Circumventing Censorship:

A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis of the Bulgarian Satirical Newspaper Pras Press

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MSc in Media and Communication

Lund University

2023

Dedicated to my mother, Galina. *In memoriam.*

Abstract

This thesis examines the role of political satire in the Bulgarian public sphere through the case of the satirical newspaper Pras Press. The bi-weekly publication is centered around political cartooning and reports on public affairs issues from pop culture to current events. It relies on online dissemination as its print editions have been, and continue to be, the object of censorship for the newspaper's abrasive commentary on domestic politics. The pilot issue of Pras Press was obstructed from reaching newsstands nationwide and the majority of its print copies were never recovered. Although press freedom in the country has been in decline for the past decade, this level of infringement on free speech is unprecedented in post-communist Bulgaria. Through this singular case the thesis seeks to generate critical social research and gain valuable insights into the power dynamics of the Bulgarian mediascape which shape discursive production in media texts. The research contributes to the loosely formed field of political cartoon study and to public sphere scholarship through a case situated in an underexplored setting - the Bulgarian media system. It also addresses a gap in research on contemporary political cartoon censorship.

This thesis finds its theoretical grounding in public sphere theory and investigates Pras Press discourse in relation to its sociopolitical context. Ten complete Pras Press editions from the period April 2021 - April 2023 were examined to monitor the progression in the newspaper's discourse as major political episodes unfold. Thematic coding was utilized to identify content patterns across samples before moving to Critical Discourse Analysis which revealed the ideological investments in Pras Press texts. The practical tools for analysis at the textual level were imported from Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis.

The findings demonstrate Pras Press' role as an alternative media, discernible both in its primary mode of distribution and its content. The publication propels a counter-discursive agenda, representing Bulgaria as a captured state, susceptible to foreign subversive influence and the private interests of politicians, public servants, and oligarchs. Pras Press takes an oppositionist stance against mainstream media and portrays it corrupt, biased, and unprofessional. In platforming critical voices Pras Press actively participates in political discourse and contributes to media pluralism, thus expanding the public sphere.

Keywords: political satire, political cartoons, censorship, Bulgaria, public sphere, multimodal critical discourse analysis, Pras Press

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Chapter I: Introduction

"The Worst Form of Censorship"

On March 1, 2017, in the midst of a national election campaign, Pras Press launched its first issue. To enter the Bulgarian market, the satirical newspaper committed to a contract with the "National Distribution" company (Capital, 2017). According to Christo Komarnitski, Pras Press cartoonist and co-founder, this decision was made out of necessity to reach readers due to the distributor's dominant market share (80-90%), albeit with caution (Capital, 2017). The pilot edition had a print circulation of 10,100 copies but after dozens of signals from citizens that Pras Press was not available in newspaper stalls across the country, the publishers investigated and found most of the copies had "vanished" overnight and never reached the shelves (Capital, 2017). From the original 10,000 prints - 100 were kept for the editorial office - the cartoonists were able to recover only 3,500 and sold them themselves at an outdoor book market in Sofia (Cheresheva, 2017; Dzhambazova, 2017).

For this incident the publication's team suspected Delyan Peevski, a media mogul and deputy from the Movement for Rights and Freedoms party:

> "Officially, his name is not present in the registration of this company, but as soon as we went there to talk about the distribution of the newspaper, a conversation about whether Delyan Peevski would approve it began," said journalist Ivan Bakalov during the press conference in BTA [the Bulgarian News Agency]. (Capital, 2017, n.p.)

Two years later, in an interview with the Bulgarian National Radio, the cartoonists reported that the problems with Pras Press' first issue were not an isolated event: citizens were hesitant to subscribe because they may not receive the copies they paid for and distributors feared carrying the newspaper for they could lose their jobs (BNR, 2019). The satirists announced the newspaper would remain as a print publication but would simultaneously go digital to reach more readers:

"They don't just take down individual cartoons. They are trying to remove the newspaper itself from the stalls, from the places where print publications are sold. This is the worst form of censorship I have ever seen", added Christo Komarnitski (BNR, 2019, n.p.).

While political cartoonists worldwide adapt to and harness the benefits of cultivating an audience on the Internet, for Pras Press this is a path necessitated by the urgency to evade censors (Leon, 2017). Self-publishing online circumvents external pressures, including political and commercial interests, and diminishes the opportunity for what Belyakov has called "censorship by money" (2009, p. 603) in Ukraine by lowering production costs and expanding audience reach (Norris, 2000; Leon, 2017). The lack of *new-school speech regulation* and control of online media in Bulgaria makes this tactic possible and allows for an alternative to, or an expansion of, the public sphere (Balkin, 2018; Dahlgren, 2013; Veleva, 2020). Pras Press' potential to mold public opinion may be limited by the relatively low internet penetration in the country but the digital divide is steadily decreasing: Internet connectivity reached 75% of the population in 2021, in comparison to 2011, when only 48% of Bulgarians were online (Herrero, L.C., Humprecht, E., Engesser, S., Brüggemann, M.L. & Büchel, F., 2017; Papacharissi, 2010; World Bank Open Data, n.d.).

The Internet can and has been demonstrated to be a viable alternative for the constrained media systems of eastern European states, where both political cartooning and the communist past have strong legacies (Davies, 2007; Herrero et al., 2017; Miazhevich, 2015). In comparison to other countries from the former Eastern Bloc, Bulgarian media experienced some of the strictest censorship, including and especially of political satire, with the exception of regime-approved publications serving to propagate official doctrine (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2015; Trifonova Price, 2018; Valkova, 2020). One such exception was *Starshel* (Hornet)*,* a satirical periodical published by the Bulgarian Socialist Party, which served to ridicule anything against the party's agenda (Paraskevov, 2012; Valkova, 2020). *Starshel* existed in parallel with the largest body of jokes ridiculing the political regime from which they emerged, contrived by those under oppression in communist eastern Europe, including Bulgaria, and the Soviet Union as a barter for more substantial civic action (Davies, 2007). These whispered jokes were "the weapon of the weak" (Hart, 2007, p. 16) and were used as a silent form of resistance in close-knit communities (Davies, 2007). But while these dual roles of satire and political cartooning have

previously been explored in both democratic and authoritarian settings, there's a notable gap in research situated in semi-restricted media environments, such as post-communist Bulgaria where Pras Press operates.

Bulgaria's press freedom consistently ranks lower than other central and eastern European (CEE) states, for which significant factors are domestic politics and the "political instability without end" (Kanev, 2014, p. 178; World Press Freedom Index, n.d.). Kanev's (2013, pp. 21-35) anxiety about the fragility and regression of Bulgarian democracy on the grounds of inadequate governance and alarmingly low voter turnout during Borisov's rule stands valid, as electoral participation continued to decline (Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Bulgaria, n.d.). Political turmoil surged after numerous corruption scandals during the third Boyko Borisov government - one such scandal entailed leaked candid photos of the then-prime minister asleep next to his cash and gold-stuffed nightstand - which triggered a series of protests that eventually turned violent (Dzhambazova, 2020; Tsoneva, 2020). These protests marked the start of a two-year political crisis and a string of unfruitful premature parliamentary elections: Bulgarians cast their ballots for parliament five times between 2021 and 2023 as political parties failed to produce a majority coalition to form a government within the constitutional time limit (AlJazeera, 2023; RFE/RL Bulgarian Service, 2023b). The crisis was an escalation of previous tensions rooted in the cartelization of political and economic power, its abuse by a narrow caste of oligarchs, who are commonly referred to as the *zadkulisie* (literally 'the backstage'), and systemic infringement on the people's democratic rights, including but not limited to assaults on free speech (Toneva-Metodieva, 2018; Trifonova Price, 2018; 2019).

Against this background Pras Press covers a range of public affairs topics in a semi-fixed 16-page format: while this includes matters of global significance, such as war, human and minority rights, and climate change, the focus is largely on domestic issues, since the publication targets Bulgarian readers. Public affairs can be broadly defined as matters of general interest that trigger social anxiety, including but not limited to current political issues (Soares, 2015, pp. 224-236). The working definition of Soares' (2015) meta-study offers more clarity:

public affairs will henceforth be understood to be general interest issues related to conflict situations, including war and terrorism both at the national and international levels; matters of political and judicial public interest; and economic concerns related to individuals' welfare, namely socioeconomic deprivation and unemployment (p. 228).

In this sense, what publications do or do not scrutinize (and with what frequency) can be interpreted as indicative of their perception of which issues are most pressing and thus must be brought to the public sphere (Soares, 2015, p. 228). Pras Press participates in political discourse by voicing the matters that in their view ought to be deliberated and utilizes online communication to expand audience reach in a hostile (traditional) media environment. What makes this case worth exploring is the blatant censorship with which Pras Press grapples in contrast to Bulgarian mainstream media which is almost entirely dependent on state and EU funding and is silenced through these illicit mechanisms (Antonov, 2013). Through this outlier case this thesis offers critical social research and valuable insights into the understudied Bulgarian public sphere by way of focusing on the concrete (Dahlgren, 2009; Flyvbjerg, 2001; Harvey, 2022).

Study Objectives and Research Questions

Discursive practices, like that of Pras Press', "are influenced by societal forces that do not have a solely discursive character (e.g. the structure of the political system and the institutional structure of the media)" (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 62). This thesis thus seeks to situate Pras Press in relation to its sociopolitical context, decipher the discourse it constructs, and discern the publication's mechanisms for circumventing censorship, while being attentive to the power dynamics and structures which impact production practices (Fairclough, 2010).

> The focus on political satire is particularly instructive, as its subversive nature is mutable with regard to different governmental practices, historical contexts and media forms. Recent interaction of the genre with technology (online practices) produces further subtleties of expression. It not only explicates particular national sensibilities but also the nature of ironic 'resistance' within the national off- and on-line context. As a result, studying political satire online can reveal both sites of subversion and modes of usage of new media. (Miazhevich, 2015, p. 3)

Dissecting Pras Press satirical articles and cartoons, and contextualizing their message within the Bulgarian media system where they were produced will reveal broader implications about the democratic process and the status of freedom of expression in the country. This thesis argues that humor in visual form, along with self-publication online, allows to bypass freedom of speech limitations in Bulgaria and constitutes an expansion of the public sphere (Dahlgren, 2013). While for scholars specializing in visual forms of satire the distinction between terms such as cartoon, editorial cartoon, political cartoon, and caricature is important, within the context of this case study such nuance is negligible, as Pras Press cartoons can be considered all of the aforementioned. Since this thesis is not strictly focused on the cartoons but also accounts for textual discursive components, the above terms are used interchangeably throughout.

This study also offers insights into the role of political satire in the Bulgarian public sphere and addresses a number of research gaps: in research on political cartooning in semi-restricted media environments; in research on political satire in post-communist Bulgaria; and in research on contemporary political cartoon censorship. To do this the thesis finds its theoretical grounding in public sphere theory as reimagined by Dahlgren (2013), and in Hallin and Mancini's (2004) influential media systems framework. Guiding the study are the following research questions:

RQ1: What discourse is constructed in Pras Press texts?

a) Through what visual and textual mechanisms is Pras Press discourse constructed?

b) How does Pras Press discourse affect the publication's positioning within the Bulgarian media system?

RQ2: How do Pras Press cartoons figure in the dynamics of the Bulgarian public sphere?

In answering the research questions this thesis adopts a triple-method approach, integrating thematic coding (Bazeley, 2013), Fairclough's (2010) classic formulation of Critical Discourse Analysis, and Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (Machin & Mayr, 2012).

Thesis Outline

This thesis follows a structured format to concisely present the research process and results. The following Chapter II establishes a theoretical foundation for the study and integrates a synthesis of relevant literature on central and eastern European media systems, the role of traditional and new media in the public sphere, and previous works on political satire and cartoons. In Chapter III can be found discussions on: the selection of methodology, methods, and sampling strategy; ethical concerns and limitations of the study; and a detailed outline of the coding and analytical processes. Chapter IV presents the research findings through concrete examples from the raw materials, which are deconstructed using the analytical tools of CDA and MCDA. Finally, Chapter V summarizes and reflects on the results, explores the implications, and suggests avenues for further research.

