

# Use of sources in newspaper coverage of the 2009 Bulgarian parliamentary election



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**ABSTRACT:** Although the importance of news sources is widely acknowledged in journalism and political communication, few studies have examined source use in election news reporting in Bulgaria. Based on a content analysis of the two national dailies with the highest circulation, the present study demonstrates that domestic politicians vastly outnumber other types of sources. In addition, election news articles rarely incorporate more than one news source, thus limiting the diversity of opinions in the press. Such coverage may potentially lead to a narrowing of the range of discussion about political issues and give national political elites the power to define the issues for the public.

**KEYWORDS:** sources, Bulgarian press, election news, political communication



## USE OF SOURCES IN NEWSPAPER COVERAGE OF THE 2009 BULGARIAN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION

The use of sources is of utmost importance in contemporary journalism (Cook, 2005; Manning, 2001; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Any news story has to rely on the viewpoints of one or more stakeholders in society in order to provide a complete report of what happened. In essence, news sources perform a number of different functions in the news-making process and as such have become an indispensable part of today's news. One of their primary functions is to provide verification that the news event did occur and thus enhance the credibility of the news (Manning, 2001). Even if a journalist cannot witness a particular event, they can rely on a personal account from another actor and offer a statement from a witness within the news story (Robertson, 1997). Using sources also plays a role in impartiality and protects journalists from potential accusations of bias: the reporter can take a neutral stance when covering controversial issues, but rely on various news sources to provide different sides of the issue (Donsbach & Patterson, 2004; Tuchman, 1978).

When working on tight deadlines, many journalists contact “expert” sources that they have an established relationship with to be able to run the story within the required time frame (Manning, 2001). Using credible sources is a must for journalists since the credibility of the source enhances people’s trust in the news report (Cook, 2005). Therefore, journalists commonly rely on authority figures as sources — for example, government officials, party representatives and NGO representatives (Manning, 2001; Sigal, 1973). These are considered authoritative sources and are generally perceived as credible because of their elite status, especially when covering stories about politics. Of course, the viewpoints of ordinary citizens are also valuable from a democratic standpoint (Bagdikian, 1997). Using multiple news sources in the news story allows the public to be exposed to diverse viewpoints about the same political issue or event. Based on the precepts of participatory democracy, providing the viewpoints of multiple stakeholders in society is desirable and healthy for democratic discourse.

The importance of news sources in political news coverage is well documented in journalism and political communication scholarship (Cook, 2005; Gans, 1979; Gitlin, 2003; Sigal, 1973). Of course, sources are just one of the factors that impact the shape, form and content of the news. As Gans notes in his classic book (1979, p. 145), “Sources alone do not determine the news... Neither do sources alone determine the values in the news, but their values are implicit in the information they provide.” Journalists who have a professional obligation to stay impartial cannot rebut directly what their sources are saying. However, the choice whether to include someone as a source within a news story lies first and foremost with the reporter putting the story together. As noted by Gans (1979, p. 117), “The source-journalist relationship is therefore a tug of war: while sources attempt to ‘manage’ the news, putting the best light on themselves, journalists concurrently ‘manage’ the sources in order to extract the information they want.”

Although the importance of news sources is widely acknowledged in the field of political communication, few studies have actually investigated the use of sources in election news reporting in Eastern Europe in general (Strömbäck & Kaid, 2008) and Bulgaria in particular (Raycheva & Dimitrova, 2008). Research coming primarily from the United States and Western Europe has documented that most of the time sources are the so-called “Knowns” government officials or elite sources with power and status in society. Typically, those elite sources appear in 70–85 percent of the news in modern democratic nations (Gans, 1979). On the other hand, ordinary citizens or “unknowns” tend to appear much less often (Dimitrova & Strömbäck, 2009). Yet, from the standpoint of representative democracy, it is generally recommended to provide multiple perspectives in the news in order to reflect the diversity of views in society (Bagdikian, 1997; Tuchman, 1978). In the U.S. media context, some have lamented the “growing gap between the number of voices heard in society and the number heard in the media” (Bagdikian, 1997, p. 67). The danger lies not only in the fact that the public will get used to a narrow range of ideas about

