

## **The post communist “hybrid” tabloid – between the serious and the “yellow”**

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## **The post communist “hybrid” tabloid: between the serious and the “yellow”**

### **Introduction**

*24 Chassa*, fondly referred to as “the people’s favourite daily” and by the diminutive “*little Chasove*”<sup>1</sup> was hated by many but read by everyone as it became a powerful symbol of freedom of speech and the newly discovered power that the mass media could wield in Bulgaria’s post-communist society. The small tabloid format pioneered by *24 Chassa* in the early 1990s became an overnight sensation, and was gradually adopted as the default model for a daily newspaper by the whole newspaper industry in Bulgaria (Štětka, 2011). Its language is alternatively described by scholars and media critics as an “abomination”, “revolution”, “speech heresy”, “stammer”, “uncontrolled avalanche”, “anarchy”, or “aggression against language” (Spasov, 2000). However, it was *24 Chassa*’s use of everyday spoken language that was seen as a means of revolt by the press against the official “wooden” rhetoric of the socialist period. Yet, this romantic vision of *24* and its sister *168 Chassa* has also been tarnished by accounts that the two tabloids were products of a toxic political culture which rejected communism in favour of rampant capitalism, basing their products on “sensationalism, politically provocative articles, racy news with even racier imagery, nudity and misogyny as an indispensable strategy for success” (Ibroscheva, 2008, para. 11). With such highs and lows, these two newspapers warrant scholarly exploration.

### **Background and history**

The media of the communist era operated under Marxist-Leninist principles of the press where the only acceptable and objective truth was the viewpoint of the party. It was the party that decided what facts should be selected and how they should be reported (Monova, 2012). In that sense, media did not practise journalism but propaganda. Following the end of totalitarian regimes throughout Eastern Europe in the late 1980s, a genre-spanning newspaper-publishing boom has been documented as

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<sup>1</sup> The Bulgarian expression is “Malkite Chasove”.

one of the most significant phenomena on the road to democracy, with newspapers playing a central role in the making of peaceful revolutions that brought down communist regimes (Cheterian, 2009). In these early years of democracy, media in Bulgaria constructed and facilitated an “environment of change” by amplifying images of citizens’ discontent, of self-mobilisation, of choosing new leaders, strikes, protests and vital negotiations (Znepolski, 1997, 11). Liberated from the constraints of communist censorship most journalists eagerly embraced their new right to freedom of speech and expression, established by Article 39 (1) of the new Constitution adopted in 1991. Censorship was officially abolished by Article 40, which declared the press should be free and not subjected to any form of overt interference (Bulgarian Constitution, 1991). The development of a free and independent press and the birth of post-communist tabloid newspapers in Bulgaria followed three main trends.

Firstly, the removal of ideological communist censorship and restrictions allowed for the rapid launch of hundreds of new titles and the establishment of the commercial press model. The press changed from being highly ideological to becoming highly commercial (Daskalova, 2010). In 1990, there were 540 newspapers with a total circulation of 1,098,632 (Tzankova, 2018), an extraordinary rise from the eight main daily newspapers published in the period between 1949 and 1990 (Vulkanova, 1995). By mid-June 1991, barely a year after the revolution, there were 850 new newspapers in print (Monova-Paneva, 1995), each fighting for space in the market. While far fewer survived that initial press boom, the explosion of titles in the early 1990s coupled with the lack of strict regulation and the general ease in launching a media outlet allowed the press to flourish. From that moment the press became a business enterprise but it only reached its full potential in a tabloid format (Spasov, 2000).

The introduction of private media ownership in the press, and later in broadcasting, started a process of commercialization of the media in Bulgaria, paving the way for the first privately owned newspapers. Newspaper entrepreneurs quickly grasped that two of the most forbidden topics during communism, politics and sex, would also bring them the most profits. However, the euphoria of the newspaper boom created the illusion that control of the press had been removed, which was hardly the case. Instead, private ownership introduced new types of control and growing economic dependency (Monova, 2012).