Chapter II: Literature Review

The literature review chapter consists of three sections, each with a specific purpose. In order to contextualize the study, a discussion on *The Bulgarian Media System*, anchored in Hallin and Mancini's (2004) influential book, seeks to uncover the peculiarities and limitations of the Bulgarian mediascape. More on the theoretical framework of this thesis can be found in the part on *Media, Democracy, and the Public Sphere,* where the role of mass media in democratic polities is set forth. A brief discussion on censorship closes the section. Finally, the closing section on *Satire and Cartoons in Political Discourse* reviews previous research on political satire, including cartoons, with an emphasis on their role in the public sphere.

The Bulgarian Media System

Although this thesis entails a definitively "ethnocentric" and not comparative case study, in Hallin and Mancini's (2004, p. 2) words, a normative skeleton still proves necessary to situate the findings within a broader theoretical field. *Comparing Media Systems* (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) offers an appropriate framework for this research precisely because its locus is at the intersection of political, economic, social, and media systems. Notwithstanding some conceptual challenges which the literature review will address shortly, a core assertion in this thesis coincides with one of the book's key insights that:

> one cannot understand the news media without understanding the nature of the state, the system of political parties, the pattern of relations between economic and political interests, and the development of civil society, among other elements of social structure (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 8).

The three media system models Hallin and Mancini (2004, p. 21) offer effectively constitute a classification system based on a number of factors, namely: media market strength and especially mass press circulation; political parallelism or the degree to which media reflects societal political division; level of journalistic professionalism; and the extent of state intervention in the media system. These factors, then, in various configurations, comprise the liberal, democratic corporatist, or polarized pluralist media system models, with an implicit

hierarchy in this order. The polarized pluralist model is marked by: weak media markets; very high political parallelism or political instrumentalization of media, with strong connections between media and political parties; compromised journalistic professionalism and predominant commentary-style reporting; and strong state intervention with periods of censorship (Curran, 2011, p. 29; Hallin & Mancini, 2004, pp. 66-86).

Hallin and Mancini's analysis is broad in terms of cross-national comparison (it covers 18 societies) but has been scrutinized by Curran (2011), among others, for it lacks the depth to reach beyond the facade of journalistic professionalism, completely disregards the Internet (despite being published in 2004), and misjudges media commercialization's impact, underplaying to negatives and overestimating the benefits (Brüggemann, M., Engesser, S., Büchel, F., Humprecht, E. & Castro, L., 2014; Curran, 2011). This line of criticism led to several propositions to revise the media systems framework, more notably by Peruško, Vozab & Cuvalo (2013), Brüggemann et al. (2014), and Dobek-Ostrowska (2015). Nonetheless the original framework remains seminal, especially within comparative media studies, and its reliability at least within the Western context has been confirmed (Brüggemann et al., 2014). This thesis aligns itself with the criticism voiced by Curran (2011) but more importantly, it addresses a drawback which he mentioned only in passing: although *Comparing Media Systems* (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) investigates the mediascape of more than a dozen countries, the authors' probing is focused on Western and European societies and does not include most of the newly democratic states in eastern Europe. This is a recurrent omission in many of the works this literature review propounds, and one that Hallin and Mancini acknowledged themselves and have since addressed (see Hallin & Mancini, 2012a; 2012b).

The eastern European and especially the Balkan contexts tend to be either neglected or underdeveloped across disciplines unless one turns to Communist and Post-communist studies. For this reason the contribution of Herrero et al. (2017) is invaluable both to this thesis and media studies in general. They rethink Hallin and Mancini (2004) with a more global perspective, modifying and applying their framework to the central and eastern European settings. Dobek-Ostrowska (2015) and Peruško, Vozab, and Cuvalo (2013) have also applied the media systems framework to the CEE region but with a lesser focus on media finance (or lack

thereof). Herrero et al. (2017) confirm there is no unique East-Central European media system per se and argue that Hallin and Mancini's variables must be modified to reflect the specificities of these new democracies. The postulation that media systems in the region will follow or strive towards the Western blueprint is not only contested but an altered framework is essential precisely because these transitional democracies are branded by an authoritarian and/or communist past (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2015).

The original media systems framework was never intended to be a universal one yet Hallin and Mancini (2012a, pp. 15-19) have argued that Central and East European media systems parallel those of the polarized pluralist model in Southern Europe. Peruško, Vozab, and Čuvalo (2013), who were first to empirically test the three models, have also advocated for this classification of CEE media. This incongruity prompted Herrero et al. (2017) to annex four additional variables to a revised media systems framework in their empirical testing: foreign TV share, ownership concentration, press freedom, and online news use. The resulting three groups of media systems named according to their regional location (northern, eastern, and central) confirm that the idiosyncrasies of Central-East European states prohibit the construction of a general model (Herrero et al., 2017; Dobek-Ostrowska, 2015; Mancini, 2015).

Bulgaria's media system figures in *the eastern cluster*, characterized by extreme political parallelism and low press freedom (Herrero et al., 2017, p.4811). Similarly, Dobek-Ostrowska's (2015) classification of Bulgaria in her politicized media model points to the "high politicization of public broadcasting service and control over public radio and television by political actors" (p. 28).

> The eastern cluster (Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania) holds the highest levels of political parallelism combined with the lowest investments in and the lowest audience of PSB. These countries also have the lowest rates of press freedom and relatively high levels of foreign ownership (compared with the countries in the central cluster). [...] In addition, the eastern cluster has the lowest levels of online news use, professionalization of the journalists, and regulation of media ownership… (Herrero et al., 2017, p. 4810)

This characterization of the Bulgarian media system is consistent with findings reported by other scholars focusing on the state of press freedom in the region. A focal point in previous research

is the economic pressures on CEE media - media ownership is a particularly meaningful variable that points to significant differences between countries in the region (Herrero et al., 2017, p 4797). Štětka's (2012; 2013) observations, for instance, illuminate the "commonalities across the CEE countries regarding the intertwinement of their media, business, and political structures" (Štětka, 2012, p. 459) and map the transition of foreign ownership to local media moguls due to unfavorable markets, resulting in diminished autonomy of news media. The instrumentalization of media by local oligarchs or business tycoons is particularly palpable in Bulgaria's case:

> Similarly nebulous ownership relations also characterize the structure of the currently largest media conglomerate in the Bulgarian market, the New Bulgarian Media Group [...] This conglomerate is officially in the hands of Irena Krasteva, former head of the Bulgarian State Lottery; however, all decisions regarding the company's management, and allegedly also regarding editorial content, are made by her son, Delyan Peevski, an MP for the ethnic Turkish party (and since June 2013 also head of Bulgaria's State Agency for National Security, appointed by Prime Minister Plamen Oresharski), while the "real owner" is believed to be Tsvetan Vasilev, an influential businessman and majority owner of the Corporate Commercial Bank, which financed the establishment in 2007 of the New Bulgarian Media Group and its subsequent purchases and operation of all the media outlets (Štětka, 2013, p. 17).

Such level of power and ownership concentration is fundamentally incompatible with democratic models, according to McChesney (2015), by virtue of negatively impacting the quality and diversity of news information for the public to view. His argument that media has become an antidemocratic force holds true in the Bulgarian context but not because corporate interests dictate the dilution of content to fit a wider audience (McChesney, 2015). The distortion in Bulgaria's media system is perceptible in the unusually high, until recently rising, circulation figures unreflective of the advertising market and large number of national dailies (Raycheva & Peicheva, 2017; Štětka, 2013; Trifonova Price, 2018). This points to an alternative to profit motive for selling below production costs, necessarily at the expense of structural and professional journalist autonomy (Štětka, 2013, p. 24). The financial paradox handicaps journalists in their duty and right to serve the public's interest and forces the media into the position of political proxy (Trifonova Price, 2018, p. 6). Stated otherwise, the politicization of Bulgarian media renders it incapable of observing democratic values: political and/or corporate interests take priority over providing voters nonpartisan information and fulfilling the media's

role under the conditions of representative democracy (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2015; Raycheva and Peicheva, 2017).

Media ownership opacity and concentration in Bulgaria fosters a prime climate for small-scale and institutional organized corruption, and censorship via financial coercion (Trifonova Price, 2018; 2019). Unlike other EU countries, the Bulgarian state has few and inefficient mechanisms to protect the public's right to democratic communication order, with virtually no regulation of print or online media (Reporters Without Borders, 2018). Attempts of legislators to address the haze around media ownership were made only recently in 2018 (Veleva, 2020). The law requires access to public information to be carried out observing principles of transparency and economic freedom but prescribes no administrative or otherwise sanctions for noncompliance, nor does any administrative body monitor for the implementation of this legislation (Veleva, 2020). Journalists report not only political interference but also *envelope journalism* (bribes for good press), institutional rent-seeking behavior, as well as dulling criticism, self-censorship *en masse*, and complete avoidance of certain topics for fear of losing financing or even jobs, especially after the disintegration of traditional business models following the financial crisis in 2009 (Antonov, 2013; Dobek-Ostrowska, 2015; Trifonova Price, 2018; 2019). Moreover, journalists themselves and various NPO and NGOs report pressure on independent media voices, and threats and physical assaults against journalists (Reporters Without Borders, 2018; Trifonova Price, 2019). Ethical codes bear little meaning as corruption penetrates all levels of journalist hierarchy:

> The main factors that seem to explain media corruption in Bulgaria can be summarized as follows: the prevalence of society-wide systemic corruption; a political and journalistic culture that is tolerant of corruption; close interelite relationships that involve media owners, editors and journalists; media's strong dependence on state advertising and private sponsorship; lack of solidarity and agreements between media with regard to ethical codes and norms; and the low pay of journalists in Bulgaria (Trifonova Price, 2019, p. 8).

Censorship mechanisms are in other words serpentine but ample, though direct interference from politicians has precedents (Trifonova Price, 2018; 2019). Media freedom has gone full circle since the abolition of communist censorship but this time its instruments are

more elegant, making a direct approach unnecessary (Trifonova Price, 2018). Besides "tailored legislation" (Antonov, 2013, p. 24) that oligarchs can purchase, they have practically domesticated media through financial coercion via selective state advertising or subsidy with EU grants (Štětka, 2013, p. 15).

> the political elite and the oligarchy has become so close that it has damaged basic human rights, such as the freedom of speech, freedom of the press and freedom of entrepreneurship. Because media ownership is concentrated in the hands of a few powerful oligarchic groups, it has become difficult for people to raise awareness of subjects that threaten society (Antonov, 2013, p. 52).

This brand of suppression, though particularly pronounced, is not unique to Bulgaria and has been observed in other central and east European media systems: Belyakov (2009), for instance, has dubbed similar patterns in Ukraine "censorship by money" (p. 603). Unlike Ukraine and other more authoritarian CEE countries, however, in Bulgaria censorship is enacted not by the state itself but on behalf of interest groups which are practically indistinguishable from it (Antonov, 2013; Trifonova Price, 2018). Reflective of this interrelation is the popular in the public sphere notion of *zadkulisie*, meaning "behind the scenes" (Trifonova Price, 2018, p. 10) or literally "the thing behind the curtain", which captures "the perceived and actual entanglement of political and economic powers, cast in the conspiracy frame of a shadowy elite trying to derail the country from its European path" (Medarov, 2015, p. 77). Compliance with demands from the *zadkulisie* are an inherent aspect of journalists' jobs, which is symptomatic of the "trends of state capture" in the country (Toneva-Metodieva, 2018, p. 37; Trifonova Price, 2018). According to Toneva-Metodieva (2018), these trends are a legacy from the communist past and a consequence of the incomplete transition to democracy, both politically and socially.