political or other issues, but also that the political elite will have considerable influence to define the issues for the public (e.g., Bagdikian, 1997; Gans, 1979; Gitlin, 2003). Partly to reduce the influence of certain sources, U.S. journalism professionals have adopted the so-called “two-source rule” where each news story must be confirmed and include viewpoints from a minimum of two different sources (Robertson, 1997). Presumably, this makes the story more reliable and allows for a more balanced news report. In addition, it limits the ability of elite sources that tend to dominate the news to frame public debate (Entman, 2004). Using more than one source also does, as mentioned above, increase the credibility of the news story while also protecting newspapers from printing false information (Robertson, 1997).

The present study examines the use of news sources in media coverage of the last parliamentary election in Bulgaria, a former Communist country and one of the latest EU members. We focus on the key players in the democratic process — the politicians, citizens, journalists and experts — and explore their relative dominance in news coverage. More specifically, we set out to investigate the following research questions:

*RQ1:* What are the dominant sources used in the newspaper coverage of the 2009 Bulgarian parliamentary election?

*RQ2:* Is there more than one source used in election news articles?

*RQ3:* Is there an association between article type (straight news, interview or feature story) and use of news sources?

## **2009 BULGARIAN ELECTION**

In July 2009, Bulgaria conducted its seventh post-communist legislative elections since 1990, under a modified electoral system. Since 1991, Bulgaria has used a proportional representation (PR system), where the share of votes that each party receives is translated into a similar share of seats in the legislature, the National Assembly. However, in April 2009, the electoral laws were modified to allow for a majoritarian element in allocating the 240 seats of the Assembly; 209 of those were filled using the PR system, while the remaining 31 (one for each electoral district) were allocated among parties using the majoritarian (first-past-the-post) system. Thus, the mixed electoral system while continuing to favor cohesive political parties with strong internal structures, also gave an advantage to personalities-based ones.

The 2009 elections were overwhelmingly won by Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB), a new political party led by Boyko Borisov, the popular mayor of the capital city, Sofia. GERB, established only in 2006, received close to 40% of the vote and was allocated 116 seats in the National Assembly. The second largest parliamentary group, Coalition for Bulgaria, led by the Bulgarian Socialist Party, gained only 40 seats, with 18% of the vote. Closely behind, with 38 seats and

14% of the vote, was the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS), a party largely supported by the ethnic Turkish population. The extreme-right, highly nationalistic party Ataka returned to legislature with 10% of the vote and became the fourth largest party with 21 seats. The remaining seats were distributed between two new political groups, the Blue Coalition (15 seats) and Order, Law and Justice (10 seats).

Thus, of the six parties that gained seats in the legislature after the 2009 elections, only three returned to Parliament, Coalition for Bulgaria, DPS and Ataka. National Movement Simeon, the Second (NDSV), which swept the 2001 elections and was in government for 8 years afterwards, under the new name of National Movement for Stability and Progress, received only three percent of the vote and no seats in the legislature. The 2009 elections also solidified the virtual disappearance from political life of the main political group that formed in opposition to the communist regime in the early years of democratic transition, United Democratic Forces (UDF). Even though one of its successors, the Blue Coalition, had 15 seats in the National Assembly, it lost close to 7% of the vote that UDF had in 2005, and became irrelevant in the right-wing spectrum of Bulgarian politics. Thus, the 2009 legislative elections resulted in the third restructuring of the party system in Bulgaria since the establishment of the new democracy. The parties that were relevant in the 1990s, BSP and UDF, were extremely weakened politically, and the main player during the 2000s, NDSV disappeared from parliamentary life.