Secondly, in the early years of democracy media began to play a central role in establishing and representing the newly emerged power elites responsible for political and economic governance. News media rapidly became agents of public communication and the centres of power struggles where hostile and open wars between the elites were fought (Roudakova, 2008; Dyczok, 2009; Gaman-Golutvina, 2009; Votmer, 2013). This is evident in the early rhetorical wars between the flagship newspapers of the socialist party and the democratic opposition, as illustrated in the next section. The idea of a free press was essentially enacted through the communist/anti-communist dichotomy on the pages of the party press.

Finally, while the media market was undergoing a rapid transformation, the lifting of all state restrictions on journalists' professional activities allowed scores of young journalists to enter the profession and embrace idealistic if naïve new norms of value-free objective reporting (Foley, 2006; Stewart, 2013). Learning by trial and error, they introduced and imposed a new model of writing, reporting, and professional practice that was a far cry from the essay-style, literary journalism of Bulgaria's past.

### **The party press – predecessors of the post-communist tabloid**

This early period of democracy is marked by the rise and fall of the organs of the political parties in Bulgaria. The two major party daily newspapers, the Socialists' *Duma* (Word) and the Opposition's *Demokratsia* (Democracy), were highly politicized along partisan lines but both managed to attract huge readerships. *Democratsia* was first published in February 1990 during the season it described as "the winter of our discontent" with the aim of giving a voice to all independent small dissident groups, unions, parties, and organisations that joined forces under the Opposition – the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) (Naidenov, 1995, 38-39). Erratic spelling of headlines, abysmal print quality, and poor layout, among other faults, became part of the "romance" and appeal of this first democratic Opposition newspaper. Its rough appearance stood in stark contrast to the polished pages of the former communist newspapers, which only reinforced the belief that communism was well and truly over.

*Democratsia*'s nemesis, *Duma*, has a much longer history. It was born in 1892, renamed *Rabotnichesko Delo* (Workers' Daily) in 1927 to, and from then on was the

main communist party organ (Tzankova, 2018). Post-communism, it faced an uphill struggle to transform itself from a newspaper where, as an old anecdote goes, the only true thing in it was the date, to a modern and progressive publication. The paper was re-born in April 1990 shortly after the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP) was renamed as the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) and rebranded as *Duma* with a new simple motto: “The Left Newspaper”. In a drastic makeover, *Duma* shed its normative image, removed all communist symbols from its masthead in its aim to appear as a modern newspaper, while staking a claim as the voice of the Left. *Duma* and *Democratsia* engaged in the first real and fierce polemic in Bulgarian journalism since the rise of communism. This enticed readers to buy and read the two papers in tandem, gripped by their heated daily exchange of unashamed insults (Naidenov, 1995), and rejoicing in political differences and open disagreements no longer being a reason to imprison people. *Duma* and *Demokratsia* remained among the three top-selling papers in the country until 1995 (Spasov, 2004) when, with the decline of the party press circulation, *Demokratsia* succumbed to a skyrocketing debt and closed down in 2002. *Duma* continues to be published as the organ of the Bulgarian Socialist Party despite its somewhat archaic format (Tzankova, 2018).

This period marks an important milestone in the development of Bulgaria’s media system. For the first time in decades, language, both political and everyday, was not being measured, controlled or checked. Newspapers actively encouraged pluralism of opinion and cherished opposing views. People and newspapers at that time exhibited symptoms of “word fever”, a peculiar illness that was brought by years of forced silence (Znepolski, 1997, 4). However, readers tired of the fierce rhetoric and endless political clashes, and soon a major change in the media environment came with the birth of the first commercial newspapers in Bulgaria, *168 Chassa* (168 Hours) and *24 Chassa* (24 Hours), and hundreds of newspapers that followed in their footsteps.

