

Spies like us: Media, politics and the communist past in Bulgaria



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ABSTRACT: The secrecy enveloping the past of public figures — journalists, politicians, and business moguls — has been plaguing democratic transition all across the Central and Eastern European region. In Bulgaria, the public has faced at different stages of the transition the uncomfortable moral crisis of reconciling the communist past with the political and cultural presence. In this process, journalists and media professionals play a vital role as critical agencies of discovering and disseminating the facts concerning the secret communist past of public figures. The situation is further complicated when journalists themselves are implicated in collaborating with the communist secret service, while at the same time, serving as prominent voices of dissent and political change. This paper examines the ramifications of these problems for press freedom and self-censorship, when not only journalists but media owners themselves, find their names on the “blacklist” of former secret agents and spies.

KEYWORDS: Bulgaria, media, politics, journalist spy, communist past



INTRODUCTION

Whoever controls the past, controls the future.
George Orwell

One of the most insidious and omnipresent remnants of the communist past for the transitional democracies in Eastern Europe has been the secrecy enveloping the past of public figures — journalists, politicians, business moguls, etc. The moral dilemma of revealing these people’s past has been a subject of public debate in every post-communist society, the result of which has had wide-ranging implications for the state of the media. National responses to dealing with the secret dossiers of public figures in government-related institutions has also greatly varied, ranging from mild acceptance to complete reconciliation and forgiveness, to unequivocal denial to public office to anyone who has ever collaborated with the communist regime, as in the case of the 1991 Czech National Assembly resolution. In Bulgaria, the public has faced at different stages of the democratic transition the uncomfort-

able moral crisis of reconciling the communist past with the political and cultural present. However, the Bulgarian authorities have been particularly reluctant to commence the process of reconciliation with the communist past, which requires full disclosure of the names of former State Security collaborators, including those who currently hold powerful positions in the structure of the democratic state. In fact, Bulgaria has often been cited as the state among all Eastern European countries that has postponed the longest addressing the process of releasing the names of secret service aparatchiks involved in the political, economic and cultural institutions (Deutsche Welle, 2008). Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the current law allowing public access to the secret dossiers of Bulgarian citizens was voted in by the Bulgarian Parliament only a few days before the country was admitted as a fully-fledged member of the European Union, despite the fact that different versions of the bill have been circulating in the public arena since 1997 (Hristov, 2010a).

The debate surrounding the need for full transparency of the degree to which public figures have been involved with the communist secret service has several important dimensions — in its essence, the secret past of politicians, businessmen and women as well as members of the cultural elite reveals significant gaps in their credibility as agents of democratic change, as well as in their ability to advocate and promote a fundamental shift away from the corrupt practices of the communist elite into a new, untainted and therefore, entirely trustworthy leadership of democratic civic society. Here, the moral implications of this societal debate are beyond debate. In this process, I argue, journalists and media professionals play a particularly vital role as critical agents of discovering and disseminating the facts concerning the secret communist past of public figures, and therefore, need to be studied on their own merit. The situation is further complicated when journalists themselves are implicated in collaborating with the communist secret service, while at the same time, continued to serve as prominent voices of dissent and political change and have been widely celebrated as symbolic beacons of the new democratic order. Moreover, I argue the ramifications of these problems stretch further to matters of press freedom and self-censorship, when not only journalists, but media owners themselves who establish, fund, and often control the editorial policies of the ever growing number of media outlets, find their names on the “blacklist” of former secret agents and spies. In this case, the question of the extent of their collaboration with the repressive communist regime is no longer to be understood solely as a question of personal credibility and ethical behavior, but also as a question involving economic power and control over the flow of information, which might be particularly threatening as far as freedom of the press and transparency of media capital are concerned. It is precisely this unique position of former spies within the media realm that have allowed them access to media resources, such as printing facilities, publication houses and broadcasting technology, as well as access to capital and financial means unavailable to ordinary Bulgarian citizens, that makes the case of revealing their communist past particularly important.

The purpose of this paper is to offer a critical analysis of the history of the spy/journalist duality in Bulgaria, tracing its evolution from the initial wide-ranging political resistance to crafting a Law of the Secret Dossiers, to the role of the media in initiating the public debate about the secret files, to the ultimate application of the current law, which has led to disclosing the names of Bulgarian journalists and current media owners who have spied for the communist authorities. As one of the Soviets' closest ideological supporters and political satellites, Bulgaria is particularly well-suited for this examination because as the German journalist and crime expert Juergen Roth (quoted by Deutsche Welle, 2008) wrote, "The Bulgarian intelligence service was the one in the former East bloc that worked most closely together with the KGB," making the role of the Bulgarian journalists who were former secret agents critically important in sustaining the communist regime, and therefore, further eroding their ability to serve as uncorrupted and trustworthy voices of democratic change.

