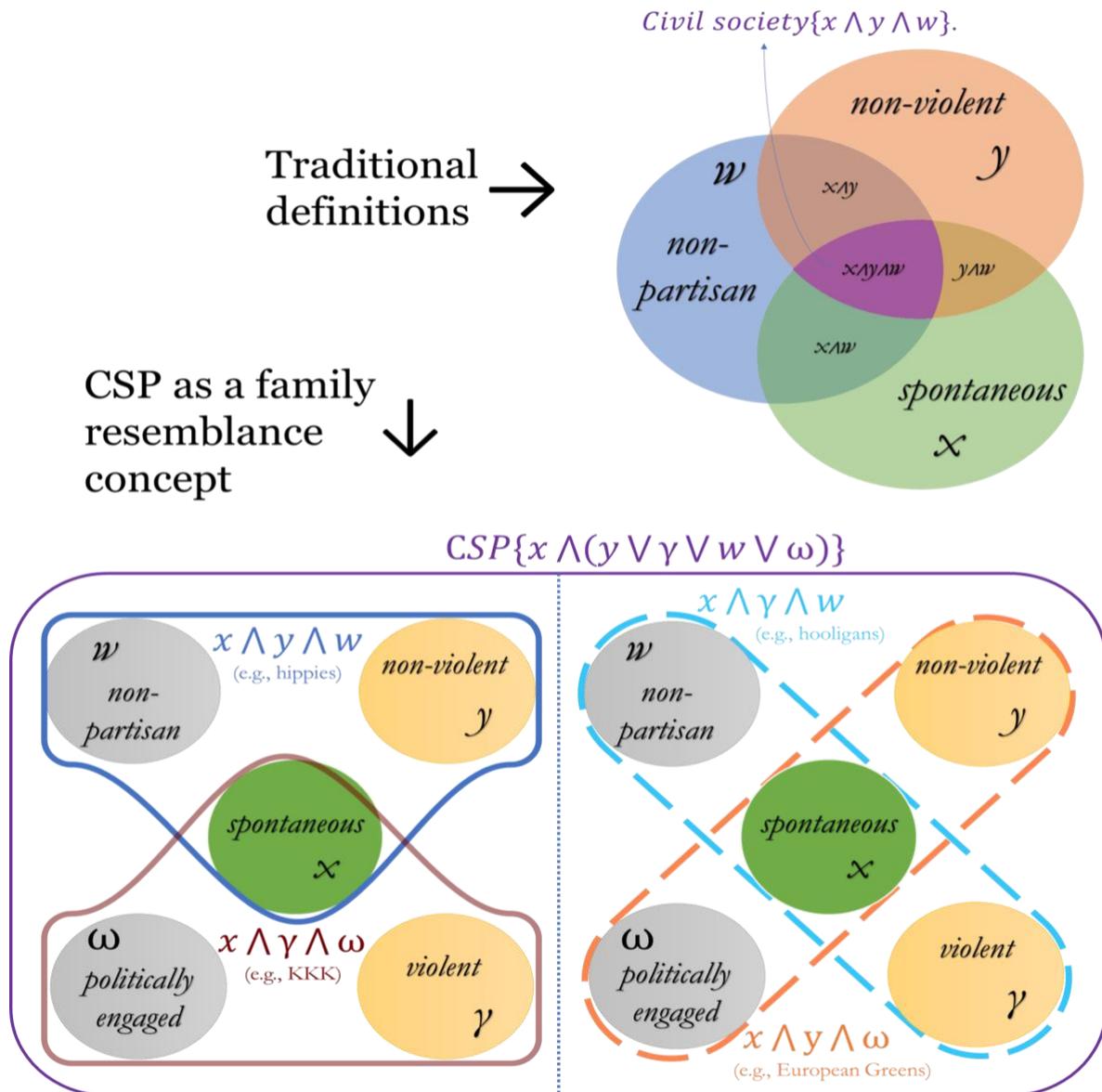
<sup>17</sup> Intuitively, this notion can be understood by considering that in a natural family, each sibling has the possibility to inherit certain traits from either the mother or the father or both. For instance, the children of a mother with brown eyes (be) and hair (bh) and a father with green eyes (ge) and red hair (rh) can either look exactly like their mother (be, bh), or exactly like their father (ge, rh), or a bit like both (be, rh; ge, bh). In any case, one can relate the children to *both* their parents as belonging to the same *family*, even if they do not manifest all of their mother’s or the father’s traits.

<sup>18</sup> Defining a notion in terms of family resemblance concepts is not simply an alternative to the more tradition procedures. On the contrary, as shown above, its heuristic power is maximised when applied in conjunction with the latter. (cf. Collier and Mahon 1993; Goertz 2012, 10ff)

**Figure 8 Defining CSP as a family resemblance concept makes its applicable o diverse contexts, going beyond traditional approaches' limitations**

In traditional approaches a concept gets narrowed down by adding more traits since the intersection between them becomes smaller as more features are considered.

A family resemblance concept gets extended by adding more traits because their union becomes larger as more features are considered.



¶ 3.2 The reality on the ground: Beyond the rejection paradigm

The study of civil society in post-socialist Eastern Europe and the FSU has oscillated between two extreme perspectives. At first, an unwarranted optimism prevailed due to the participation of some CSOs to anti-communist protests in 1990s. Successively, abandoned many of the theories developed in those years to adopt a bleaker view, often uncritically reproduced (as in Nelson 1996; Smolar 1996; Lomax 1997; and Green and Leff 1997). Amongst the theories elaborated in the last years, most popular postulates the *rejection of civil society*. Essentially, this scholarship is animated by two simple ideas. First, the political elite in most post-socialist countries of Eastern Europe and the FSU has operated a rejection of CSOs. Second, the related policies are “complicit with the broader ideological agenda, and the actual

The rejection of civil society

platform on which the ruling political formations build their support at the ballot.” (Marzec 2018, 4) Thus, in this perspective, ostracism of CSOs is one of the distinguishing features of post-socialist societies in Eastern Europe. Interestingly, some of the studies adopting this perspective are not completely on the wrong path. After all, they reflect on the factual reality of CSOs and their Western bakers’ failures in Eastern Europe and the FSU. Sometimes, they may even mention data and events virtually analogous to the ones discussed above (see § 1 ¶ 1 on page 2 above).

The duplicity  
of post-  
socialist civil  
societies

However, adopting CSP as the definition of civil society, reveals that civil society is neither dead nor moribund in Eastern Europe and the FSU. If there is such an impression in the literature it is due to the neoliberal models through which the ‘civil-society rejection’ theory reads Eastern Europe’s transformations and defines civil society. Namely, when applied to post-socialist societies, traditional approaches to the study of civil society tend to be more distortive than their supporters are willing to acknowledge (Kopecky and Mudde 2002, 2). In fact, being geographically and historically relative, CSP admits for multiple, differentiated outcomes — thus civil society’s portrayal must be mixed. In the specific case of post-socialist countries, one can distinguished rather approximately two segments of civil society. On the one hand, according to several experts, there are scores of non- or il-liberal CSOs that are “more authentic representatives of civil society in post-communist Europe [... than] prominent ‘civil’ organisations [...] which are elite-driven [...] and] detached from society.”(Mudde 2002, 159) On the other hand, there is a segment of civil society complying with all the criteria of the neoliberal model. These liberal, pro-Western CSOs talk of grassroot activism, emancipation, big-heartedness and disinterestedness, but they have actually chiselled themselves in “a professionalized realm [...] inaccessible to most local groups.” (Hemment 2004, 221)

Against the  
‘civil-society  
rejection’  
theory

In sum, this duplicity has led to a differentiated degree of acceptance of CSOs depending on the field in which they carry out their activities. Generally, CSOs that are agnostic on – or even opposed to – liberal values, but provide a useful social service to local communities thrive in Eastern Europe and the Western part of the FSU. Yet, the firing platoon is out for those CSOs aiming at “empowering excluded groups, questioning discriminatory practices or lobbying for environment-friendly solutions” (Marzec 2018, 4) and, thus, acting “as de facto agents of [liberal] democracy” (Kamat 2003, 65). More concretely, post-socialist countries host CSOs that are “more complex and more amorphous organisations than the neoliberal model allows.” (Cellarius and Staddon 2002, 215) Hence, it is time to strongly discard any theory arguing for the rejection of civil society in Eastern Europe and Russia. In its place, one has to adopt CSP and other novel interpretations of civil society in order to grasp the fundamental duality of post-socialist civil societies and its consequences. In addition, this perspective should allow to read through the Russian government’s active reproduction of this divide by “crowding out” politicised CSOs progressively (Gilbert 2016) while letting those providing useful social services freer to operate (Cooley 2020, 97).

### ¶ 3.3 CSOs and the media: Is it even a thing?

All CSOs need  
media  
attention

Against this background, the story of CSOs in Bulgaria and Russia needs essentially to be rewritten in order to account for CSOs other than pro-democratic ones. Surely, such an effort cannot be carried out in this research. Yet, by focusing on public-opinion steering, the present research can add a piece useful to solve the wider puzzle. In fact, regardless of their stances towards the status quo, CSOs needs a supportive political environment, sufficient funds and enough human capital. But to gather these resources and increase awareness of their causes, CSOs need to engage in media politics (Hiebert 2005; Gillmor 2006; Dean, Anderson, and Lovink 2006; Raupp 2011). Thus, all CSOs need to master the tools of public relations in order to achieve their aims — whatever they may be. Consequently, CSOs’ activities adapt to the different opportunities they have to conquest (free) airtime in both Eastern and Western Europe. The easiest way is to supply or less stable flow of information to the media, an area in which many CSOs compete (Castells 2008, 85ff). When this strategy is botched or unavailable because of media

biases, CSOs can organise events appositely to attract media attention or resolve to more radical public-relation strategies (DeLuca and Peebles 2012). Arguably, in a functioning democracy, CSOs will employ more ‘extreme’ form of activism (e.g., civil disobedience, marches, strikes, urban guerrilla) only rarely to shake a “largely indifferent public” off its political torpor on a specific issue (Murphy and Dee 1992, 11).

#### ¶ 4 The media in Bulgaria and Russia — A common fate?

##### ¶ 4.1 Expectation vs reality: News media’s role in post-socialist societies

Admittedly, defining the role mass media play in contemporary societies is not easy. Therefore, it can be useful to discuss what an ‘ideal’ benchmark media should operate like. Looking at the certainly demanding normative standards of a perfectly functioning liberal democracy, there are eight “functions and services” the media should execute “for the political system” (Gurevitch and Blumler 1990, 270):

1. Anticipate and cover socio-political developments expected to affect people’s wellbeing;
2. Determine the ‘order of the day’ of society and politics (i.e., *agenda-setting*, see below);
3. Channel the messages of politicians and various interest groups in an intelligible and neutral way;
4. Offer as many different opinions as there are discording views on an issue;
5. Make institutions, civil servants, politicians, and other powerful individual accountable to the court of public opinion;
6. Stimulate viewers and readers to educate themselves and become active citizens rather than passive subjects;
7. Defy any attempt from third parties to undermine the media’s autonomy, veracity, and loyalty to the final user;
8. Show respect for the final user, whom the media should not patronise

In these most positive depictions, by providing public relations expertise the media should act as a partner of civil society (Botan and Taylor 2005; Taylor 2009). The media’s correct functioning is considered indispensable for a liberal civil society’s prosperity and State institutions’ consolidation. Moreover, it should limit itself to “add value to the public sphere by bringing attention to issues/topics/areas that are bettering societies, such as providing coverage for a nonprofit sector.” (Cooley 2020, 84) Thus, at the core, such a media would provide people the minimal level of trust necessary to come together outside of, act on and discuss about politics, the market and other institutions. In other words, in a perfect liberal democracy, the media would function as a ‘fourth estate’ counterbalancing the power of the State, the markets and other institutions.

In an ideal depiction, the media would play an even more important role in post-socialist countries. In fact, with the exception of Czechoslovakia no country of Eastern Europe and the FSU had ever experience a real liberal democracy. Moreover, in former SEE and most of the FSU the media got embroiled in a complex nation-building process (see Taylor 2000b on media’s role in post-socialist to national building).<sup>19</sup> Therefore, the media had a rather ‘unconventional’ role in rebuilding the foundations of intrapersonal trust and the sense of community that had been shattered during the 1990s (Rose 1994). For this reason, in order to be both an enabler and an amplifier of CSP under post-socialist conditions, the media should ideally perform a series of peculiar functions (based on Jakubowicz and Sükösd 2008, 11) besides the ones listed above:

9. Introduction and legitimization of the concepts of democracy, rule of law and constitutionalism
10. Introduction and legitimization of the concepts of political pluralism, competition; and new political parties and candidates as legitimate competitors
11. Developing civil society by introducing NGOs and other civic groups as legitimate public actors

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<sup>19</sup> In addition, see also Maureen Taylor’s (Taylor 2000a) own research on the case of Bosnia; Sandra Braun’s (2004) paper of Bulgarian media; as well as Nadia Kaneva and Delia Popescu’s (2011) comparative study of Bulgaria and Romania.

Media’s ideal  
role in liberal  
democracies

Media’s ideal  
role in post-  
socialist  
societies

12. Challenging the space and degree of transformation for further democratization
13. Safeguarding new democratic institutions
14. Personalization of politics: introducing candidates and parties before the first democratic elections by applying criteria regarding democratic programs and personal skills
15. Democratic education regarding elections and voting procedures
16. Offer a space for democratic evaluation of national past (including the communist period and its leaders) and the discussion of historical justice
17. Contribution to national integration along democratic lines (in many newly formed countries, contribution to nation building)
18. Democratic performance of the media as a contribution to the democratization of other sectors (media communication as a facilitator).

