

*Uncaptive Minds*

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## **Seminar Papers**

What Happened to the Dream of  
Independent Media?

The Case of Bulgaria

*by* Tatiana Vaksberg

*Presented at the IDEE Seminar*

**25 Years After 1989:  
Time for Reflection on Unfinished Business  
October 3–5, 2014, Warsaw, Poland**

## IDEE Seminar Papers

The following paper was presented at the Institute for Democracy in Eastern Europe seminar “25 Years After 1989: Time for Reflection on Unfinished Business,” held on October 3-5, 2014 in Warsaw, Poland. It is extracted from the special issue of *Uncaptive Minds* (Summer 2015), which is titled “25 Years After 1989: Reflections on Unfinished Revolutions” and includes the full proceedings of the seminar. See [www.idee-us.org](http://www.idee-us.org) for the full special issue of *Uncaptive Minds*.

## The Author

Tatiana Vaksberg, a leading activist in the Bulgarian students’ movement in 1989–90, is an award-winning journalist based in Sofia. A correspondent for Deutsche Welle Bulgarian Service and Radio Liberty Russian Service, her journalism has focused on human rights issues and the field of transitional governance. Her works include “Technology of Evil,” a 2001 documentary film that investigates the communist-era campaign of forcible assimilation of the Bulgarian Turks; *Milosevic and the Tribunal: A Personal View of an Unfinished Trial* (2007); and a forthcoming documentary on the Khmer Rouge Trial in Cambodia (2015). She was awarded the Robert Bosch Foundation Literaturhaus Berlin and Herta Müller Scholarship for her book *State Security and the Kids*. She is co-translator of Varlam Shalamov’s *Kolyma Tales* and Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s *Gulag Archipelago* into Bulgarian.

## Theme 7

# What Happened to the Dream of Independent Media?

### Presentation

#### **The Media in Bulgaria: The Full Story**

*by* **Tatiana Vaksberg**

I was a little bit unsure when I prepared my paper whether to focus more on the contemporary gangsterization of the media in Bulgaria or about the lack of freedoms for media in the 1990s and what caused it. So, I will tell you the full story.

In November 1989, my grandparents' apartment in Sofia became the repository of strange items from the Occident. One was an electric typewriter brought by Irena Lasota, an unknown person to us at the time. We had just created the Bulgarian Independent Students Association. She told us this was a basic tool for us to be able to be heard. Just write the news the way you see them through your own eyes, she said. Don't rely on the state media to give an accurate image of the events; they won't do it for you. These were among the most important sentences ever spoken to me.

A few weeks later, we received two more gifts from Poland. Both related to a free press. In December 1989, a Bulgarian studying in Warsaw brought to us a small manual mimeograph machine donated by Solidarność. For it, a typewriter was used to impress heavy waxed-paper stencils—a highly uncertain process because you can't see really what you type. The stencils were placed on a drum for copying what you wanted to produce with ink. The problem was that you need a lot of practice operating such a machine and we didn't know all the intricacies. The Bulgarian Student Association managed to produce three issues of a prototype publication with 40-50 copies each. Some copies were posted with glue on the buildings of popular places in downtown Sofia.

The second present was given to us in the very beginning of 1990 by a Solidarność representative named Marian Orlikowski (he is now the Polish consul in Lviv). He brought us an offset press with metal plates—a much more sophisticated machine to produce a real newspaper. He told us this was the cheapest and easiest way to produce a publication and communicate with people what you want to be heard. We managed to produce two issues of a student newspaper with it. We should have done more, of course, but at the same time the first “real” independent newspaper was born, *Demokratiya*, the daily of the United Democratic Forces (UDF). As part of the UDF, the students association turned its attention to helping make this daily a success. It was one of our most important mistakes—not to insist on producing an independent student newspaper and relying on one single opposition newspaper instead.

When Orlikowski met with the students in Sofia, in January 1990, he also delivered a very important message to the newly created Bulgarian opposition: not to agree to the Communist Party proposal to hold a Round Table with the opposition as the mechanism for arranging the country's transition from a single-party state to a multi-party democracy. “Do not negotiate with them”, he said. “Just do yourself what you think is the right thing to do.” His advice was ignored. It became one of the greatest mistakes of the Bulgarian opposition. From that moment, virtually all of the gains of the opposition were based on permission given by the Communist Party, instead of independently winning the opposition's goals. In late January 1990, the UDF presented two preconditions to the Communist Party for agreeing to the Round Table with the Communist Party where the forthcoming elections and future multiparty system were decided. They were: permission to publish a newspaper with a large circulation using state printing presses and state-controlled print paper and permission to occupy office space. The first daily, *Demokratiya*, and the weekly *Svoboda Narod* (Free People), which started in February 1990, were grant-

ed circulation of 70,000 copies each, printed through the state printing offices. This determined the development of the media in Bulgaria.

There were other attempts in 1989 and early 1990 to create newspapers independently from the Communist Party and the democratic opposition. The first and most important was *Nezavisimost* (Independence), which was inspired by two samizdat magazines *Glas* (Voice) and *Most* (Bridge), both published in the late '80s during communist rule. *Nezavisimost*, edited by Gancho Ganchev, put out ten issues using an early computer and printer. But most of those independently sponsored newspapers could not survive for long. The newspapers that survived were launched on the same model as *Demokratiya*, by gaining the state's permission. Based on its precedent, editors of new publications also asked to use the state printing offices. Soon after the first free elections in 1990, it became clear that a very strange kind of press freedom was born: free media that never really fought for their freedom. Twenty-five years later, many analysts agree that one of the main reasons for Bulgaria's significant and constant decline in press freedom indexes over the past two decades lies in part in the perception that establishing the independence of free media was not a value that Bulgarians were willing to struggle for.

