“Post-truth” politics, journalistic corruption and the process of self-othering: The case of Bulgaria

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*The poorest EU member-state Bulgaria also has the lowest press freedom ranking, significantly lagging behind all EU members, including neighbouring Romania and Greece. While “a laggard” in many respects, the country has leadership potential in at least one area: “post-truth” politics is not a new phenomenon. A prime example of its powerful impact was the ascent to power of the country’s former king whose promise to change Bulgarians’ lives in 800 days led to the electoral victory of his newly-formed political movement in 2001 and his subsequent appointment as Prime Minister. A 2016-2017 survey of Bulgarian journalists as part of the Worlds of Journalism study shows they have grappled for years with the kind of issues their Western colleagues have been lamenting about over the past few months – from covert collusions with political and business elites to a range of corruption practices such as bribes, “subsidised” smear campaigns and “sponsorships” of TV programmes in exchange for cover-ups. A resilience technique adopted by journalists is that of self-othering, which involves a strong condemnation of the “dire” state of journalism and distancing from the unethical practices that plague their profession without assuming any responsibility. This paper “unpacks” this process of self-othering.*

KEYWORDS Bulgaria; corruption; journalism; normative ideals; “post-truth” politics; self-othering; Worlds of Journalism study

**Introduction**

The Oxford Dictionaries word of the year 2016 was “post-truth” - defined as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief”. While Midgley (Oxford Dictionaries 2016) acknowledged that the term was not new, he explained that Oxford Dictionaries chose it because of “a spike in frequency this year in the context of the EU referendum in the United Kingdom and the presidential election in the United States” and its association “with a particular noun, in the phrase post-truth politics”. D’Ancona (2017) wrote that the “post-truth” era was characterised by a global trend of “a crash in the value of truth, comparable to the collapse of a currency or a stock”. It is an era “in which democratic orthodoxies and institutions are being shaken to their foundations by a wave of ugly populism. Rationality is threatened by emotion, diversity by nativism, liberty by a drift towards autocracy”, and politics is perceived as a zero-sum game (D’Ancona, 2017). While D’Ancona and his colleagues in Western established democracies have only recently begun to grapple with the full extent of this phenomenon, for their colleagues in non-democratic countries and the young democracies of Central and Eastern Europe this is not new.

The poorest EU member-state Bulgaria is a case in point. Bulgaria has the lowest press freedom ranking in the EU. It is ranked 111th out of 180 countries by Reporters without Borders, thus significantly lagging behind all EU members, including neighbouring Romania (44th) and Greece (74th). While “a laggard” in many respects, the country has leadership potential in at least one area: “post-truth” politics is not a new phenomenon. A prime example of the powerful impact of populism and “post-truth” politics was the ascent to power of former king, Tsar Simeon II, and his bodyguard Boyko Borisov. A 2016-2017 survey of Bulgarian journalists conducted as part of the Worlds of Journalism study shows they have grappled for years with the kind of issues their Western colleagues have been lamenting about over the past few months – from covert collusions with political and business elites to corruption practices such as bribes, “subsidised” smear campaigns and “sponsorships” of TV programmes in exchange for cover-ups. This paper explores how these developments have affected the work of journalists, their role conceptions and practices by focusing on the process of self-othering – a key resilience technique adopted by them. The process involves labelling the state of journalism as “sad” and “dire” and providing examples of unethical practices journalists engage in without assuming any responsibility for them.

**Populism and “post-truth” politics: the case of Bulgaria**

Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha or Tsar Simeon II ascended to the throne in 1943 at the age of six after his father died under mysterious circumstances. Following the 1944 communist coup, the regents were executed and a 1946 referendum forced Simeon II to leave Bulgaria. 55 years later in April 2001 he announced his decision to return to Bulgaria for good by forming a new political entity named after him – the National Movement Simeon II. His political aim was clear and ambitious – to win the parliamentary elections in June 2001. He promised Bulgarians he would change their lives in 800 days, and the majority believed him by voting for his MPs – by and large new entrants into politics.