While GERB won the highest number of seats in the Assembly, it still fell short of an outright majority necessary to form a government. Negotiations for a coalition agreement with members of the Blue Coalition, however, were not successful, and Borisov formed a minority government, composed 100% of GERB members. To pass the investiture vote through, GERB received the support of Order, Law and Justice and Ataka.

This unique combination of parties and the changing political climate in Bulgaria during the last election make it important and timely to investigate the election news coverage provided by the national press.

## METHOD

The study is based on a content analysis of the two Bulgarian dailies with the largest circulation — *Dneven Trud* and *24 Chassa*.<sup>1</sup> These two newspapers are read by the general public and allow us to see how the popular press (as opposed to specialized media) covers elections. Our analysis includes all articles published in the selected newspapers that focus on politics or the upcoming election. The time frame includes the two weeks before the 2009 Bulgarian parliamentary election — June 20

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<sup>1</sup> According to their Web site, *Trud* is the most popular national newspaper for at least the past 12 years (<http://www.trud.bg/AboutUs.asp>). See also <https://www.vgb.bg/bg-BG/AboutUs.asp> (Accessed June 28, 2011).

to July 4. Articles were manually copied from the archives of the Bulgarian National Library and include both weekday and weekend editions of the two dailies.

In order to answer the research questions posed above, we developed a comprehensive list of news sources that tend to appear in news coverage. These included domestic politicians, international politicians, ordinary citizens, media analysts/spokespersons for the media, non-partisan/academic experts, spokespersons for unions, spokespersons for business, and spokespersons for social movements/grassroots organizations, NGOs and international organizations such as the EU. Since many of these sources were almost never used, we collapsed them into a category labeled “other” and focused on the four most commonly used sources, namely the domestic politicians, citizens, media analysts/ spokespersons for the media and non-partisan/academic experts.

Domestic politicians are defined as news sources who hold a position within a Bulgarian political party and are identified as such within the story. In rare cases, the source may lack direct identification but is clearly known as a party leader and is coded as such. Ordinary citizens are sources who appear in the article not because of any special position they hold in society, but as a representative of the general public. Media analysts/ spokespersons for the media are defined as sources who work for a media organization but are different from the reporter publishing the story. Finally, expert sources include non-partisan or academic sources referenced in the article, such as political scientists, sociologists or public opinion company representatives. Each news article was coded for dominant news source, presence of more than one news source, and article type (straight news, interview, feature story or other).

## RESULTS

Using the procedures described above, 111 articles were retrieved from *24 Chassa* and 179 from *Dneven Trud*. Thus, a total of 290 articles provide the basis for our analysis.

The first research question addressed the dominant sources used in the 2009 Bulgarian election news coverage. Perhaps not surprisingly, domestic politicians were the main news sources in the vast majority of the articles. In *24 Chassa*, domestic politicians dominated above other sources in 68% of the stories. That percentage was even higher in *Dneven Trud*, where domestic politicians were present in 85% of the coverage.

There was some variation across newspapers in terms of which source came as a distant second: ordinary citizens were the second most dominant source in 5% of the articles published by *24 Chassa*, while media analysts/ spokespersons for the media were the dominant news source in 2.2% of the *Dneven Trud* articles. Media analysts/ spokespersons for the media were most prominent in 3.6% of the *24 Chassa* coverage. Ordinary citizens were the dominant news source in only 2% of the

election news articles that appeared in *Dneven Trud*. In both newspapers, non-partisan/ academic experts were the dominant source in just 2% of the election coverage. Table 1 shows the percentage each of the above categories was used in the two newspapers analyzed here.

What becomes clear from these results is that, by and large, domestic politicians were used as the dominant news source by both national dailies. The possible reasons for this finding and likely implications are discussed in the following section. To illustrate the dominance of official voices in the coverage we provide two examples.