THE ETHICAL RAMIFICATIONS OF THE SPYING JOURNALIST

Much has been written about the role of spies in the Cold War (Klehr, Haynes & Vassiliev, 2009; Haynes & Klehr, 2003; Klehr, Haynes & Anderson, 1998; Klehr, Haynes & Firsov, 1995). In fact, the spy figure has occupied the imagination of fiction writers, movie makers, songwriters and the like, creating an almost myth-like character, a dubious hero, in the cultural space of both superpowers and their respective propaganda efforts. Despite this wide-ranging presence in popular culture accounts of the Cold War conflict however, little attention, particularly so in media studies, has been paid to the role of the journalist spies in the post-communist transition and their ethical duties and social responsibilities in divulging their relationship with the repressive apparatuses of the communist regime. One of the most recent accounts of Cold War espionage has focused on the efforts of each of the superpowers in recruiting journalists of the opposing side to sympathize and collaborate against what they saw were the repressive actions of their own governments (Klehr, Haynes & Vassiliev, 2009). In their seminal study, which also aggregates their previously published research data, Klehr, Haynes and Vassiliev (2009) turn their attention in a chapter of their book to the role the journalist spy played in the history of the conflict. The authors argued that since the Soviet regime was much more interested in acquiring intelligence data, that they deemed critical in terms of its value — such as military, industrial and technological secrets — the contribution of journalist spies was often seen as marginal, albeit culturally relevant, by their Soviet informants. To illustrate this, Klehr, Haynes and Vassiliev point out that in 1941, the KGB counted 22 journalists among its American agents, compared to the recruited forty-nine engineers, four economists, and eight college professors. While the emphasis was clearly placed on gaining access to classified technical information as well as industrial and military data, journalists were recruited

because of their “access to inside information and sources on politics and policy, insights into personalities, and confidential and nonpublic information that never made it into published stories” (p. 148). The value of information delivered by well-positioned American journalists is perhaps best illustrated by the case of Walter Lippmann, one of America’s most influential columnists and liberal thinkers, whose impact and position in contemporary journalism has never been replicated. Lippmann’s views that were often seen as openly sympathizing with the left, and by extension, with socialist ideals, were of particular interest to the KGB. In fact, as Seeger (2009) pointed out, the KGB called him “Imperialist” yet penetrated his office by planting Mary Price, a communist, as his personal secretary. Despite the fact that the value of information provided by journalist spies was not necessarily top ranking intelligence compared to that provided by government employees or scientists, as Klehr, Haynes and Vassiliev contended, journalists were nonetheless engaging in deceptive practices that violated the very principles upon which their journalistic profession was built. As Seeger (2009) argued, “they used their access to information to deceive their employers, their colleagues, and their public about their loyalties and veracity. They betrayed confidences and pursued political agendas while pretending to be professional journalists” (p. 4).

Despite the fact that no formal admittance has ever been issued by the former Soviet intelligence agencies, it is a well-known public secret that journalists in the Soviet Union and the former communist bloc were often recruited as spies, and as a result, often enjoyed illustrious careers in this capacity. Perhaps the best example in this connection comes from no other than the Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation, Yevgeny Primakov, appointed in 1996 by President Boris Yeltsin after serving for five years as Director of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service. Primakov, who is fluent in Arabic and is often credited with boosting foreign service workers’ morale and decreasing defections by Russian intelligence officers, was himself a career journalist who worked as a Middle East foreign correspondent for *Pravda*. Although Primakov never publicly admitted that he worked as a spy during his appointment as a foreign correspondent, he certainly signaled his awareness of the suspicion associated with his profession as he publicly announced at the time of his appointment that this practice of duality and deception would no longer be employed by the Russian foreign office, boldly declaring that “journalism should not be a cover for intelligence” (cited in Schodolski, 1991).