Tsar Simeon II won the elections and became Prime Minister Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Cotha just three months after delivering his historic speech. He did not run for MP, thus “still nurturing the idea that he was the tsar of all Bulgarians, not a simple party leader” (Smilov 2008, 16). As Smilov (2008, 16) pointed out, “the sole source of mobilisation of the people behind Simeon II was personal – his personal charisma and historical legacy”. His victory was a prime example of the powerful impact of “post-truth” politics, stemming from a populist appeal to voters’ emotions and precluding the potential for well-informed decisions based on facts. His success was both unprecedented and logical. As Zankina (n. d.) wrote, “after a decade of political instability and economic hardship Bulgarians were overcome by transition fatigue, disillusioned with politicians, and impatient with the democratic process. They were looking for a savior.” They assumed they had found “their savior” in Simeon II – a king in exile they did not really know but decided to trust.

Simeon II’s “return to Bulgarian politics abruptly did away with the bipolar political model, marking the birth of populism in post-communist Bulgarian politics and legitimizing the personalist party model” (Zankina, n. d.). While his legacy in terms of legitimising populism and the personalist party model is undeniable, the very specific promise he made to “fix” people’s lives in 800 days haunted him for the rest of his rather short-lived political career. Soon after coming to power his government “cut back on many of the fantastical promises its leader made” (Smilov 2008, 17). Four years later his party lost the elections – his share dwindled to 21.83% and although his party remained in power as part of a three-party coalition, it did not pass the parliamentary threshold at the 2009 elections and all MPs lost their seats.

The party that won the 2009 elections was again a newly-formed one, led by Boyko Borisov - the former bodyguard of Simeon II and the last Bulgarian communist dictator - Todor Zhivkov. Borisov owed his own ascent to power to Simeon II who appointed him as Chief Secretary of the Ministry of the Interior in 2001. Borisov resigned in 2005 and became Mayor of Sofia after winning the elections as an independent candidate. In 2006 he formed his political party – GERB. As Smilov (2008, 18) pointed out, “GERB’s main resource was the personal charisma and appeal of its leader”. Although in the eyes of Western journalists, he looked “intimidating” with his “shaved head, thick neck and massive shoulders of a wrestler, which is what he was, long ago” (Higham 2009), in the eyes of his fellow citizens he became the most popular politician of the post-communist era, who is still running the country.

Zankina (n. d.) claimed that Simeon II’s and Borisov’s political parties represented “a new brand of populism rather different from the radical right-wing populism witnessed across Western Europe in the 1980s and 1990s” - a brand of “soft populism”, defined as “a challenge to the existing system of representation and mainly to the existing party system” (Smilov and Krastev 2008, 9). Although it “thrives on popular perceptions that the established parties are corrupt, that they form cartels and are alienated from the people”, it does not pose more “severe threats to the constitutional framework” (Smilov and Krastev 2008, 9). Both parties were “riding on big promises” that “had an effect on voting behaviour” because “voters became less mature in their choices, continuously looking for the next savior, and less patient with government performance, ousting incumbent governments and frequently switching party affiliations” (Zankina, n.d.)

Borisov did not simply learn from Simeon II by utilizing some of his populist techniques but his political career has been considerably more successful in large part due to the more effective relationship he struck with the media. As Smilov (2008: 19) wrote, Borisov was “to a large extent a product not of party life and party politics, but of media representation. He has an extremely fine sense for PR matters and manages always to be in the focus of media attention”. Moreover, he built a very productive relationship with media owners and editors, based not only on his charisma and effective PR but also on a complicated web of relationships between politicians, business and media owners (Slavtcheva-Petkova 2016).