Media's real  
role in liberal  
democracies

However, this idyllic image is far from reality even in the most consolidated liberal democracies. On the contrary, the media has long “corrupted itself and went astray from its primary responsibility” (Cater 1959; see also Brucker 1949). Everywhere, the media abuses its agenda-setting power by cherry picking according to opaque criteria which issues will be given salience and, reversely, which will be ignored (as described in McCombs and Shaw 1972). At the same time, the media has never ceased to surreptitiously embedding evaluative judgements in the coverage of the news it chooses to report on (defined as ‘convergence of agenda setting and framing’ in McCombs and Ghanem 2001). And these distortions have all but grown smaller with the advent of social media and other alternative news sources. On the contrary, they have simply allowed traditional media to appropriate of new functions. For instance, as a consequence of the alleged Russian interference in the 2016 US elections, scholars and experts have begun looking at traditional media as a tool to fight the misinformation spread on the internet (West 2017; RTS 2019). This trend has grown stronger during the ongoing pandemic (Duraisamy, Rathinaswamy, and Sengottaiyan 2020; Effiom Ephraim 2020).<sup>20</sup> This dismal picture is completed by actors outside the media who try to exploit these degenerations to their partisan benefit. In fact, as hinted above, the media does not simply ‘help’ structuring the public sphere — it owns the lion share of the capabilities for its steering and “manipulation” (Bernays 1928). Therefore, to better achieve their goals, both CSOs (§ 2 ¶ 3.2 on page 17 above) and political elites (§ 2 ¶ 1 on page 10) have a vested interest in tilting the media to their side. Hence, gets “entwined in a vicious circle of mutual manipulation, mythmaking, and self-interest” because its operators (writers, talking heads, investigative journalists, and reporters) tend to “dutifully report those fabrications” from which media owners stand to gain economically or politically (Vanderwicken 1995).

Media's real  
role in post-  
socialist  
societies

In a word, functioning liberal democracies themselves only have a weakly independent media landscape, in which vested interests strive against each other. Yet, the circumstances under which the media has operated and keeps operating in post-socialist countries are arguably even less favourable (Jakubowicz 2014; Mungiu-Pippidi 2014). In fact, the very conditions of post-socialism constituted a “disabling environment” (Jakubowicz and Sükösd 2008, 10) for the emergence of an independent media no less than for that of pro-Western CSOs. In fact, both cases, the Western European institutions and organisation created on foreign models adopted during post-socialist countries’ imitative, feckless transformation lacked widespread, autochthonous support (Jakubowicz 1995; 2001; Mungiu-Pippidi 2003).<sup>21</sup> In essence, post-socialist media suffered from three severe diseases: the media’s exaggerated

<sup>20</sup> However, there is little indication that this latter function is really being carried out by traditional media in post-socialist countries. If it is of any indication, studies on the Russian public found that there are no sensible differences between the opinions of television viewers and those of internet users when it comes to red-meat topics (Cottiero et al. 2015). Similar results should be expected in Bulgaria and other Eastern European countries that show similar gaps between high level of trust in television and mistrust in internet media (see § 1 ¶ 3 on page 5 *Realise the manipulations* — How the media shapes perceptions of CSOs).

<sup>21</sup> In studying a country like Bulgaria it is especially interesting to look diachronically at the cases of more consolidated democracies such as Hungary (Galik 1997; Griffen 2020) or Slovenia (Bašič-Hrvatini 2002; EBU 2020b; Bayer 2021).

focus on politics; customarily blurred borders between political activism, partisan engagements and journalism; significant role of capitals belonging to the State, leading (former) politicians and/or famously partisan individuals (Hallin and Mancini 2004, 73; Jakubowicz 2014, 117). Consequently, in almost all post-socialist countries there is an “umbilical cord” between the media and the State (as Papatheodorou and Machin 2003 argue is the case in Greece and Spain).

#### ¶ 4.2 Post-socialist media politics: Bulgaria vs Russia

It is not surprise, then, that media politics is a fundamental component of the media’s functioning in post-socialist countries. However, journalists’ often-pedagogical and always partisan behaviour is only one of the reasons why media’s political orientation has always been somewhat of a delicate question in post-socialist countries. Equally, if not more, important was the former Communists’ addiction to State monopoly over the media — as well as their opponents’ habit of enjoying strict ties with underground information networks (Gross 2002, 34). Nevertheless, the existence of some sort of opposition interested in nurturing its own set of biased medias granted independent radios and television the necessary protection. After all, where underground information network had existed before 1989, medias linked to the former anti-Communists managed to conquer some legitimacy in the public’s eye. However, there were only a few such cases: Czechoslovakia was the main one with its “parallel polis” manifesto (Benda et al. 1988), Hungary was another, crawling towards the constitution of a “second society” (Hankiss 1988); Poland was the most radical, realising the opposition between civil society and the State (Arato 1981, 1980–81). The situation was much bleaker in Albania, Bulgaria, and Romania, where there never was an underground media (Gross 2002, 35). Similarly, only the westernmost parts of FSU and the two Russian metropolises of Moscow and Saint Petersburg experienced the “*samizdat* culture” (Hollander 1969; Meerson-Aksenov and Shragin 1977; Cohen 1982). Therefore, at the outspring of the post-socialist transformation, the media’s path in SEE was much more similar to the one seen in the FSU.

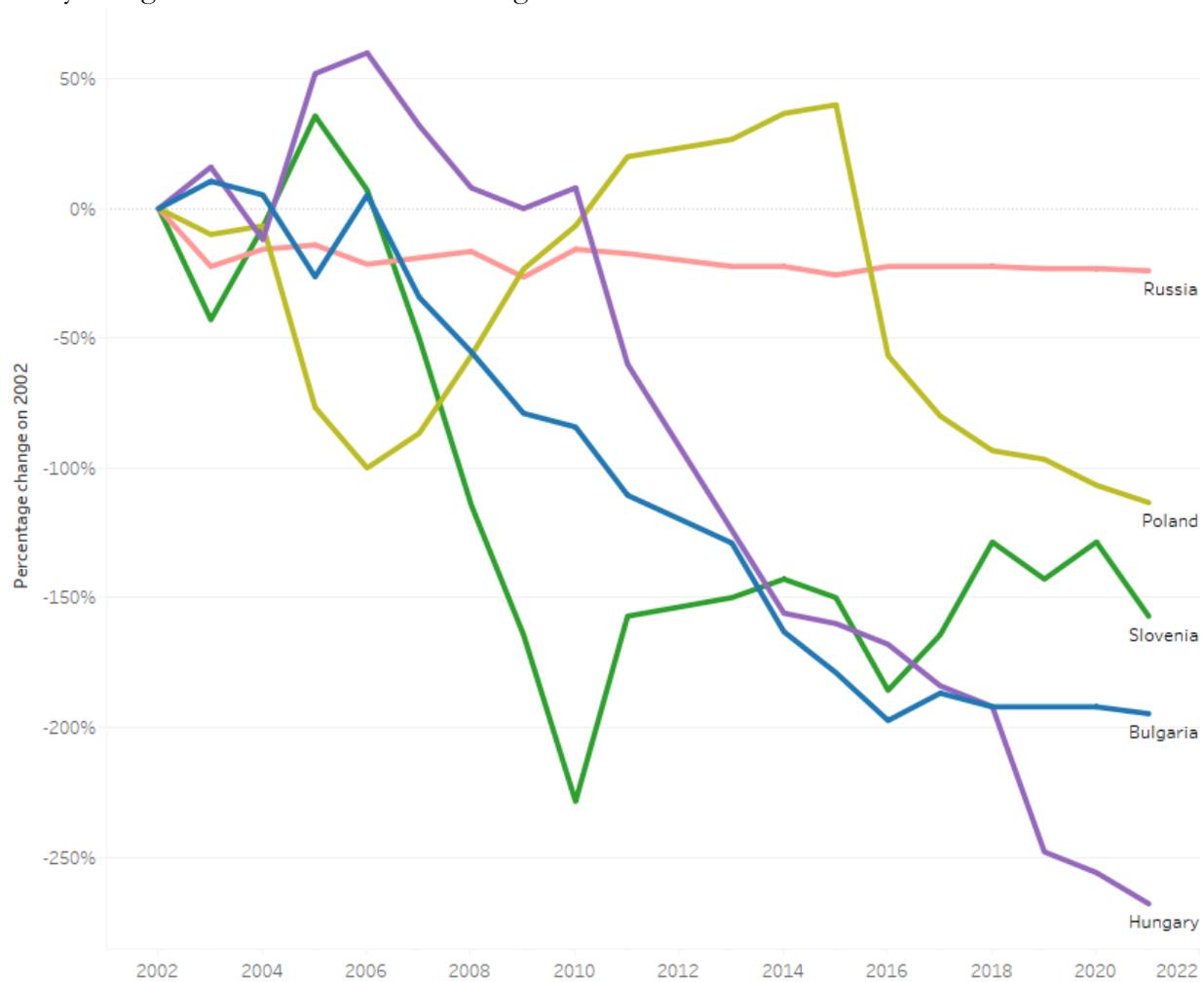
In these countries, post-socialist elites acquired the fullest awareness of the power of the media after the so-called *colour revolution* (Lane 2009; esp. Russia, as Finkel and Brudny 2012a; and Horvath 2013 argue). After that wave of pivotal political changes across SEE (Serbia, 2001) and the FSU (Georgia, 2003; Ukraine, 2004; Kirghizstan, 2005), CSOs lost much of their access to radio and TV frequencies due to a backlash against independent media (esp. in Russia, as Finkel and Brudny 2012a; and Horvath 2013 argue). Soon afterwards, in the immediate aftermath of the Great Recession, governing elites in SEE and CEE pursued the same aim by indirect pressures and corruption (see Andresen, Hoxha, and Godole 2017 for the Western Balkans; and Price 2019 on Bulgaria) (Figure 9 on page 22).

Motives and forms across the region

Changes over time across the region

**Figure 9 Media freedom has worsened massively across CEE and SEE, and Bulgaria is amongst the most inhospitable countries for journalists**

Yearly change in selected countries' ranking in the *Press Freedom Index*.



The chart shows the rate of change in each country's ranking compared to 2002. Thus, the lines do reflect whether a country's ranking has improved/worsened over more or less over time; and not whether it is lower (better) or higher (worse) than another.

Chart by: F. A. Telarico | Data source: (RSF 2002; 2003; 2004; 2005; 2006; 2007; 2008; 2009; 2010; 2012; 2013; 2014; 2015; 2016; 2017; 2018; 2019; 2020; 2021)

¶ 4.2.1 Media landscape and media politics in Bulgaria

A disabling media environment

Some experts maintain that Eastern European countries' membership in the EU marked/will mark the end of their post-socialist transformation (Ost 2009; Donahoe and Habeck 2011; Cullen Dunn and Verdery 2015; Müller 2019). However, in terms of media politics Bulgaria has not moved any closer to Western liberal standards. On the contrary, according to the editor in chief on one of the country's largest investigative publications, "With Bulgaria's accession to the EU, the freedom of the media has worsened" (Marchenko 2021). An often-mentioned statistics at this regard is Bulgaria's ranking in the Press Freedom Index compiled by Reporters without borders, according to which the media environment's quality has declined almost twofold (Figure 9 on page 22). The greatest damage to the independence of the media has been dealt between 2007 and 2016, after which the situation stabilised somewhat. What exactly happened in the country to explain these changes is difficult to explain, and much has still to be written and said about it. However, something is certain: the structure of media ownership changed dramatically.

From  
functioning  
oligopoly

In the mid-2000s, Bulgaria's media market was already an oligopoly. However, the presence of massive foreign investments made the system's working not incompatible with normative expectations. Unfortunately, today, the Bulgarian media landscape has turned into a virtual monopoly dominated by a single national player, the *New Bulgarian Media Group* ('Nova Bŭlgarska Medyna Grupa' NBMG). This fact, which threatens freedom of speech itself, was made possible by the post-socialist origin of Bulgaria's media landscape. In fact, without extremely strong political influences and oligarchical control over capital, it would not have been possible for NBMG to achieve an impressive market power over the nationwide media system. However, the current monopolistic structure did not emerge until after the Great Recession's first reverberations in SEE. In fact, that the withdrawal of a number of foreign media companies from Bulgaria in a 3-year-short time span created a window of opportunity for aspiring media moguls. First, the German *Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* sold the newspapers *24 Chasa* [24 Hours] and *Trud* [Labour], the "once leading" publications in the country, in a bundle with the weekly magazine *168Chasa* [168Hours] and its printing house and distribution company *Strela* (Vesti 2010). Following suit, ProSieben sold its radios in Bulgaria in 2011 (*Financial Times* 2011) as the American *Emmis Association* did later in 2013 (Antonova 2013a). In the meantime, the Swedish *Bonnier* had already disinvested in favour of *Ikonmedia*, owned by a Bulgarian entrepreneur, in 2011 (Ikonmedia 2011). Finally, the Finnish *Sanoma* ceded all assets to its historical Bulgarian partners, the Drumev brothers in 2013 (Antonova 2013b).