In Bulgaria, the moral dilemma and the philosophical implications of the journalist-spy dichotomy is well-documented in Ognyanova’s work (1993). Ognyanova has argued, specifically in the case of Bulgarian journalists recruited during communism, that they had an opportunity to make a moral choice, despite the country’s stifling dictatorship and the widely circulating thesis that journalists had no choice but to collaborate with the regime, stands on shaky ethical ground. Specifically, she pointed to the privileged positions foreign correspondents, who almost exclusively were also recruited to serve as intelligent officers aboard, knowingly held and in full

realization of their political consequences. “All of these conditions created a deserved image of the Bulgarian foreign correspondent as a spy” (p. 160). Ognyanova’s unflinching position is categorical — Bulgarian foreign correspondents were faced with the moral dilemma of either maintaining their bestowed position of privilege or quit, thus making their decision to remain within the structure of the secret service a conscious and deliberate choice. Therefore, their willingness to be part of the state security structure is to be interpreted not as being a victim of circumstances or of the oppressive political machine of communism, but as making an intentional choice to maintain a position of access and privilege, which would otherwise be denied.

THE CASE OF THE BULGARIAN JOURNALIST SPY: SECRECY COMING UNDONE

With the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the euphoria of the democratic transition took over the entire Central and Eastern European region. While Bulgaria was among the “laggard” states in doing away with the regime, it nonetheless enthusiastically took on the path towards dismantling the tyranny of the authoritarian rule of the communists. Along with the final realization of just how oppressive and stifling the regime has been, came also the renewed search for fresh political and cultural leadership. In this process, the role of the media was undeniably crucial, since the media served as the fore where political change could be discussed and a vision for the future could be articulated and debated. The media suddenly found themselves in a state of flux, and as Ognyanova (1993) pointed out, former foreign correspondents turned into the most ardent promoters of Western values, as their knowledge of the West already put them in an advantageous position in terms of access and inside information about the way things are done in the West — something that the rest of the general Bulgarian public who lived in isolation for forty five years, simply could not imagine. In fact, the unique experiences and knowledge of foreign correspondents put them among the most needed professionals in journalism and in this regard, they became more useful to the post-communist media than their colleagues who never left the country during the communist rule. “It’s a great paradox but those people really knew and know how things are going on in an open society and a free market, so they know how to do it. I don’t.” said Jan Jirak, a professor at Charles University in Prague and in fact, many other commentators have also noted that some of the intelligence agents turned out to be pretty good journalists (quoted in Ognyanova, 1993, p.161). In fact, a large number of them moved to anti-communist media, which were pioneered by former political dissidents with no journalistic experience, or very young journalists who lacked the necessary know-how or professional experience to jumpstart a self-sustaining and successful media outlet.

All of these developments were necessary to establish a new order in a society that has collapsed under the weight of its own destructive and ideologically stifling

machine. And in the uncertain times of transition and accompanying euphoria signaling a fundamental shift towards the exciting, yet, relatively uncertain future, no one spent a lot of time thinking about the role of the past in building a path to the future. Eventually, however, that sense of exhilaration passed and journalists, who long before the collapse of communism refused to collaborate with the secret service in order to advance their careers, raised questions about the moral responsibility and the guilt of former spies/journalists, who quickly forgot their past and embraced the promise of democracy.

The response on the part of the accused spies/journalists varied just as much as their individual contributions to the oppressive system. Some of them admitted their sense of guilt publicly, some left the field of journalism altogether, while others simply argued that “we all have sins, we were all guilty,” claiming that given the repressive nature of the communist regime, there was practically no avenue to resist or escape the complacency of being a part of the system (Ognyanova, 1993). Their universal call to all Bulgarians to publicly admit their own individual share in contributing and maintaining the oppressive system, while clearly politicized and aimed at absolving the sins of the former communist apparatchiks, was not met with enthusiasm by the emerging “democratic forces.” In fact, the general sense among the newly formed political parties, many of whom were to establish their own media outlets (predominantly newspapers at the very onset of the transition) was to vehemently reject this call for a conformist attitude in addressing the guilt of the communist cadres and their contribution to sustaining the authoritative nature of the regime. The call to “forget the past” and close the chapter of the “unhealthy state of Bulgarian journalism” left the public in a state of suspended expectation while the debate as to whether the dossiers of politicians and public servants, including members of the cultural elite should be made freely available, raged on for over two decades.