While Bulgaria’s political future looks brighter than ever, the levels of freedom of expression and of the press have followed a contrasting trend. Bulgaria joined NATO in 2004 and the EU in 2007 and currently chairs the EU Presidency. However, its press freedom rankings have rapidly deteriorated over the past decade or so. Reporters without Borders placed Bulgaria 38th out of 139 countries in its first 2002 press freedom index but from 2007 Bulgaria’s ranking has significantly declined – from 51st out of 169 countries in 2007 to 111th out of 180 countries in 2018. Freedom House’s verdict is not as dire but there is still a noticeable negative trend. Bulgaria was ranked 55th out of 187 countries in 2002 but its worst ever rating was recorded in 2017 – 80th out of 199 countries. According to Freedom House (2004), this deterioration in press freedom started in 2004 when Bulgaria’s status was changed from “free” to “partly free” because of “increased government influence over public media outlets as well as a rise in the use of libel suits”. These negative trends were exacerbated by the recession and the withdrawal from the media market of foreign investors, resulting in job losses, mergers and shutting down of publications, and the advent of mini-Murdochs – local owners with strong political agendas (Hume 2011; Štětka 2012). As Štětka(2012) pointed out, Central and Eastern European countries had been “plagued by their own mini-Murdochs—and in these more fragile democracies, they represent an even bigger threat.”

**Role conceptions, identities and the process of (self)-othering**

How have these political developments, including the rise in populism and the emergence of the “post-truth” era affected the work of journalists, their role perceptions and identities? When exploring this question, the paper considers not just the extant theoretical framework on journalistic role conceptions underpinning the Worlds of Journalism project this survey is part of but also the literature on collective identities. Holton, Lewis and Coddington (2016, 850-851) rightly argued that “how journalists perceive their professional roles in society is a central area of journalism studies” but most studies on role conceptions are based on self-reported survey measures “at the individual level of media psychology”. However, “real journalism” (journalistic practice) is often different from “ideal journalism” (journalistic ideals), and the relationship between the two is somewhat understudied (among others, Slavtcheva-Petkova 2016; Holton, Lewis, and Coddington 2017; Mellado 2015). As the findings of this study will demonstrate, when discussing the state of journalism, Bulgarian journalists often describe negative practices and processes they disassociate themselves from. Similarly, Allan (2010. 37) talked of a culture of othering in everyday journalism practice and а “gap between the rhetoric of journalistic identity and its lived materiality in everyday contexts”.

Othering is an essential aspect of the process of collective identities. Sociologists such as Jenkins (2004, 23-25) described identity as a “unified model of the dialectical interplay of processes of internal and external definition” - the “self-image” and the “public image”. Weedon (2004, 19) clarified that this process “presupposes some degree of self-recognition on the part of the subject, often defined in relation to what one believes one is not”. Identity is not only about similarity but also about difference and othering – the existence of ‘us’ presupposes the existence of ‘them’. In fact, theorists regard difference as more important than similarity. Barth (1969, 15) emphasized the relevance of the social “boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses”, while Hall (1996, 4) argued that identities were “more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical, naturally-constituted unity”. Identity is a process – identities are not fixed, but at the moment of identification people acquire “a limited and temporary fixing” of “a particular mode of subjectivity’” (Weedon 2004, 19). Unpacking the balance of this ‘internal-external’ dialectic (Jenkins 2004, 18) is especially important in a context such as the Bulgarian one where journalism has undergone a series of rapid transformations that have made the process of identification very fluid.

This study reveals how these transformations and challenges have affected journalists’ role perceptions, their values and identifications. Unpacking those self-reported measures and attempting to uncover the societal processes that underpin them is of essential importance, because as Mellado (2015) pointed out, while roles reveal how journalists believe they should do their work, namely the normative ideal, their practice might actually be different. Furthermore, as Roudakova (2017, 217) argued in her book about Russia, “since journalism is linked to the pursuit of truth by definition, when journalism devolves, the value of truth-seeking devolves with it…but journalism is existentially threatened when truth-seeking begins to lose its appeal as a value – both for journalists and for society at large”.