Media, Democracy, and the Public Sphere

State capture is most commonly defined as systemic political corruption benefiting a small elite that operates parallel to and in symbiosis with the legitimate government (Callaghan, Foley & Swilling, 2021). The concept has transcended its original iterations simply as grand corruption on a national level and more recently extends its reach to encompass other aspects of

political and social life, including media actors (Callaghan, Foley & Swilling, 2021; Voinea, 2015). It is a phenomena with a particularly tight grip on post-communist CEE states due to the stunted nature of these young transitional democracies and their authoritarian past (Toneva-Metodieva, 2018; Voinea, 2015).

> In several Eastern European countries, the danger of state capture is almost always associated with another type of phenomena which could be aggregated under the label of "media capture" by business and political leadership (Voinea, 2015, p. 15).

Both of these state capture manifestations appear to be present in the case of Bulgaria (Toneva-Metodieva, 2018; Voinea, 2015). Toneva-Metodieva (2018) points to the "common practice" (p. 40) for most political contenders of direct and indirect vote buying as evidence of state capture and the organized abuse of political competition in the country. Such illegal means of control are characteristic of an advanced stage of state capture where institutions "deliberately fail to notice" (Petrović, 2021, p. 7) violations of democratic norms, a further corroboration of which is the lack of convictions for electoral fraud of politicians or political parties in Bulgaria despite precedents of arrested individuals for the crime (Todorov, 2022a). If viewing the state of affairs of mass media in isolation, the three main reasons for state capture outlined by Callaghan, Foley and Swilling (2021) - rent seeking, political power accumulation, and maintaining legitimacy - are nonetheless substantiated with academic research (see previous section).

A well-functioning democracy requires political participation from all segments of the populace (Andersen, K., Ohme, J., Bjarnøe, C., Bordacconi, M. J., Albæk, E., & de Vreese, C. H., 2021, p. 27), hence participatory apathy poses a serious threat to the legitimacy of governance (Dahlgren, 2009). While decline in (at least traditional modes of) civic engagement is a characteristic of contemporary democracies, especially those in post-communist eastern Europe (Cześnik, 2006; McManus‑Czubińska, C., Miller, W. L., Markowski, R., & Wasilewski, J., 2004), it must be investigated on a case by case basis:

> Also, and significantly, actual manifestations of democracy in the world today vary considerably; there is no universal template, even if most would argue that there are a number of essential features to be included and criteria that must be fulfilled. Within Europe and the EU we find noteworthy differences and even tensions in regard to

political traditions, notions of citizenship, assumptions about openness and access, conceptions of what constitutes civil society, and so on (Dahlgren, 2013, p. 9).

Beyond systemic electoral fraud, Bulgarian democracy owes its fragility to the rapid decrease in voter turnout linked to "the deepening of the crisis of trust in institutions of the political system" (Toneva-Metodieva, 2018, p. 41). Previously Kanev (2013; 2014) has warned of the dangers of such instability after the first significant tremors in Boyko Borisov's rule which lead to unprecedented mass protests against his cabinet in 2013. The issue of voter apathy has intensified since: during the political crisis of 2021-2023 were held five elections, each with a lower turnout than the previous (Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Bulgaria, n.d.).

Different conceptions of good citizenship call for various forms and degrees of civic participation but voting competence is the baseline for all modern democracies if the people are to benefit (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2017). Additionally, citizenship models within democratic theories can also prescribe participation in public discourse, decision making, or grassroots activism (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2017, p. 1889). Dahlgren (2013, p. 21) calls these maximalist versions of political participation, which transcends conceptions of good citizenship simply as informed voting. Nonetheless a degree of political literacy necessarily constitutes even alternative citizenship models enabled by new technology (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2017). Because citizens source most of their knowledge about politics from mainstream media (Dahlgren, 2009, p. 81), civic agency in Bulgaria is limited due to the constraints on freedom of expression under which the press operates (Toneva-Metodieva, 2018).

The social construction of citizenship models is adjacent to the information ecology (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2017), hence the role of both legacy and new media in political discourse and by extension democracy is apparent, albeit not plain. If previous formulations of traditional media as the Fourth Estate ascribed it power, rationality, and autonomy (e.g. Lippman, 1922), contemporary research has taken a turn away from such simplistic and firm delimitation. Instead, scholars view media through the prism of public discourse, popular culture, civic engagement, rhetoric and linguistics, context and semiotics, power dynamics, and so on. While the Fourth Estate conception remains seminal (e.g. Jamieson & Waldman, 2003), contemporary literature on

the matter is generally consistent with social constructionism and explores the dynamics between mass media, traditional or digital, and other social aspects. That is, the media is no longer regarded as an impartial mediator but rather it assumes an active role in political discourse and our constructions of the world; its representations are thus subject to social, cultural, organizational, commercial, and political pressures (Benson, 2004). A key influence on this thesis is Benson (2001; 2004), who has strongly advocated for a focus on the link between discursive production and the structural properties of media systems *in lieu of* the popular frame analysis or audience reception studies.

The "custodian of facts" (Jamieson & Waldman, 2003, pp. 165-166) duty to ensure democratic values are observed is integral but media performs a number of other functions and its character is multifaceted (Dahlgren, 2009). Some key functions include but are not limited to information dissemination, civic education, monitoring of public and political figures, facilitating symbolic contestation and construction of political meaning (Dahlgren, 2009; Kligler-Vilenchik, 2017; Penney, 2017). Penney (2017) sees in the media a pillar of modern democracy for its function to circulate opinion and factual information about civic issues to a literate voting public, or in Curran's (2011) words, "a democracy needs to be properly briefed to be effectively self-governing" (p. 2). However, all democratic models rely on citizens making sound political decisions based on the information they acquire mainly via media consumption (Andersen et al., 2021; Dahlgren, 2009; Kligler-Vilenchik, 2017), hence the media has a vital role in directing and informing public opinion (Papacharissi, 2010). For this reason the media presumes a degree of responsibility over their audience's political involvement and its autonomy from vested interests is imperative for democracy (Dahlgren, 2009). Albeit with no guarantee, media is a prerequisite to a democratic society, according to Dahlgren (2009), and in his view it has several tasks, including, and perhaps most importantly, a function as a deliberative arena, facilitator of idea exchange, or even as a source of political education. The media is both a proliferator of and an obstruction for civic cultures which democracy requires (Dahlgren, 2013), it's essential to the shaping of public knowledge and has significant implications on the democratic process (Dahlgren, 2018). Precisely this public sphere aspect (Dahlgren, 2013; 2018), not quite as narrowly defined as in the Habermasian sense, of facilitating public deliberation, is where this thesis departs from theoretically.

If for Habermas (1991) the public sphere constitutes a space for rational deliberation by private individuals, Dahlgren's (2013) conception of it is a tiered pyramid of sub-spheres with varying degrees of (largely asymmetrical) influence, where the media figures in the middle. The top tier in Dahlgren's (2013) public sphere pyramid is the *elite sphere* where the state, legislatures, and the corporate world elite comprise a 'strong' public sphere with decision-making powers; in the middle follows the *mainstream sphere* as embodied by mass media which is, of course, subject to vested interests; finally at the bottom is the weakest *societal sphere* where the political connects to the everyday lives of the people.

> Despite its somewhat bare bones, the virtue of this model is that it incorporates contemporary perspectives on social and cultural factors that shape political communication and agency – giving deserved attention to processes of micro- and meso-political activities and processes and the operation of power at these levels. Yet it also retains a focus on the traditional – and still so decisive – structured forms of power and decision-making that shape society, as represented by the top and middle tiers (Dahlgren, 2013, pp. 48-49).

This conception is the theoretical departing point for this case study, as it is optimal for the exploration of discursive constructions in media texts in relation to their sociopolitical contexts and accounts for the power structures affecting the production process (Benson, 2001; 2004). Since Pras Press's dissemination route is predominantly online, one significant drawback is that both Habermas' (1991) and Dahlgren's (2013) conceptions of the public sphere contemplate the role of legacy media but overlook digital media and the impact of its affordances on political communication. That traditional media are a crucial factor of public discourse, public opinion, the democratic process, and civic engagement is marginally contested unlike technology's potential to foster democratic renewal in the face of a crisis (Bessant, 2014). This thesis sides with Bessant, cautious yet hopeful of digital media's capacity to enhance deliberative practice and transcend narrow definitions of the public sphere, while acknowledging the importance of being "attentive to questions of ethics and power" (Bessant, 2014, p. 261).

One argument often deployed against the Internet as a public sphere is that of the digital divide (e.g. Matačinskaitė, 2011). If the Internet can be a tool for enhancing citizenship

(Mossberger, Tolbert, & Mcneal, 2007) and a public sphere is by definition inclusive and egalitarian, the question of access, education, and capability when it comes to using new technology becomes pertinent (Norris, 2001; van Dijk, 2020). While online communication is positively linked with civic participation, including voter turnout, inequality in new technology access is not only significant but quite worrisome for democracy, particularly so when Internet penetration is low (Mossberger, Tolbert, & Mcneal, 2007; Norris, 2001). Online communication's reflection of the imbalances of the real world is disconcerting, according to van Djik (2020), who has argued that digital media even exacerbates the skewed distribution of social capital and reinforces social segregation. At the same time the Internet offers a number of affordances that alter the transmission of information via lowered costs, increased speed, and broadened reach (Norris, 2001). Unorthodox civic engagement routes are in this way enabled by, for instance, social media albeit not without risks. Such risks include another common concern in the online public sphere debate, that users will remain in an echochamber of preferred content which could reduce access to objective information thus aggravating political division or, more optimistically, may "lead to *less* political alienation and *more* participation" (Lee, 2005, p. 428) (Italics in original).

> Not all technologies are democratizing or democracy-related. Most technology has little to do with the condition of democracy. Yet, technologies that afford expressive capabilities, like the radio, television, the Internet, and related media, tend to trigger narratives of emancipation, autonomy, and freedom in the public imagination. (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 3)

New media, however, does not exist in some sort of social vacuum but rather people import their real values and norms to the virtual world. Consequently digital reincarnations of traditional media function not as their replacement, on the contrary they expand communication to new realms (Norris, 2000) by offering, *inter alia*, an opportunity for reciprocal rather than unidirectional message exchange. Simultaneously, digital communication enables novel forms of censorship and surveillance which piques the interest of governments, corporations, and even private actors. Within this configuration roams free speech, evading regulations and limitations. Balkin's (2018) free speech model captures these dynamics and denounces previous dualist models of speech regulation:

The twenty-first-century model is pluralist, with multiple players. It is easiest to think of it as a triangle. On one corner are nation-states and the European Union. On the second corner are privately owned internet-infrastructure companies, including social media companies, search engines, broadband providers, and electronic payment systems. On the third corner are many different kinds of speakers, legacy media, civil-society organizations, hackers, and trolls (Balkin, 2018, p. 2011).

While traditional speech regulation where nation-states seek to limit expression through various penalties such as fines or imprisonment is no less problematic, this triangular model also shows the potential for what Balkin (2018) calls *new-school speech regulation,* which can manifest as coercion of private digital infrastructure owners to censor on behalf of the state (*collateral censorship*), or, infrastructure owners exercising *digital prior restraint* by restricting users without due process due to imposed liability by the state.

Satire and Cartoons in Political Discourse

Satire, to which political cartooning belongs (Bal, A.S., Pitt, L., Berthon, P. & DesAutels, P., 2009; Manning & Phiddian, 2004), is a brand of humor with a critical purpose and when applied to politics, it can aid the pursuit of a particular agenda or serve to comment on politicians individually or collectively (Davis & Foyle, 2017). Its role in political discourse may be stronger than ever as it functions to express the contempt, disdain, anger, and disgust of both its creators and audiences, thus benefiting any democracy that will permit it (Davis & Foyle, 2017).