### **The 168 and 24 Chassa revolution**

The weekly *168 Chassa* was born in the spring of 1990, four months after the end of the communist regime, introducing Bulgarian audiences to a completely different newspaper design, style and content from its party predecessors. Its first issue boldly declared: “Tomorrow starts with us!” (Monova, 2012,105). It aimed to shock and challenge audiences with its uninhibited use of language and parody of the communist

past, unapologetically dispensing with totalitarian jargon and taboos. Journalists, scholars, and readers alike perceive it as the newspaper that laid the foundation of modern Bulgarian post-communist journalism (Ianeva, 2018). Hundreds of newspapers were being published at the time, yet despite being the most expensive, *168 Chassa* instantly became a market leader. Readers were drawn to its investigations, analysis, and reporting on Bulgaria's complex new political and social landscape. The newspaper was established by a group of journalists<sup>2</sup> who had been colleagues in the communist *Otechestven Front* (National Front). Indeed, the publisher Press Group *168 Chassa* is known as an “enterprise, founded and managed by former Communists” (Hiebert, 1999, 97). Several of its founders were leading journalists during communism and two of them were exposed as secret service informers in 2008 (Trifonova Price, 2015).

“I would not be surprised if ‘mini-newspapers’ become as fashionable as mini skirts”, proclaimed one correspondent of *168 Chassa* when pondering all the exciting things that its daily sister-in-the making *24 Chassa* would offer its readers (Naidenov, 1995, 78). On its debut on 18 April 1991, *24 Chassa* stood out like a black sheep on the news kiosks in its “mini” tabloid format among its long-skirted rivals. The newest creation of the Press Group, *24 Chassa*, radically transformed existing concepts of journalism and newspapers in post-communist Bulgaria, revolutionizing news. It was designed not as an elite newspaper, but a mass popular one. It proclaimed itself the “terminator of the press market” and the “newspaper of the new century” (Gotcheva, 2001, 7-8). Its motto, “a daily for the news as it is”, reflected the paper's aspirations to become a “mirror” of the new post socialist reality (Spasov, 2000). As one of its former editors notes, life in the country was radically changing and *24 Chassa* wanted to reflect that change (Iankov, 2001).

Panaiot Denev (2009), a senior Bulgarian journalist and former editor-in-chief of *Demokratsia* claimed to have been in the room when the concept of the paper was dreamt up, with a simple idea that had already been implemented in other countries, such as Greece:

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<sup>2</sup> Petio Blaskov, Veleri Naidenov, Radostina Konstantinova, Dragomir Vassilev, Emil Dimitrov and Vladimir Raychev were the founders of the company that published the two newspapers (Vulkov, et al., 2019).

This was the idea: you get on the bus in *Mladost 4* (a suburb of the capital Sofia), let's say bus number 306, you have bought a newspaper, 6 to 8 pages, at the lowest possible price. You get off in the centre of town and you've read it, you throw it away and you know everything.

The intention was to make a newspaper that fitted the established criteria for modern journalism in the West and to become “an opposition to power” (Ianeva, 2018, 14). By then the idea of journalism as a watchdog for society had reached Eastern Europe and was starting to take root. Yet, the newspaper's goal seemed more fundamental than simply reporting the news as it happened and keeping an eye on the government. It was on the pages of this new tabloid where readers could receive a daily dose of reassurance. Reassurance, and comfort, that fundamental principles and rights such as freedom of speech and expression, the right to information, and pluralism had become a permanent feature of the post-communist public sphere.