Table 1. Source use by newspaper (in percentages)\*

Source	24 Chassa	Dneven Trud
Domestic politicians	68	85
Ordinary citizens	5	2
Non-partisan/ academic experts	2	2
Media analysts	4	2
Other	23	8

\*Percentages do not add up to 100 due to rounding.

A feature story published in *24 Chassa* on June 23, 2009, reports on President Purvanov’s visit to a Bulgarian archeological site. The story cites the president’s opinion that the majoritarian component of the electoral system (described in a section above) is not implemented very well. In the story, President Purvanov expresses his concerns that the selection of candidates to run in each district is too much under the control of the political parties. He goes on to say that the mixed electoral system would make it more difficult to form a government after the elections. This story is interesting (for researchers) for at least three reasons. First, it is remarkable that a report that claims to focus on a non-political cultural event quickly switches to the topic of the new electoral system. Secondly, the discussion of the electoral system is framed as a debate between the President and the political parties, but only the voice of the former is reflected. Moreover, the position of the President in Bulgaria is typically rather non-political, unifying and representing the entire nation, thus it is noteworthy both that Purvanov expresses public criticism of the political parties and that the newspaper reports on it. Lastly, and perhaps blatantly, the story does not draw on the views of academics or political analysts, for instance, to explain the broader implications of the mixed electoral system for the country.

The story described above is also covered by *Dneven Trud* in its June 23, 2009 issue. Again, the Bulgarian President is the only source included in the article and here, as in *24 Chassa*, he expresses critical views of the political parties. Having the same event be covered in such a similar way is indicative of the fact that the two news outlets use a similar approach of utilizing a single source when covering the

story; they even chose to include the same statement made by the President in their respective publications.

The dominance of politicians as news sources becomes reason for concern especially if their voices are the only ones provided in the media coverage. To investigate whether this was indeed the case, the second research question asked whether there was more than one source per article in the Bulgarian election news coverage. Here the results also demonstrate some strong similarities between the two national newspapers.

Figure 1 shows the percentage of articles where more than one source was used when reporting on political news prior to the 2009 elections in the two leading dailies, *24 Chassa* and *Dneven Trud*. Overall, only a small fraction of the 290 articles that are analyzed here utilized multiple sources in their reporting. Journalists publishing in *Dneven Trud* relied on more than one source in only 20% of their articles while an even smaller percentage of stories in *24 Chassa* used more than one source. Clearly, relying on just one news source per article limits the range of debate on any

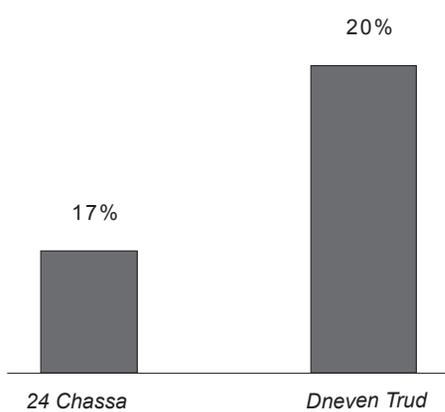


Figure 1. Percentage of articles with more than one source

political issue and cannot provide a representative picture of public opinion. Here are two examples that illustrate the limited and arguably one-sided coverage.

A news article from *24 Chassa* published on June 27, 2009, reports on the visit of the Bulgarian Prime Minister, and leader of Bulgarian Socialist Party, Sergey Stanishev to a pre-election meeting with constituents. The story focuses on Stanishev's speculation that if the front-runner, GERB, wins the election, they would have to form a government with the Blue Coalition (a successor of BSP's main political rival, United Democratic Forces).

Stanishev also predicts that GERB's leader, Boyko Borisov would then give the Prime Minister's position to the Blue Coalition's leader. Stanishev is the only news source used in the article. His views seem politically motivated and were most likely expressed to mobilize BSP supporters to vote for the socialist party. However, by limiting the voices to just that of the head of the government and leader of one of the main competing parties, the story comes out as speculative and biased. It does not include the views of BSP's supporters who were present at the meeting with Stanishev. The story also fails to follow up on the idea of post-election coalition government by approaching the leaders of GERB and the Blue Coalition, or by seeking the views of a political analyst.

