

Viewing cable 09SOFIA304, BULGARIAN MEDIA: LACKING MONEY AND MORALS

If you are new to these pages, please read an introduction on the [structure of a cable](#) as well as how to [discuss them](#) with others. See also the [FAQs](#)

Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
09SOFIA304	2009-06-18 14:02	2011-05-03 12:12	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Sofia

Appears in these articles:

<http://www.bivol.bg>

VZCZCXYZ0012

PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHSF #0304/01 1691416
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 181416Z JUN 09 ZDK
FM AMEMBASSY SOFIA
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6086
C O N F I D E N T I A L SOFIA 000304

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/18/2029

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KCOR](#) [KCRCM](#) [BU](#)

SUBJECT: BULGARIAN MEDIA: LACKING MONEY AND MORALS

Classified By: Ambassador McEldowney for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Bulgarian media is highly manipulated and increasingly concentrated in fewer hands. Reporters and editors accept bribes to cover stories, to print propaganda articles as though they were news, and to not print information that sponsors do not approve. The media's cooption obviously limits its ability to serve as a voice for civil society. With elections for the national parliament around the corner, the consequences of concentrated media ownership and corrupt journalism are already on full display. Though some independent outlets are surviving, the public has largely lost faith in mainstream media and is turning to tabloids for diversion. End Summary.

¶2. (C) With the overabundance of both traditional and new media outlets, many cannot survive on advertisement revenues alone and are reliant on donors. The new local private media owners, who unlike their predecessors have no journalistic background, use the media to influence the public and promote their business interests through the selected release of information and targeted attacks. Among the more dominant players is the recently formed conglomerate New Media Group, which is speculated to own three national dailies and one weekly newspaper, one regional newspaper and one television station, with rumored plans to purchase another. The Group jump-started in the summer of 2007 with the acquisition of three papers, one of which, the Telegraph Daily, has become

the largest circulation daily with over 100,000 copies on Saturdays and 60,000-70,000 on workdays. The Group is rumored to belong to the circle of companies close to the current junior government coalition partner, the Movement for Rights and Freedom (MRF) political party. The reported head of the Group, Irena Krustova, is a former government official with no credible means to afford such an investment.

¶3. (C) Local media outlets regularly practice self-censorship and even have black lists of politicians and rival businessmen that are neither interviewed nor covered. The New Media Group recently printed the exact same article in all of its newspapers in apparent targeted attacks against its business and political enemies. The Group has resorted to this practice on at least two previous occasions, the January gas crisis and the April garbage crisis in Sofia. The national daily Sega and the Standart daily have been criticized for more subtly representing the interests of their business mogul owners. Similar trends are visible in television media, except at a much higher cost to business and political interests.

¶4. (C) By contrast, the German media group WAZ, which owns two daily papers, Trud Daily and 24 Hours, with total circulation of over 150,000 copies, is considered more focused on the bottom line. The emphasis on revenues has led to more sensational articles in both papers, lowering the overall quality. With the foreign owners' lack of familiarity and interest in the local political scene, the chief editors of the papers largely determine reporting on domestic politics. While these papers are not known to maintain blacklists, certain politicians receive clear preferential coverage, allegedly based on personal friendships with the chief editors.

¶5. (C) With the emergence of new media and countless short-lived papers, many mainstream papers complain that their readership has decreased. During the election season, editors say that readership typically drops further because readers "know" the stories are paid for. Companies reduce their advertisements and instead, act as intermediaries purchasing advertisement space for political parties. With the decrease in revenue and reporters, smaller papers sometimes resort to covering the news by watching television, which often offers sponsored news coverage. Though under strain, larger newspapers continue to have enough staff to cover major events. Privately, journalists say that political parties pay reporters, editors, and TV producers for interviews and news coverage, which appears without any financial disclosure. Political parties also openly sponsor papers, such as Duma (Socialists) and Ataka newspaper and TV Skat sponsored by the nationalist party Ataka, which are easily identifiable.

¶6. (C) Accustomed to manipulation of the press, the Bulgarian public has turned to tabloids for diversion. The print media market has been flooded with short-lived yellow

newspapers with anonymous owners. Mainstream editors allege that these owners operate in the gray economy, evading taxes and basic journalistic ethics. Because of murky ownership and the prevalence of unsigned articles the public has no protection against libelous stories printed in them. The tabloid weeklies, Weekend and Show, are among the most popular and influential papers, with total circulation over 450,000 copies. The expansion in readership has prompted even serious politicians to grant the tabloids interviews. Days before the European elections, the PM gave an extensive interview for Weekend promoting his party's ideas.

¶7. (C) Candidates across the political spectrum know how the game is played. Journalists described MRF's current strong play for media influence as part of a long-standing tradition of political figures investing in media when their power is challenged. The Socialists and the liberal-leaning King's party also have a well-established history of paying for press coverage. The opposition center-right parties (DSB and UDF) previously paid only for advertisements. In the past, GERB relied mainly on the charisma of the party's informal leader Boiko Borissov for coverage, who often called or texted journalists directly.

¶8. (C) Comment: Most Bulgarians get their basic news from TV, not papers. But, print journalism is the political opinion driver, and many TV news programs feature headlines and articles from the papers, extending their influence far beyond the circulation numbers. Overall, gray sector players and business practices are seriously threatening investigative journalism and media pluralism in Bulgaria.
End comment.
McEldowney