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Resignation or resistance, Bulgaria's embattled press hesitates

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Bulgaria was ranked 59th out of 173 countries in the latest Reporters Without Borders press freedom index, lower than any other member of the European Union, which it joined in January 2007.

The press freedom situation has worsened considerably in the past two years. The murder of columnist and author Georgy Stoev in the centre of Sofia in April 2008 and a savage attack on Ognyan Stefanov, the editor of the *Frog News* website, by men using hammers in September recall the dark days of 1990-95 when gangland "mutris" (thugs) made it clear to journalists they were not to attack the foundations of a system that had integrated organised crime into the market economy.

Revelations in August 2008 that the State Agency for National Security (DANS) was tapping journalists' phones highlighted the new techniques being deployed by politicians and organised crime, replacing the brute force of the "mutris" by more discreet forms of corruption and news manipulation.

There are no taboo subjects in the strict sense of the term in Bulgaria, but political and business stories are not easy to cover. Journalists still resist the pressure to censor themselves in the capital but they often capitulate in the provinces.

This was the background to the Reporters Without Borders visit to Bulgaria to meet the press and those who have not yet abandoned the attempt to get Bulgaria to conform to the democratic standards to which its people aspire.

BULGARIAN JOURNALISM – FLAWS AND IDIOSYNCRASIES

Bulgaria emerged from more than four decades of centralised news control and censorship when Todor Zhivkov's Soviet regime collapsed in 1989. Twenty years later, the country has many national and regional publications. *Trud* and *24 Chasa* (*24 Hours*) are the

two most popular and widely distributed dailies. The daily *Sega* is growing in importance but has yet to pose a threat to the daily *Dnevnik* and the weekly *Capital*, the two newspapers of record.

The other newspapers are tabloids based on the German and British models. *Express*, *Monitor* and *Politika* are the most widely-read ones. Free newspapers such as *19 minutes* and *Za Grada* are beginning to appear in Sofia.

Bulgaria has one public TV station: *Chanel 1*. It has few viewers and suffers from a lack of technical resources that prevents it from competing with the two main commercial TV channels: *Nova TV*, owned by the Modern Times Group (MTG) and *BTV* (owned by Rupert Murdoch's News International). The Economedi group launched a new channel, *Replay TV* (*RE:TV*), in late 2008.

Behind this relatively conventional façade, the Bulgarian news media are subject to constant pressure. The influence of the parallel economy, organised crime and an often corrupt political class compound a lack of professional training.

Influence of politics and grey economy

The fall of the Soviet system was not accompanied by the fall of its elites. The opening of the communist era archives, approved in 2006 in order to facilitate entry into the EU, showed that the Bulgarian political class is largely comprised of former officials and heirs of the Zhivkov regime.

Relations between politicians and press continue to be marked by this legacy, which favours secrecy and a culture of silence. Politicians for the most part seem to think that the press is still in the "service" of the state and national identity. Investigative journalism is hailed when an opponent is the target, but it becomes defamation when one's own political camp is affected.

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Although still wooed for the services it can provide, the state continues to be weak. It has gradually given way to intermediate organisations that exploit their position and their networks to divert public funds earmarked for reconstruction to personal benefit. Bulgaria has evolved from a strong communist regime to a modern feudalism, but without any real change of actors. The former oligarchy invested massively in the privatisation of the Bulgarian economy at the start of the 1990s and took control of all the key sectors such as energy, construction, natural resource management, transport, telecommunications and real estate.

The media have been no exception. A 1998 law bans any former National Security official from holding a managerial level position in the media, in the media regulatory body or in news agencies such as the state-owned *BTA*. The reality is quite different and it is not uncommon to find news media being run by former National Security directors, former officials in powerful ministries or former intelligence officers who funded their investments from contraband. Many of them make no secret of their past and even hold it up as evidence of their patriotism.