The concentrated format of political cartoons makes them a pungent mechanism of dissent as images can often circumvent the limitations of text communication (Davis & Foyle, 2017; Walker, 2003) and besides entertaining, cartoons can carry deeper meanings (Streicher, 1965). Streicher (1965) was one of the first to ponder the social angle in studying caricature and especially the influence of power structures on the genre. His study of David Low's Colonel Blimp cartoons demonstrated they hold more than meets the eye, as the character embodied contemporary political thought in Britain. Similarly, DeSousa and Medhurst's (1982) classic text on the role of political cartoons postulates they constitute a vehicle for the symbolic denigration of politicians. They also recognized the editorial cartoon's potential to provide a framework through which the audience can view the political process, as well as a possibility to contribute

to media agenda-setting via renditions of the most significant social issues (DeSousa & Medhurst, 1982). A barometer of society's most pressing matters, then, is recurrent subjects in cartoons (DeSousa & Medhurst, 1982, p. 92).

Amber Day (2011) saw a renaissance in the realm of political satire, so much so that satirists ought to be considered legitimate players in political dialogue. The comedic mode allows highly politicized satire such as parodic news shows, satiric documentaries, and ironic, media-savvy activism to participate in political discussion, critique, expose inconsistencies, and generate communities. Satire (and parody), Day (2011) argues, is an effective discursive strategy within broader mediascapes, hence public sphere theorists must relinquish the inherited from Habermas affinity for "serious" discussion and approach satirical texts as worthy of exploration contributions to political discourse. In regards to political cartoons, Walker (2003) has made an analogous appeal to take them seriously, as cartoons can contribute to the accumulation of information and formulation of public opinion.

Political satire is clearly an offensive art for it is malicious in its witty provocations (Freedman, 2008) - it magnifies the defects of politicians' true character to trigger moral judgment. Hence cartoons' most potent attribute is their ability to undermine a politician's public image, leaving a permanent stain on their reputation (Danjoux, 2007).

> Political cartoons, by definition, strive to exploit the most obvious or grotesque features of a leader and put them on display, and in so doing, go directly to highlight or attack political Image (Bal et al., 2009, p. 230).

But for a cartoon to work, its object of caricature must have three key characteristics: *sympathy, gap,* and *differentiation* (Bal et al., 2009, p. 232). Successful satire necessarily maintains sympathy (i.e. is relatable), retains a gap between the image and reality, and exaggerates the point of differentiation (or simply the unique characteristic of the satirized object). The construct of *gap* is akin to Waisanen's (2018) concept of *comic counterfactuals* which explains the appeal of political comedy. Comic counterfactuals use comedic methods to juxtapose real events and alternate realities:

I argue that the comic counterfactual invites audiences to critically reflect upon the political, social, and performative consequences of historical events by bringing affective, sensory weight to alternative visions, moving unaccountable private interests into public culture, targeting the subtle determinisms that can easily creep into communication, and creating plausible ways to reworld the status quo (Waisanen, 2018, p. 72).

Because wit is a potent political weapon, it grapples with both authoritarian and democratic states (Freedman, 2008; 2012). The censors are many: in authoritarian politics it is often the state itself that censors, in democracies more prevalent are limitations due to commercial interests, and in the face of hostility satirists may even censor themselves (Freedman, 2008; Manning & Phiddian, 2004). Ultimately, there are fewer constraints on expression of dissent in democracies, while autocratic states pose a hostile environment for political satire but as Freedman (2008) puts it, "almost everywhere satirists have used their ingenuity to find loopholes in oppressive laws and invented ways to ignore, bypass, or confuse the censors" (p. 6).

While political cartooning has been explored in both democratic and authoritarian settings, semi-restricted media environments are notably underrepresented in previous research. Particularly interesting is the case of political satire in CEE states where not only the politics and economics, but even satire carries the legacy of the communist past. In fact, the largest corpus of jokes ridiculing the political system come from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union - they are the product of extensive political repression in the region (Davies, 2007).

The Soviet Union was profoundly repressive, deeply hostile to dissent, and enforced censorship at every turn, yet satire flourished (Freedman, 2008; Miazhevich, 2015). For Davies (2007), the body of humor produced in communist states constitutes a silent form of protest - it is a barter for more substantive civic action. Although humor won't do much for persuasion and cannot alter already formed opinions (Markiewicz, 1974), for communities with established collective identity Hart (2007) demonstrates the power of the "weapon of the weak", in democracies and repressive regimes alike, to frame political protest and form collective identity in social movements. In the Soviet Union and communist eastern Europe, according to Davies (2007), the whispered jokes critiquing the regime were a harbinger of change and, while direct

translation from satire to civic action is unlikely, jokes are a "thermometer not a thermostat" (p. 301) and can be used as an indicator of social dispositions to current issues.

An exception to the Soviet jokes of resistance, however, were regime-approved publications that parroted the Politburo. The kind of dissent in *Krokodil,* a satirical magazine published in the Soviet Union and subsequently in Russia until 2008, was rarely directed at the regime itself (Etty, 2019). There is value in satire as a tool to propagate official doctrines and *Krokodil* was a vehicle for this vision, making "Soviet satire" an oxymoron (Freedman, 2008). *Krokodil*'s satirists came from all levels of the regime hierarchy and their cartoons were by necessity not oppositionist (Etty, 2019). In parallel, all communist states in Eastern Europe at the time had their own regime-approved satirical magazines and the Bulgarian answer to this was *Starshel* (Hornet), the oldest periodical in the country to date. It has been running uninterrupted since 1946 when the Bulgarian Socialist Party began publishing it (Valkova, 2020). The newspaper fulfilled direct propaganda tasks and ridiculed anything that went against the communist party (Paraskevov, 2012; Valkova, 2020). Much like *Krokodil, Starshel*'s purpose on the Bulgarian mediascape was to propagate the new socialist rule:

> The Starshel newspaper emerged at the dawn of socialist rule in the country as an attempt to harness the critical nature of humor and satire and use it to assert the newly established power (Valkova, 2020, p. 24).

The role of political satire in communist eastern Europe and by extension Bulgaria was thus twofold: it served as a tool for resistance against the regime when more substantive action was impossible (Davies, 2007) and simultaneously satire was an instrument for the Soviet/communist propaganda machine to disseminate official doctrine (Etty, 2019; Valkova, 2020). Recently, within a similar to Bulgaria's context of decreasing freedom of expression, Aiello, Krstić, and Vladisavljević (2020) have demonstrated an exciting new role of political cartoons as *counter-discourse*. Adding new meaning to ongoing events, political cartoons become an instrument of counter-power against the Serbian regime and the media under its control - a testament to cartoons' evolving role in political discourse. The counter-discursive role of political satire, however, is only "new" within the post-communist eastern European context. The satirical newspaper format has a track record of resisting dominant discourse, an excellent

account of which was offered by Richard Terdiman (1989), who describes how, in 19th century France, satirical publications harnessed the mechanism of the newspaper "which functioned to establish the very set of social practices the satirists desired to contest" (p. 143) as a tool against dominant paradigms. The satirical papers of 19th century France can be best understood as "the systematic ridicule of the bourgeois, [and] as their first institutionalized counter-discourse" (Terdiman, 1989, p. 152). Through the resources of exaggeration, Terdiman (1989) continues, satirists used the political cartoon to "perform a complex and corrosive reconception of the objects of the satire", the outcome of which was novel "modes of cultural functionality, which in this period [19th century] were emerging in what we have since come to call the 'public sphere'" (pp. 154-157).

For most societies beyond the West, political cartoons are a cultural import (Laxman, 1989), resulting in weaker cartooning traditions (in comparison to France or Britain) and lack of substantial research. Perhaps predictably, despite its influential positioning in the public sphere, research on political cartooning in Bulgaria is scarce. Previous research is generally focused on cartoons from the 20th century from periodicals like *Papagal* (Parrot)*, Shturets* (Cricket)*,* and *Bălgaran* (see Buzashka, Dobreva, & Nusheva, 2022; Parusheva, 2013; Sarafova & Pilev, 2020; Staykov, 2019). Key insights from such works include the role of visual satire as a propaganda tool, as well as its influence in the Bulgarian public sphere. Parusheva (2013), for instance, explores the portrayal of neighboring nations in 20th century Bulgarian cartoons, demonstrating the evolution of the Bulgarian "gaze at the Other " (p. 428) as mirrored by cartoonists. More importantly, her research uncovers political cartoons' aptitude to reflect the social climate in which they are produced.

Research on contemporary Bulgarian political cartoons is even sparser but a potent contribution for this thesis is Genova's (2018) detailed analysis of cartoons by Christo Komarnitski, who also now cartoons for Pras Press. In exploring the visual and textual elements of Komarnitski's cartoons, Genova (2018) finds that in the meaning-making process the two communication modes can convey *the same message, strengthen each other's message,* or when seemingly unrelated *produce a meaningful message* when combined. Beyond intertextuality, she

stresses the role of humor as a vehicle for subliminal messaging in political cartoons, rather than it being the end goal.

The lack of substantial research on political cartoons, however, is not limited to the Bulgarian or eastern European contexts. Because political cartoons are not the focal point of any particular discipline, a unified scholarship is yet to emerge (Davis & Foyle, 2017, p. 4). One of the most robust efforts to map the field of political cartoon study is by Chen, Phiddian, and Stewart (2017) - their meta-study encompasses 144 works from various disciplines and categorizes them into six types: "meta-studies of political cartoons, the properties of political cartoons, political cartoons' function as a cultural mirror, political cartoons' impact, audience reception, and the political cartoon ecosystem" (p. 129). Their analysis finds that the majority of studies focus on exploring the properties of political cartoons and their capacity to mirror society, while significantly fewer studies seek to find their actual impact and how varying audiences may perceive them. Furthermore, the authors point to several shortcomings of the "loosely formed field" (Chen, Phiddian, & Stewart, 2017, p. 144) of political cartoon study, one of which this thesis addresses - the lack of research studies on contemporary political cartoon censorship.

The deficiency in research about political cartoons can be attributed to two main reasons: the absence of a unified political cartoon study field and skepticism about the future of editorial cartoons. Because political cartooning surged in popularity almost simultaneously with the emergence of mass print, its lifeline is necessarily connected to the very turbulences that affect print media (Danjoux, 2007; Leon, 2017). Precisely the decline of print media and the Internet's expanding influence prompted several scholars to warn of the end of the editorial cartoon.

Lamb (2004) was particularly wary of the potential decline of political cartooning as a genre due to the restraints under which cartoonists (much like journalists) must operate. The commercialization of media has led to mass sanitizing of political cartoons for wider audience appeal, necessarily diluting the value of the art. This depreciation in value stems from newspapers' resignation from the watchdog role in democracy, prioritizing commercial interests instead (Lamb, 2004, p. 223). Similar remarks have been made by Walker (2003) that cartoons

are a resource of the dominant and serve to reinforce opinions of media owners or those with social power.

On the contrary, Danjoux (2007) has been very optimistic about the future of editorial, and especially political, cartoons in the face of a digital future. He urges reconsideration of the decline narrative and points to the freedoms that online publishing can grant cartoonists. Although political cartoons owe both their rise and decline to the same elements, they not only continue to be relevant, influential, and as controversial as ever but are also evolving into their digital counterparts (Danjoux, 2007; Leon, 2017). They're "evidently not dying out" (Davis & Foyle, 2017, p. 6), but rather morphing into a new form. The digital rebirth of political caricatures allows cartoonists to circumvent editorial control albeit not without risks, and, as this thesis will show, evade censorship (Danjoux, 2007, p. 247).

Political cartoonists have always been open to embracing new techniques and going digital offers benefits in two avenues: production methods and dissemination of content (Leon, 2017, p. 166). While quality of (re)production is ever-increasing as enabled by new technology, the capacity to instantly reach a wide audience is the most significant benefit of online dissemination for political cartoonists; it also allows to bypass the editorial process which may otherwise hinder creativity in favor of commercial interests (Lamb, 2004; Leon, 2017).

> Self-publishing in this manner allows the political cartoonist a mechanism to circumvent the editorial process by publishing cartoons that might otherwise be deemed too offensive for publication and denied endorsement by the newspaper editors (Leon, 2017, p. 173).