To  
disfunctioning  
monopoly

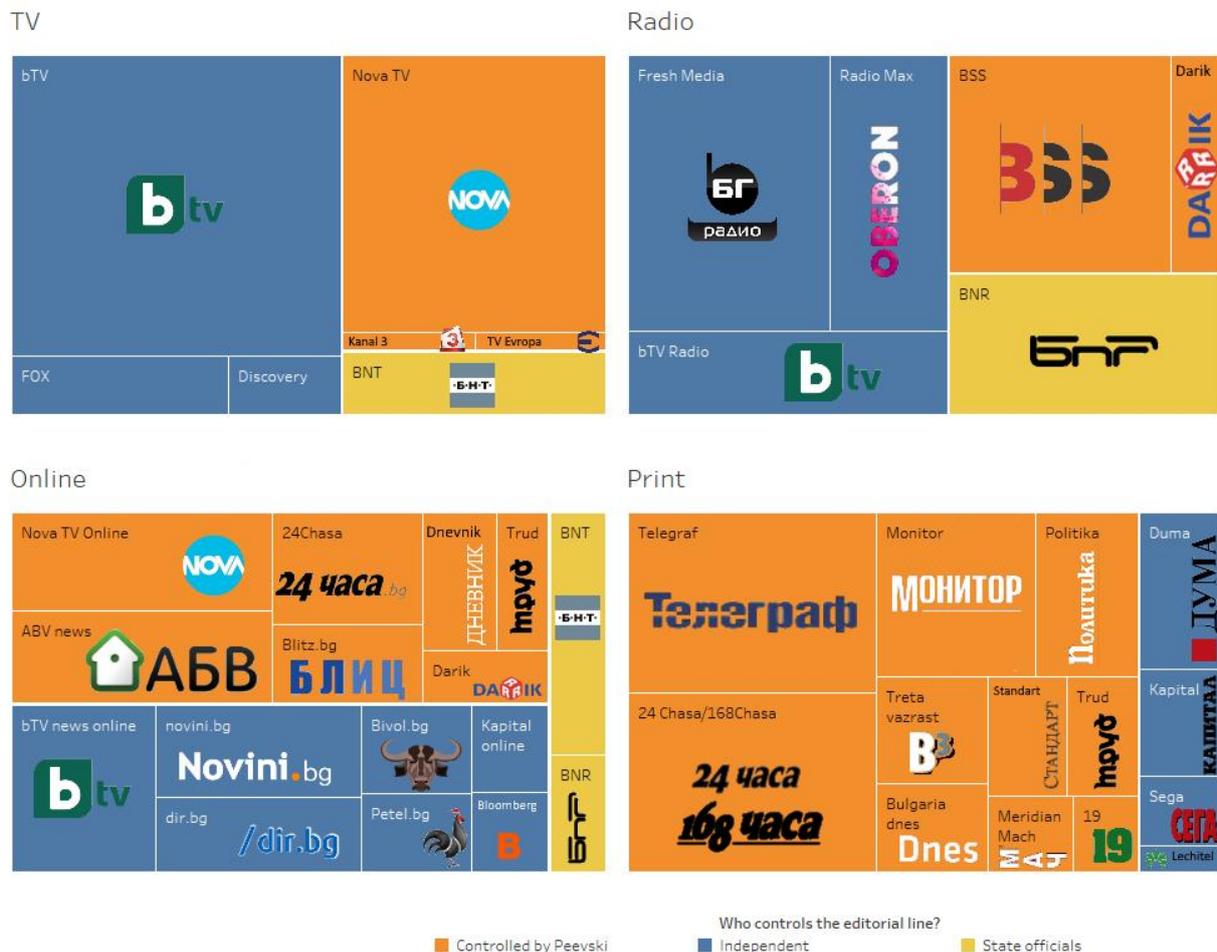
The basis for the establishment of NBMG's monopoly were laid down in 2007, when the future founder of NBMG, Delyan Peevski, was still just a deputy of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (*Dvizhenie za Prava i Svobodi*, DPS). Back then, Peevski's political connections allowed him to get a loan to start building its media empire (Vaksberg 2014) from Tsvetan Vasilev's Corporate Commercial Bank ('Korporativna Tŭrgovska Banka', KTB), the fastest-growing and fourth-largest bank in Bulgaria at the time (BNB 2014). With the sum, close to €2mln, Peevski bought the newspapers *Monitor* and *Telegraf*, and the weekly *Politika*. All things considered, these publications accounted for "8.5% and 4.5% of newspapers' advertising revenues [... and] 1.4% of those of weeklies" (Peev 2007). By the end of the crisis, *24 Chasa*, *Trud*, *168Chasa*, *Standard*, *Presa*, *Novinar*, and a number of news sites including *Dariknews.bg*, *Vesti.bg*, *Blitz.bg*, *Epitsentŭr* and *Kanal 3* had either been bought directly by Peevski or were under his indirect control (*Skandalno* 2011; Srebrer 2013; *Actualno* 2017; Antonova 2019; Bakalov 2020). Moreover, Peevski pressures journalists and editors working in medias that refused to join his Media Publishers Union in collusion with the Chief Prosecutor and his office (Raycheva 2019; Georgiev 2021; Gloria Hristova 2021). In addition, using his mother as a not-so-credible frontwoman, Peevski got the authorisation for one of his other companies to buy up virtually every print media distribution company in the country (KZK 2013). This is not to mention the allegedly very close ties between Peevski and the new owners of the second-largest television group in Bulgaria: *Nova TV* (Velenski 2020; I. Vasilev 2020).

The *affaire* KTB

All things considered, the building of Peevski's empire was made possible by KTB, which – according to its owner, Tsvetan Vasilev (2014) – granted the former about €400mln in loans. However, when Vasilev fell out of grace with the governing political elite which had emerged around Prime Minister Boyko Borisov cabinet and the DPS in 2014, KTB became also the first victim of the media monopoly it had helped establish (Coppola 2015). In a matter of weeks, directed by the Prime Minister Borisov and with the complicity of the Head of the Bulgarian National Bank and other powerful individuals, Peevski wilfully induced KTB's clients to run on the bank (*Klub 'Z'* 2016; *Bulgarian Times* 2017). The *affaire* KTB, as it is widely known in Bulgaria, was the most evident manifestations of the risks excessive media-ownership concentration pose to a functioning liberal democracy and fair-competition markets (Sotirova 2014; OCCRP 2016). According to some of Peevski's critics, NBMG's companies and the scores of journalists who (are forced to) align with them have actively worked to discredit liberal politicians and activist. With the help of the Chief Prosecutor, this bad PR has left "20% of the population [...] without political representation in the National Assembly" for several years by causing the opposition's electoral failure (SIB 2018, 11).

**Figure 10 The risk of monopolisation of news media is enormous for television, radio and online news, while the press is already a lost cause.**

Media groups' relative dimension per sector (size) and their editorial line (colour).



Television's and radio' charts show the average shares of viewers.

Online news media's chart shows the percentage of people who access that news source at least once a week.

The chart for print media shows the press ad market share of each publication over the year.

Charts by: F. A. Telarico | Data source: (Piero 97 2020; Newman et al. 2020, 65)

Recent developments

That being said, NBGM officially sold most of its media assets to *United Group* in August 2021 (*Klub 'Z'* 2021). However, this change of ownership only accentuates the previous trend towards monopolisation. In fact, the acquiring holding already controls significant assets in the media and information sectors (*webcafe.bg* 2021). Namely, it owns *Nova Broadcasting Group* (NBG), whose main television channels' gross advertising revenues were about 40% of the nationwide total in 2019 (Piero 97 2020). Moreover, it operates the channels *Kanal 3*, *The Voice* and *Magic TV*, as well as radio stations representing 20% of the national market (Piero 97 2020; *Mediapool.bg* 2020). Not least, one also has to disclaim that the eminence grise behind NBGM, former deputy Delyan Peevski, is allegedly also in control of Nova through political and business ties to the owner of Vivacom, the second largest telecommunication firm in Bulgaria, and mastermind of United Group's strategy in Bulgaria (Velenski 2020; I. Vasilev 2020). Therefore, it could be reasonable to argue that the transaction was realised to shield NBGM-owned companies from the financial difficulties due to the US's sanctions under the *Global Magnitsky Act* (US

Treasury Department 2021)<sup>22</sup> on Peevski, his associates and his expansive network's firms (Telarico 2021i; BNT 2021; RFE/RL 2021).

#### ¶ 4.2.2 Media politics in Russia

Surely, the amount of works written and comments made about Russia's media landscape and politics is but smaller than those about Bulgaria's. Yet, the very fact that this topic is more widely discussed amongst non-specialist media, especially since 2014, reduces the need to summarise all such ideas here. Therefore, this paragraph will simply sketch the general trajectory of the Russian media's evolution in the post-socialist era in light of the theories enounced above. Essentially, the following text wants to emphasises the similarities and differences that make a comparison of media politics in Russia and Bulgaria not only sensible and relevant, but potentially fruitful.

First of all, the historical contexts in which the media's post-socialist transformation started are radically different. In fact, both countries lacked any real experience of a free, liberal press before 1991. Even if Russia had a more or less free media in the period between the February Revolution and the Bolshevik's coup, this phase was too short to shape journalism's professional ethos. Meanwhile, both countries experienced real-socialist regimes in which all medias were a useful tool to predicate the gospel of Marxism-Leninism. Yet, both the Soviet and the Bulgarian communist party failed to build consensus, suffocated free media and replaced them with those obtuse, coercive "forces and traditions of the old society" Lenin (1920, 43) despised. However, the events that unfolded after 1991 led to a botched transformation which never even reached the stage of 'functioning oligopoly'.

As a matter of fact, since privatisation of extant media assets and the liberalisation of the relevant markets began in 1992, Russian media never managed to fulfil the basic functions these institutions should carry out in a functioning liberal democracy. One of the reasons behind this failure is in the strong dependence of private media from advertising,<sup>23</sup> and the consequent domination of apolitical content (Bessudnov 2008). This transformation has been helped by the "tabloidization" of many newspapers (Fomicheva 2007, chap. 3), and by the rise in the number of Russian families owning and watching television regularly (De Smaele and Vartanova 2007). In fact, according to Elena Vartanova (2012, 132–35) there have been three different phases in the Russian media's post-socialist transformation, corresponding to the three broader moments in Russia's political history: (1) the beginning of the post-socialist transformation; (2) the Yeltsin era, and (3) the Putin era. At first, the dissolution of the Soviet Union led to a progressive retreat of the State and the government from media ownership and management. However, already in the mid-1990s it was becoming clear that the emerging integrated elite comprised of state officials and new capitalists had combined efforts to control the Russian media system even if their initial objectives might have been different. Of all aims the most difficult to realize has been the state's withdrawal from the media. Yet, given the widespread infighting amongst political elites (Telarico 2020b), Russian media started to take sides rather than fostering more diverse opinion and enhancing political pluralism. This is most evident in the way the Russia's public service broadcaster, functions. In fact, instead of counterbalancing private behemoths, it serves "the dual goal of promoting the influence of the political elite by establishing tough controls over public opinion

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<sup>22</sup> The *Global Magnitsky Act* authorises the President of the United States to sanction any foreign individual or entity who/that (a) is responsible for "gross violations of internationally recognized human rights" or (b) "is responsible for acts of significant corruption, a senior associate" of such a corrupted official, "or a facilitator of such act." (Weber and Collins-Chase 2020) Sanctions include denying entry into the country, revoking visas, blockage of properties under U.S. jurisdiction, and impossibility to enter into transactions with U.S. individuals and entities.

<sup>23</sup> The Russian advertising market has grown faster than GDP by several times. For comparison, ad revenues were around \$10,000 in 2000; whereas they reached \$450,000 in 2014, about 40% of which generated by TV and 22% online (Carey 2014, 6).

and garnering commercial profits through uncontrolled transmission of advertising” (Vartanova and Zassoursky 2003, 98).

The Yeltsin  
Era:  
Incomparable

This situation, which was already quite different from the one Bulgarians lived through in the same years, changed drastically in 1993. After having violently suppressed the nascent opposition to his habit of ruling by decree, Boris Yeltsin started establishing stricter connection with the country’s business elite. In this effort, Yeltsin’s administration brought liberal democracy’s avenues for exchanges between (governing) political elites and media owners (discussed above as part of the iron triangle model of public-opinion steering; see § 2 ¶ 1 on page 10). In a matter of months, Yeltsin had bound himself and his political future to a group of powerful men, the so-called *oligarchs*, whose banks financed the President’s political campaign and his daughter’s outrageously expensive lifestyle (Bohlen 1999; Shevtsova 2007). Yet, another side of the story which only a few have underlined is that these oligarchs also owned the main private medias in the country (amongst them, Treisman 2011). And they turned their companies into mouthpieces for Yeltsin and his associates, “manipulating the public opinion” (Resnyanskaya, Voinova, and Khvostunova 2007) in exchange for “political benefits”(Berezhovky in *Kommersant" Vlast'* 2007) which “can be converted into all other forms of capital outside the media domain” (Koltsova 2006, 224; see also Roudakova 2008). Thus, the “media, particularly television, have been used to subvert development of a pluralistic party system, with appealing broadcast campaigns outpacing the growth of responsible parties that are accountable to the electorate” in favour of the segment of the political elite for whom it exercised its “ability to create, market and win elections for a chosen few political parties and presidential candidates.” (Oates 2006, 66).