The minimalist approach to text meant that an entire newspaper's content could fit perfectly into half the space (or less) than any of *24 Chassa*'s competitors. With the high price of paper at the time, this meant *Chassa* was the cheapest on the market, costing two to three times less than its competitors. In practical terms, *24 Chassa* dispensed with the long-form journalism that other newspapers indulged in and insisted on clearly marked separation of fact and opinion, according to one of its founders and first editor-in-chief Valeri Naidenov (2009). It managed to uphold the value of factualness of news reports throughout its development and has been classified as providing information, rather than conveying an interpretation of a given fact or statement, offering opinions, or evaluations (Wessler et al, 2008; see also Monova, 2012). However, this emphasis on facts is said to have drowned readers in text and minute details on the public and private lives of those in power. *24 Chassa* focuses on who, when, where, and how, but fails to ask the most important question of “why?” (Monova, 2012). In the decade since 2010 (when it was sold by its foreign owners) *24 Chassa* has been drawn to the frontline of media wars and questions such as why corrupt and incompetent officials in positions of power often remain outside the scope of its daily coverage.

### **The 24 and 168 Chassa phenomenon**

*24 Chassa* has been a dynamic and organic phenomenon not only in the history of the Bulgarian press but also in Bulgarian culture (Naidenov, 1995). While media critics have argued over key issues such as its news values and agenda, the reliability of its sources and the potential for hidden opinion in its news stories, it goes undisputed that *24 Chassa* was radically different from any other newspaper on the newsstand at that time. The key to its significance is rooted in three important developments in newspapers in Bulgaria at that time.

Firstly, by early 1992, less than a year after its first edition, the small format enjoyed huge popularity, its success signalling the end of the era of dominance of the party press. Secondly, up to that point the press had not seen such determination to focus on news and only news, without commentary and pompous language. *24 Chassa* ensured the stories it published were value-free. Thirdly, it aimed to stand above the political bickering of the parties and to be viewed as impartial – presenting all viewpoints equally in contrast to the one-sided coverage of *Duma* or *Democracia* (Naidenov, 1995). As its first editor-in-chief Valeri Naidenov (2009) claims, “We managed to push aside the party press by offering readers exactly the opposite in content that was actually interesting and not concerned with those vying for power”, adding “Prior to 1989, all newspapers were impossible to read and reeked of decay but only five years later, they were completely transformed – every issue was interesting, lively and full of joy”.

At first, the public trusted the newspaper wholeheartedly. In 1992-93, the levels of trust among its readership were unprecedented with between 70 per cent and 80 per cent of active newspaper readers trusting the newspaper (Tomov, 2001). From 1992 to the present, *24 Chassa* has been among the top ten dailies in Bulgaria.

*24 Chassa* is regarded by media scholars as a “hybrid”, leaning toward tabloid content. Bulgarian scholars have differentiated between two types of tabloid newspapers in the post-communist landscape – the “hybrid” and the “typical yellow” (Spasov, 2000, 53-54). Hybrid tabloids combine elements of both tabloid and quality newspapers, of serious and popular, even scandalous, reporting, but they tend to identify themselves as serious, quality newspapers (Spasov, 2004; Štětka, 2011). *24 Chassa* has also been characterized as a “broadloid”, a term used for those newspapers that copy the style of tabloids while retaining some elements of



broadsheets (Wessler et al, 2008). Hybrids contain serious analysis and features, often as full-page articles, written in accessible formats. They dedicate significant space to international news and opinion and while the focus on sensational content is still there, its presentation is much softer than in “typical yellow” tabloids (Spasov, 2000). This combination could be explained by the lack of distinct social classes after the fall of communism, with the hybrid having to cater to all types of readers. This hybrid tabloid format holds a central place in the Bulgarian press system and is the format of the Bulgarian transition; one of its most important features is the ratio between information and analysis, containing an average of 70 per cent information and news and 30 per cent analysis, comments and interviews (Monova, 2012). Hybrid newspapers such as *24* and *168 Chassa* continued to thrive at the expense of quality titles, which struggled in the 1990s and have had a very limited presence in the market since 2001 (Spasov, 2004), a prime example being the quality newspaper *Sega* (Now) ending its print edition in December 2019, moving online to keep costs down.

The features of the “typical yellow” tabloid is very much like its Western counterparts with the following characteristics: more aggressive language, content dominated by sex and crime, less attention on politics and more on sensational news, little international news, and images and content that can be described as soft porn (Spasov, 2000). They tend to be weekly and mostly cover “unchecked gossip and scandal about celebrities and popular figures” (Štětka, 2011, 7).