**Method**

This article presents findings from a national survey of Bulgarian journalists as part of the 2012-2016 Worlds of Journalism study – a collaborative project, including researchers from 67 countries and over 27,500 journalists. The Bulgarian survey was conducted in 2016-2017. 928 out of a total population of 5800 journalists were invited to take part. 263 completed the online questionnaire (28.3% response rate, confidence level 95%, confidence interval 5.9%). The sampling method was purposive quota sampling of organisations and simple random sampling of journalists. The aim was to achieve a national sample of news media that reflected the structure of the media system – in line with the Worlds of Journalism study’s methodology. The indicators used were: media type, content orientation, reach and ownership. Of the 263 interviewed journalists, 64.6% were women, 75% held a degree from a graduate programme and 20.5% - a Bachelor’s degree. On average, journalists were 41.74 years old (s=10.40). The project received ethical clearance from the University of Chester and all journalists provided written consent.

In addition to the standardised questions asked in all countries, the Bulgarian questionnaire included a few questions about the state of journalism, corruption practices, changes since Bulgaria’s accession to the EU and ownership/transparency issues. This article is going to focus on two sets of questions: first, the standardized questions about journalistic roles and ethical orientations, which provide a useful point of comparison, and second, a few questions asked in Bulgaria about the state of journalism and corruption practices.

The two Worlds of Journalism (2012-2016) survey questions were:

1. Please tell me how important each of these things is in your work and then enlisting roles such as: be a detached observer, report things as they are, provide analysis of current affairs, monitor and scrutinize political leaders, be an adversary of the government; support national development, convey a positive image of political leadership, support government policy; provide entertainment and relaxation, etc. The five options were: extremely important; very important; somewhat important; little important and unimportant.
2. The following statements describe different approaches to journalism. For each of them, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree: 1. Journalists should always adhere to codes of professional ethics, regardless of situation and context. 2. What is ethical in journalism depends on the specific situation. The five options were: strongly agree; somewhat agree; undecided; somewhat disagree and strongly disagree.

The questions asked in Bulgaria were: 1. As a whole, are Bulgarian media free? 2. What is the state of Bulgarian journalism at the moment? 3. Have you witnessed any corruption practices in the Bulgarian media? If yes, can you please provide specific examples?

The quantitative questions were analysed by using IBM SPSS Statistics 22. Frequencies will be presented as an illustration of the trends. The qualitative questions were thematically analysed by using the constant comparison method. Thematic analysis is one of the most flexible methods of qualitative textual analysis, which “can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data” (Braun and Clarke 2006). The procedure included a few stages of coding – initial and then focused coding - with the aim of identifying and refining themes emerging from the data (Braun and Clarke 2006).

**Findings**

*Ideal journalism - Role conceptions and ethical orientations*

The most important role for Bulgarian journalists was to report things as they are – as many as 98.8% said this was “extremely” or “very important” for them, thus placing Bulgaria second out of the 67 countries in the Worlds of Journalism study. Other roles endorsed by over 80% of journalists were: educate the audience, be a detached observer, let people express their views, provide analysis of current affairs, promote tolerance and cultural diversity and support national development. However, supporting national development was not understood in the sense of supporting government policy or conveying a positive image of political leadership. The latter two roles were the least popular – only 3.5% said that to support government policy was “extremely” or “very important”, and only 2.7% placed high importance on conveying a positive image of political leadership.

Similarly, journalists showed a strong normative commitment to ethics. 97.7% said they agreed that “journalists should always adhere to codes of professional ethics, regardless of situation and context”, thus placing Bulgaria fourth out of 67 countries in support of this statement. Similarly, Bulgaria had the second lowest percentage of all countries of journalists supporting the statement that “what is ethical in journalism depends on the specific situation” – 24.3%.