Beyond overcoming the obstacles of traditional dissemination routes, political satire online is not as vulnerable to politicians and corporate media's control over the discursive agenda (Leon, 2017, p. 182). Thus the digital evolution of political cartoons is not only a logical adaptation to the contemporary condition but a necessary move if situated within a hostile media environment. Self-publishing online is a path to independence from the market and immunity from institutionalization, making satirical publications alternative media (Atton, 2010).

Satirical newspapers or magazines function as alternative media in more than one way: the prime objective of cartoonists is to disparage the image of politicians thus redressing the perceived imbalance of power in mainstream media (Atton, 2010; Bal et al., 2009). In that satirists often report from their position as citizens and members of communities, they voice the interests of under-represented groups (Atton, 2010).

> The ideology of alternative journalism embodies a critique of the ideological effect of the mass media through developing practices that challenge the dominant practices of professionalised journalism. Consequently, in its ideal form alternative journalism is produced outside mainstream media institutions and networks (Atton, 2010, p. 169).

As an alternative media practice, satirical publications call attention to the challenges to dominant media practices in respect of structure - both the market and the state (Atton, 2010, p. 171).

Summary

Bulgarian democracy exhibits trends of state capture, a reflection of which is the country's semi-restricted media system. It is characterized by extreme politicization of media, institutionalized corruption, opaque ownership, strong dependency on state and EU funding, low press freedom and levels of online news use, and poor journalistic ethical codes and norms. Journalists (and satirists) work under hostile conditions, either self-censored or censored by private interest groups practically indistinguishable from the state. Consequently, legacy media is rendered a political proxy and unable to fulfill its functions in the public sphere as deliberative arena and a state watchdog, which is imperative for democracy. Both traditional and new media are inadequately regulated in Bulgaria. The fragility of Bulgarian democracy also manifests as consistently low voter turnouts - an issue which, under all models of citizenship, could be remedied through an independent mass media that provides unbiased and comprehensive political information to engaged citizens.

The theoretical departure point for this thesis is public sphere theory, more specifically Dahlgren's (2013) refinement of the concept which allows to explore discursive production in media texts in relation to their sociopolitical contexts. A drawback in public sphere theory is the

focus on traditional media: the Internet offers the infrastructure and affordances for the democratization of information distribution, albeit with the risk of reflecting the power imbalances of offline society. Though not inherently democratic or good for democracy, new technology enables unorthodox paths to civic participation but also peaks the interest of censors who seek to control public opinion.

Satire and political cartooning are insufficiently studied as the subjects are not a focal point of any particular discipline. Nonetheless, both are more than simply entertainment and worthy of serious exploration for they serve as social barometer and participate in political discourse. Political cartooning has previously taken on various roles, from a propaganda tool to a weapon of resistance and counter-discursive device. It is an optimal mechanism for the circumvention of censorship and disparaging the weak points of society. In that they expose the most grotesque features of public figures, satirical publications constitute alternative media. Political satire has a strong legacy as an instrument to the communist regime in Bulgaria.

Chapter III: Methodology and Methods

Prioritizing practical, context-dependent knowledge is a pivotal aspect of socially relevant research (Flyvbjerg, 2001), hence this case study looks at the role of political cartooning in the Bulgarian public sphere through the lens of a concrete example - the satirical newspaper Pras Press. Ten full issues of the publication from the period of April 2021 - April 2023 were purposively selected for analysis based on contextual and temporal factors (Bazeley, 2013). The aim is to generate critical social research (Harvey, 2022) and illuminate the discursive patterns with which Pras Press challenges or reinforces dominant narratives in Bulgarian media (Fairclough, 2010). To capture the nuances of the satirical newspaper format, the methodological framework integrates thematic coding, critical discourse analysis, and multimodal critical discourse analysis.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA), as classically formulated by Fairclough (2010), offers a rich toolbox with which to deconstruct texts and their meaning as situated within a wider social practice. "Discourse", according to Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999, p. 38), includes semiotic elements beyond language, such as non-verbal communication and visual images, yet lexical analysis is a focal point in CDA, ergo the necessity to annex a more tailored to satirical newspapers approach in the face of Machin and Mayr's (2012) multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA). Finally, thematic coding permits the identification of recurrent topics and patterns within the data set, "work out the relationships *between* code categories" (Bazeley, 2013, pp. 190-191) (Italics in original), and thus affords an entry point for further analysis.

CDA & MCDA

This thesis assumes a social constructionist stance, thus postulating that discourses, our systems of meaning, obscure relations of power through ideology (Burr, 1995). That is, media communication and the discourses it embodies have ideological potential which those in power seek to harness. In the Bulgarian media system this manifests as ownership concentration, censorship via financial coercion, and system-wide corruption thus enabling vested interests to achieve ideological hegemony (Antonov, 2013; Trifonova Price, 2018; 2019). In the public

sphere, an arena of discursive tensions, is where ideologies collide and delimitate themselves from each other (Žižek, 1994, p. 19).

> A social constructionist theoretical position does not necessarily mean that one must use a discourse analytic approach in one's research, or that to use a discourse analytic approach means that one must be a social constructionist (Burr, 1995, p. 112).

Critical discourse analysis is, however, a common choice for social constructionists on account of its capability to uncover and critique social inequality by focusing on the role of discourse in the reproduction and defiance of dominance (Taylor, 2012; van Dijk, 1993) In other words, CDA concerns itself with revealing political or ideological investment in texts (Machin & Mayr, 2012) and "the nature and sources of social wrongs, the obstacles to addressing them and possible ways of overcoming those obstacles" (Fairclough, 2010, p. 235), making it suitable for research pertinent to censorship and corruption, such as is the case in this thesis.

Because CDA lacks clear delimitations as a theoretical and methodological framework (Fairclough, 2010, p. 234), it has many incarnations. Common among them are the view of discourse as constitutive of and constituted by other social dimensions, the recognition of its ideological function, and advocacy for empirical investigation of language use within its social context (Fairclough, 2010; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). CDA, then, is particularly well-fitted for traditional media texts, as it bridges critical social science and linguistics together, and in so doing creates a dialogue between them (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999, p. 6). Albeit with a satirical twist, Pras Press is a newspaper and thus features much of the same type of content as its non-humorous counterparts, including news articles and op-eds, rendering it an ideal match for CDA.

A simple yet nuanced approach to critical discourse analysis is Fairclough's three-dimensional model which posits that:

> Each discursive event has three dimensions or facets: it is a spoken or written language *text*, it is an instance of *discourse practice* involving the production and interpretation of text, and it is a piece of *social practice* (Fairclough, 2010, p. 94) (Italics in original).

Beyond its clarity, Fairclough's framework offers a panoptic view of the dialectical relationship between text and social practice, which this case study seeks to highlight. The discursive practice level is not neglected either, since establishing the sociocultural context where the sampled texts occur coincides with knowledge about Pras Press text production. An emphasis on *interdiscursivity* (the discourses and genres constituting a text) and *modality* (degree of affinity) will guide answering this study's research questions (Fairclough, 2010; Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002).

Though Fairclough's (2010) conception of CDA is distinct from that of Laclau and Mouffe's (2001), he accepts their notions of *logic of equivalence* and *logic of difference*, hence this thesis deploys them in interpreting data. Through linking signs to expand on the paradigmatic pole, *chains of equivalence* help group and identity formation (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, p.130). Stated otherwise, identity in discourse can be constructed through linking signs in a specific meaning chain (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p.44). In contrast, the *logic of difference* is ultimately one of increasing complexity, whereby distinction is constructed through the connection of signs (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, p.130).

The critical discourse analysis approach associated with Fairclough and van Djik, however, is known for its focus on language (Taylor, 2012, p. 77), which poses a risk of reductionism in analyzing Pras Press texts. Inasmuch as the satirical newspaper format is multimodal in nature, it requires a tailored approach to prevent contextual omissions. "Visual imagery is never innocent" (Rose, 2016, p. 23) and should be taken seriously, especially when employing a critical approach.

A necessary integration for this study's methodological framework is thus Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis as proposed by Machin and Mayr (2012). MCDA, too, tasks itself with uncovering implicit meanings in text and acknowledges the important role of visual semiotic choices in the communication of power relations. It allows the simultaneous deconstruction of visual and textual components of a multimodal text, while distinguishing the idiosyncrasies of each medium. More importantly, Machin and Mayr's (2012) work demonstrates significant differences between communicated messages generated by words and images. For the

interpretation of Pras Press' discursive constructions this interrelation of text and visuals is a key aspect. Beyond basic lexical analysis, Machin and Mayr's (2012) MCDA offers a plethora of analytical tools to examine lexical, grammatical, and visual semiotic choices. In deciphering Pras Press' discursive patterns, most significant are the various *rhetorical tropes* (metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, etc.) and *representational strategies* available to multimodal text authors (personalization/impersonalization, generic/specific depiction, etc.) as well as *transitivity,* or what people are represented as doing (Machin & Mayr, 2012).

Sampling

Obtaining sufficient volume of data for critical discourse analysis is a rare obstacle; on the contrary, a common issue is narrowing down the material to a manageable selection (Taylor, 2012, p. 60). For sampling in this study were considered all Pras Press issues released between April 2021 and April 2023, as this time frame maximizes the practical limits of this project (Taylor, 2012, p. 68) and coincides with, *inter alia*, a period marked by unprecedented political instability in Bulgaria, the COVID-19 pandemic, and an escalation in the Russo-Ukrainian war. The resulting selection is rich in content on central to the Bulgarian public sphere topics, such as the country's electoral process and institutionalized corruption. Since the newspaper is bi-weekly, this makes for a total volume of 44 Pras Press issues, excluding special editions. From this population, additional contextual (parliamentary/general elections) and temporal (publication date proximity to the elections) factors were implemented for optimal choice of material to complete the purposive sampling (Bazeley, 2013; Creswell & Creswell, 2018), enabling the research to track the evolution of Pras Press discourse as key political events unfold.

Between 2021 and 2023 five elections - four parliamentary and one general (presidential and parliamentary combined) - were held in Bulgaria. In 2021, parliamentary elections took place in April and July, and in November were held general elections to elect both president and vice president, as well as the National Assembly. The November 2021 elections had a second round in the same month as presidential candidates did not achieve a majority vote during the first. 2022 saw another parliamentary election in October after the fall of the Petkov cabinet and in April 2023 the fifth parliamentary elections within a two year span took place.

The final samples thus include ten Pass Press issues as follows: #92 (07.04.2021), #93 (21.04.2021), #99 (14.07.2021), #100 (28.07.2021), #105(10.11.2021), #106 (24.11.2021), #125 (12.10.2022), #126 (26.10.2022), 137 (05.04.2023), and 138 (19.04.2023).

This sample size makes for 22.7% of the population albeit its representativeness can be contested due to the purposive sampling. Bazeley (2013) has defended this approach and its utility:

> Often samples are initially purposive in that they are selected especially to meet particular research goals or to provide variation; they are then supplemented by a theoretical sample which is designed to allow exploration of questions that arise from initial analyses (p.49).

But "qualitative research does not and cannot use statistically representative samples" (Taylor, 2012, p.68) and the case of Pras Press itself is certainly not representative of broader discursive dynamics within the Bulgarian media system, given the publication's previous encounters with censorship. Quite the contrary, the research design purposefully sought out an outlier case in order to gain valuable insights and avoid sterile results. Stated otherwise this thesis embodies Flyvbjerg's (2001) phronetic research framework and explores the concrete. A phronetic approach aids to detail the mechanisms of power and values at work, prioritizing the particular (Flyvbjerg, 2001; 2004).

Data Acquisition and Ethics

Several attempts to come into contact with Pras Press cartoonists and/or staff were made directly by the researcher with no success. Subsequently, a number of Pras Press issues of interest for this study inexplicably disappeared from the newspaper's online shop database, which was the only feasible route to obtaining raw materials. Data acquisition was thus impeded due to unresponsive editorial personnel and temporary lack of access. Eventually the 44 newspapers (ten of which were sampled) in their electronic format were obtained in two ways: half were purchased on the researcher's behalf with the assistance of contacts that were met with

cooperation upon contact with Pras Press, and the remaining editions were obtained at a later stage after reappearing on the eshop catalog.