### **Leading the pack**

From four pages, the daily *24 Chassa* quickly jumped to eight, then 32, then 64, and then the profits rolled in. It became financially successful because advertisers were clamouring to get their messages into the pages of the daily and its weekly sister *168 Chassa* (Hiebert, 1999). This played a significant part in both newspapers’ growth, as substantial profits allowed them to pay for good journalism. Its reporters quickly became famous for their critical questions and investigations and the steady revenue from advertisers in these early years helped *24 Chassa* avoid having to accept payments and bribery from politicians; “we had more money than they did at the time”, said Naidenov (2009). Journalists and scholars agree that *168 Chassa* also conducted some landmark investigations (Lozanov, Spasov and Iankov, 2001). Its exposé, “Isle of Man – The golden chest” (1994) revealed the offshore accounts of

Bulgaria's banking industry, specifically the missing funds from Biochim Bank. Its journalists exposed a well-used scheme to export East European capital to anonymous offshore companies; so-called "red" money obtained in dubious circumstances or privatization deals. The newspaper is also famous for its series of investigations into the shady privatization process of former state-owned resorts along the Black Sea, and has brought to light several banking scandals over the years. During such investigations, especially in the early years of democracy, many of the press group's national and regional reporters and correspondents were regularly harassed and beaten in the course of their work, either by crime figures or by local barons. Despite several complaints and attempts to get the authorities to intervene, nothing was done to protect them or find the perpetrators (Naidenov, 2009). Reporters often paid a price for their work.

*24 Chassa* was a pioneer in introducing Bulgarian readers to media campaigns, exemplified by its 2005-2006 "patriotic" national campaign for readers to nominate and vote for 24 "wonders of the motherland" (Vaglenov, 2007, 37). The campaign was developed in response to a Swiss initiative to select the Seven Wonders of the World in which 19 million people voted worldwide. Only two Bulgarian "wonders" were nominated but they did not make the final cut so *24 Chassa* invited its audience to show their patriotic side by nominating and voting for places that "make readers proud to be Bulgarian", encouraging foreign visitors to see them. Readers responded with hundreds of nominations and a final list was compiled with help from historians, archeologists and on the basis of the highest number of nominations received. (Vaglenov, 2007, 38).

Another campaign that *24 Chassa* participated in took a more sinister turn. In 2007, two academics, Martina Baleva and Ulf Brunnbauer, planned to speak to a conference in relation to the Batak massacre. Described as "one of the most horrendous acts in its history" (Rowlands, 2009), in 1876 the Turkish army killed 5000 Bulgarians, men, women, and children. Once news of the talk trickled out, a large number of Bulgarian media outlets alleged the academics were denying the existence of the massacre and claiming the number of victims was exaggerated (Roth, 2010). Coverage of the conference talk sparked a wave of outrage and a media campaign against the researchers spearheaded by *24 Chassa* and rival daily, *Trud*. The campaign included

publishing strong views of prominent historians and public figures, the Prime Minister, and the President, condemning the event as anti-Bulgarian and as a sharp provocation to the dignity of national history (Roth, 2010). Following the openly hostile campaigns, the event was cancelled and the European Commission issued a stern warning to the Bulgarian authorities to take action against the people who sent the two researchers death threats. Eventually Bodo Hombach, the managing director of the WAZ Newspaper Group that owned the newspapers at the time, admitted that the *24 Chassa* and *Trud*-led campaign was “a mistake” and that WAZ would learn from it (Rowlands, 2009).