Therefore, the patterns emerging on a normative level suggest a clear commitment to ethics and professional values such as impartiality and public service journalism. However, the additional questions demonstrate a noticeable discrepancy between journalistic normative ideals and journalistic practice.

*Real journalism – the current state of journalism and corruption practices*

When asked, “As a whole, are Bulgarian media free?”, only 1.5% said “Yes, fully” and 46.7% said “yes, partially”. The majority – 51.7% - said “no”. Journalists depicted a dire picture when asked “What is the state of Bulgarian journalism at the moment?” A few themes emerged with some overlaps between them. Overall, the majority described the state of journalism in negative terms and only 5.7% used positive language (words such as “good” or “improving”). The dominating theme was of crisis and decline. Some of the recurring words and expressions were: a complete catastrophe, a battle for survival, on the brink, at rock bottom, a landslide, dire, desperate, ill, tragic, worrying, sad, critical/crisis.

A journalist at a national daily newspaper highlighted the disjunction between ideals and practice: “Tragic, at the moment, journalism, the real one, the one we had dreamt of practicing, has categorically vanished.” A magazine journalist provided his interpretation:

One word – tragic. There is NO demand for quality journalism – either by society or by publishers. No resources and potential for professional development and positive recruitment. A very low level of trust in the media as a whole. Very low status (in terms of pay and prestige) of the journalistic profession. As a result – complete demotivation of the media workforce. A lot of the highest quality journalists have eloped to other professions. It’s a MASS practice for journalists to become PR professionals.

An online journalist, who also used the word “tragic”, said that “professionals are not valued and fast profits are sought at the expense of quality and ethics”. Another online journalist explained there were “no free media, most media are in the hands of one owner, there is complete censorship and deliberate propagation of yellow news”. A regional journalist wrote that the state of journalism was “not good” because “there is a lack of transparency of media ownership. There is a lack of objectivity. No abiding by the Ethics Code of Bulgarian media. Journalists do not receive decent pay. No respect for copyright. A lot of media are in the grey economy”.

A key reason cited for the dire state of journalism was the servile attitude of their colleagues and/or owners/editors and a general culture of “dependency”. 16.7% described the state of journalism as one of dependency and/or servitude, and this was the second most commonly recurring theme. А regional journalist wrote about “ostentatious political influence or pure servitude borne out of one’s own will (either as a result of or in anticipation of certain benefits)”. She said there was “no critical thinking”, and negativism and the lack of perspective were widely promoted by a focus on “bad and catastrophic news” and the idolising of “fake” heroes.

Another online journalist also discussed the detrimental impact of this culture of dependency:

Dire. Journalism is dependent on business, advertising and politics, which are intertwined in a very peculiar sphere, governed by monopoly. Bulgarian journalism is becoming duller in the same way in which society is becoming duller (due to the deteriorating literacy and the weaker role social and religious values play). There are very few media that fulfil their media tasks. A lot of “mailboxes”1 of all political parties and mafia men.

The negative role owners played was a recurring theme. A TV journalist wrote there were “increasing levels of censorship by media owners and a tendency towards devaluation of journalistic labour”, which made journalists “more easily manipulated”. A regional print journalist also mentioned low pay as a key factor. He argued that journalists received the same pay as “the women who collect the classifieds”. A TV journalist said journalists were financially dependent on corporations with questionable capital and as a result, there was “no freedom and no depth, and journalists do not defend the public interest”.

Professional and ethical standards were described as very low by 15.2%. When asked whether they had witnessed any corruption practices in Bulgarian media, 37.2% said they had, but only 13.3% of them admitted to having witnessed corruption practices in their own medium. 13.8% refused to answer this question, and 49% said they had not witnessed any. Common practices included: journalists being on payroll at other companies and producing PR materials; businessmen and political parties paying for “favourable coverage”; smear campaigns; paid trips/holidays; “subsidies” or funding by state and private entities in exchange for favourable coverage and/or cover-ups; bribes; hidden advertorials and a general intertwining of business, political and media interests.