The Putin Era:  
State  
monopoly

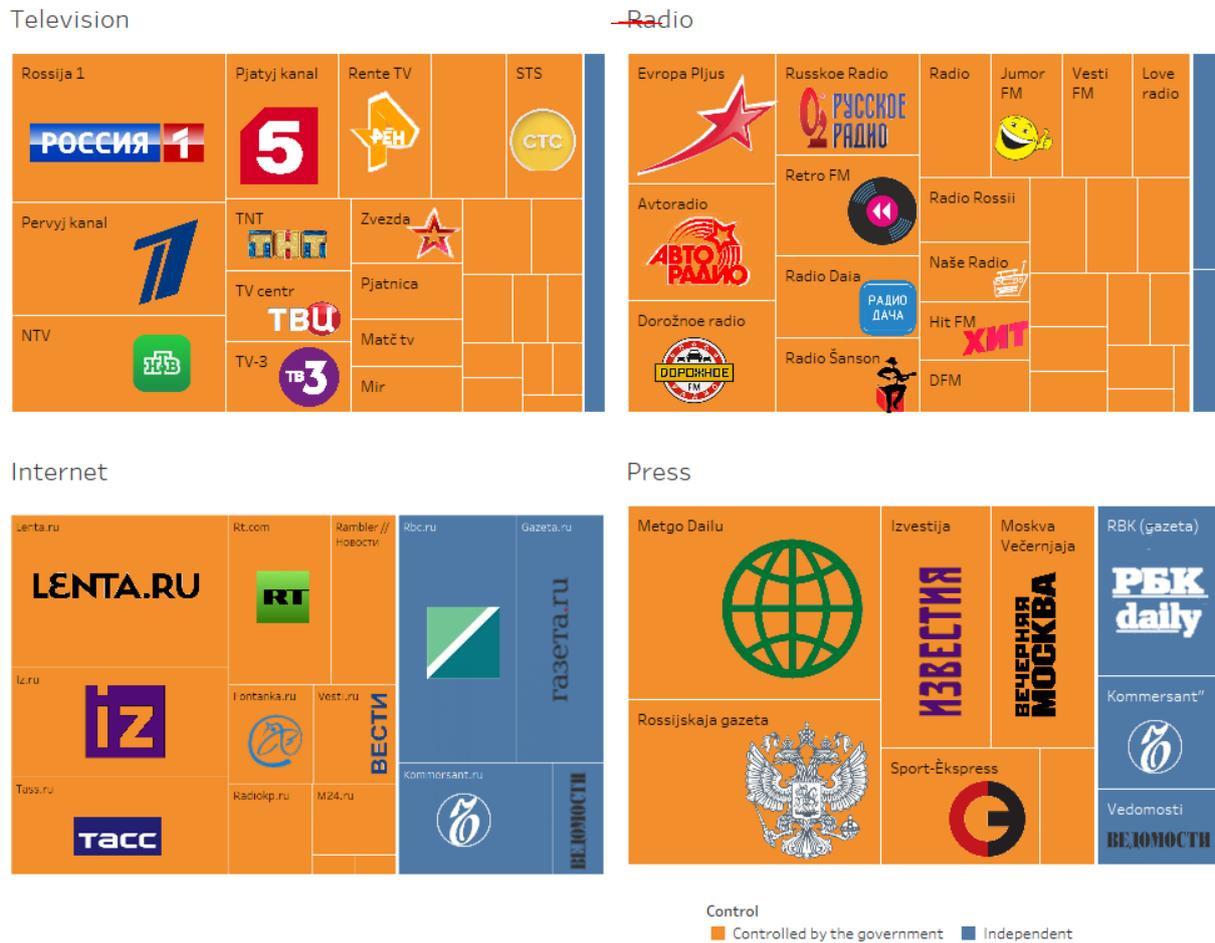
Eventually, the Russian media landscape began to change again in the early 2000s. After having won the 2000 presidential elections with the support of Yeltsin’s clique, Vladimir Putin decided that the status quo in which “lying and stealing under the president’s patronage constituted normal relations between the press and the authorities” could not last any longer (Alexei Pankin quoted in Pietiläinen 2002, 133). He turned against the oligarchs and pursued a merciless campaign aimed at restoring the Kremlin’s supremacy and politics’ centrality over economic and personalistic interests (Telarico 2020b). In order to do so, the new president started the “re-etatisation” of many spheres of society, including the media, of whose power Putin was well aware (Dubin 2005; Dubin, Poluektova, and Dondurey 2009). Ultimately, the President simply “gave a push, but the system collapsed by itself because it was not viable”(Pankin 2001). In a matter of two years, the State imposed itself as both the only regulator and the largest media owner in the country, “possessing about 70 percent of all electronic media, 20 percent of national and 80 percent of regional print media” in 2003 (Fossato 2003). The combination of these two roles has made it possible for the innumerable, conflicting current within the Russian governing elite to put pressure on the media and induce self-censorship through both media and advertising regulation (Prokscha 2021; Paskhalis, Rosenfeld, and Tertychnaya 2021), while also concentrating ownership and editorial control in the hands of either the State or friendly oligarchs (see ownership information in SDI Project 2021). Hence, Russia under Putin is living “a paradoxical period” during which media (formally) enjoying financial independence from the State are made unable to express any real opinion via other means (Pankin 2001; Pietiläinen 2002, 135; Vartanova 2012, 139).

Media  
landscape in  
Russia

Against this background, it is not difficult to imagine what the Russian media landscape looks like. First of all, the multiplication of national, regional and local printed publication has not avoided a massive fall in overall circulation and average audience. In addition, television remains the most trusted news source for many Russians, but its viewership is reducing (Boletskaya 2016). Nevertheless, state-owned and controlled media remain dominant in every segment of the news market, making it apparent that Russians live *de facto* under a State monopoly on information (Figure 11 on page 27 below).

**Figure 11 Monopolisation of news media is not simply a risk in Russia. For television and radio are already a lost cause, whereas the press and its online presence offer the only independent voice.**

Medias’ relative dimension per sector (size) and their editorial line (colour).



Online news media’s, radio’s and press’s charts show data for monthly audiences. Television’s chart shows the average weekly share in the period August 8–15, 2021.

Charts by: F. A. Telarico | Data source: (Mediascope 2021a; 2021b)

#### ¶ 4.2.3 Comparison: Different, but similar

What appears evident at a first sight is that political factors were as important as – if not more than – economics in informing the post-socialist media landscape in Bulgaria and Russia. In fact, crucial contextual differences have kept two countries unlike each other for most of the past three decades. However, there has been a gigantic alteration in the attitude of Bulgaria’s governing elites towards media’s independence between Borisov’s second and third cabinets (2014–2021). This fundamental paradigm shift, together with the inherent post-socialist features of Bulgaria’s media landscape, explains the identity of outcomes in the two countries: media ownership’s continued politicisation and its monopolisation

However, in Russia almost all the factions within the governing political elite have taken part to the subjugation of the media. Essentially, besides a handful of independent publications and news websites, Russian media outlets are “either highly commercialized and sensationalized or instrumentalized by informal state–business alliances” with one or the other sector of the ruling elite (Vartanova 2012, 127). Thus, media politics is rather a tool which the ruling elite uses to keep the current illiberal regime afloat

State monopoly  
vs  
State capture

*tout court* as well as to settle disputes amongst its members. On the contrary, in Bulgaria's case, unscrupulous individuals to acquire immense power in collusion with a segment of the ruling elite which controlled only some of the State's apparatuses. Hence, in Bulgaria media politics is a tool leveraged by some individuals to keep control over and extoll resources from the State — what could be termed “State capture” (Hellman, Jones, and Kaufmann 2000; Innes 2014; Keil 2018). Therefore, the functioning of an increase quote of the media has little to do with defending the extant liberal democratic regime and providing the services which voters should be entitled to. Rather, it lay the foundations for the subversion of the current regime through the monopolisation of the capabilities for public-opinion steering.

Transfer of political tools for public-opinion manipulation

Nevertheless, Bulgaria seems to be on a similar path to Russia's when it comes to media politics. In fact, the sophisticated mechanisms for public-opinion steering extant in Russia produced a unique political entity in the 1990s: the *efirnaya partiya* or “broadcast party” (interview with Yelena Rykovtseva [1999], quoted in White, Oates, and McAllister 2005, 197) In fact, the many parties of power which coalesced around Yeltsin, his daughter and their closest associates hold different name: *Russia's Choice* (“Vybor Rossii”) in 1993, *Our Home — Russia* (“Nash dom — Rossiya”) in 1995, and *Unity* (“Yedinstvo”) in 1999. But behind the change of name and apparent leader stood “parties that d[id] not exist outside of a stream of flickering electronic images are, in the end, merely a reflection of the popularity of television rather than a real political phenomenon” (interview with Yelena Rykovtseva [1999], quoted in Oates 2006). In other words, the electoral manifestations of that clique did not resemble anything ordinarily understood as a ‘party’ (for a historical review of various definition of political parties see Ignazi 2013). Until very recently, the *efirnaya partiya* could be considered a Russian exclusive. Namely, for weak they may have been and still be, centre and centre-right Bulgarian parties were “cartel parties” in the 1990s and turned into “professional parties” in the mid-2000s (cf. Panebianco 1988; and R. S. Katz and Mair 1995; with Karasimeonov 2010). Meanwhile, the former-communist and other left-wing parties aspire to be mass parties able to involve as many ordinary citizens (Karasimeonov 2010). However, public-opinion steering has reached similar levels in Bulgaria very recently. Arguably, it is only with the emergence of *There is such a people* (“Ima takuv narod”, 2020) that a proper *efirnaya partiya* lacking any territorial structure and even a real political programme managed to conquer the hearts and minds of many Bulgarian voters.

A transfer of rhetorical tools?

Writing on Russian media's coverage of CSOs in the country, Asya Cooley (2020, 84) argued that giving “the importance of news media for nonprofit organizations, it is surprising that academic researchers have only marginally focused on this issue.” However, this research is opening up another area which is not simply under-researched: it went almost unnoticed. In fact, the mutually-reinforcing feedback effect between pro-Western CSOs, free media landscapes and liberal democracy is undeniable. But few have discussed the possible negative interactions between illiberal political regimes and the demise of those CSOs as mediated through the media. Considering that Bulgarian elites have already borrowed the *efirnaya partiya* in their current infighting for power, it is not unbelievable that they could also plagiarise other aspects of Russian media politics. In the context of writhing liberal checks and balances, it is not unlikely for such a transfer to happen in relation to pro-Western CSOs, whose failure can compromise the very long-term viability of liberal democracy. Hence, this is exactly the gap that this research will try to bridge by analysing the extent to which the rhetorical devices that prop-up an illiberal regime such as Russia's find fertile ground in Bulgarian media belonging to a State-capturing monopoly.

### § 3 Case study – The depiction of environmentalist and human-right NGO in some mainstream Bulgarian news media

#### ¶ 1 Background

Media coverage of CSOs

Studies on mass media's coverage of CSOs and their activities are actually quite scarce and most of them focus on Western liberal-democratic countries (Dimitrov 2008), while the existence of several theories of civil society compounds the difficulty in finding trustworthy analysis by fragmenting the field. One of the reasons for this scarcity is that such researches does not attract much funding; yet, they are strongly labour-intensive and require expensive pieces of software (see 0 below below) that few universities can provide. Indirectly, the important role played by funding can also be inferred by the relatively large share of studies with a predilection for quantitative evaluations over qualitative analyses (Deacon, Fenton, and Walker 1995; Greenberg and Walters 2004). Additionally, past studies deserve criticism for their narrow focus on a single news source (e.g., Martens 1996; Jacobs and Glass 2002) and a limited set of issues (as in Kensicki 2004; and Myhre and Berg-Nordlie 2016); the use of abating keywords (e.g., Gould et al. 2003).

Linguistic barriers

In addition, the lack of researches on the post-socialist world is strictly related to linguistic barriers. In fact,<sup>24</sup> the average Western European language has 125 million native speakers, many of whom lived in former colonies. Meanwhile, without considering Russian, post-socialist Eastern Europe's 12 largest national languages are, on average, spoken by just 12 million people or 16.7% of the Old Continent's inhabitants. Considering that before 2020 there were “no studies that looked specifically into media portrayals of the Russian nonprofit sector” (Cooley 2020, 85), one should not be surprised to discover there still is none in Bulgarian (ca. seven million of native speakers) or Albanian (ca. five million), for instance. Given the peculiarities of the post-socialist social and political systems and the entanglement of interrelations between media, CSOs and the steering of public opinion, this absence is of the utmost gravity.

Last introductory remarks

In the previous section, a clear theoretical framework was laid out, and the reasons why it is reasonable to expect a partial transfer of Russian tropes and rhetoric were highlighted. In the current section, several methods of analysis, both qualitative and quantitative, are employed on an appositely set-up database to test a series of relevant hypothesis at this regard. The results of this inquiry shed a light both on the advantages of adopting CSP as a working definition of *civil society* and the possibility of transferring mechanisms of public-opinion steering from Russia's consolidated autocracy to Bulgaria's dwindling liberal democracy. In fact, if most – or even all – of those hypotheses appear to be true, one should conclude that “outlets' owners and sponsors use the media under their control to advance their particularistic interests” (Roudakova 2008, 43) in both countries. Hence, some segments of the Bulgarian media landscape have been wilfully betraying their vows of neutrality and impartiality by accepting political prying, abdicating basic professional standards and favouring self-censorship. Thus, Bulgarian media would be engaging in the sort “neo-Soviet” arrangement with the (then-)governing political elite which their Russian counterparts have become used to (Oates 2007).

#### ¶ 2 Hypothesis

Before describing the specifics of the methods employed, it is appropriate to write down the aim this method works towards. At the core, this research tries to ascertain whether the coverage of CSOs in selected Bulgaria media outlets manifests some of the Russian media's rhetorical and conceptual devices. In order to do so, it is necessary, first of all, to laid out regarding the key features of media reporting on CSOs in Russia. Then, taking into account the theoretical framework and the contextual specificities

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<sup>24</sup> The number of speakers for each language can be found here: (Marian 2017).

delineated above, each of these features is operationalised as a hypothesis which can then be tested using the appropriate qualitative and quantitative methods.

Determining which are the key aspects of Russian media's coverage of CSOs is not an easy task. However, a comprehensive review of the extant literature allows to highlight a few characteristics which manifest recurrently, no matter the methodology, geographical scope, and thematic field of the research. Should these features recur in similar ways in Bulgarian media, this would be a clear indication of a direct transfer.

First of all, *positive* coverage is associated mostly with CSOS "oriented toward social type of work" and "well-planted news media stories picked up by news media organizations." (Cooley 2020, 97) This feature may be explained theoretically by looking at the iron triangle of public-opinion steering. In fact, voluntary organisation helping the poor exist in Russian (and Bulgaria) since the 1990s, and they are relatively popular. Thus, they have been able to create strong synergies with (governing and opposition) political elites. Hence, given that media ownership corresponds or, at the least, aligns closely with the political elite, it is unsurprising that Russian media show supportive of these CSOs. Considering that in Bulgaria these two vertexes have been growing closer since 2007, one could expect the selected media to pursue a similar agenda. Hence, the first hypothesis:

H1: The coverage of charitable, social-work oriented CSOs is mostly favourable.

In order to verify this hypothesis, it could be useful to also check for a complementary assumption. In fact, non-socially useful and politically sensitive issues are often underdiscussed in Russian media. Moreover, when they actually get any attention, the coverage tends to distort the organisations' real aims and to represent the topic more as a sort of distraction than a serious problematic (Khotkina and Bogolyubova 1996). Several studies have found that this judgment applies ubiquitously not only to women-right CSOs (Sundstrom 2002, 212), to which it was originally referred, but also to those "that focus on law, advocacy, and politics (e.g. civil rights and consumer protection) and international issues (e.g. international human rights and peace organizations)" (Cooley 2020, 99). All in all, these are the organisations most likely to be pro-Western and neoliberal-model compliant. Thus, one may hypothesise that the coverage of these CSOs and their activities will be inevitably tainted in negative tone:

H2: The coverage of neoliberal-model CSOs is mostly unfavourable.