### **Adversaries or allies to power?**

With its rapid rise in popularity and influence, in the 1990s the new Bulgarian press came under government pressure and attempts to control its narratives. The press responded by becoming an open rival to all political parties in. Hostility manifested in its scathing populist criticism towards those in power and in the language of its news. As an example, its 1997 coverage of a protest outside the Bulgarian Parliament, which saw protesters break inside, was headlined: “Crowd breaks Parliament” with the subtitle “Crazed people attack the MPs’ castle” (Znepolski, 1997, 116). Through descriptions of violence and damage to the cars of MPs, the restaurant, and the National Assembly building, depicted as “castle”, the newspaper presented a view of contempt towards those in power as having removed themselves from the rest of society, including those attacking parliament. This is typical of the hybrid tabloid, which *24 Chassa* exemplifies by discursively promoting itself as a mouthpiece of the public while simultaneously positioning the public as being ignored by politicians (Spasov, 2004). In essence, *24 Chassa* embodies the successful uprising of the masses against the elite (Krastev, 2001). The use of manipulative textual mechanisms and phrasing that indicates the revolt of the masses, and their distrust in the authorities, aims to reinforce the public’s trust in the paper’s own version and description of the unfolding events.

This type of language also fostered a predominantly negative attitude and cynicism towards politics altogether, and *Chassa* adopted a decidedly aggressive macho narrative (Lozanov, 2009). The slogan “they are all the same and they are all bad” became a common refrain for many newspapers, including *24* and *168 Chassa*. This

included pattern in headlines and articles alluding to male politicians as sexual predators, illustrating social tensions with highly charged innuendo (Znepolski, 1997). Poor people are often “ridden”, “screwed”, “victim of predators”, with “naked behinds”, while politicians’ actions are presented as a sexual threat towards the public (Znepolski, 1997, 87). Such discourses allowed the newspapers to create a systematic, creative, and persistent illusion that it is intolerant of those in power while at the same time deeply concerned with the lives and suffering of ordinary people. In their desire to curry favour with the public, and demonstrate independence, they continuously criticised “corrupt” and “incompetent” authorities. This is a common trend in Eastern and Central Europe where the “often vicious treatment” of governments contributed to perceived public disillusionment with politics and institutions (Jakubowicz, 2003, 239).

While the focus was on adversarial journalism in the mid 1990s, the newspaper was also not exempt from serious mistakes that cost it a significant amount of trust among its readership, and by the end of 1994 trust had plummeted, with only 26-27 per cent trusting the daily, and 24-26 per cent distrusting it. This trend continued until 1997 when trust fell to 21 per cent and distrust jumped to 40 per cent (Tomov, 2001). It seemed that *24 Chassa* had taken its finger off the pulse of the nation and missed the rising wave of political discontent with the socialist government it had been tacitly supporting at the time. This loss of trust has been attributed to its unethical, openly partisan, support of one of its own publishers, Ventsislav Yosifov, who had been nominated by the Bulgarian Socialist Party to be mayor of Sofia. For the first time since its launch, *24 Chassa* resembled a party organ, putting it in conflict with its more liberal or right-wing readers (Iankov, 2001). A turning point in the campaign to drum up support for Yosifov was the decision of the president of the *168 Chassa* Press Group, Petio Blaskov, to publish *compromat*<sup>3</sup> on the opposition candidate the day before the mayoral election; in this case, a fake copy of his Communist Party membership record supplied by the Socialist campaign office. The fake record was presented to journalists at a press conference organized by supporters of Yosifov. However, most journalists present saw through the attempt to manipulate the election and agreed not to report on it. Only *24 Chassa* did, and the following day it was

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<sup>3</sup> *Compromat* from Russian is short for compromising materials timed and published with the aim to destroy a political or business rival’s reputation.

inundated with angry letters and phone calls from its readers, according to one of its former editors Rossen Yankov (2001). The newspaper's dominance in the market ended with the decision to publish the fake record (Nikolov, 2009).

However, there is general agreement that in its approach to power, *24 Chassa* largely served its readers' interests apart from a few "excruciating" moments (Lozanov, Spassov and Iankov, 2001, 72). Both *24 Chassa* and *168 Chassa* have carried out watchdog reporting on state institutions and demonstrated an important role of practising non-partisan journalism in times of political turmoil (Raycheva and Petev, 2003).