Journalists gave numerous examples by also providing specific names. The examples illustrate these trends:

The whole transition period is full of examples. Political parties pay media organisations to secure their comfort. In 1997 in a provincial city, substantial sums were pumped up in a publication linked with the underworld. Today, its former editor-in-chief is a deputy minister, and before that the PR person of a political party. This is not a precedent. More recently, a former agriculture minister was pumping significant sums in {*two daily newspapers}* with the help of his media advisor and in exchange for prominent and favourable coverage.

It is about trading influence – the medium follows an information line which serves the interests of a person/political party and they then show their gratitude by giving them advertising contracts or sponsorship deals. Sometimes the link is less direct but the dependency is clear. The real owners of the big newspapers are not the ones officially registered as such.

I was sent to conduct an investigation about wrongdoings in a heating plant. I was tipped off by a big businessman. Later it became apparent the heating plant was a competitor. I received 2000 leva to “urge” people to talk. The Prosecution Office launched an investigation on the day of publication of the article. They used me and the media I worked for as an instrument in their battles.

The sacking of a {weekly newspaper} journalist because of an article criticising {a high-profile official}. I know from her and her colleagues working in publications toading to the government and to the Movement for Rights and Freedoms that they have lists of companies and people they have to write only negative stories about, or only positive stories about. These rules are strictly observed because daily checks and very strict control are carried out…Only culture editors, the authors of cooking recipes and the like have freedom.

**Conclusion**

Both when describing the state of journalism and the corruption practices they had witnessed, journalists condemned these developments but did not acknowledge whether and what role they played in them. They defined the ideal role they should be playing in opposition to the actual, largely negative, journalistic practices. It was incredibly rare for anyone to admit to taking part in these practices. Journalists’ verdict on the state of journalism was damning but they rarely mentioned, let alone critically reflected upon, their role in the process. Similarly, while distancing themselves from these practices on a normative level, the majority did not explicitly deny involvement in them. Hardly any pronouns were used and while some names of media organisations, owners, politicians and businessmen were specified, names of journalists were rarely mentioned.

The majority were highly critical of the state of journalism but very few admitted engaging in questionable practices so can the dire state of journalism be entirely attributed to external factors? Hardly so. It is difficult to say to what extent journalists were willing and active participants but it is clear they appeared to have engaged in a process of self-othering. They identified themselves in opposition to “what one believes one is not” (Weedon, 2004, 19), namely in opposition to the other (Hall 1996; Weedon 2004) but the other was not simply other journalists but the majority of journalists in Bulgaria as a collective and journalism as a profession – a collective and a profession they were an intrinsic part of. This process of self-othering was a key resilience technique adopted by journalists in their attempts to account for the largely negative practices that defined their profession and to ultimately explain the discrepancy between “real journalism” and the ideals they professed a commitment to.

Finally, journalists’ accounts suggest the era of “post-truth” politics has been anything but short-lived in Bulgaria. Populist promises and policies do not appear to have lost their appeal for voters even though 17 years have already passed since Simeon II’s broken promise to fix Bulgarians’ lives in 800 days. Rather than hindering or stopping the process, journalists appear to have fallen victims to it. The damage inflicted on their profession is undeniable. Journalists’ damning verdict on the state of journalism as well as their attempts to distance themselves from the way in which it is practiced demonstrate that journalism in Bulgaria has indeed hit “rock bottom”. Climbing out of this rock bottom is possible only if journalists themselves start acknowledging their own role in the process. Has the devolution of journalism led to “a society-wide erosion of the value of seeking truth and speaking it to power” (Roudakova 2018, 8)? Further work utilizing a wider array of theoretical approaches should delve deeper into this issue as well as into the link between ideals and practices.

**NOTES**

1. The term ‘mailboxes’ refers to the practice of journalists simply relaying messages without any fact-checking or questioning.

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