It is perhaps the last group of former spies/journalists that appears to be most troubling. This is also one of the largest groups, as it remains practically unknown as to how many journalists in all different media collaborated with the secret service. These are the journalists whose guilt was not known to the public, neither did they acknowledge any responsibility publicly. In addition to actual members of the media professions, this group also includes the newly formed media owner elite, whose connections to the secret police and the extent of their individual contribution to maintaining the repressive apparatus of the communist rule remained clouded in secrecy, especially so at the onset of the media reformed in Bulgaria, when media outlets were privatized and professionalized.

THE BULGARIAN LAW ON THE SECRET DOSSIERS: THE ROLE OF THE JOURNALIST

Bulgaria postponed making a decision on whether the secret files on all citizens should be made public information, and particularly so, the secret files on public

figures and politicians, including journalists and other media persona. The slow response on the part of the legislative body was both a result of a general lack of determination to face the past and more importantly, to make a definitive and abrupt break with the dark heritage of the communist oppressive system. The issue was finally tackled head on by the legislators only recently, when in 2006, the Dossier Commission finally revealed the names of journalists, media owners and public commentators who collaborated with the secret service during communism. The Commission released the names of 101 secret agents, who currently work in private media outlets. Although the investigation included a dossier check on 2366 people from a total of 273 media outlets, the complete picture was only partially revealed (Antonova, 2009). This is attributed to the fact that the previous Parliament voted in an amendment to the law commissioning the release of secret dossiers, restricting investigation of media practitioners and personalities only to those who have worked in the media after 2006, but not prior to that, rendering the names of some of the first spies/journalists — the ones who had immediate and unfettered access to the media resources of the communist propaganda machine — many of whom either became the voices of private media or their practical owners, virtually non-existent.

To quench some of the criticism which this amendment has caused, an investigation of Bulgarian National Television (BNT) and Bulgarian National Radio (BNR) was conducted, which, however, was limited only to checking the backgrounds of the leadership of the media, namely, program directors, top executives, editors-in-chief, and members of editorial boards. This investigation revealed that forty-three secret agents have worked in BNT since 1989, sixty in BNR, and twenty in the Bulgarian Telegraph Agency (BTA), whose names were also made public (Antonova, 2009).

It is perhaps particularly instructing to trace the chronology of how the current Law on the Secret Dossiers came into existence, allowing the release, albeit, a restricted one, of the names of media professionals and their financial sponsors. As it became clear, the discussion of whether to declassify the records of the former State Intelligence Agency has been ongoing since the onset of the democratic transition, but the real breakthrough only took place in 2006, partly as a result of a miscalculated pre-election political attack by the then Minister of Internal Affairs Rumen Petkov. As Hristov (2010a) reported, Petkov single-handedly decided to declassify the dossier of one of Bulgaria's popular morning talk show hosts and former Radio Free Europe journalist, Georgi Koretarov, in order to deflect Koretarov's growing criticism of Petkov's failure to effectively fight organized crime. In an act of a textbook case of personal vendetta, Petkov released information to the media, showing Koretarov on the Secret Services' payroll and spied on fellow students and other unsuspecting contacts. Petkov justified his action by claiming that he was responding to a request filed by another freelance journalist, Angelina Petkova, who has called on numerous occasions for a wide release of the dossiers of famous TV per-

sonalities and journalists (Hristov, 2010a). Ironically, Petkova's name was also later found in the annals of the Secret Police, where her role was described as a physical facilitator of secret rendezvous among State Security agents (Hristov, 2010a).

The unintended consequence of the provoked political deadlock was a renewed public debate about the necessity to finally confront the past of secrecy and deceit. This time, it was met with great interest and overwhelming support among the Bulgarian public, which found the selective release of certain public figures' dossiers problematic, calling for a wider release of the secret files of both public figures and ordinary citizens alike (Hristov, 2010a). The pressure of civic society was further amplified by the collective efforts of several non-governmental organizations as well as those of a number of media practitioners, who joined the call to revisit, revamp, and finalize the Law on the Secret Dossiers to include complete declassification of the existing files, as well as full access to an independent, centralized system housing those files, free of any possibility of political manipulation.

In an ironic twist, the release of the details of Koretarov's secret past, as well as pressure by other media professionals, including media commentators and members of the Council on Electronic Media (the government regulatory body on the state of the media) Georgi Lozanov, that propelled into motion the finalization of the law. Media professionals who found Petkov's deliberate and selective approach to declassifying Koretarov's dossier a violation of the people's right to freely access information, commenced a campaign, entitled "Clean Voices," in which a large number of journalists insisted for the Secret Services to release their individual dossiers in an attempt to demonstrate how intrinsic to their profession is the need for honesty and transparency.