### **The "street" language controversy**

The language of the new post-communist press, including language found in *24* and *168 Chassa*, has been the subject of much attention by Bulgarian scholars (e.g. Monova-Panova, 1995; Znepolski, 1997; Zambova, 2000; Spassov, 2000; Getsov, 2009; Monova, 2012). It has been described as direct, intentionally rude, negative, often marked by a nasty streak, full of barbaric, cynical words, the language of the nouveau riche simpletons, and the angry poor (Znepolski, 1997). The change from the formal, dry, boring language of communism was so significant that Bulgarians living abroad often could not understand the meaning of headlines on first reading (Balotova, 1996 cited in Spassov, 2000). After 1989 the way people talked to each other was transferred to the pages of the press and helped to establish a new journalistic language of the transition period (Spassov, 2000; 2010).

When *24 Chassa* entered the market in the spring of 1991, it broke language norms and grammatical conventions, especially in its headlines, and simultaneously attracted readers like a magnet while repulsing language experts. Academics bemoaned the state of the Bulgarian language being "torn apart" by the media (Panaiotov, 1995, 14), with foreign words said to be invading and drowning the "pure" Bulgarian language (Semov, 1995, 18). In its first issues, *24 Chassa* drew readers' attention through "a small language scandal manifesting itself in breaking habits and irritating good taste", which became a weapon in the fight against newspaper competitors (Znepolski, 1997, 80) and a clear statement against elitism.

However, the editor-in-chief of *168 Chassa*, Petio Bluskov (2009) disagrees with scholars' assessments:

Our language was not the “language of the street”, it was the language of the people. The people were longing to read in that language and we, as journalists, were longing to write in it. [...] we wanted to write and read it because it was forbidden for over 40 years, it just did not exist.

Adopting everyday speech including common slang was another act of opposition to communist-type official media language, seen as too ideologically and politically charged. Newspapers of the early 1990s were proud of the fact that they had broken the language barriers and emulated the language of their readers (Lozanov, 2010). While it served to connect journalists with their audiences, it contributed to the establishment of two types of story narratives in *168*, *24 Chassa* and others: the “black” and the “yellow”.

“Black” narratives include stories about the criminal elite or *Mutri*, Bulgaria's former top wrestling champions, who found themselves out of work at the end of the regime and began organizing themselves into criminal gangs. Lozanov (2010) argues the press legitimized the new powerful criminal elite by providing just as much coverage of criminals as of legitimate public figures. This led to the permanent inclusion of the criminal elite as part of the powerful of the day. “Yellow” tabloid narratives focus on the hierarchy of money and lifestyle, in which criminals became very important and their crimes forgiven and accepted by the public as part of life (Lozanov, 2010; see also Daskalova, 2013). However, *24 Chassa*'s editor-in-chief Valeri Naidenov has argued that the readers did not want to read about official meetings, they wanted to read about Ivo Karamanski's<sup>4</sup> release from prison. “We are slaves of our readers”, he claimed (cited in Getsov, 2009, 120).

Alongside serious coverage, *24* and *168 Chassa* indulged their readers in lengthy, vivid features about notorious and wealthy crime figures, turning the shady figures of the transition into urban legends. Readers of a certain age would still remember the life stories of Krokodila, Mechkata, Lisicata, Italianeca, Margina and Madzo. This is a particular strength of the tabloid press – to create myths and legends that appeal to a

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<sup>4</sup> Notorious crime figure from the 1990s.

mass audience (Monova, 2012). While by all accounts the reporting was often accurate and based on official police sources, the image of the underground world recreated by the newspapers through criminal slang was like a mafia movie about bad guys or “the big bosses” that had earned respect for their actions and power. Reporting on the latest crimes and arrests showed their evil as well as their human, and weak side. Their lives were mythologized in a constant narrative in which their families, descendants, mistresses, and enemies featured heavily (Daskalova, 2013). The lives of these figures were surrounded by mystery and gossip while their often untimely or dramatic murders further amplified coverage. Crime was presented as a game in which criminals famous politicians and legitimate business actors all participated, painting a colorful picture of a lawless society in the early days of the transition.