Another example of an article with only one news source is a June 29 story from *Dneven Trud* that reports on a pre-election meeting led by the mayor of Sofia and

leader of GERB, Boyko Borisov. The main focus of the story is his statement that it is imperative that Bulgaria selects a woman as a Prime Minister but that he is not sure this will happen during GERB's government. There are several noteworthy aspects of this story. Although it was published close to a week before the election, it gives the impression that GERB has won and has been given a mandate to form a government. The story, however, does not refer to any poll numbers or public opinion surveys regarding election front-runners. It also lacks justification why the gender of the Prime Minister is relevant and what the implications for democracy and international standing are if Bulgaria votes for a female leader. Additionally, the opinions of female politicians or of women's organizations are remarkably missing.

These examples demonstrate that, in contrast to widely accepted U.S. standards of multi-sourcing and objectivity, Bulgarian election news reporting rarely included more than one news source per article. Taken together, the results of the first two research questions may lead us to believe that the one, often times official source used, was given more power and opportunity to frame the news as they wished in this particular election cycle (see Entman, 2004).

The last research question asked if there was an association between article type (straight news, interview or feature story) and the use of sources. Tables 2a and 2b display the results for each of the two newspapers.

Table 2a. Source use by article type in *24 Chassa*

Source	News Article	Interview	Feature	Other
Domestic politicians	64	73	70	75
Ordinary citizens	7	5	0	0
Non-partisan/ academic experts	1	5	0	0
Media analysts	3	0	20	0
Other	25	18	10	25

Table 2b. Source use by article type in *Dneven Trud*

Source	News Article	Interview	Feature	Other
Domestic politicians	87	79	75	85
Ordinary citizens	2	0	0	4
Non-partisan/ academic experts	3	3	0	0
Media analysts	2	0	0	8
Other	7	17	25	4

In *24 Chassa*, official sources dominated 64% of the straight news stories, 73% of interviews, and 70% of feature articles. Although there was some variation in the percentage of official sources used in *Dneven Trud*, there are again no clear-cut differences in source use across article types. Ordinary citizens were most common in 7% of the news articles and 5% of the interviews in *24 Chassa*. A similar pattern emerges for the other types of sources in the two newspapers, with one noteworthy exception: media analysts/ spokespersons for the media seem to appear more frequently in feature articles in *24 Chassa*. Due to the small number of observations, however, statistical tests for significant differences cannot be performed.

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The news media can influence both politicians and voters in multiple ways. By repeating what officials say however, as the present study has found, the media “influence by legitimating or providing a kind of aura to information simply because the information appears in a place that carries prestige and public legitimacy” (Schudson, 2002, p. 265). In other words, by relying almost exclusively on domestic politicians as sources, the news media provide legitimacy for the political elite and current power holders. Perhaps unwillingly, the news media may thus allow domestic officials to extend their own agendas (Wanta, 1997) and frame public debate in ways that are favorable to their own party or candidate (Entman, 2004). Such coverage may furthermore limit public discussion on political issues only to the ones the official sources want to address.

Certainly, heavy reliance on official sources is not uncommon for other democratic societies and there are important reasons why journalists frequently select official sources, including their productivity, reliability and authoritativeness (see Cook, 2005; Gans, 1979; Manning, 2001; Tuchman, 1978). The current study extends research on news sources to a post-communist context and shows that, similarly to media coverage in the West, the voices of domestic officials dominate national news coverage in Bulgaria as well. The implications of this finding concern both the Bulgarian public as well as news practitioners in the country.