These new tycoons see the media as just a way to further personal enrichment through the possibilities they offer for influence or extortion. The new media owners are now part of the privileged power circle whose members often wage battle with each other by means of media campaigns. A form of blackmail that is quite common among the popular newspapers is to charge for publishing favourable stories. Packages combining advertising inserts and positive coverage are an integral component of the practices of some media. It explains how certain well-known people or companies can be praised and decried with equal conviction in the same week in the same publication.

Some newspapers use the threat of publication in order to blackmail, inviting prominent people to buy advertising space at the top rate to avoid being exposed or criticised in upcoming articles. Such practices are especially common at election time.

DANS loses its way in “Operation Gallery”

If you had to characterize the impact that the political class and organised crime has had on press freedom in Bulgaria, the scandal affecting the State Agency for National Security (DANS) since September 2008 would be a textbook illustration.

Created in January 2008 to combat corruption and organised crime and hailed by European officials as one of the few examples of concrete progress made by the Bulgarian government in the fight against corruption, the DANS is now at the centre of scandal that has discredited it.

Answering directly to Prime Minister Sergei Stanishev and headed by Petko Sertov and his deputy, Ivan Drashkov, the DANS launched a major investigation in August 2008 to track down the origin of important leaks, many of them to the European authorities. The DANS also wanted to identify those responsible for the *Opasnite* website (<http://opasnite.net63.net>) on which a range of classified documents had been posted, some of them involving senior politicians and DANS members.

The DANS arrested Yorgo Petsas, the young administrator of the *Frog News* website (Frognews.bg), on 5 September 2008 on suspicion of posting documents on *Opasnite*. Released after seven hours of interrogation, Petsas refused to make any comment. The *Opasnite* website was closed down the day he was arrested, but bloggers and the Anna Politkovskaya Association (<http://politkovskaya-bg.blogspot.com>) reactivated the site at a new location (www.opasnite.eu) using Google caches and several Bulgarian blogs that had stored information posted on the original site.

But the scandal was not just about the *Opasnite* investigation. The Bulgarian parliament's Internal Security Commission carried out an investigation into the DANS and, in its findings, issued on 30 September 2008, reported that it had tapped the phones of many parliamentarians and journalists as part of an “Operation Gallery” that had been launched in August on the orders of the director, Sertov. This was supported by the statements of some

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of his subordinates in the reports of unclassified hearings that were posted on *Dnevnik's* website (<http://www.dnevnik.bg/show/?storyid=559302>) and in the daily *Trud*.

Some sources claim that the Bulgarian government, alarmed by the growing number of leaks to the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF), ordered the DANS to conduct "the broadest possible investigation."

Far from being over, the DANS scandal has left many questions unanswered. Is the DANS tapping journalists' phones in its search for the origin of the leaks? If so, is the aim of this tapping to identify their sources and to silence them? Can phones be tapped without obtaining the consent of the DANS management? If so, how is that such an agency could so easily escape the control of those in charge? And finally, why is the DANS so interested in *Opasnite* if the information posted on it was so "mendacious and uninteresting"?

The media job market is booming in Sofia but on the whole journalists are badly paid and this makes some of them more receptive to "business gifts." Journalism to order is not the general rule, but it is not uncommon. Journalism is not a prestige job, journalists are often regarded as little more than the mouthpieces of their employer's business interests, and most of them still have little training. Some universities now have a journalism faculty but few of the people currently working as journalists graduated from them.

The Union of Bulgarian Journalists – the official union – adopted a code of professional ethics with international support. But implementation is virtually non-existent and the union has little credibility within the media. It claims to have 4,500 paying members but its main source of funding are hotel complexes on the Black Sea and in the mountains, a legacy of the communist era. It also publishes a weekly called *Pogled (Insight)*, which is not widely distributed.

Jurgen Roth, a German journalist who has written several books about organised crime, devoted his latest work, *The New Bulgarian Demons* (published by Sluntsé, Sofia, 2008), to Bulgaria's underworld and the way the various

components of the so-called grey economy fit together.