Interestingly, the names of former intelligence agents working as journalists took audience members by surprise, as they revealed that some of the most respected figures in Bulgarian journalism, both during and after communism, have indeed held high ranking positions within the State Security apparatus. To illustrate this, one of the most glaring examples was the case of Ivan Garelov, known as agent Talev, the host of the political commentary program "Panorama," universally deemed as the most prestigious fore for social and political discourse in the years of transition. Garelov had an illustrious career in journalism and was one of the most respected representatives of the profession. In addition to his reputation as a great interviewer and political analyst, he was well known for his work as a foreign correspondent in Greece and the Middle East, fluent in multiple languages, including Arabic, a personal friend of famous political figures, including Yasser Arafat, with an impressive list of world dignitaries and political figures who sat down for an interview with him. The Dossier Commission's investigation revealed that Garelov had been a collaborator with the secret police since 1967, which many speculated was the path that secured him his ability to rise in the ranks as Bulgarian National Television's chief foreign correspondent and eventually, host his own show (Antonova, 2009). His work for the secret services was not only beneficial and well

compensated by the state, but also allowed him unprecedented access to resources and funds that no other journalists could imagine (Hristov, 2010a). This access might also explain how Garelov was able to fluidly transition after his retirement from serious journalism into the world of entertainment, where he produced and hosted a lowbrow entertainment show entitled “Vote of Confidence” and continues to serve on the board of directors of multiple media outlets. In 2011, Garelov served as the head of the grand jury presiding over the prestigious award for journalism “Saint Vlas” and has continually defended his action by arguing a fine line must be drawn between the work of petty Secret Service collaborators and intelligence officers, such as himself, whose work was essential to the defense of Bulgaria’s state interests abroad.

An even more shocking example comes from the case of Nidal Algefari, one of the informal leaders of the students’ movement that has been credited with effectively bringing the demise of the regime, and also, chief creative director of the first independent student TV show “Ku-Ku” (Coo-Coo). “Ku-Ku” was one of the most entertaining programs in the early 1990s, and was admired by its audience for its harsh social satire and relentless critique of the old regime and the failures and paradoxes of the transition. In fact, “Ku-Ku” became almost an international sensation when it carried a mock-broadcast of a scenario reminiscent of Orson Welles’ broadcast “War of the Worlds,” when they aired a fake newscast supposedly reporting on the failure of a Bulgarian nuclear reactor, Chernobyl-style, to illustrate, albeit by causing mass panic and widespread shock, the ill-preparedness of the state to handle a national disaster of this scope. Because of its widespread popularity with the entire generation of the democratic transition, many of Ku-Ku’s actors and its creative producers either became involved in the political realm or were among the very first pioneers of a new type of television, free of ideological control or communist censorship. Algefari enjoyed a special place among the young intellectual elite of the post-communist transition and later on, rose in the rank to executive director of Bulgarian National Television. As an agent, Algefari was known under the alias Nasko and was recruited to provide intelligence on the activities of foreign students studying in Bulgarian universities (Antonova, 2009). Among the names of secret service collaborators were also the names of Toma Spostranov, a well-respected DJ from Bulgarian National Radio, as well as Vladimir Bereanu, a quick-witted TV reporter known for his investigative reporting skills and biting satire. Consecutive examination of the files also revealed that other major figures deemed by many as exemplifying the virtues of Bulgarian journalism, such as Kevork Kevorkian, host of the legendary TV show “Every Sunday” and Petko Bocharov, the doyenne of the Bulgarian journalistic class, were also paid collaborators of the State Security apparatus (Hristov, 2010b).