Today, *24 Chassa* continues to use everyday spoken language, slang, and words that breach the main ethical code for the press; for example, by stating the ethnic background of the people it reports on (Tzankova, 2018). Crime reporting of murders, attacks, theft and so on remains the second biggest topic in its daily coverage, after current national and political events (Vulkov, et. al., 2019). While Bulgarian journalists working for “hybrid” newspapers have often been accused of disregarding professional standards, it can be argued the early excesses of this genre, such as publishing explicit sexual images verging on pornography on front pages, crass language, and the obsession with mafia bosses and their lifestyles, served to test the limits of the newly acquired freedom of speech and expression. The territory where freedom could be fully demonstrated and achieved was at the level of language. Excessive and vulgar language was also lucrative since it generated maximum profit in minimal time while removing the need for journalistic effort and specialist training (Spasov, 2004).

## **Journalists**

The staff of *24 Chassa*, fondly referred to “as our people”, are an important part of the mythology of the newspaper (Naidenov, 1995). The revolution in language, for instance, was carried out mainly by those young journalists “with the linguistic experience of youth culture – subversive and undisciplined by definition” (Spasov, 2004: 56). For those journalists who entered the profession in the early 1990s, the

author of this chapter included, the environment and not the university was their best tutor. The policy of *24 Chassa* and most of the press to hire young and inexperienced people during this period had a twofold effect: on the one hand, young people learnt and reproduced “street” speech well, which helped the media sell more copies; they quickly learnt new skills on the go, and talked about issues freely and without inhibitions. On the other hand, first and second-year journalism undergraduates did not have the necessary experience to analyze events in depth, nor were they able to evaluate them critically, a skill that is acquired after years of professional and life experience. The shortage of older and more experienced journalists required to write serious and quality content was felt acutely in the media environment throughout the transition (Daskalova, 2010). Scholars have also lamented the deficit in general knowledge in the majority of Bulgarian journalists and their “linguistic illiteracy” (Monova, 2012, 80).

## **Conclusion**

If there is one thing that the newspapers *24* and *168 Chassa* can be described as without causing a controversy, that would surely be as an antipode of the old, state controlled, press of the communist era. In many ways, and despite their numerous flaws, both have become a type of “drug”, a “drug” that dulls the horror of readers’ tacit knowledge of a complex and difficult reality that they have to navigate alone. *24 Chassa* offered entertainment and emotional authenticity as a way of dealing with the harsh reality of the transition. Readers became addicted to the “linguistic freedom” that *24 Chassa* offered, its uninhibited expression, reinforcing the illusion that the newspaper said things that otherwise could not be said (Spasov, 2001). The tabloid had a recipe for everything and while it didn’t give a reason or looked for logic, it was always suspicious and knew whom to blame on behalf of its readers (Monova, 2012; Krastev, 2001).

The pages of the two newspapers allowed a multitude of voices to be heard, voices that shaped the new democratic political order, rhetoric and discourse. Since their debut and despite numerous setbacks, *24* and to some extent *168 Chassa*, have dictated the main trends in the development of the press in Bulgaria. Whether they were branded as heroes or villains in public life, often accused of populism, undermining institutions, servitude to power, and other sins, they remain an important



factor and institution in shaping public opinion in Bulgaria. They were pioneers in changing the post-communist press landscape, revolutionised news and created the model of popular, accessible-to-all daily newspaper, in a form that Bulgarian readers liked and wanted to read at the end of the century. Despite the criticism, the two newspapers are an accurate historical record of the state of Bulgarian post-communist society, its soaring highs and dangerous lows.

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