In addition, these CSOs are also the most likely to receive foreign funding. And "the media are obliged to refer to their 'foreign agent' status" when mentioning a CSOs which falls under this designation (Moser and Skripchenko 2018, 660). Hence, one can expect the coverage of foreign CSOs to be equally negative:

H3: The coverage of foreign CSOs is mostly unfavourable.

In addition, one should notice that Russian media tend to put enormous emphasis on the interactions between State actors and CSOs. In particular, depending on the specific area of focus, the media may tend to describe "state/non-state cooperation in a matter-of-fact way — it was generally neither criticised nor defended, but brought up as a natural phenomenon." (Myhre and Berg-Nordlie 2016, 201) In relation to specific topics, it might also describe the State's "need to co-operate with non-state actors" insofar as they can be "a potential resource." (Myhre and Berg-Nordlie 2016, 197, 205) Therefore, it could be interesting to see whether a similar frame is imposed also on Bulgaria CSOs in the selected media. After all, when media ownership is dependent on or corresponds to a segment of the political elite, the media only has a vested interest in supporting those CSOs which the latter have vetted and approved of. Hence:

H4a: Cooperation between the State and CSOs is not seen unfavourably.

H4b: Cooperation between the State and CSOs is seen favourably.

H4c: CSOs contesting the State are seen unfavourably.

Finally, when talking about CSOs, Russia and media, one cannot avoid to mention George Soros and his Open Society Foundation (Hurst 2017; Arnsdorf, Hanna, and Vogel 2017). Over the last few years, illiberal and Russian-backed media around the world have begun criticising the Hungarian billionaire for his foundations’ involvement in regime change and large-scale, public-opinion steering operations in Eastern Europe and the FSU (Beacháin and Polese 2010; Finkel and Brudny 2012b). Sometimes, these arguments have taken anti-Semitic undertones that seem to transcend the borders of what can normally be considered satire, mockery or a joke (Keating 2018; Hybrid Warfare Analytical Group 2020). But discussing about Soros means discussing more than just a person. In a sense, he has become the incarnation of neoliberal-model civil society and its pretence to homogenise the world to its canons. However, with a few rare exceptions, mainstream Bulgarian media do dedicate attention to neither blunt nor articulate critiques of US foreign policy (as Volgin 2021 noted recently). Thus, should there be traces of a full-fledged adhesion to the Russian media war against Soros and his foundations it needs to be deemed a *direct transfer* of tropes and rhetoric devoid of any structural or contextual explanation. Arguably, it could be deemed as media ownership’s attempt to manipulate the Bulgarian public with an interpretation closer to that of the Russian media than to Western Europe’s.

H5a: Soros’ foundations are covered extensively.

H5b: The coverage of Soros’ foundations is mostly unfavourable.

### ¶ 3 Database & Methodology

Numbers

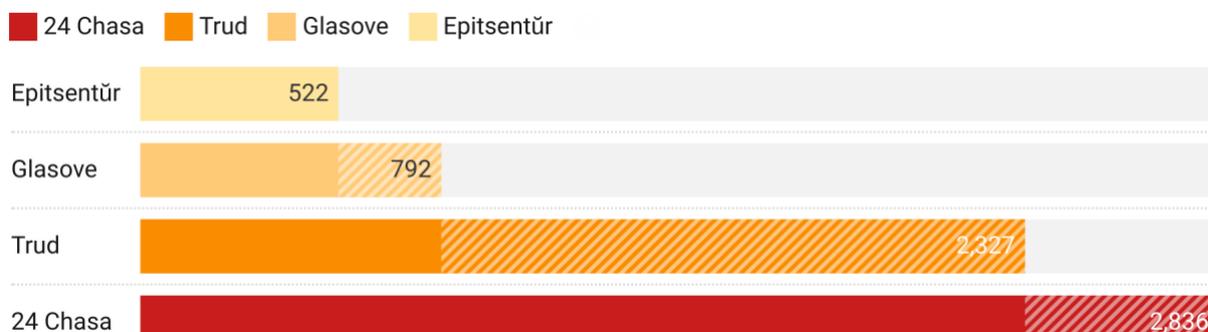
The analysis of CSOs’ portrayal in Bulgarian media is carried out on a vast database containing 6,477 articles from selected print and online publications. In gathering the content, the choice of keywords and sources reflects the specific needs of this research and the assumptions underpinning the iron-triangle theory of public-opinion steering and CSP. The database only includes new sources belonging to the monopolised segment of the Bulgarian media landscape.<sup>25</sup> Hence, four sources are considered within the vast empire associated with NBMG and Delyan Peevski: *Trud* and *24 Chasa* for the traditional press with nationwide coverage, *Glasove* (‘Voices’ but also ‘Votes’) and *Epitsentür* (‘Epicentre’) amongst the online-only media. As it can be clearly seen in Figure 12, the distribution of the articles is quite unequal, with *24 Chasa* and *Trud* having 2,836 and 2,327 entries against the 522 of *Epitsentür* and the 792 of *Glasove*.

XFHSTRJA

**Figure 12 The database reflects the inequalities between Bulgarian media**

Number of articles per outlet in the database.

Ghctdt



<sup>25</sup> In fact, looking into State-owned media, other established newspapers and magazines or independent outlets is not just unreasonable within the theoretical framework highlighted above, but it could skew the result too.

One must say that this difference is also due to the very different reach of these outlets. In effect, any Bulgarian news outlet would look microscopic if compared against two colossuses of online and print informationsuch as *24 Chasa* and *Trud*. However, the remaining two news sources, *Glasove* (*glasove.come*) and *Epitsentür* (*epicenter.bg*), have managed to build up their own niches by casting themselves as an independent, trustworthy alternative to mainstream information. Namely, both websites attempt to distance themselves Peevski's empire, even though their origins are somehow connected with it. As a result, the owners and editorial directors of the two outlets mimic closely the line adopted by NBMG and expressed by *24 Chasa*, *Trud* and, with different tones, *Telegraf* and *Monitor* on paper and online.

### ¶ 3.1 Selected news sources

Thus, the choice of these four sources allows to take into account the divide between top-category established publications (to which *24Chasa* and *Trud* have consistently been told to belong; cf. Tabokova 2008, 317ff) and the tabloidized yellow press (in Bulgarian, *z̄hũlta presa*). In fact, the differences in quality and ethical standards between these two types of outlets is undisputable in both Bulgaria (Tabokova 2008) and Russia (De Smaele and Vartanova 2007). Moreover, the yellow press's bias against CSOs regardless of their field of activity, is well-documented around the world (Greussing and Boomgaarden 2017; Hegner 2019).<sup>26</sup>

#### ¶ 3.1.1 *Trud* and *24 Chasa*: Traditional press with a massive online presence

Unfortunately, ownership in terms of “physical persons” who set the editorial line is virtually the only information media companies are requested to disclose as far as Bulgarian law is concerned (NS-RB 2001 art 7a, added in 2010). In particular, media companies have no obligation to publicise information such as the newspapers' and magazines' circulation, advertising revenues, revenues from political ads, donors, etc. (Nenkova 2011) Therefore, assessing how influential a given Bulgarian outlet is beyond anecdotal evidence and word of mouth is difficult. However, it is an almost certain fact that all of NBMG's publications represented about 80% of the Bulgarian printed media market in the 2010s (Nenkova 2011; SIB 2018, 2). According to the latest publicly available information – which are outdated, probably – the four main daily newspapers formerly controlled by NBMG have a combined circulation of 245,000. Excluding the tabloids *Telegraf*, and *Monitor* – with a circulation, respectively, of 123,000 copies in 2016 (Tsankova 2018) and 10,000 copies in 2011 (Galya Hristova, Georgiev, and Lazarova 2013, 101) –, *Trud* and *24 Chasa* should have a combined circulation of about 122,000 copies. More precisely, *24 Chasa*'s weekly average was slightly smaller than 60,000 copies in 2016 (excluding Sunday's edition, for which there are no data; see MGB 2016a). Meanwhile, from about 500,000 copies in 2001, *Trud* had shrunk to 52,000 in 2011 (*flagman.bg* 2011). By comparison, *Sega* [Now], the single largest, nationwide newspaper not owned by NBMG, has an estimated circulation of 5,000–7,000 copies (Tsankova 2018).<sup>27</sup>

Besides topping the ranking of the most read print dailies, NBMG also manages the most visited news websites in the country (monthly data, source: Gemius; Vũlgenov 2019). Namely, the news sites following the group's editorial line have on average reach around 33%, for a combined 15 million real users (median, 1.2 million). By comparison, the single largest rival website, *btvnovinite.bg*, has 1.4 million real users and a 31% share. Meanwhile, the websites of the State-owned Bulgarian National Radio (BNR, *bnr.bg*) and Bulgarian National Television (BNT, *bnt.bg*) lag behind with 665,000 median real users and a 14% average reach. And thanks to their massive online presence, the websites *24Chasa.bg* (as well as *m.24Chasa.bg*) and *trud.bg* have contributed the lion share of this success. As a matter of fact, more than half of the people who surf the intern in Bulgaria are either on *24Chasa.bg* or *trud.bg*. In particular, *24*

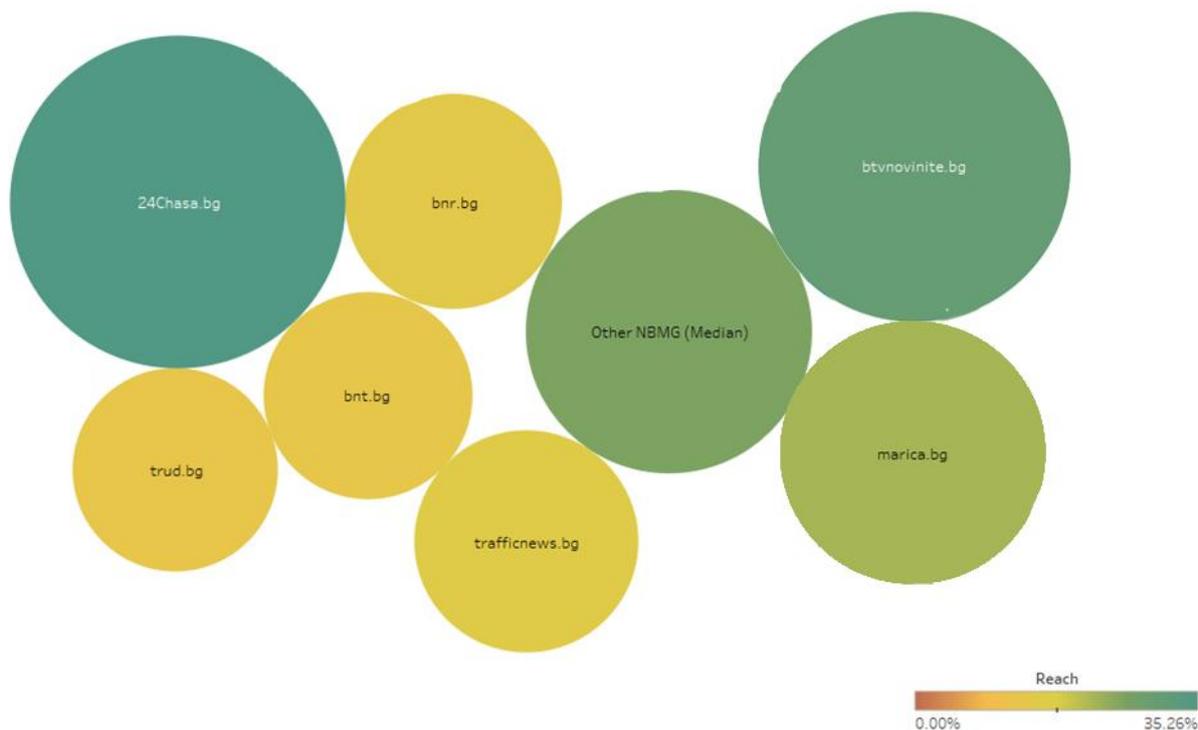
<sup>26</sup> For a global outlook cf. also the case of CSOs helping people with AIDS in the Philippines (Batnag 1994); that feminist CSOs in India (Gonzales 2008); and that of charities in Nigeria (Odiboh et al. 2017)

<sup>27</sup> Similarly, the weekly *168Chasa*'s circulation is 37,000 copies (MGB 2016b), against the 20,000 of *Kapital* the second-most popular Bulgarian weekly (Ikonmedia 2018).

*Chasa* passed from not being in top-10 list of the most popular Bulgarian news website in 2017 (Data source: Alexa; Bakalov 2017), to become the single largest web portal in the country two years later. Behind this exponential growth stand a “stable online audience, mostly made up of youngster, well-educated specialists, senior managers, students, computer enthusiasts, people who like to go to cultural events, travel and have fun.” (Vülgenov 2019) At the same time, despite the drastic reduction in its print counterpart’s circulation, *trud.bg* is a solid news site closely trailing *bnt.bg* and *bnr.bg* with its more than 620,000 real users and 13% reach.

**Figure 13 Peevski’s media empire also has an impressive reach online.**

Online medias’ relative reach in Bulgaria in 2021.