Cover of Jurgen Roth's book

When he came to Sofia to present the book in November 2008, he was greeted with threats of prosecution by Bulgarian Socialist Party parliamentarian Vasil Antonov and former interior minister Rumen Petkov. The latter did not just threaten lawsuits. The 11 November issue of *24 Chasa* quoted

Petkov as saying of Roth: "The liar, the slanderer, the spineless swindler must be hit in the mouth, the hands and all parts of his body."

More surprisingly, the most virulent criticism of the book came from journalists in the leading state-owned media. *Trud* columnist Kevork Kevorkian said Roth should be "tarred and feathered." Georgi Koritarov, the host of a morning current affairs programme on *Nova TV*, ignored the substance of the book and just challenged him to reveal his sources, reminding him that he was in "the studios of a serious TV station, in a serious member of the EU, and not in a remote province at the other end of the world." The comment prompted Petkov to offer Koritarov his "congratulations" for "saving the country's honour."

The legal environment in which the media operate continues to be very poorly defined. It is still marked by the Soviet era and judges, who benefit from the system's endemic corruption, show little appreciation for investigative reporting.

Some significant progress has nonetheless been achieved thanks to the work of the *Access to Information Programme (AIP)*. A foundation created in Sofia in October 1996, the AIP is a coalition of journalists, lawyers, economists and sociologists who have managed to get several laws guaranteeing access to public information adopted – no small feat in a country dominated by a corrupt state apparatus.

The AIP also campaigns for freedom of expression and every 28 September awards prizes to journalists and other citizens who

have made a significant contribution to free expression or in their use of the new legislation.



The Access to Information Programme Trophy

AIP director Alexander Kashumov is rightly proud of what his organisation has achieved but he is also aware of the limits on the application of these laws. “The government and institutions continue to be opposed to this policy of transparency,” he said. “The courts also resist what in fact would represent a real revolution in their customs. In the end, the application of these laws is only possible in Sofia. Unknown or poorly applied, they do not circulate in the rest of the country, where the courts have little independence. I sometimes also wonder about the lack of interest shown by news media, as these laws would enable them to go further with their reporting. The successes that have been achieved can be attributed more to the determination of a few individuals than the entire profession, which ought to be leading the way in this fight.”

TWO LEVELS OF PRESS FREEDOM

Relative freedom in Sofia

As the 2008 Transparency International report confirms, Bulgaria is the EU's most corrupt country. The subject is not taboo in the press. Maria Nikolaeva, who used to work

for *Politika* and now works for *Express*, has done investigative reporting into corruption. But not without risks. She is used to getting phone and email threats. A few weeks ago, she got a letter from someone held in a Sofia prison telling her very clearly to stop taking an interest in his business. A crudely-drawn sword left little doubt as to his intentions if she did not comply.



Maria Nikolaeva in her Express office

Nikolaeva was shocked by the murder of Georgy Stoev, a columnist and author of several books on organised crime in Bulgaria. He wrote articles for *Express* and allowed it to publish extracts from his books. He was gunned down on 7 April 2008 in one of Sofia's busiest squares.

Stoev was a former gangland member who had abandoned criminal activity and turned to writing about his underworld experiences, sometimes naming gang leaders. Nikolaeva said his murder signalled an increase in the level of violence. “Not longer ago, they disfigured journalists by throwing acid at them,” she told Reporters Without Borders. “Now they have moved to murder. It has not yet become generalised and I hope it stops there. But it is a very clear sign.”

The Internet has unquestionably become a place where people can express themselves freely, but it has also made it easy to send anonymous messages, which Nikolaeva gets regularly by email. “Whether it's a text message or some kind of picture, the message is clear – shut up!” she said.

Nikolaeva says she has temporarily suspended work on about 15 stories for fear of reprisals. “I work on them from time to time with a view to having them published one day. I dee-

ply regret this impotence. Reluctantly, I have ended up censoring myself. I catch myself taking care with what I write almost unconsciously." She nonetheless adds that she cannot imagine ever abandoning what for her is "more than a job."