While the revelation that some of the most influential media voices in the post-communist transition have indeed been providing intelligence to the Secret Police might have shocked the Bulgarian public, one of the more surprising, and arguably,

more disturbing, trends is emerging from the list of collaborators who currently own some of the most influential media outlets (many of which have been successfully sold to foreign media conglomerates), often considered the pioneers of private/independent media in Bulgaria. The list of secret agents released as a result of the Dossier Commission's investigation is rather long and reads like a "who's who" on the Bulgarian media market today. A particularly interesting case is presented by Krasimir Gergov, one of the most influential and controversial figures on the Bulgarian advertising market. Gergov, who unofficially has been credited with securing the bid for the second Bulgarian TV channel to Rupert Murdoch's Balkan venture bTV as well as the establishment of the fourth national TV channel, TV2, both of which were also recently unloaded to Central European Media Enterprises, has collaborated with the Directorate for Safety and Security, where he appeared as a paid contributor (Antonova, 2009). Although no details of his actual activities and responsibilities were made available, it becomes clear from the leaked details of his dossier that Gergov himself volunteered for the position and wrote a rather illustrious letter of interest, expressing his determination to use his "talents and creativity in the struggle against the destructors of the historical road to development" (as quoted in Antonova, 2009, p.10). What becomes clear from the dossier, however, is that Gergov served his post with the State Security at the same time with Ognyan Dimov, another important figure on the new Bulgaria media market. Dimov, who owns a number of media outlets, including PRO.BG, also served as director of advertising for Bulgarian National Television (BNT) in the early 1990s, which as Antonova (2009) points out, conveniently coincides with Gergov's start in the advertising business as he managed to secure a large number of lucrative TV advertising contracts that jumpstarted his career as a media mogul on home turf. Interestingly, Dimov acquired TV2 from Gergov, transforming it into PRO.BG and selling it to the same media conglomerate that purchased bTV, a deal which Gergov is suspected to have moderated. Curiously, none of the information pertaining to Gergov's file was reported either on bTV or TV2 — a clear testimony to why people who own and control the so-called private independent media must come unburdened by lies, secret files and history of espionage (Hristov, 2010a). Other famous media moguls whose names also appeared on the list of collaborators of the secret services included Todor Batkov, owner of one of the first independent newspapers, Standart, as well as the current owner of the most popular soccer club Levski; Radosvet Radev, owner of one of the most popular radio stations of the 1990s, Darik Radio, as well as Krasimir Uzunov, owner of the news agency "Focus" and the founder of the BBT TV channel, Petat Madjunkov. In addition, as Hristov (2010c) reported, a check on the records of regional media owners also revealed that from the seventy-six examined media outlets, nineteen were owned by people whose names appeared in the annals of the secret police, for a total of 27 confirmed collaborators. This fact further demonstrates that the degree to which the network of secret files and their authors, who were either rewarded materially by means of

hefty honorariums or symbolically by receiving social privileges, such as the ability to travel abroad, were able to rise in the ranks of the journalistic profession and secure access to media and technical resources and know-how, unavailable to the Bulgarian population at large.

CONCLUSION OR WHY TRANSPARENCY MATTERS

The process of revealing the past of Bulgaria's top politicians, businessmen and women, and its cultural elite has become an exercise in "pin the blame" game threatening to become a never-ending saga. In fact, the latest developments demonstrate just how critical the need to address the lack of transparency in the top echelons of power has become. A December 2011 investigation by the Dossier Commission revealed the names of 218 ambassadors, deputy mission chiefs and consuls who collaborated with the communist regime's secret services between 1945 and 1989. These figures, simply put, demonstrate that over one third of the current ambassadors and diplomats, many of whom serve in prominent posts in European capitals and other major diplomatic institutions, such as the United Nations, were essentially intelligence workers for the State Security apparatus (Kostadinova, 2011). Under mounting public pressure and criticisms from Brussels, the Bulgarian Parliament, perhaps in a largely populist move to save the former government from facing an image fiasco, voted to recall the ambassadors whose names have been confirmed as collaborators of the secret services. What is even more, further leaks of secret files also showed that the current Bulgarian President, Georgi Parvanov, was also a paid intelligence officer under the alias "Gotse", although his actual file could not be located. And to prove that the secret past can never be forgotten, a June 2011 investigation also revealed that a number of prominent scholars, university professors and respected names in Bulgarian science, were also among those who have been regular collaborators of the state security apparatus.

The presence of such compromising information poses a threat not only to the reputation of the implicated politician, journalist, or scientist, but can potentially threaten the balance of the often volatile political status quo, hence, providing little or no incentive for the establishment to actually work towards a definitive resolution of the matter. And while the ramifications of declassifying the secret files of the political elite might seriously shake the foundations of the power structure, the question of the journalist spies and their secret past poses an even more complex dilemma. For one, it is precisely the responsibility of the journalist to investigate, reveal and disseminate the truth about the communist regime's transgression, no matter how inconvenient or politically comprising it might be. Moreover, in the age of Wikileaks and other means of revealing information previously hard to imagine circulating in the public realm, the role of the journalist as a beacon of credibility and objectivity becomes even more relevant and pressing. And because, as Alexander Kashumov, the attorney for the Bulgarian NGO "Access to Information" stated,

“only when one understands important details about his/or her past, can he or she make informed choices about his/or her future” (quoted in Antonova, 2009, p. 14).