Charts by: F. A. Telarico | Data source: (monthly data, source: Gemius; Vülgenov 2019)

¶ 3.1.2 *Glasove* and *Epitsentür* – Apparent alternatives, same substance

*Glasove* iand  
Yavor  
Dachkov

The founder of *Glasove* is Yavor Dachkov, a well-known journalist and political commentator. Back in the 1990s, Dachkov spent began his career working at *Darik Radio*, the country’s first private radio with nationwide coverage now part of Peevski’s empire. In the following years, Dachkov made a name for himself at BNR network’s *Horizont* (‘Horizon’) and *Hristo Botev*. In the early 2000s, he moved to television becoming a familiar face for many Bulgarians as a talking head and pundit for Nova TV, bTV and BNT, where he hosted a talk show called ‘*Glasove*’ for several years until mid-2005.<sup>28</sup> Despite the show’s success, or perhaps because of it, the National Council for Radio and Televisions requested Dachkov’s head, together with that of BNT’s then-director Lili Popova (*Mediapool.bg* 2005a). The reason was a complaint filed by the press secretary of former Tsar Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha’s government which alleged the use of “manipulative editing, offensive qualifications of the prime minister and members of the sitting cabinet, unverified and unproven allegations, and one-sided argumentations in the studio” (quoted in *Mediapool.bg* 2005b). Eventually, the BNT laid off Dachkov, who kept moving from a private television

<sup>28</sup> *Glasove* a polysemic word in modern Bulgarian which besides two literal meanings (‘voices’ and ‘vote’) can figuratively indicate “a publicly expressed opinion” or “the statement of a person with fame or authority” (Chitanka 2010).

to the other ever since (*Dir.bg* 2009). Currently, he cooperates with the *Bŭlgarska svobodna Telteleviziia* ('Bulgarian Free Television') and manages his political news website *glasove.com* full-time. Interestingly, Dachkov has begun speaking about Delyan Peevski's influence on and monopolistic control over the Bulgarian media landscape only recently. Until 2018, there are no instances in which he or *Glasove* can be associated directly with negative coverage of the former deputy and his media empire. Only in 2019, after his second interview with Tsvetan Vasilev (2019),<sup>29</sup> has *Glasove* taken a public stance on the issue. However, *Glasove* has criticised Boyko Borisov and his closest associates only rarely since its founding.<sup>30</sup> Meanwhile, through the republishing of his articles on other outlet's websites and *Glasove*, Dachkov agitates the fists against some of the leading figures whose declared aim is to dismantle the system which made Peevski's rise possible. Amongst them the successful showman and popular politician, Slavi Trifonov is foremost (Dachkov 2021d; 2021b),<sup>31</sup> followed by former ombudsman-turned-lefty-opposition-leader, Maya Manolova (Dachkov 2021a). But no hits are being spared to the caretaker cabinet's finance minister Kiril Petkov (Dachkov 2021c), who has been leading a vast effort against Borisov's 'vertikal in miniature'<sup>32</sup> and the well-oiled speculation mechanisms which serve companies "linked to [Borisov's party] GERB and the DPS [...] and Delyan Peevski" (Petkov 2021). Therefore, *Glasove* merely pretends to be an alternative to NBMG's outlets, while in reality echoing their political bottom line loyally.<sup>33</sup>

The events that marked the genesis of *Epitsentŭr* are not too dissimilar. Its founder is Valeria Veleva, who like Dachkov is well-known to the Bulgarian public due to her career as a TV journalist. Yet, unlike Dachkov, Veleva is an almost universally acclaimed journalist, whose career was crowned with the *Chernorizets Hrabar* award. Overall, her writing style and personal conviction have been shaped by her experience at BNT during the early post-socialist years and, perhaps predominantly, the 16-year-long tenure as a columnist for *Trud* (Veleva 2016). After having left the newspaper in the early 2000s, Veleva went back briefly to television, before moving on as deputy editor in chief of the novel newspaper *Presa* ('Press'). There, she joined forces with Tosho Toshev, her former editor in chief at *Trud* (*Marica.bg* 2015b). Notably, Toshev is a known affiliate of Peevski, who after Peevski's clash with the Union of Publisher in Bulgaria even participated in the founding of the *Bŭlgarski Medien Sŭyuz* ('Bulgarian Media Union') of which "at first [Peevski] himself became chairman" (SIB 2018, 9). In doing so, Toshev declared indirectly that *Presa* -- and the associated magazine *Tema* ('Theme') -- were one of the media under Peevski's control (*Mediapool.bg* 2012). What is more, in 2013, a construction company acquired *Presa* and *Tema* in a single-handed buyoff ultimately coordinated by Biser Lazov (*Mediapool.bg* 2013)<sup>34</sup> — another close associate of Peevski (Velinova 2020) involved in the affaire KTB (*Klub 'Z'* 2020). Despite the backing of the mighty media monopolist, in 2015, *Presa* and *Tema* ceased publications due to insolvency on €1.8-million worth of debts, 83% of which owed to the bankrupted KTB (*Marica.bg* 2015a; T. Vasilev 2015). And it was after this failure that Veleva created *Epitsentŭr* (*Marica.bg* 2015c; *Trud* 2015). The site was presented as just one piece of a larger project encompassing the establishment of the *Institut za strategii i analizi* ('Institute for Strategies and Analyses'), a think tank (Veleva 2015). Apparently, the very journalists and editors who worked at *Presa* and *Tema* felt that the quality of Veleva and Toshev's new media was not as high as

<sup>29</sup> As Dachkov mentions in the interview, his first such meeting with Vasilev was in 2015.

<sup>30</sup> It is sufficient to have a look at the results of a research for Borisov's name on *glasove.com* to make it apparent. At most, *Glasove* echoes Vasilev's theory according to which the Prime Minister and his party are stuck in a paltry meadow together with the malevolent, criminal coterie gathered around Peevski and Ahmed Dogan, the éminence grise behind the DPS (T. Vasilev 2020).

<sup>31</sup> With whom Dachkov has had a spat for over a decade (see R. Petrov 2006)

<sup>32</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Curiously, the editor in chief of *glasove.com* is no one else than Galya Dachkova, Yavor Dachkov's wife (Dachkova 2010).

<sup>34</sup> *Presa* and *Tema* were bought up by *Integrirani pŭtni sistemi AD* ('Integrated Road Systems JSC'), 99.99% of which is owned by *Evrobuidl Proekt EOOD* ('Eurobuild Project LLC'), controlled in turn by *Yulinor EOOD* which belongs to the Serbian limited-liability company *Botsa DOO*. Both *Evrobuidl Proekt* and *Yulinor* are managed by Simeon Simeonov, Biser Lazov's frontman (*Mediapool.bg* 2013).

announced (*Mediapool.bg* 2015). Eventually, as soon as the website was launched, the reasons for these fears became clear: *Epitsentür* sells its journalism offering a detailed pricelist.<sup>35</sup> Thus, the platform has a strong economic motif for sure, but showcases little journalism professionalism. But it was a typical example of how truthful is the phrase “things have to change [...] to stay as they are” (Tomasi di Lampedusa 1958, 21). In fact, Veleva brought Toshev with her (Veleva 2015), confirming her allegiance to Peevski’s coterie. Rather unequivocally, *Epitsentür*’s coverage of Peevski only mentions his philanthropic donations (*Epitsentür* 2020a; 2020b; 2020f; 2020h), offers distorted interpretations of simple facts (e.g., *Epitsentür* 2020e on consequences of the scandal that broke out in Rosenets), and voices the dubious comments of people openly or surreptitiously on Peevski’s paybook (*Epitsentür* 2020d; *Epitsentür* 2020c; *Epitsentür* 2020g).

### ¶ 3.2 Keyword crawling

The articles making up the database were found by crawling the websites *24chasa.bg*, *epicenter.bg*, *glasove.com*, and *trud.bg* for a series of keywords.<sup>36</sup> The list of Cyrillic keywords includes: НПО (transliterated *NPO*, English: NGO); фондация (*fondatsia*, foundation); правозащитник (*pravozashitnik*, human-right activist); хомосексуален (*homoseksualen*, homosexual); Сорос (Soros); Отворено общество (*otovereno obshtvo*, Open Society [Foundation]); amongst others. Due to the limited capabilities of the software used for this operation and Bulgarian language’s grammatical features, it was necessary to search multiple times for each keyword (see Figure 14 on page 36). In fact, in Bulgarian all adjectives and some nouns come in three genders (masculine, feminine, neuter) and one or two plural forms (a masculine/neuter/generic one and, in some cases, a specific feminine-plural form). Moreover, in modern Bulgarian: ‘fondatsia’ (foundation), ‘fondatsia-ta’ (the foundation). Additionally, definite masculine words can be distinguished in animated (трудът, *trudŭt*) and unanimated (труда, *truda*). Hence, the queries for feminine, neuter and plural words were doubled (definite and indefinite forms), whilst those for masculine words were tripled (animated-definite, unanimated-definite, and indefinite forms).

The four websites were crawled using the specialised software *ParseHub*, which allows the creation of customised templates for the retrieval of URL addresses from a webpage.<sup>37</sup> In one case, that of *Epitsentür*, the complex functioning of the website made it necessary to make recursive use of a JSON list of keywords. Meanwhile, the slimmer coding behind the remaining three sites made it possible to simply crawling through multiple search URL addresses corresponding to the chosen keywords. The result was a series of comma-separated spreadsheets containing the 6,477 articles matching the research criteria. At first, attempts were made to employ a tool called *wkhtmltopdf* (Truelsen and Kulkarni 2020), which converts URLs directly to portable-document format files, in combination with a concise piece of code written by the author in the batch script language and inspired by a freely available, shorter script wrote in PowerShell language (Britz 2021). However, this approach determined the loss of over 30% of the articles due to connection errors. Meanwhile, using dedicated pieces of software such as *Total HTML Converter* (CoolUtils 2021) or *Free HTML to PDF Converter* (Weeny Software 2021) caused the loss of roughly 63–85% of the articles due to unknown errors. Hence, the URLs were manually extracted into a plain-text file and fed into *wget*, a free utility for non-interactive retrieval of files from the web through the most widely used internet protocols. Unfortunately, *wget* does not work natively on Microsoft’s operative systems. Therefore, the retrieval was operated through *Cygwin*, “a large collection of tools which provide functionality similar to a Linux distribution on Windows” (Cygwin authors 2017). Subsequently, the articles were converted in portable document format files using *Acrobat DC Pro* (Adobe 2020) – in

<sup>35</sup> To add a grotesque note, halfway between comical and seriously worrying, the complete *carte* follows: reportages cost €400, up from €225 in 2015; analyses and commentaries €500, up from €350; and interviews €1000, up from €325 (*Epitsentür* 2015; *BGlobal* 2015; *Epitsentür* 2021).

<sup>36</sup> The full list of keywords can be found in the appendix (§ 4 ¶ 1 on page 47)

<sup>37</sup> The templates created for this research are freely available at the following link:

combination, where necessary, with *Fine Reader 15* (ABBY 2021). Finally, before being imported into *Atlas.ti* for Computer-Assisted Qualitative Discourse Analysis (CAQDA).

**Figure 14** *The combination of three genders and post-fixed definite articles made it necessary to multiply the number of keywords*

Schematic representation of how keywords were derived from their dictionary form.

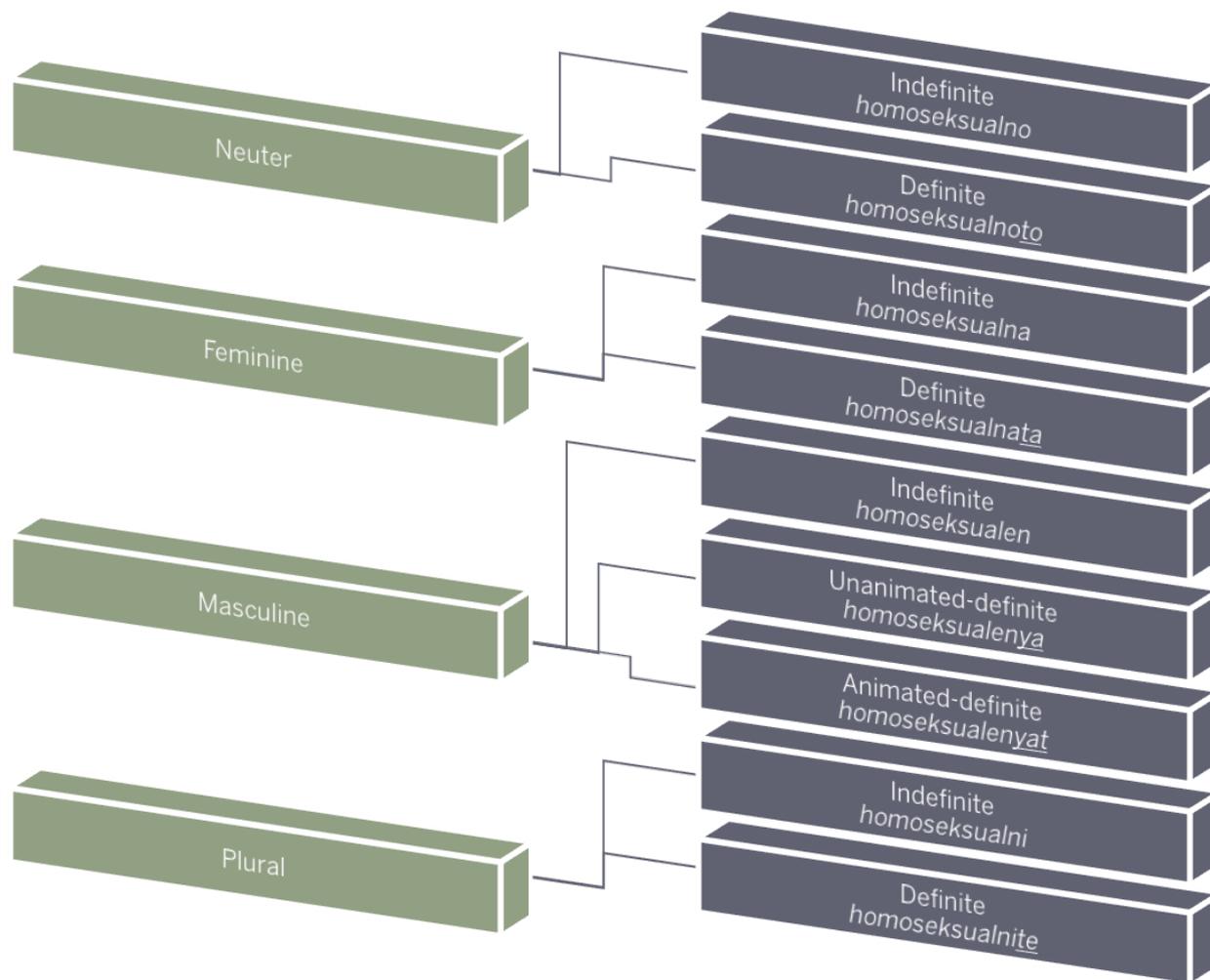


Chart by: F. A. Telarico

### ¶ 3.3 Computer-Assisted Qualitative Discourse Analysis

The hypotheses formulated above are verified or disproved by using specific functions within *Atlas.ti* or combining more of them. However, before using any CAQDA software, researchers must acknowledge that grasping “the capabilities and limitations of technologies [is necessary] in order to know the possibilities they offer for design” (Gaver 1991, 79). In fact, each such research is going to meet a hurdle due to the gap between “the framework of concrete actions that the software provides qua design [... and] the epistemologically and ontologically guided strategy or procedure” behind the research (Schmieder 2015). Therefore a process of translation must be initiated to match up the overreaching research strategy, which is “to varying degrees iterative and emergent [... with] the use of cut-and-dried, pre-determined computer software tools.” (Silver and Woolf 2015, 535) Thus, the final workflow emerged in total accordance with the approach termed “Five-Level Qualitative Discourse Analysis”. Namely, this means that employing CAQDA software implies a cyclic reasoning (Figure 15):

1. Determining the objectives, that is the research questions;
2. Formulating an analytic plan, that is operationalising variables and hypotheses;
3. Translating each of the analytic plan's steps into one or more of the software's components;
4. Selecting the right tools to execute simple operation (e.g., search and code);
5. Constructing tools to solve gaps between the analytic plan the available tools by combining more functions or using third-party software.