Indeed, over the years, Bulgaria media went through a spectacular decline in freedom and public confidence. At the outset, there was an impressive and rapid propagation of print media. In 1990 alone, there were 1,000 newspapers in the country, mostly organized around a community, a leader, or a cause. Most were closed, but new ones did emerge. While the total numbers did not change significantly, with an estimated 900 print publications in 2007, the content of them did change quite a lot. In the beginning of the 1990s, the majority of print publications published general interest and news and corresponded to the sharp political polarization of society. Today, the print media are largely entertainment, lifestyle, fashion, music, cinema or sport publications. General news and information publications declined in number, public confidence, and level of freedom.

In 2014, the Open Data sociology group of the Open Society Institute determined that 3 percent of the public had confidence in newspapers, 3 percent in radio, and 4 percent in internet news sites. Television has a higher level of confidence at 43 percent, but much of this group is found in the age category of 60 years and older. Freedom House and Reporters Without Borders show that there is something dramatically wrong with media governance and freedom. In 2003, Reporters Without Borders listed Bulgaria 34<sup>th</sup> in media freedom, ahead of Italy, the Czech Republic, and Romania. In 2014, it occupies 100<sup>th</sup> place. To illustrate the drop, post-war Serbia, which is not in the European Union, holds the 54<sup>th</sup> place.

European authorities often criticize Bulgaria for the lack of media freedom. They are especially critical of the law that allows anonymous companies to own media. This means that shady business circles, including those involved in illegal activities, can possess a media outlet without any transparency. These outlets claim to be authoritative sources for news and analysis on political and economic issues, however any Bulgarian journalist can tell you which publications are funded by trafficking in women, or by arms sales, or by Russian organized crime.

The second corrupting factor in media governance is the state, especially through its program of media and PR funding. In the last six months alone of 2013, the Bulgarian government gave 3 million Euros to media to explain its policies—from the need to reform the health system to the need for constructing new roads. The government is also operating European Union funds through which many media find support to publish or broadcast. Such state-controlled funding does not contribute to media's critical stance towards the government.

Last but not least, the communist past plays an important role in the deplorable conditions of media. It took twenty years for the government to admit that the security services played a key role in the transition from communism, especially in the field of media. Only in December 2009, the Files Commission published a list of current journalists with ties to the former security police. It announced that in 2009, 11 percent of the journalists working in print media as well as the hosts of the most popular television shows had worked for the communist state security. Some of the journalists were working for foreign-owned Bulgarian-language newspapers, such as *Business Week* or for the US-funded *Radio Free Europe*. The most important revelation was the state security connections of the editors-in-chief of the two leading general interest newspapers, *Trud* and *24 Hours*, as well as of the entire office of the weekly newspaper *Pogled*, published by the Bulgarian Journalists Union. Meanwhile, attempts to establish an alternative journalists' association repeatedly failed.

The Files Commission was established according to the State Security Archives Law, which was passed by parliament only in 2006. This independent commission was charged with checking state security affiliations of twenty-nine categories or groups, including national politicians, members of the judiciary, bank owners, army representatives, ambassadors, their deputies and other members of consulates, mayors and members of municipal councils, sociological agencies and lawyers associations, and people known as credit millionaires. This last group is made up of people who in the 1990s were given credit by banks without any collateral and when those banks went bankrupt, they were untouchable and did not have to give any of the money back.

Media represented a distinct category. While the Files Commission had to check all the members of the other groups who entered public life after 1989, journalists were checked only as of the date the law entered into force. It is thus believed that journalists played a much more significant role during the transition period, with many more than 11 percent of journalists being agents of state security and using their positions to manipulate public opinion.

With all these factors—the media relation to state security, the modern-day state-funded corruption, the non-transparent ownership of media—it is no wonder that the biggest scandal now in Bulgaria is the following. A company created by a family relation of a parliament member took a very large credit from a private bank at a time when the government had ordered the majority of state-owned enterprises to put their funds in that particular bank. The bank was allowed to use these funds from state-owned enterprises for any financial operations and it was the fastest growing bank in Bulgaria in the period of 2007–12, growing 9 percent annually. The family relation of the MP used the very large bank credit he received to become owner of a dozen national newspapers, one television station, a publishing house, and also the companies controlling general distribution of newspapers and other publications at kiosks.

The story finally attracted attention but by this time the newspapers were sold to an off-shore company and the ownership could not be traced. When the European Union paid more attention to the gangsterization of the Bulgarian economy, the government announced that this powerful bank was in fact unfit and its owner was a criminal under an Interpol warrant. The owner fled to Belgrade and the bank was closed with all the money seized or blocked by the government. Many people are not able to pay their mortgages as a result, which has created an artificial amount of bad credit. The media sold to the off-shore company now orchestrates campaigns against the political enemies of the leading party.

## Responses

### **Sergey Duvanov**

We are talking about why the dream of independent media was not reached. In Kazakhstan, the dream did start to be realized during *perestroika*. During that time and right after independence there was a renaissance of free media and free speech. It was an epoch when everything was possible. In the late Soviet period, together with my friends, I set up an independent newspaper and we were able to earn enough money and raise money from the US to establish a television channel. We had to bribe here and there but it was more or less acceptable. It was a Romantic peri-