These circumstances forced changes in the initial research design as data acquisition was delayed and production interviews became unfeasible, simultaneously raising ethics concerns in regards to the reproduction of cartoons. A good ethics practice requires obtaining a permission for use (Rose, 2016, p. 302), but since authorization is absent, no Pras Press cartoons are reproduced in this thesis. While certainly an obstruction to clarity, image reproduction is not necessary to report and discuss research results. For the curious reader, Pras Press issues can be purchased online from the official website or local distributors in Bulgaria.

Limitations

The two largest concerns in this thesis - CDA's language-focused analytical tools and data acquisition for the study - have already been addressed above. Instead, I offer a brief discussion on reflexivity since it is a core characteristic of qualitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 314).

While researcher background can be an obstruction to result validity, in this particular case my Bulgarian nationality is beneficial for a number of reasons. Most importantly, Pras Press is a satirical newspaper produced by and for Bulgarians. Deconstructing its discursive patterns thus requires not only fluent Bulgarian but also cultural, political, and historical knowledge about the country.

> Awareness of context during analysis contributes, therefore, to meaningful and appropriate interpretation of what has been observed or told and to understanding relationships between structure and process (Bazeley, 2013, p. 81).

More than that, deciphering the meaning of political cartoons necessarily entails familiarity with its sociopolitical context or "the literary and cultural source to which it refers" (Medhurst & DeSousa, 1981, p. 201). Additionally, my previous academic and professional background in journalism lends me a unique perspective in working with newspaper content. It

is, however, possible that some nuance is lost in translation when it comes to excerpts in the analysis section - in part because the translations are my own but also due to the substantial dissimilarity between Bulgarian and English. Since Pras Press often relies on colloquial language, dialect forms, and metonymy, translations focus on conveying the intended meaning rather than offering complete accuracy.[1]

Coding

While computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) is not suited for discourse data analysis itself (Taylor, 2012, pp.68-69), CAQDAS can be helpful in sorting, marking up, commenting on, and categorizing data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Taylor, 2012). To optimize the analytical process, this case study utilized NVivo software for storing and retrieving information, as well as coding the data after the primary stage of gaining familiarity with the entire corpus (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Data-driven open codes in the first stage guided their grouping/categorization in the second thematic coding stage (Bazeley, 2013). Visual and textual components were treated equally during the coding process, e.g. an in-text reference to and a cartoon about the Bulgarian electoral process belong to the same code - *Elections & Results.* For ease of retrieval, however, visuals were tagged with an additional temporary code - *Image* - which also simplified comparison between textual and visual elements at later stages of analysis (see Appendix A). In order to ensure consistency in application of codes, the process was guided by a basic codebook (see Appendix B) created during the dynamic process of comparing Pras Press content across the entire data set (Bazeley, 2013).

The emerging themes are a direct result of working out the connections between codes (Bazeley, 2013) and offer an entry point to CDA and MCDA. Themes were, in other words, "a step on the way" (Bazeley, 2013, p. 191) to constructing the Pras Press discursive map (see Appendix C). A total of five themes - *Corruption, Political Collusion, Foreign Subversive Influence, Mass Media,* and *Elections & Results* - translate to nodal points in the subsequent critical discourse analysis (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999; Fairclough, 2010; Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002). In the final stage of analysis, CDA and MCDA tools aid to explore the

mechanics of Pras Press discourse: using Fairclough's (2010) three dimensional model, MCDA analytical tools are integrated in the analysis on a textual level before moving on to the discursive and social practice dimensions. While textual and visual elements were first treated independently, their interrelation is evaluated by comparing the subliminal messaging of each source before drawing conclusions.

Chapter IV: Analysis

A Counter-Discourse

Instead of focusing on a single discursive moment or nodal point at a time, this chapter abstains from abstract discussions and delivers a concise yet comprehensive view of Pras Press discourse in a three part structure. The first section elaborates on the largest, most salient theme found across the samples - *Corruption* - which coincides with the nodal point of the satirical newspaper's discourse (Fairclough, 2010). Next follows an in-depth exploration of Pras Press' positioning in the Bulgarian mediascape, as well as a detailed look into how the publication represents mainstream media and journalism in the country. The last part aggregates three more Pras Press themes - *Elections & Results, Political Collusion, and Foreign Subversive Influence* - to extrapolate what the publication makes of Bulgarian politicians, their conduct, and the state of democracy. Each segment is driven by concrete examples, where both visual and textual elements are thoroughly deconstructed with the aid of CDA and MCDA tools to showcase the complex, multidimensional nature of Pras Press discourse. Additional context helps the reader grasp the meaning behind the various cartoons and content excerpts, while offering a window to the social practice dimension of Fairclough's CDA model.

As the analysis will demonstrate, Pras Press is positioned as an alternative media source because of its content, conditions of media production, and independence from interference by the state or market actors (Atton, 2010). Central to the satirical newspaper are public affairs topics, especially those pertaining to Bulgarian politics and civic concerns, which paint Bulgaria as a *captured state* by the interests of local private actors, politicians, and oligarchs, as well as foreign states (Callaghan, Foley & Swilling, 2021; Voinea, 2015). In platforming critical voices, Pras Press actively contributes to political discourse and Bulgaria's public sphere (Day, 2011; Dahlgren, 2013).

Drawer-gate and Other Corruption Scandals

Corruption is the largest cluster or nodal point in the 'captured state' discourse Pras Press constructs (see Appendix C), and redirecting attention to the institutionalized corruption on all

levels of Bulgaria's both public and private sectors is central to the publication's practices (Toneva-Metodieva, 2018; Voinea, 2015). Recalling the purposive sampling of this case study, these continuous reminders of the state of democracy in the country flash through a background of political debates, exit polls, and election results talk in the mass media.

The satirical piece titled *Dancho the Policeman: The thief oligarchs and criminals try to undermine us* (#126, p.14) highlights the severity of the issue, while capturing the everyday experience of many Bulgarian drivers. It ridicules a then-recent incident of a drugged police officer who caused a car crash (Trud, 2022), simultaneously raising the subject of the MVR's (Ministry of Interior) failure to observe the law and order, as well as of national security.

> After the undisputed election victory of General Boyko Borissov and the GERB party, a prerequisite was once again established for a complete and utter fight against the status quo, organized crime, the mafia, and the *zadkulisie*. An alliance between MVR, the prosecutor's office in the face of Mr. Ivan Geshev, and a working government under the leadership of Mr. Borisov only means that there's a power in the state that is not afraid to stand up against Bulgaria's biggest enemies and to fight with all its might for the wellbeing of the Bulgarian nation and our glorious motherland (#126, p. 14).

The use of honorifics ("General", "Mr.") underscores the importance of Borisov and Geshev's roles in domestic politics while implying a connection with the *zadkulisie* not only through a tacit link within the same utterance but also connotatively with semiotic lexical choices, such as "alliance", "power", and "leadership" (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Similarly, "the status quo, organized crime, the mafia and the *zadkulisie*" are grouped, effectively conflating their demarcations and equating "the status quo" (in Bulgarian "*statukvoto*", refers to the sitting cabinet or ruling party, i.e. GERB in this context) with criminals, oligarchs ("*zadkulisie*"), and the mafia. A connection between the prosecutor's office, MVR, and Boyko Borisov's cabinet (which should be independent) is constructed in a similar way but the connotation of "alliance" is a semiotic choice that makes this link overt. High affinity modality ("undisputed", "complete and utter") and absent hedging (or "padding" of language) demonstrate confidence in the discursive construction's veracity and strengthen the message (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Appeals to patriotism ("glorious motherland", "Bulgarian nation", "Bulgaria's biggest enemies") introduce an emotive element as a persuasive tactic.

Dancho the Policeman is a fictional character - a policeman parody - and "author" of a column part of the newspaper's fixed format which occasionally, as is the case with this example, expands to full-length feature articles. The connection of Borisov and Geshev with organized crime, then, is constructed as Dancho's opinion, serving as a comedic element but also removing agency from Pras Press itself.

> In a petty attempt to undermine us, the shadow state devised a scheme with which to make out Bulgarian policemen to be drug addicts and alcoholics (#126, p. 14).

Dancho the Policeman shows contempt for the newly installed mandatory alcohol and drug tests policemen must take as a response to the aforementioned drugged officer car crash incident. He is confident in his conviction that these measures are a ploy ("petty attempt to undermine us") by those in power ("the shadow state") to destroy the reputation of Bulgarian police ("make out Bulgarian policemen to be drug addicts and alcoholics"). Implicitly, Dancho asserts the police as a reliable and competent institution. This juxtaposition with reality generates a *comic counterfactual* (Waisanen, 2018), or a *gap* in the terms of Bal et al. (2009), inciting critical reflection on the political and social effects of the police officer's car crash. The adjacent cartoon extends this invitation for reflection to the everyday experience of many Bulgarian drivers through a satirical depiction of a police traffic stop.

In the cartoon, a police officer has stopped a driver, presumably for a routine check on the road. Behind the two figures is a detailed background with road lane markings and the driver's car, inserting the subliminal messaging into a recognisable social context (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 203). The policeman is in uniform, with a traffic control paddle in his back pocket, inscribed with "MVR", emphasizing the police force's function as proxy of the Ministry of Interior. The officer is bent over, appearing to be snorting something through a funnel or straw from the driver's pant pocket. With this visual allegory of police corruption, Pras Press pokes fun at a common experience - being subjected to a traffic stop and then asked to bribe the police. What makes this cartoon work is the driver's pose: standing with arms up in the air, observing the situation passively and with resignation. It creates *sympathy* (Bal et al.. 2009), i.e. making it

relatable, as the cartoon speaks to the frustrations of everyday people, feeling helpless in a corrupt system.

Police misconduct is a relatable example of a much larger, systemic corruption issue which Pras Press ridicules with confidence, personifying the problem - frequently with the face of Boyko Borisov or Ivan Geshev - rather than persuading with abstraction. The epitome of this personification are two cartoons of Boyko Borisov alongside a mock article called "*10 ways to enter and not enter the Eurozone*" (#99, p. 6), both of which subliminally construct him as the embodiment of corruption through a reference to a scandal with leaked photos from his bedroom. The now dubbed "drawer-gate" (in Bulgarian "*chekmedzhe-geit*") scandal involved leaked '*kompromat'* (reputation damaging; blackmail) pictures of Borisov, "showing him sleeping in his bedroom with a handgun on his nightstand and photos of the same bedroom showing the nightstand drawer filled with wads of EUR 500 banknotes and gold bars" (Bivol, 2020, n.p.).

This exact scene is the setup of the first Borisov cartoon: he is depicted sitting on his bed in underwear and a sleeveless undershirt, looking down at a blonde female journalist sitting across from him with her legs open, revealing the view from under her mini dress towards which he is pointing. Her pose, with her back towards the viewer, can be interpreted as commentary on the integrity of Bulgarian journalists - they're docile, anonymous (to the public in terms of their affiliation with power), and in bed with the prime minister. On the other hand, Borisov's pose, taking up space, suggests domination and a relaxed state with one arm supporting the back of the neck, despite the infamous drawer in the background, stuffed with cash and gold. On its surface is a handgun alongside what appears to be two magazines - a juxtaposition that speaks to Borisov's dismissal of corruption allegations. Borisov's speech bubble reads "The advantage of Euros is that the drawer can fit twice as large a sum", making the visual elements' messaging explicit: he is corrupt and unapologetic about it. The cartoon itself is extremely detailed, straying from abstraction thus seeking to rekindle the viewer's memory of the scandal which mass media conveniently buried, unlike the other Borisov cartoon.

In the second cartoon Boyko Borisov and his nightstand appear once more, this time with minimal detail - blank background, nothing on the nightstand's surface, just the stacks of Euros

visible through the open drawer. Low articulation of detail and/or background in visual communication is indicative of the image's symbolic function and in this case Borisov himself is the personification of corruption (Machin & Mayr, 2012). An interesting semiotic choice is his pose: the same as Uncle Sam's in the famous 1917 WWI military recruitment propaganda poster.