**Figure 15 The Five-Level Qualitative Discourse Analysis framework**

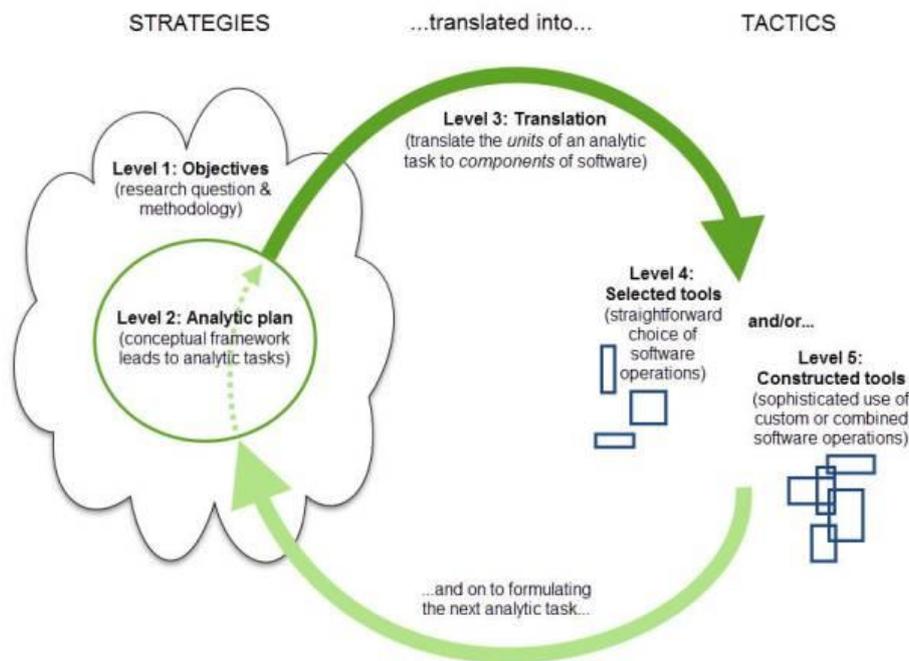


Diagram by: C. Silver and N. H. Woolf (2015)

Workflow in  
Atlas.ti

First of all, the articles – called ‘documents’ in Atlas.ti – were organised in groups according to the outlet from which they were extracted. Then, the “Search and Code” function was used to create codes based on the keywords used for research. Hence, each of the sentences including at least one of the keywords was marked with a ‘tag’ carrying the corresponding dictionary form (e.g., a sentence containing *homoseksualnite* belongs to the code *homoseksualen*). Then, the codes were aggregated into ‘code groups’ reflecting the following topics: CSOs, human rights, LGBT issues, environment, Soros, charities. Additional codes were created and aggregated in the groups: political left (*levitsa*), political right (*desnitsa*), Russia/Putin, Hungary, and the European Union.<sup>38</sup> Thence, the need for an out-of-the-box solution emerged strongly while trying to verify the abovementioned hypotheses. In fact, most of them refer to language’s psychological valence. After all, the notion originally indicated the inner drivers pushing towards what is advantageous while leading away from the unwanted (Lewin 1951). But it “has since been considerably extended”. In fact, valence has become a topic of interests for socio-linguists, who are interested in *how* language expresses emotions and desires. Moreover, discourse analysts refer to the notion while investigating *why* discourses’ lead to denote specific entities with a (biased) positive or negative valence (see Myhre and Berg-Nordlie 2016; and Cooley 2020 for applications of this approach to Russian media’s coverage of CSOs). By default, Atlas.ti can deal with valence through a dedicated function (called ‘Valence analysis’); however, it only works with texts in English, German, French, Spanish or Portuguese. Hence, a complex tool for valence analysis in Bulgarian was elaborated (step 5 of the process in Figure 15) by combining coding and qualitative analysis. In particular, a list of common

<sup>38</sup> The full codebook can be found in the appendix (§ 4 ¶ 2 on page 48).

adjectives commonly conveying valence was created. Each term was assigned a value ranging between -5 (most negative valence) and +5 (most positive valence). The words were added as codes associating labelled according to their scores (e.g., sentences containing the word *strahotno*, superb, were coded as '+5'). Finally, the co-occurrence of valence-related codes and thematic one was analysed through a combination of big-data analysis and qualitative assessments.

#### ¶ 4 Corpus analysis with Atlas.ti: Findings

Once the corpus was analysed, a stark division between the selected outlets emerged. In light of the criteria used for analysis, the articles could be clustered essentially into two groups. On the one hand, *Trud* and *24 Chasa* seemed to use more explicit language. On the other,  *Glasove* and *Epitsentür* which articles adopted a more nuanced tone. However, once the data are normalised for the unequal number of articles crawled from each source this difference appear less significant. In fact, addressing the hypotheses formulated above the four outlets did not differ significantly.

Similarities between outlets

**Table 1 The selected Bulgarian media address human rights, LGBT issues, environmentalism and Soros's organisations in similar ways**

Summary table of the average valence of the articles addressing human rights, LGBT issues, environmentalism and Soros's organisations for each outlet.

Outlet	Charities	Other CSOs	LGBT issues	Human rights	Soros
<i>24 Chasa</i>	Mostly positive	Negative	Negative	Negative	Negative
<i>Epicenter</i>	Mostly neutral	Negative on average	Negative	Negative	Negative
<i>Trud</i>	Mostly neutral	Negative	Negative	Negative	Negative
<i>Glasove</i>	Mostly neutral	Negative	Negative	Negative on average	Negative

Mostly positive means the value is between 1 and 2; mostly neutral means the value is between -1 and 1; negative on average means the value is between -2 and -1; negative means the value is between -3 and -2.

Table by: F. A. Telarico

#### ¶ 4.1 Charities

✓ H1: The coverage of charitable, social-work oriented CSOs is mostly favourable.

As regards the coverage of charities and other CSOs which activities relate to the 'social sphere', the starting hypothesis is mostly confirmed. In fact, there are about 457 sentences which directly address such organisations, and virtually all of them co-occur with adjectives bearing a weakly positive valence. This correlation about 20% stronger for the 139 documents mentioning the words (*the*) *foundation/s foundation* than for the 213 using (*the*) *association/s*. This suggest that the label 'non-profit', which in Bulgaria is more commonly associated with foundations than with associations, plays a key role in granting charities a more positive coverage. Moreover, the average valence of the documents addressing social issues and mentioning non-profit organisation (+1.81) is the highest in the entire database.

#### ¶ 4.2 Pro-Western CSOs

✓ H2: The coverage of neoliberal-model CSOs is mostly unfavourable.

True, this consonance alone does not suffice to argue that the selected Bulgarian outlets are mimicking their Russian counterparts. In fact, it is quite common for the coverage of CSOs and charities to be rather positive. However, the 3244 sentences containing references to LGBT rights, the 1854 addressing human rights and the 1375 referring to ecologism occur prevalently in document with a

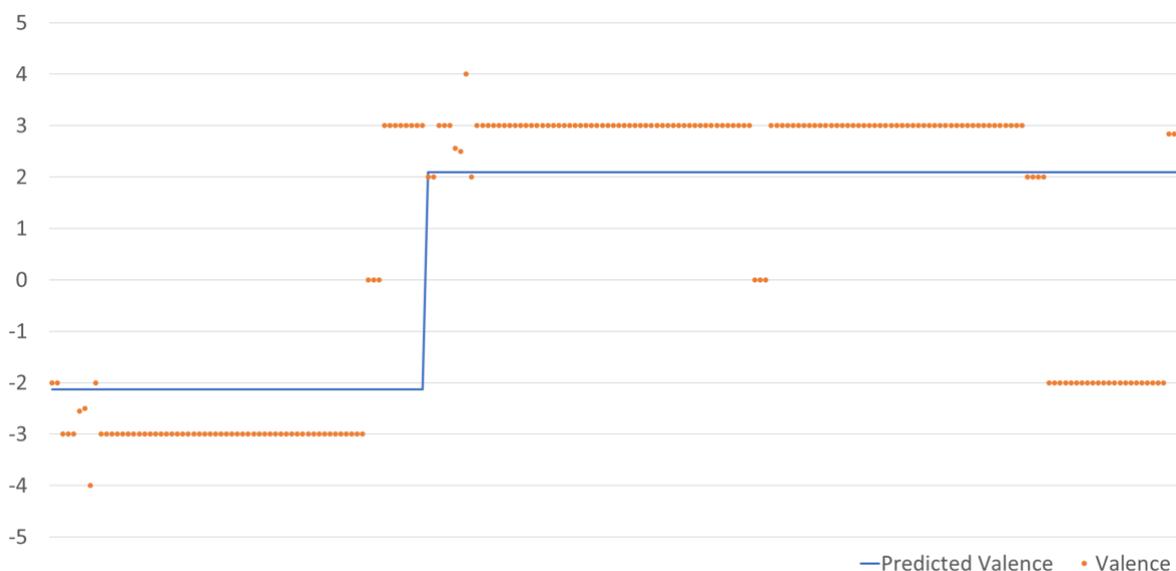
Hypothesis on the coverage of charities

Hypothesis on the coverage of neoliberal CSOs

sensibly negative tone (*Average valence* = -2.6). The relation between the topic and the low valence is made apparent when trying to predict valence on the basis of the articles' topic through a linear regression. Using the 140 sentences in which valence-coded words co-occur with the code LGBT, Human Rights or Nature and a random sample of 69 sentences in which other codes co-occur with valence-related words, it appears that about 52.79% of the variation in valence is due to the articles' different topics. Thus, just like in Russia, the tone becomes less supportive when dealing with pro-Western CSOs trying to defend rights and increase the awareness of issues which the wider public is not especially keen on. Hence, the second hypothesis is also verified.

**Figure 16 Neo-liberal or pro-Western CSOs are represented mostly negatively in the selected Bulgarian media**

Comparison between an article's actual valence (orange) and the values predicted based on whether it address human rights, LGBT issues or environmentalism.



This model is highly reliable since its p-values are 4.83095E-29 for the coefficient and 1.38157E-35 for the intercept.

Chart by: F. A. Telarico

¶ 4.3 The State and civil society

- ? H4a: Cooperation between the State and CSOs is not seen unfavourably.
- ? H4b: Cooperation between the State and CSOs is seen favourably.
- ? H4c: CSOs contesting the State are seen unfavourably.

Despite the dimensions of the database built for this research, the jury is still out on all the hypothesis concerning how media portray the relation between CSOs and the State. In fact, the number of articles associating State institutions and civil society is quite scarce (less than 100) and no direct co-occurrence was registered at the sentence level. So, any statement on this issue can only be approximate. Yet, a clear idea of the relation between State and (civil) society is a key feature of Russian media's discourse on CSOs. Thus, the very lack of any clear reference to this aspect may suggest that rhetoric and metaphors were not wilfully transplanted between the two countries.

¶ 4.4 Coverage of George Soros's and other foreign CSOs

Hypothesis on the coverage of State-CSOs relations

? H3: The coverage of foreign CSOs is mostly unfavourable.

Hypothesis on  
the coverage  
of foreign

Similarly, foreign CSOs are not mentioned that often. Generally, references are limited some global CSOs publishing reports highlighting the critical state of liberal democracy in Bulgaria. Namely, about 40% of the occurrences relate to *Reporters Without Borders*, which has criticised the lack of media freedom in the country, and *Transparency International*, which consistently judges Bulgaria to be one of the most corrupted countries in Europe. But the coverage of these organisations is rather neutral, as if they were mere source of information which each individual should then validate or refute.

✓ H5a: Soros's foundations are covered extensively.

Hypothesis on  
the coverage  
of Soros

About eight ninth of the remaining articles mentioning foreign CSOs are somehow linked to George Soros. In total, the man is mentioned in 943 sentences, more than all charities combined. This is still less than the words *association* and *foundation* or any other keyword, but the figure is still remarkable given the scarcity of references to foreign CSOs more broadly. Thus, one can safely argue that Soros and his foundations are covered extensively in the selected Bulgarian media, exactly as it happens in Russian outlets.

✓ H5b: The coverage of Soros's foundations is mostly unfavourable.