The tone is less alarmist and more confident at the weekly of record *Capital*. Editor Stanka Tosheva is a member of the older generation who readily recognises that practising journalism was impossible under Zhivkov. "But since 1989 I have always felt free to write what I want," she said. "It is true that there were a few difficult moments in 1995 when threatening phone calls became more frequent and more insistent. Such 'wise advice' was offered above all in connection with stories about the grey economy and major crime cases."

When *Capital* ran a story about the proven links between former interior minister Rumen Petkov and organised crime members, Tosheva was summoned for questioning by the police but it went no further. "This kind of reaction is all part of the job and often proves that we were right," she said.

In general, the staff of *Capital* are able to work freely and without constraint. The weekly has opted for a team of young journalists. It was a deliberate choice and the newspaper is proud of it.

Rosen Bosev covers domestic politics at *Capital*. He is young, perhaps too young in the eyes of those who are used to seeing an older generation in charge of political stories. But he is respected by his peers and by his newspaper and has won several journalism prizes. He also won the AIP Prize for his use of the freedom of information laws.

Like his colleague Ivan Mihalev, Rosen is of the view that there are no subjects that cannot be tackled, except the major crime bosses involved in drug trafficking and prostitution. *Capital* gives him a free rein and he uses it. *ble sont rares.*"

Bosev has three mobile phones. But in his case, it is not extravagant, it is professionally necessary. "I don't feel threatened but I am no fool," he told Reporters Without Borders.

"Phone taps form part of the obstacles to my work. Changing numbers is a way to cover my tracks. It also enables me to diversify my sources and offer them different channels of communication."



Rosen Bosev at *Capital*

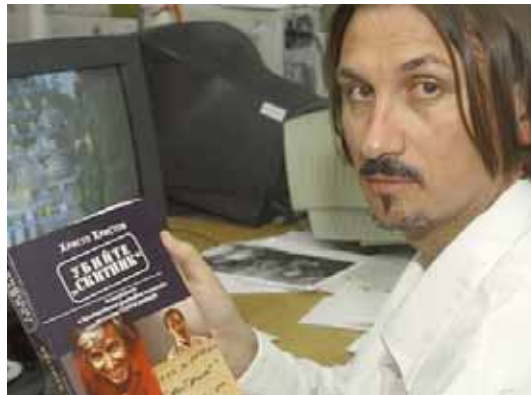
Between two calls, he recognised that the lack of interest readers show in some of his stories sometimes induces a degree of weariness in him. "It may seem surprising, but people have got used to this kind of thing, to corruption and political scandals. We often confirm what they already know, but we also break lots of new stories. Although they are essential, they do not always get the attention of our readers, who rightly or wrongly think they will not make a lot of difference."

Capital is just a few metres away from *Dnevnik*, Sofia's daily of record, where Hristo Hristov works. It was Hristov who established how Georgi Ivanov Markov, a Bulgarian journalist and writer who defected to the west and worked for *Deutsche Welle*, the *BBC* and *Radio Free Europe*, came to be murdered in London by a Bulgarian intelligence agent using a poison-tipped umbrella on 7 September 1978. Hristov began in 1999 to patiently reconstruct the case and told it in two books (<http://hristo-hristov.com>).

Hristov thinks that the opening of the former pro-Soviet regime's archives and access to public and classified information should be the priority for Bulgarian journalists. "It is not about waging a witch-hunt but understanding that our current leaders, ministers, judges and business owners have a past that can influence – not always positively – important decisions in key areas of our society," he said.

"Newspapers tend to focus on the more sensational aspect of the scandals and do not investigate the causes or the contradictions in people's behaviour. Analyses and overviews are rare."

Hristov very logically gets a lot of reaction from the authorities he keeps investigating. "I am not subject to any internal pressure in *Dnevnik*," he said. "I write what I want and how I want. It is from outside that the contrary winds blow. But obviously, I first of all find out how the people I am going to write about are likely to react. Some limit themselves to threats. Others are liable to go further. My apartment was broken into three times from 1999 to 2001. I was in a different apartment each time. The last time, the break-in came three days after a documentary about Georgi Markov was broadcast on a national TV station. They stole my computer, my phones and other equipment."