The consequences for the journalist spies whose names appeared on the payroll of the secret service have been far from dire. Although their reputations might have been tarnished by the comprising facts, exposing the degree of their complacency with the communist regime, many of the journalist spies enjoy an active media career and continue to be considered among the most recognizable voices and faces of Bulgarian journalism.

The information which became available as a result of releasing the dossiers of media professionals also shows that these former agents not only had unique access to information, but also had access to virtually unfettered capital and technological resources, off-limits to anyone else outside secret service circles. Clearly, the people who had been essential minions in the structure of the secret state apparatus have had unprecedented access not only to opportunities the rest of Bulgarians could only dream of, but also had access to information, state infrastructure, and in many cases, a large influx of money, which incidentally served as initial capital to start many of the current media outlets that determine and define the political and cultural discourse of the post-communist transition. As Georgi Lozanov stated, “these very same people continue to occupy key positions in the entire public sphere, which indicates that the State Security apparatus has been successfully transformed” (quoted in Antonova, 2009, p.14). Essentially, the old communist spying machine has not been dismantled — on the contrary, in a quiet, yet highly efficient way, it has atomized and dispersed itself among the multi-layered cultural and political fiber of the transitional democratic society, while at the same time, making sure that no visible signs of this transformation could be traced down to its initial genesis. As Petar Volgin, a BNR talk show host argued, “This list only proves what has been widely circulating as an unspoken truth — that private media were almost exclusively founded by members of the secret police” (as quoted by Borisova, 2009, p. 5), demonstrating how the foundations of present day capitalism were laid, where media outlets were only part of the larger picture.

To their credit, it must be noted that many of the accused journalist spies have indeed admitted the possibility of existing secret dossiers, but have also offered what they deem as compelling arguments in defense of their decision to collaborate with the system. One such argument has been the “inevitability of the situation” — essentially claiming that if one wanted to pursue the journalistic career one loved, then he or she had no choice but to agree to have his/her name added to the list of potential secret service collaborators. Others, whose names were released with the initial report by the Commission on the Dossiers, have claimed that they were not even aware of the existence of these secret files (Borisova, 2009). Yet a third group consisting mainly of members of the new elite of media owners, has aggressively come out against the compromising information leaked out by the declassified secret files, arguing that their contribution has been misrepresented and in

many cases, has served as an intentional personal attack and an attempt at character assassination, rather than an exercise in coming to terms with the communist past. These same media owners, including Todor Batkov, owner of Standart News, and Petar Punched, owner of the first private radio station FM+, have argued that their work for the secret service has to be understood as having been carried out in the interests of national security, and not out of a need to personally trade favors with the communist establishment. In fact, Batkov released an open letter to the media in which he stated, “Every Bulgarian must be proud when he or she can contribute to the well-being of their motherland. And those who continue to lump together intelligence officers with pathetic little rats, must be ashamed of themselves” (quoted in Hristov, 2010b).

Ultimately, the debate surrounding the espionage past of many of the key media figures in the Bulgarian media boils down to the credibility and independence of the media outlets themselves. It is not a surprise, then, that the Bulgarian public is generally distrustful of the media outlets and the information they disseminate, and does not accept without a dose of pessimism the “fair and objective information” they provide. In fact, according to the latest public opinion poll, dated 2009, 76% of Bulgarians trust the media only to some extent, while only a mere 9% express full confidence in the media institutions (Angelova, 2009). In the meantime, while the public remains skeptical about the truthfulness and the independence of the news sources they consume, there is certainly no shortage of media outlets, which claim independence, reliability and professionalism — in fact, 104 TV stations, 91 radio stations, and 404 newspapers, to be precise, in a country with a population of less than 7.5 million people (Alpha Research, 2009). Ironically, the owners of these media outlets remain shrouded in secrecy and generally unknown to the Bulgarian public at large, while the calls for transparency in the origin of capital and the vested interests in media ownership remain buzz words for naming media awards and authoring reports, while calling for lasting change in the way media are funded, controlled and run in the post-communist transition.

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