Hypothesis on  
the valence of  
the coverage  
of Soros

Analysing them mere statistics on the occurrence of negative-valence words in articles mentioning George Soros and his organisations, one would be led to discard the hypothesis related to a mostly unfavourable coverage. In fact, 86% of those sentences are associated with positive-valence words in Atlas.ti. However, this is simply the result of the software's inability to apply machine learning and natural language processing to texts in Bulgarian. In fact, reading those articles reveals the overwhelmingly negative undertone which permeates them. For instance, in an article which appeared on *24 Chasa*, a parliamentarian is quoted while arguing that in 1997, "part of the SDS [the anti-communist opposition] was satanised by [...] Soros's structures."

**Figure 17 Articles mentioning George Soros and his organisations are the one associated with the most negative valence**

Share of articles addressing Soros and his organisations (orange) or charities (blue) associated with different average valence values.

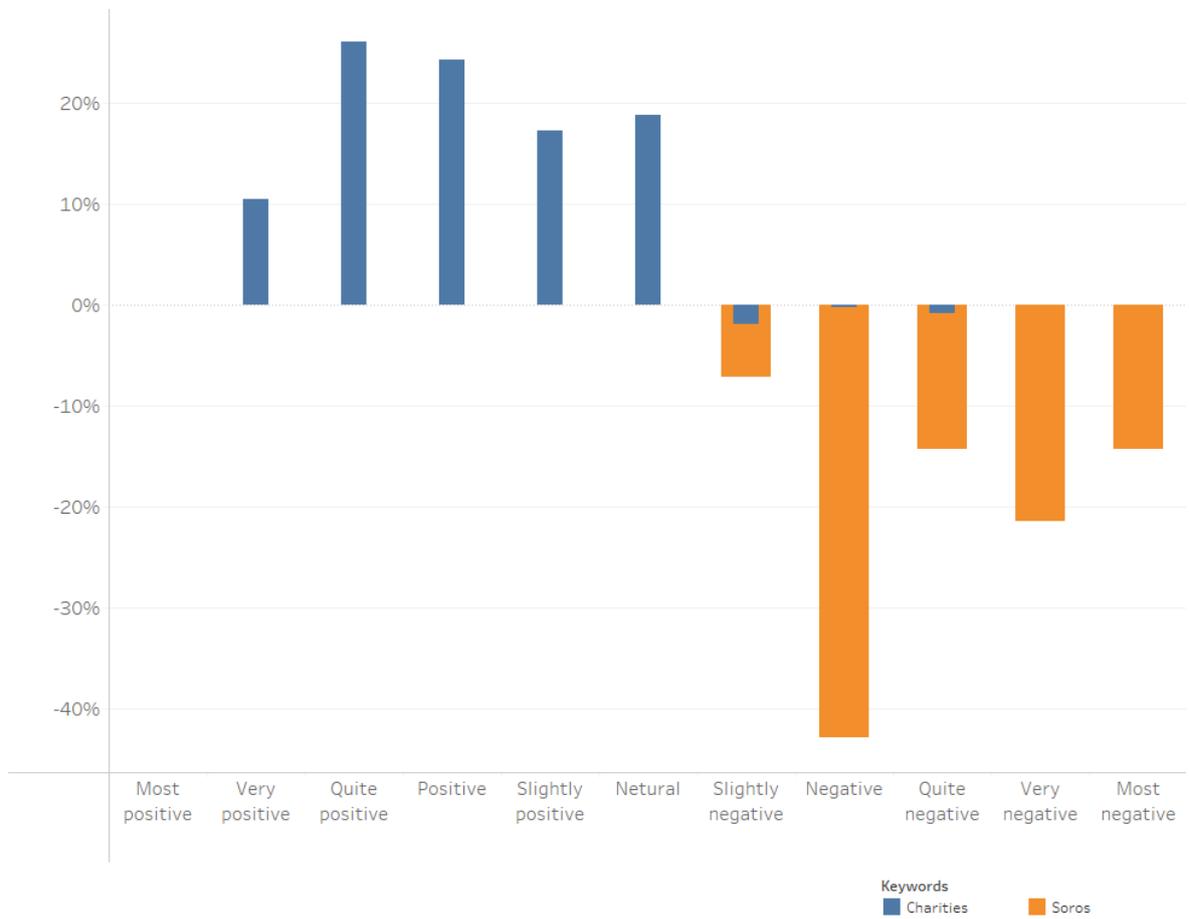


Chart by: F. A. Telarico

## § 4 Conclusion — Demythologising Russia’s footprint in Bulgarian media?

Against  
commonplace  
conclusions

This research started with the desire to offer a new perspective on events, facts and deeds that many consider of little relevance. Yet, it is worth paying attention to Bulgaria for smaller it may be. After all, in the last 100 years Eastern Europe has worked as a large-scale societal laboratory compressed between the West’s precarious majesty and the shadow of a paranoid Russia. Within this wider regional context, Bulgaria appears to be still somehow ‘in between’ a post-Soviet society and a Western-European one. In this contest, the most that illiberal cliques and corrupted officials can obtain is to perpetuate the status quo beyond ordinary people’s desires. But their success is essentially the result of their opponents’ failures. The proof is in the very fact that pro-Western CSOs in Bulgaria are unable to counter-act the denigrating rhetoric some media use against them. In effect, these CSOs are but the product of a CSP enabled only by transfers of values from the West. Even after 30 years of post-socialist transformation, they express what many people stand insincerely for in a country where religious value and traditions matter immensely.

The over-  
determination  
of CSP in  
Bulgaria

In other words, the country and its civil society stuck in a limbo between, still undecided between two roughly equal, but ontologically different forces pulling in opposite direction. On the one hand, there are many organisations that keep trying to turn Bulgaria into a liberal society in which environmentalist and LGBT groups would not be seen as ‘fringe’. For these ‘pro-Western’ CSO, building a wealthier, freer society the likes of which existed in CEE in the 1990s is the final aim. On the other hand, many struggle to accept these values, which they perceive as untraditional and, sometime, unholy. Yet, even those CSOs which take care primarily of homeless and poor people are well aware that the status quo is not sustainable nor desirable. In a word, civil society is indeed best understood as a process in Bulgaria. More specifically, it is a process that is not simply contradictory, but *overdetermined* (in the sense of Althusser 2005, 87–128). As of now, a return to the poverty that suffocates the Western Balkans or the oppressive politics of the post-Soviet space would be unacceptable.

Bulgaria is not  
Russia

What appears clear now is that pretending to blame the weakening of liberal institutions on the closeness to and interference of Moscow is a mistake. Against the presumption of Russia’s widespread influence in the country, Bulgarian media seem not to have willingly borrowed from their Russian counterparts. Sure, the case studied presented above proves that there not a few intersections when it comes to media coverage on CSOs. However, there are too many differences in key aspects of Russian and Bulgarian media’s treatment of civil society. Nor should anyone be surprised of this result. Even if the editors of the *24 Chasa*, *Trud*, *Epitsentür* and *Glasove* wanted to copy their Russian colleagues, their efforts would have failed miserably. And the reason why is simple: despite the ongoing monopolisation of the media landscape, Bulgaria is not Russia, this is undeniable. And this is especially relevant for the media’s coverage of CSOs in two senses.

A weak State

First, Bulgarian State institutions are still endemically weak. Thus, Bulgarians are adverse to reliance on a State that has ceased to be authoritarian in the 1990s only to become “weak” today (Kaneff 2002; Delteil 2015). Meanwhile, Russian media can predicate the prevalence of the State over civil society, while contextually depicting the latter as a ‘complement’ to the latter (Myhre and Berg-Nordlie 2016). Clearly, this approach makes sense because the average Russian accepts the State’s omnipresence and almightiness as a matter of fact (Vartanova 2012). Hence, there is here an unmistakable link between political and media practices which aim at steering public opinion in such a way as to make deprive CSP of its procedural nature and render it toothless. Therefore, even those editors who have a vested interest into imitating their Russian colleague have to stop short of copy-pasting.

Democracy is  
still popular

Second, the Bulgarian public opinion continues to be strongly supportive of democracy; whereas Russians have mixed feelings at this regard (Wike et al. 2019). Sure, Bulgarian media may still depict CSOs that complement State functions positively; but they cannot dare to attempt steering public

opinion too blatantly. Equally, they may adopt a mostly negative stance and, sometimes, an ironic tone. In so doing, they can imitate the Russian media's rhetoric on pro-Western CSOs; but they cannot distort reality completely. Concretely, they still have to remember their readers that Bulgaria is amongst the few EU countries where the "hate crimes of homophobic and transphobic speech is not included in the Penal Code." Nor can they silence people like Veneta Limberova, chairman of the *LGBT Youth Organisation Action*, or activist Nikolay Radulov in the same way Russian media do with those who oppose Putin.

Against this background, it is important for CSOs that strive to bring about authentic changes to adapt their strategies and tactics. Crucially, they ought to stop acting as if they knew some sort of universal truth. Instead, experts working for foundations and think tanks in Bulgaria and elsewhere in Eastern Europe should start a new season of dialogue with other segments of society. Eventually, they may manage to educate large strata of the masses to a version of these values which better fits with the populace's pre-extant beliefs. Echoing the suggestions made by most of the literature, there are a few immediate steps Bulgarian CSOs can take to make negative coverage of their work less credible for the general public. For instance, they could exploit the direct linkages between media ownership and CSOs (see § 2 ¶ 1 above on page 10) by direct endeavours to promote their activities. Om addition, it is vital to put increased effort in fundraising operations, the yields of which would allow to fund smart marketing campaigns.

Should this not happen soon enough, Eastern Europe could soon become a model for illiberal ideologues, ruthless entrepreneurs, power-seeking politicians and people nostalgic of a past when life was more predictable in the West. In fact, the mirage of peace and stability in an era of seismic changes could prevail even where personal freedoms are taken for granted. Not least, because during the current pandemic liberal democracies around Europe have been turning increasingly repressive and hostile to personal freedoms. After all, civil society is not simply a vector for democratisation, but more simply a broadcast for individuals' aspirations, wishes, and passions. While frenzy and uncertainty seem to be the dominant ingredients in the increasingly explosive *milieu* of nowadays' liberal democracy.

An agenda for  
positive

Perhaps the  
East is the  
West's future

## Appendix

### ¶ 1 Keywords

<b>Keyword</b>	<b>Code</b>
НПО	НПО
неправителствена организация	НПО
неправителствената организация	НПО
неправителствени организация	НПО
неправителствените организация	НПО
асоциация	НПО
асоциацията	НПО
асоциации	НПО
асоциациите	НПО
фондация	НПО
фондацията	НПО
фондации	НПО
фондациите	НПО
човешки права	Човески права
човешките права	Човески права
права на човека	Човески права
правата на човека	Човески права
правозащитник	Човески права
правозащитникът	Човески права
правозащитника	Човески права
правозащитници	Човески права
правозащитниците	Човески права
правозащитни	Човески права
правозащитните	Човески права
LGBT	LGBT
ЛГБТ	LGBT
лесбийка	LGBT
лесбийката	LGBT
лесбийки	LGBT
лесбийски	LGBT
гей	LGBT
гейове	LGBT
гейски	LGBT
гейските	LGBT
хомосексуални	LGBT
хомосексуалните	LGBT
хомосексуалност	LGBT
хомосексуалността	LGBT
хомосексуален	LGBT
околната среда	Nature
природата	Nature
околна среда	Nature
природозащитник	Nature

природозащитникът	<b>Nature</b>
природозащитника	<b>Nature</b>
природозащитници	<b>Nature</b>
природозащитниците	<b>Nature</b>
природозащитни	<b>Nature</b>
природозащитните	<b>Nature</b>
Сорос	<b>Сорос</b>
Open Society	<b>Сорос</b>
Отворено Общество	<b>Сорос</b>
Централноевропейски университет	<b>Сорос</b>
Central European University	<b>Сорос</b>
благодарителен	<b>Социално</b>
благодарителния	<b>Социално</b>
благодарителният	<b>Социално</b>
благодарителната	<b>Социално</b>
благодарителна	<b>Социално</b>
благодарителни	<b>Социално</b>
благодарителните	<b>Социално</b>
бездомен	<b>Социално</b>
неστοпански	<b>Социално</b>
неστοпанския	<b>Социално</b>
неστοпанският	<b>Социално</b>
неστοпанските	<b>Социално</b>
неστοпанска	<b>Социално</b>
неστοпанската	<b>Социално</b>
неστοпанско	<b>Социално</b>
неστοпанското	<b>Социално</b>

## ¶ 2 Database coding

Code	Group	Logic structure	№ of occurrences
False match добър (1)	False match		702
False match добър (2)	False match		2835
False match слаб	False match		2848
NGO на Сорос	Soros's NGOs	NGO AND Сорос	220
асоциация	NGO		1305
банален	-3		18
безличен	-2		5
безумен	-3		99
велик	+2		399
глупав	-4		51
готин	+3		25
добър	+3	NOT [False match добър (1) OR False match добър (2)] AND добър (with false matches)	2795
добър (with false matches)	False match		6332

забавен	+2		63
загубен	-5		38
задължителен	+3	<i>NOT False match задължителен AND задължителен (with false matches)</i>	731
задължителен (with false matches)	False match		3568
изгубен	-3		104
красив	+2		423
False match задължителен	False match		2862
ЛГБТ	LGBT LGBT+HR		3244
невероятен	+4		176
НПО	NGO		2809
правозащитник	HR LGBT+HR		664
предсказуем	-2		60
природа	Nature		1375
приятен	+3		132
разочарован	-4		105
силен	+3		974
сучен	-3		29
слаб	-3	<i>NOT False match слаб AND слаб (24 Chasa, with false matches) OR слаб (Т, Е, Г)</i>	233
слаб (24 Chasa, with false matches)	False match		2911
слаб (Т, Е, Г)			157
Сорос	Soros		943
социално	Social		457
страхотен	+5		85
ужасен	-4		118
уникален	+4		343
фондация	NGO		1799
хубав	+2		346
човешки права	HR LGBT+HR		1190
як	+3		22

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