Hristo Hristov at *Dnevnik*

Hristov always keeps backups of his work in several places, but the burglaries have caused him significant financial losses that have imposed limitations on him.

The threats got more specific a few months ago. The people who live opposite him on his floor received a visit from unidentified individuals who advised them to tell Hristov to stop appearing on TV or the apartment block would be bombed. "*Dnevnik's* editors were worried and very supportive towards me," he said. "They wanted to send me out of the city for a few days. I stopped writing for a week and kept a low profile. But it is impossible to live and work like that. These risks are part of the trade. You have to cope with them."

Hristov has taken protective measures. His latest apartment is located over a shop that is permanently open. He has had his fixed line disconnected so he is no longer disturbed in the middle of the night by people who want to give him "advice." And he has taken other measures to afford himself a bit more peace.

Barren hinterland

While journalists can still work more or less freely in Sofia, the situation is a lot tougher for their colleagues in the provinces, who enjoy little press freedom.

There are many local newspapers but they are directly controlled by powerful individuals who maintain close ties with local officials. Provincial cities are usually under the thumb of a single party or coalition that almost never changes. It is not uncommon to seek mayors, local politicians, judges, prosecutors, police chiefs and organised crime leaders sitting together at the same table in a restaurant.

None of Sofia's dailies has a real network of local correspondents, not even *Capital* or *Dnevnik*. This is not by preference or because of financial constraints, but because it is simply very difficult or impossible to find a local correspondent ready to tackle the kind story that is normally covered in Sofia.

The methods of putting pressure on the local press have modernised. The fines for press offences are greater than the ones for money laundering. Local judges with close ties to big business and political barons do not hesitate to fine journalists 4,000 or 6,000 euros in libel cases. It is easy to understand that this does not encourage investigative reporting on the part of local journalists with an average monthly salary of 300 to 400 euros.

As in many other countries, advertising plays an enormous role in the financial viability of the local or regional press. A newspaper can quickly go bankrupt if a few companies decide, even if only temporarily, to withdraw orders for publicity inserts. The resources of local organised crime are diversified and its networks are very influential. It is hard in these

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circumstances to clearly identify which stories are better avoided.

It is the government's job to combat corruption and carry out the reforms required by the EU but the press can and should play a vital role. Some of the country's journalists are actively trying to fulfil this role and to expose the system's flaws. It is absolutely essential that their efforts receive support from European institutions. They also need support from the European media which provide little coverage of Bulgaria.

Journalists as a profession must break with the existing system of patronage and combat the media's use as tool in the service of business interests, which is completely incompatible with its mission of providing news and information.

The overhaul of the judicial system required by EU entry should also be applied to media law. Protection of the confidentiality of journalists' sources and the decriminalisation of press offences should be priorities for the government. There needs to be a permanent dialogue on these issues involving all those concerned. There is also an urgent need for the implementation of these reforms in the provinces, where they can no longer be delayed.

The freedom allowed on the Internet must be maintained and guaranteed. The closure of websites and the harassment of those posting online are not encouraging signs and must not be tolerated in an EU country.

Bulgaria is worrying its European partners more and more, to the point that some of the aid programmes have been blocked or frozen. Its politicians need to rise to the occasion of the European elections in June 2009, when clear, public commitments must be given that the press will be allowed to work in an environment that meets democratic standards. The media coverage of these elections will test the reality of these commitments and the will to carry out reforms.

Finally, the authorities must shed light on the State Agency for National Security's practices. Tapping journalists' phones is unacceptable, especially if it is done with the aim of suppressing their sources of information.

Only if this is done will Bulgaria emerge from the current paradoxical situation in which the political and business elite is working solely to preserve its own interests while the population wants to break with the past.

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Investigative journalism is not encouraged in the Bulgarian provinces and some people would like to see its last practitioners start censoring themselves like everyone else. Assen Yordanov is one of the few hold-outs. He is like a UFO in the media world of the Black Sea city of Burgas, negotiating political pressure, judicial traps and gangland ambushes.