The caption below Borisov's caricature continues the symbolic play and is similar to J.M. Flagg's style calls to action: "Did you sign up for the Eurozone?". The prime minister's face is stern yet with a sleek smile, suggesting an ulterior motive to call for Bulgaria's Eurozone accession. This spin on potent cultural symbols delivers a strong message: much like the Uncle Sam poster, in this cartoon Borisov propagates his own interest as Bulgaria joining the Eurozone will unlock more EU funding to the state. With the nightstand by his side, the textual and visual elements jointly create another layer of meaning (Genova, 2018) that the EU funds will end up in Borisov's nightstand drawer just as the stacks of Euros already in there. Ironically, this cartoon was published less than a year before the former prime minister would be detained in connection to EU funding fraud (Dallison, 2022). The reference to Uncle Sam may obscure the cartoon's message for a viewer with limited knowledge of American history but even without that additional layer, the cartoon still works as a standalone piece mocking "drawer-gate", Boyko Borisov, and the scale of corruption in the country.

Given their placement, however, both Borisov cartoons seem to be meant as illustrations to accompany the mock article "*10 ways to enter and not enter the Eurozone*" (#99, p. 6) in the familiar top ten list format. Its content takes the reader through the "ways" in which Bulgaria could finally get across the Eurozone border - a hotly debated issue in the public sphere since the country has been repeatedly denied entry in the EU's Schengen and Eurozone on the grounds of inadequate anti-corruption measures (RFE/RL Bulgarian Service, 2023a). The satirical piece elegantly ridicules the situation without mentioning Borisov a single time and the reason for Eurozone rejection (systemic corruption) is left implicit. Both cartoons, then, are an active ingredient in the discursive construction linking the prime minister, systemic corruption, and by extension Bulgaria's failure to join Schengen and the Eurozone.

In this way, Pras Press texts harness the potential of the political cartoon as a visual medium, circumventing the constraints of textual communication and by extension censorship (Davis and Foyle, 2017; Freedman, 2008; Walker, 2003). Results from the first stage of coding for this research show that Pras Press adheres to this tactic of persuasion with abstraction in texts yet making visual metaphors overt, particularly when addressing topics considered 'taboo' for the mass media, such as corruption or the *zadkulisie* (Trifonova Price, 2018). *"How the Chief showed himself to be worthy of his post"* (Pras Press, #100, p. 13) is but one example of this discursive strategy. The parody news article features a spoof press conference transcript in which the chief prosecutor, Ivan Geshev, reports on the latest anti-corruption endeavors of the Legal Protection Bureau, where among the arrested is Valchan Voyvode - a mythical Bulgarian revolutionary, documented through the lens of folklore. On the surface it seems that Valchan Voyvode's "search warrant" is a satirical device to mock the inefficiency of the Bulgarian justice system but a closer look reveals that the mythical figure is the *source domain* (Machin & Mayr, 2012) of a metaphor for Boyko Borisov and his involvement in corruption.

> - Could you reveal something more about Valchan Voivode? [journalist]
> - What can I tell you. A typical case of a common criminal posing as a freedom fighter. Which, by the way, is what most of today's democrats are. But I want to ask, where was the vaunted Mrs. Kövesi? Why did she turn a blind eye to the crimes of Valchan Voivode for so many years? [Ivan Geshev] (Pras Press #100, p. 13).

A significant lexical choice here is "democrats", referring to oppositionist parties such as "We Continue the Change" and "Democratic Bulgaria". The implicit discursive division puts Geshev and Borisov's party, GERB, on one side while "today's democrats", i.e. the oppositionist parties, are equated to common criminals. Geshev's vested interest in protecting Borisov becomes plain with his derogatory reference to the European Chief Prosecutor, Laura Kövesi, as "vaunted" - the connotation in Bulgarian ("*prehvalena*") implies she is undeserving of praise. With this discursive construction Pras Press lampoons the reactions to Kövesi's report on "over 120 cases of funds mismanagement and corruption in Bulgaria" (Todorov, 2022b, n.p.) to be investigated, which eventually led the prime minister at the time, Kiril Petkov, to exclude Geshev from conversation with the European Prosecutor's Office as he was seen as Borisov's protector, and to Borisov's arrest in 2022 (RFE/RL Bulgarian Service, 2022).

During the spoof press conference Geshev asks why Kövesi shut her eyes to "the crimes of Valchan Voivode" - a metaphor, the *target domain* (Machin & Mayr, 2012) of which is Boyko Borisov and the various suspected crimes including "fraudulent use of European funds, mismanagement of public funds, misuse of agricultural subsidies, violations in the field of infrastructure, as well as compensations and recovery aid packages following the COVID-19 pandemic" (Todorov, 2022b, n.p.) during his reign. At the same time, the choice of Valchan Voivode as a stand-in for Borisov is a clever pun: the name "Valchan", meaning "don't be harmed by wolves", comes from the Bulgarian word for "wolf" (*"valk"*) - a witty reference to previous Pras Press caricatures of Borisov as a wolf. Inasmuch as this constitutes an inside joke with the newspaper's devoted readers, Pras Press enlists satire not only as a vehicle to participation in political dialogue but also to generate a community (Day, 2011; DeSousa & Medhurst, 1982).

If Valchan Voivode is actually Borisov, then Geshev himself classifies him as "a common criminal posing as a freedom fighter" and this *gap* with reality is what drives the satirical take to success (Bal et al., 2009). A similar gap between image and reality is present in the illustration of this parody article but the cartoon, as is customary for Pras Press, relinquishes abstraction and depicts Borisov and Geshev's connection quite literally.

The two are portrayed in white undergarments, chained to each other with what appears to be handcuffs. This prison setting makes for an abrasive comment on Borisov and Geshev's conduct - that they're criminals and belong behind bars. Amplifying the message and affirming the two as accomplices are their gazes directed at one another (Machin & Mayr, 2012), the handcuffs, and Geshev's speech bubble remark: "Political bullshit,... for me Bay Yanaki, for you - Bay Stavri..". Ivan Geshev refers to "Bay Yanaki", i.e. Yanaki Stoilov (former Interim Minister of Justice), and "Bay Stavri", a fictional Pras Press character who is a senior inmate in Sofia Prison, with the archaic honorific form "Bay", connoting respect, an older man's seniority, or close relationship with the speaker. Yanaki Stoilov was the first to enter a request for Geshev's dismissal as chief prosecutor (Mediapool, 2023) and the use of "Bay", which connotes a sense of inferiority of the speaker, is a semiotic choice that perfectly captures this power dynamic. By extension, a similar interplay is discursively constructed between Boyko Borisov and "Bay Stavri", the seasoned prisoner.

Summary

The most salient line of criticism in Pras Press discourse is that of systemic corruption, penetrating all levels of governance in Bulgaria. Rekindling the viewer's memory, the publication generates a new meaning for ongoing events (Aiello, Krstić, & Vladisavljević, 2020), utilizing a number of discursive strategies - most notably, *personification*, *metaphors*, and *comic counterfactuals* (Machin & Mayr, 2012; Weissanen, 2018). Persuasion in the texts is achieved through abstraction, tacitly linking individual public figures to the *zadkulisie* and exposing the connections between oligarchs and organized crime groups, and the state. Pras Press deploys cartoons to make these power dynamics overt, disparaging the political image of public servants (Desousa & Medhurst, 1982; Danjoux, 2007; Bal et al. 2009). The visual medium allows circumvention of the limitations of text communication to deliver abrasive social commentary and address taboo subjects. Satire, especially in its visual form, is the main driver of the newspaper's counter-discursive effort.

Pras Press in the Bulgarian Mediascape

"Since satire is a negative art, it tells us what they're against rather than what they're for" (Freedman, 2008, p. 3) and Pras Press takes an oppositionist stance against Bulgarian mass media. The most colorful examples can be found in their 100th issue:

> For these [last] 100 issues, which we have drawn, written, digitized, printed, and (partly) sold - embarrassing as it is - we have not received a penny of state or NGO money. For this there are more deserving media outlets such as Blitz, which have been receiving money from the state company "Motorways" each month, as "Capital" reported recently. Ministries have also been pouring money into individual media outlets for years. They probably do it to stimulate pluralism and fight against fake news and propaganda disguised as journalism. For some reason, however, these media outlets mostly produce rehashed gossip and tabloid journalism (Pras Press, #100, p. 4).

The most striking semiotic choice here is that of pronouns, which alludes to a disassociation from mass media outlets via an 'us versus them' discursive construction. "We", that is Pras Press, have not received a single penny but "they", other media outlets, are so corrupt that

"Capital" - a weekly newspaper linked to media mogul Ivo Prokopiev (Rone, 2016, pp. 208-224) - reported on it. Within this same expression can be found a combination of *individualization* and *collectivization* (Machin & Mayr, 2012) to further drive the point: corrupt media are collectivized ("more deserving media outlets"), accentuating Pras Press' positioning at the peripheries of the Bulgarian mediascape, yet, denoting a confident act of resistance, the collective other has a face - Blitz, an online media connected to another media magnate and oligarch, Delyan Peevski (Mediapool, 2017; Štětka, 2012; 2013). Disdain for corrupt media is also evident in lexical choices when describing other outlets, e.g. "propaganda disguised as journalism" or the ironic "more deserving". The concluding phrase from the above excerpt "rehashed gossip and tabloid journalism" was interpreted for its intended meaning but the original is a play on words, a metaphor, literally translating to "pissed-on sawdust and anal journalism", underscoring the lack of value in Bulgarian journalism.

Another "they" figures here, too - the Bulgarian state as represented by its ministries who, unsuccessfully, as implied with sarcasm, has been "stimulating" media pluralism with long-term investments. A nuance largely lost to translation is the contempt for political bias in government financing (Štětka, 2013), that also manifests as *overlexicalisation* in the *material process* of "these 100 issues, which we have drawn, written, digitized, printed, and (partly) sold" (Machin & Mayr, 2012), as well as the sarcastic "embarrassing as it [not receiving state funding] is". Recalling that *overlexicalisation* indicates ideological contestation (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 37), Pras Press discourse about Bulgarian media can be interpreted as counter-hegemonic in that it seeks to dismantle notions of mass media outlets as objective, independent, and impartial. More than that, this case study's results appear to confirm that, in Pras Press texts, Bulgarian media is consistently discursively constructed as corrupt, biased, and an oligarchic protégé through high affinity modality, e.g. "Ministries have also been pouring money", indicating the authors' desire to convince the audience of the truth of these statements (Fairclough, 2010; Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002; Machin & Mayr. 2012, p. 188). Implicitly, Pras Press is the antithesis of that - integrous, impartial, and independent:

> Let them audit us, maybe someone corrupt will be found on the high floors in this country at last! (Pras Press, #100, p. 4).

A few pages in the same newspaper later, Pras Press returns to the reputation of journalists associated with the *zadkulisie*:

> One of the characteristic features of Borisov's idiolect is the attitude towards journalists - he introduced the term "misirka" [turkey] and it became synonymous with shoddy journalism. Of course - the term applies to any journalist who is not one of "ours". If they're one of "ours", they're not a turkey. So, for example, because Borisov is out of the picture, the turkeys to be insulted are now Iva Nikolova and [Iliana] Benovska (Pras Press, #100, p. 12).

"*Misirka*" (мисирка; pl: *misirki*) literally translates to "turkey" but the dialect word also holds another derogatory meaning - "stupid woman". Boyko Borisov compared reporters to "*misirki*" after receiving uncomfortable questions in 2020 (Mediapool, 2020) and the expression has since become a byword for yellow journalists, or those not serving the public interest. Pras Press' satirical take highlights the double standard in applying the term only to certain "uncooperative" reporters and brings to the surface an uncomfortable truth - some journalists have connections to the power elite. While the in-text comment on the changing, as a result of Borisov's fall of political grace, journalist hierarchy ("the turkeys to be insulted are now Iva Nikolova and Benovska") is somewhat mild, the adjacent cartoon amplifies the message.