From the audience perspective, if the media continue to provide predominantly official voices and continue to offer the opinions of the same government officials, this may limit the public’s exposure to diverse opinions and hamper people’s ability to comprehend the complexity of political issues. In effect, “stories then absorb the officials’ definitions of the situation” (Gitlin, 2003, p. 28) and the bottom-up perspective is missing. Furthermore, getting exposed to only a limited number of viewpoints may even lead to alienation and decrease people’s willingness to get involved in the political process. As Bagdikian (1997, p. 67) has aptly pointed out, “a public used to a narrow range of ideas will come to regard this narrowness as the only acceptable condition.”

The study also has important implications for political journalism in Bulgaria. It seems clear that the Bulgarian press, represented here by the two national dailies with the highest circulation, is far from following the U.S. standard of using multiple news sources in their election coverage. In fact, our findings indicate that the vast majority of articles relied on only one source in their news reporting. This is indicative of journalistic unwillingness or perhaps inability to provide quotes from multiple sources when covering the same story. It also suggests that, by and large, Bulgarian journalists have more control over election news content than their U.S. counterparts as they write the majority of news content and rarely include more than one external source. As Beleva (2010, p. 56) states, “[b]y publishing public speeches of government or political officials, the press is directly used as a means of transmitting influential political views and opinions without any journalistic critical observation or thinking.” That is not an uncommon perception among the general public and leads to questions about media bias and impartiality.

There is no doubt that Bulgaria’s media environment has undergone tremendous transformation in the last 20 years. Media are generally free of direct political control, have access to international news, and subject to the conditions of market competition (Raycheva & Dimitrova, 2008). The spirit of market reform has certainly permeated Bulgarian media as evidenced in the proliferation of media outlets (Beleva, 2010). It is estimated that there are close to 450 newspapers and magazines in circulation in Bulgaria, close to 100 radio stations and 200 TV stations (IREX 2010).

Yet, media reforms with respect to freedom of the press has resulted in little approximation to Western standards and norms. Ognyanova (2009) notes that while Bulgaria has a very high rate of compliance (99.77%) with European Union media legislation, the country still lags behind other member states with respect to civil society and regulatory oversight of the media. For example, the author points out that passing of legislation related to media regulation is extremely politicized in Bulgaria, and that “[i]n practice, the members of the regulator from the parliamentary quota are determined in the same way as Bulgarian ministers — after approval by the political councils of governing parties” (p. 35). Such heavy political influence over the agencies in charge of media regulation and oversight undoubtedly has an impact, even if involuntary, on the actions and reporting of journalists. Thus, the high reliance on government officials as sources in the leading Bulgarian dailies is hardly surprising when one considers the heavy politicization of media regulation in the country.

Ognyanova’s conclusion that in practice, the transposition of media norms and values that are consistent with Western standards is lagging in Bulgaria is confirmed by the annual reports on media sustainability published by the International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX). The index captures developments in the media environments of the transition economies in five areas, free speech, professional journalism, plurality of news sources, business management and supporting insti-

tutions. In the latest issue of the Media Sustainability Index in 2010, the authors note that Bulgaria has slipped in its scores to its lowest ranking in six years. While the country continues to rank relatively high in terms of access to international news and freedom of speech, the professionalism of journalists is on the decline. This tendency, combined with incidences of harassment and threats against journalists, as well as expert observations of journalistic self-censorship, would also explain why the media prefers to be cautious and to utilize primarily government sources for its reporting.

Whether these trends are new to Bulgarian election news coverage or have existed for a while has not been studied in a systematic manner. Therefore, future studies should investigate political news reporting in Bulgaria before 2009 and incorporate election news from the entire post-communist period in order to compare how the coverage has evolved over time. It is also important to examine how different types of newspapers, including party newspapers and specialized publications, portray political issues. Such studies would not only provide a comprehensive look at the state of political news journalism in the country, but also assist scholars in their understanding of voters' knowledge and attitudes in this newly established democracy.

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