Reporters Without Borders (RWB): What is your view of the current press freedom situation in Bulgaria?

Assen Yordanov (AY): Paradoxically, I think the situation is more difficult now than in the 1990s. It has worsened during the past 15 years. I don't think there are any really free and independent news media, with the possible exception of *Capital* and *Dnevnik*, which are like a ray of sunshine in an otherwise leaden sky. The function of most media is either to serve the business and political interests of their owners or, especially in the case of national radio and television, to execute an editorial policy set directly by the government.



Assen Yordanov

RWB: How can one work as a journalist in such a situation?

AY: (Smiles) Journalism in Bulgaria is like doing a Super-G slalom on a snowboard... you twist and turn and avoid the obstacles! There is a very centralised media policy in Bulgaria but spaces open up from time to

time. I chose not to join the staff of any news organisation. I am a freelancer. This allows me my independence. I try to get my stories and my investigative pieces published in various media, according to the possibilities. This is a choice that allows me to have a degree of freedom and to have more, and more varied, sources. But financially it is much tougher and more uncertain. But I don't do journalism in order to become rich. It is a passion, a commitment. My independence is a my luxury, and it is a rare privilege (smiles).

RWB: How do you account for the fact that staff reporters don't do the same kind of investigative journalism that you do?

AY: Three reasons. This type of investigation requires access to specific sources. Belonging to a newspaper cuts you off from some of them. You need them, and they can be more easily handled. Secondly, you need training. Investigative journalism is a trade. You need experience and a certain degree of professional ethics. And finally, you have to have the desire and the courage to do it.

RWB: You have been a journalist for more than 20 years. What kinds of threats have you received?

AY: I will give you three examples. When I was at *Politika* (in February 2007), I worked with Maria Nikolaeva on a very big corruption story linked to the construction of apartment complexes in Bulgaria's biggest ecological reserve located at Strandja (on the Black Sea). Aside from the financial profitability of these complexes, construction is one of the preferred sectors for money laundering. Major works began in the reserve without any permit being issued. It covered an area of more than 110 square kilometres. The construction suddenly became legal because the region's judges so desired. After the first part of our story was published, several "mutris" came to *Politika* headquarters holding a copy of the newspaper bearing the National Assembly's special stamp. [Only newspapers distributed

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within the National Assembly carry this "Not for sale" stamp.] They threatened to throw acid at Maria if the second part appeared. I also received my share of "kind words."

Very clear photos of the faces of our visitors were obtained from the security cameras at the entrance to *Politika*. We also got the licence number of their car. All this was handed over to the police. But neither Maria nor I was called to give a statement.

I was returning to my home at about 7 p.m. on 20 December 2007 in Burgas when, at a distance of about 10 metres from my home, I saw a man coming towards me. He did everything possible to block my way. As I was trying to get past him he tried to stab me. I managed to grab his hand to make him let go. I was then hit several times on the back with a steel bar. I fought as best I could and finally my assailants gave up.

RWB: Do you know why you were attacked?

AY: No, it is not easy to identify the causes with so much precision. I write about a lot of people. Many of them are upset... At the time I was researching a story that I had not yet written. Perhaps it was a "warning" to make me stop. That is very often the sole aim. The police opened an investigation but it went nowhere. You know, no real attempt is made to find the perpetrators of this kind of attack. Those who resort to this kind of procedure have sufficient resources to ensure that the people in authority stop an investigation of this sort, which is defined as an ordinary "altercation." Impunity is the norm in Bulgaria. And not just as regards the press.

RWB: What are the sensitive subjects, those that cannot be tackled, or not without consequences?

AY: There are many of them, unfortunately. The two most sensitive ones are corruption involving senior judges and prosecutors and

corruption involving interior ministry officials. But the number of such subjects is growing in the neo-feudal society in which we are currently living. I have several stories or investigative pieces prepared on this subject but I don't know when I will manage to have them published.

RWB: You often have great difficulty in getting your investigative stories published. Why don't you do it through a website?

AY: The Internet could be an alternative, but it does not lend itself to everything. In Bulgaria, the Internet is mainly a medium for young people, and they are focused on other things. Furthermore, there are still many regions where the Internet does not exist. I don't deny what it may represent in the future, but I don't think it has enough influence to change Bulgarian society. This change still, and above all, requires television, radio and print media.

RWB: The picture is rather negative. How can the situation be improved?

AY: Our main chance is our entry into the European Union. It is probably the best thing that has happened to us in more than a century. The EU means the obligatory introduction of European laws and standards into our legislation, subject obviously to our controlling their execution and application. The biggest challenge is reforming our judicial system, which is without doubt the most corrupt sector. Eighty per cent of the current judiciary is tied to the business and political oligarchy. But the European Union must diversify its sources of information. We are ready and willing to help in this domain.

For many of us, the European Union is the only way that Bulgaria is going to free itself of its links to the former Soviet Union and Russia. The still every active impact of these ties cannot be underestimated. There is even a risk of Russian Trojan horse being introduced into the European Union.

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THE FROG NEWS AFFAIR

This is a bad time for the *Frog News* website. It is not the company's financial situation that worries its 15 employees, it is the attempted murder of its editor, Ognyan Stefanov, and the *Opasnite* scandal.

Alexandre Ivanov joined *Frog News* at the age of 38 after working for many years for the print media and TV (seven years for the national TV channel and two years for *Nova TV*). He is now its deputy editor. When he met Reporters Without Borders he was still under police protection. He was being watched by policemen who sat in the next room during the interview. Other bodyguards provide his home and family with round-the-clock protection, which the authorities gave him at his request. Ivanov has had to change his lifestyle. He restricts his movements to the minimum and now hardly ever leaves the office. When he does, policemen accompany him everywhere.



Fresco in the lobby of the *Frog News* office

Reporters Without Borders (RWB): You have had police protection since the attack on Ognyan Stefanov. Have you received threats?

Alexandre Ivanov (AI): Yes. Three men dressed in black and wearing hats came and rang my doorbell at around midnight on 15 October. They advised me to be "prudent." Earlier that day, the newspaper *24 Chasa* had

published the first interview with Ognyan Stefanov since the attack. I am not saying there was a cause and effect relationship, but you could see it as a second warning to our website. It is never very easy to understand the exact reasons for this kind of threat. I requested police protection and it was granted. I hope this will be temporary and that I will soon be able to resume a normal life.



Alexandre Ivanov

RWB: Many people have linked the attack on Ognyan Stefanov and the threats you have received with the *Opasnite* affair. What do you think?

AI: You should never rule out anything but I don't think that what we are experiencing now is directly linked to that case. We saw a very strange website appear in August 2008 with the name of *Opasnite* – "Dangerous Information." The site published top-secret documents with a lot of strange information. Some of it was nonetheless interesting and even if only 10 or 20 or 30 per cent of it is true, this 30 per cent is dangerous. The information concerned such matters as the DANS (the State Agency for National Security), the president, and corruption linked to companies.

A letter was posted on our website forum a few days later that supposedly carried the signatures of *Frog News* owners Ognyan Stefanov and Wladen Moutaftchiisri. In the let-

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ter, the two men “regretted” creating *Opasnite*. The same letter appeared on the *Opasnite* website. It was ridiculous. This forged letter began to circulate so we published a formal denial in which we said we had nothing to do with the creation of *Opasnite*. That did not change anything and three weeks later his wife called me to say he had been the target of an attack.

RWB: If Ognyan Stefanov and *Frog News* were not behind *Opasnite*, how do you explain the attack?

AI: If only we knew... Journalism is the only thing Ognyan does. It is legitimate to assume that the attack was linked to his work, but we have no proof. We publish lots of things and we investigate a good many cases. How is one to know? The attempt on his life was on 22 September 2008, the national holiday marking the 103rd anniversary of our independence. Does that mean it was a warning message to all of Bulgaria's journalists? I don't know.

RWB: The *Opasnite* affair and the threats against *Frog News* have raised many questions about the DANS. This case seems to have upset a lot of people. What do you think?

AI: Yes. It is complex, and there are many strange things. The European Commission's report was very critical of Bulgaria. The Commission presumably got information through other channels, which did not please the government. The president told the DANS to find out where OLAF obtained the sources for its report. For example, the Commission's report gives the names of two people who financed the president's campaign and who allegedly misappropriated European funds.

Some of the information published on the *Opasnite* site is classified, but no one knows which information or why it is classified. The DANS embarked on an operation about which we are slowly discovering things and which raises many questions.

OGNYAN STEFANOV

It is a miracle that Ognyan Stefanov, the editor of the *Frog News* website, survived. As he left a restaurant on 22 September 2008, he was savagely assaulted and beaten by a group of men using hammers and steel bars who broke both of his legs and one of his arms and left him for dead near his car. One of the blows damaged the carotid artery and he lost a lot of blood. He was in a coma for three days in hospital.

Although still convalescing Stefanov has resumed researching the stories he was working on and does not intend to stop there. The rehabilitation therapy and treatment he is receiving take their toll on him, but he found time to talk to Reporters Without Borders.

RWB: Do you remember what happened? Did you see your assailants?

Ognyan Stefanov: No, not very well. I was leaving a restaurant and going to my car when someone called me by my name. I turned and received a massive blow to the head which stunned me. I tried to resist but I don't remember anything after that. Witnesses who came out of the restaurant spoke of seven or eight assailants. But I don't remember anything more.

RWB: Had you received threats before the attack?

OS: No, not directly. A few days before, *Frog News* had been linked to the publication of classified documents on the *Opasnite* website. We had posted a letter on our site explaining that we had nothing to do with this site or the documents posed on it. I was questioned at the DANS, but the interview was conducted in a very calm and professional manner. I cannot establish a direct link between the attack and this affair. I write about many different subjects, mostly corruption, in many areas. It is hard to know who was behind the attack on me.

But the "mission" achieved its goal. I have had a lot of interviews with journalists who have all told me that they are now more worried about their families, their fellow journalists

and so on. I think that, as a result of the attack on me, there will be more self-censorship for a while in the newspapers. How can you blame them? There are not many heroes in the world and I can understand their decision. But we should be concerned about the consequences.



Ognyan Stefanov in his hospital bed

RWB: Do you receive a lot of pressure in connection with your stories?

OS: (Smiles) In the first issue of *Frog News*, we posted an article based on a foreign source who told us that Bulgarian ministers visiting Vienna had been seen in a restaurant in the company of well-known Central European organised crime bosses, which is not normal. We had a lot of reaction and very pressing demands to remove the article. We had already decided that people who challenged the accuracy of our articles would be given the right of reply on our website. That appears at the top of almost all of my articles. But perhaps they thought it was more natural to respond to our articles by other means.

The problem in Bulgaria is that politicians and other leading figures have two faces – one for their public activity and one for their private activity. The public face is cultivated with the aim of making oneself loved. Nothing should be allowed to spoil the portrait. Not everyone accepts the idea of linking the two. When the French president, Nicolas Sarkozy, makes a private visit to Egypt with his new wife, he says so, and photographers are there. Bulgaria's politicians prefer to hide everything, even when there is nothing wrong with it. The climate of suspicion that ensues is not good.

Bulgaria

Resignation or resistance, Bulgaria's embattled press hesitates

What we need is for people to finally start using their right of response.

RWB: Are you still getting police protection?

OS: (Smiles) Yes, I was advised to. The authorities did not want to be accused of failing to give me protection. It is appreciated, but what could two men do against this kind of vio-

lence? If those who wanted to kill me still want to do so, how could one prevent them? But I prefer to remain optimistic. The doctors who treated me have worked a miracle and I cannot thank them enough. And then, there is at least a positive side to all of this – your arrival and your moral support. If an organisation such as yours can continue to take an interest in our problems, we will be winners a second time.