Depicted against a minimal background are the journalists Iva Nikolova and Iliana Benovska, both wearing skimpy outfits, in complete contrast to their real selves - a clever play on the secondary meaning of "*misirka*" (a stupid young woman). The journalists' faces are *caricatured* (Bal et al., 2009), i.e. comically exaggerated or distorted, gazing at each other and away from the viewer, suggesting their work in tandem even though the two report for different media outlets. Nikolova is depicted holding a microphone labeled with the name of her news agency "PIK" but Benovska's cartoon holds up a single pumpkin in one hand and in the other - a mesh bag with more pumpkins. The choice of *attributes* in the cartoon is a reference to a *potent cultural symbol* (Machin & Mayr, 2012) - that of Boyko Borisov's derogatory nickname, the Pumpkin (in Bulgarian "*tikvata*"). This visual element of the pumpkins, in conjunction with the textual medium in the cartoon (the speech bubbles), produce a brand new meaning (Genova, 2018) for those familiar with Benovska's provocative attempts to throw apples retrieved from her purse at not one, but two Bulgarian presidents during press conferences (BTV News, 2017). The

speech bubbles read: "Honey, are you out of apples?" - Nikolova to Benovska - "I'm an oppositionist journalist now!". Staggered with the adjacent article (excerpt above), the cartoon acquires one more layer of meaning - Benovska has turned into "an oppositionist journalist" now that Borisov is no longer in power and so she has switched to throwing pumpkins. The subliminal messaging, then, is a social comment on the state of journalism in Bulgaria - that it's tainted with corruption, collusion, and forged objectivity.

Pras Press consistently commits to this division or *logic of difference* (Fairclough, 2010; Laclau and Mouffe, 2001) built on their segregation from other media. In a satirical piece about the launch of Donald Trump's social media platform *Truth Social,* the focus is shifted to the "hostile media reality" in Bulgaria:

> "The news also pleased the journalists from the few surviving Bulgarian democratic publications - PIK, Blitz, Petel, Shrapnel, Kukundrel and others, as they will finally be able to spread correct, truthful and verified news about global politics [...] The expectations are that the new social media will attract proven journalists in the face of Nikolay Barekov, Iliana Benovska, as well as the entire editorial team of the PIK agency, as its correspondents from Bulgaria" (Pras Press, #105, p. 2).

Once more, the 'us versus them' dichotomy reemerges and "they" (publications such as PIK or Blitz) are sarcastically labeled "democratic publications" and "proven journalists". The *transitivity* patterns (Machin & Mayr, 2012), or what "they" are depicted as doing, aggregate to a recurrent in Pras Press content discourse of media incompetence, certainly challenging their already fragile reputation. Agency PIK, for instance, has lost a number of cases mainly for defamation (Mitov, 2019). Similarly, former journalist turned politician Nikolay Barekov has also been repeatedly sued for defamation and lost to, among others, media group owner Ivo Prokopiev (Mediapool, 2022).

Beyond individual journalists or media outlets, Pras Press routinely mocks, among others, oligarchs and media moguls Ivo Prokopiev and Delyan Peevski. Their names often serve as metonymy for the *zadkulisie*, drawing attention to the opacity and concentration of media ownership in the country (Štětka, 2012; 2013; Trifonova Price, 2018; 2019).

The biggest post-election problem with many unknowns remains the business of media comfort, because apart from political reshuffling, there was a tragedy on the media front - the new owner of bTV and Telenor, Petr Kellner, died in a plane crash before we even found out if he was the new Peevski or the new Prokopiev (Pras Press, #92, p. 7).

"The business of media comfort" here refers to the common to the point of becoming public knowledge practice of oligarchs "purchasing" tailored legislation and media comfort, i.e. favorable coverage or even complete concealment from the public eye (Antonov, 2013; Štětka, 2013). Especially telling is the casual tone, reflecting an apathetic attitude towards "political reshuffling" or the normalized nepotism in Bulgarian business and politics, which Prokopiev and Peevski embody. The representational strategy here is *personalization* (Machin & Mayr, 2012) - the oligarchs' names are synonymous with the domestication of media. Problematized in the resulting discourse is the interrelation between media, politics, and power, a satirical element which is achieved with the ironic, perhaps on the nose, use of "tragedy" in connection to Kellner's death.

The Bulgarian press is discursively constructed in Pras Press texts as subordinate not only to domestic political actors and their interests but also to foreign subversive influence. A cogent example of this is a cartoon of Eleonora Mitrofanova, ambassador of Russia to Bulgaria, and Kostadin Kostadinov, a Bulgarian politician and leader of the "Revival" ("*Vazrazhdane*") party (see Figure 7). Mitrofanova is depicted in a reminiscent of German WWII military uniforms attire, her armband in red with the Russian military symbol "Z" is a medley of potent cultural symbols and obvious commentary on Putin's regime. The ambassador is holding Kostadinov on a short leash, himself caricatured as a panting dog standing on its back legs as if to attack. The speech bubble adjacent to Mitrofanova's caricature reads: "Get the press, Kopoykin!!!".

"Kopoykin", with which Mitrofanova refers to Kostadin Kostadinov in the cartoon, is a pun with one of his derogatory nicknames "*Kopeykin*" (from the Russian "*kopeyka*", a subunit of the Russian Ruble, insinuating his connection to the Russian regime) and the archaic Bulgarian word "*kopoy*" (also a Russian dialect form for "dog") meaning "hunting dog", ergo his depiction as a dog. The *logic of equivalence* established here visually and textually is rather simple (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001): the Russian regime via Mitrofanova controls Kostadinov, and he in turn exerts

influence on the press. This discursive construction, of course, lies on the *presupposition* (Machin & Mayr, 2012) that the Bulgarian media *can* be influenced to bend its principles to suit other than the public's interest. Comments on the status of free speech and media integrity in the country are more explicit elsewhere:

> An alternative to the hostile media reality in our country will be provided by the columns "The red flag gave birth to us" by radio journalist Petar Volgin and "Moscow Speaks" by Svetlana Sharenkova (Pras Press, #105, p. 2).

Denoting a genuine commitment to the statement, "hostile media reality" is in a somewhat serious tone in this otherwise sarcastic utterance which delivers a critique on Bulgarian media's volatility. If the press serves the interest of local oligarchs now, it could just as easily swing to parroting the Russian agenda with content from the likes of Svetlana Sharenkova, a politician from the Bulgarian Socialist Party and a Friendship Order awardee by Putin himself (Bivol, 2013), or Petar Volgin, a journalist of Russian heritage whose TV programme was taken down for unlawful "lack of pluralism" (Koleva, 2015, n.p.). The reference to Volgin here is sarcastic but at the same time reminds of his past "troubles" with propelling a pro-Russian agenda and offers a *comic counterfactual* (Weissanen, 2018) - columns such as "The red flag gave birth to us" and "Moscow Speaks" are very much within the realm of possibility.

The evidence on a textual level is an attestation for what is discernible on the social practice level (Fairclough, 2010), shaped by sociopolitical context. Pras Press texts surface from the planes of Bulgaria's media system, where the cartelization of mass media, system-wide corruption, assaults on freedom of speech, and political interference are natural conditions (Antonov, 2013; Herrero et al., 2017; Štětka, 2012; 2013; Trifonova Price, 2018; 2019). A testament to the power of Pras Press as an alternative media, and the dialectical relationship between discourse and other social dimensions (Fairclough, 2010; Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002), is the suspected political interference with the publication's pilot issue, when thousands of print copies vanished overnight, allegedly because of the story on judicial corruption in it (Dzhambazova, 2017). Such an assault on freedom of speech is out of character for the political elite, as the default route to censorship in the country is via financial coercion (Antonov, 2013; Štětka, 2013; Trifonova Price, 2019). Barring Pras Press from selling in print via the largest

domestic distributors indicates the presence of a strong elite with an exceptional grip on the public sphere (Dahlgren, 2013) which forces the satirical newspaper into an alternative production mode - online.

Summary

Pras Press is an alternative to mainstream media in terms of both its content and its primary mode of dissemination, which grants autonomy from censors at least online (Atton, 2010). Through an 'us versus them' discursive division (Fairclough, 2010) the publication assumes an oppositionist stance against mainstream media, the *zadkulisie,* and the state. Bulgarian media is represented as corrupt, biased, unprofessional, and susceptible to external pressures from politicians, oligarchs, and foreign state agents. By problematizing the interrelations between power, politics, and media, the satirical newspaper constructs a counter-hegemonic discourse (Terdiman, 1989), seeking to dismantle dominant notions of mass media as impartial and trustworthy. The publication also takes on a "custodian of facts" (Jamieson & Waldman, 2003, pp. 165-166) role by exposing through satire the opacity and concentration of media ownership in the country (Štětka, 2012; 2013). Implicitly, Pras Press claims independence, integrity, and impartiality, necessarily placing itself at the peripheries of the Bulgarian mediascape.

A Captured State

Owing to the obstructions to free speech in Bulgarian mainstream media, Pras Press uses online dissemination to capitalize on the Internet's "unlimited opportunity for anyone to reach an audience with humor related to politics, sex, religion, race, or ethnicity, no matter how gross or grotesque" (Freedman, 2008, p. 165). The newspaper's counter-discursive effort is beyond a one-dimensional critique of corruption: it contradicts dominant discourse and seeks to project subversion onto the naturalized protocols which drive it (Terdiman, 1989, p. 151). Satire is an optimal weapon to discern the points of stress within the social system (Terdiman, 1989), a process in itself symptomatic of hegemonic struggle and the slow institutionalization of the new (Fairclough, 2010; Laclau & Mouffe, 2001), a window to which the purposive sampling in this

research design warrants. The sampled newspapers were published immediately before or after elections, hence their content is rich with discourse on domestic politics and the electoral process, which aggregates to a clear view of the state of democracy in the country as discursively constructed by Pras Press.

The opinion piece "*Startup for digital democracy*" (Pras Press, #99, pp. 12-13) encapsulates Pras Press discourse on the integrity of Bulgarian elections: it criticizes the return of paper ballots that the parliamentary legal committee voted in overnight with the support of GERB, the Bulgarian Socialist Party, and the Movement for Rights and Freedoms, effectively rendering the previous shift to machine voting obsolete (Mediapool, 2022; SvobodnaEvropa, 2022). Machine-only voting was supposed to prevent electoral manipulation and fraud but the final switch to digital ballots was obstructed by its original proponents - the Movement for Rights and Freedoms and GERB (Mediapool, 2022).

> You see, voting machines have also been introduced. I mean the ones with buttons and a screen. Otherwise, voting was automatic even before, or at most with the help of an ATM. (Pras Press, #99, p. 12)

The pun that makes this bit work does not translate to English but the essence is to ridicule voting fraud: "voting was automatic" in that until the political crisis of 2021 the same parties (generally) got the same amount of votes regardless of the turbulence in the National Assembly, public criticism, and protests. A witty allusion to the reason for this - "at most with the help of an ATM" - constitutes an evaluation of the electoral process - votes are bought and the results illegitimate. Buying votes is "common practice for most political contenders during elections" (Toneva-Metodieva, 2018, p. 40), so much so that discussions about it are ordinary business for prime time TV programs, though instead of admitting guilt politicians weaponize election fraud accusations against their opponents. Pras Press embraces the taboo and through the visual medium makes its allegations clear: GERB's election results are fraudulent.

Illustrating the op-ed is a cartoon of Boyko Borisov, depicted buying votes. The former prime minister is portrayed standing next to a voting machine, holding up a 50 BGN (approximately 25 Euros) banknote. While Borisov points at GERB's checkbox on the digital

ballot, his gaze is directed at the viewer in an invitation to vote. Peaking out of the security camera next to the voting machine is the face of Ivan Geshev, the chief public prosecutor at the time, who is looking at Borisov. This visual allegory for the alleged collusive relationship between the two and Geshev's protection of Borisov is a witty remark on the judiciary's inefficacy in prosecuting voting manipulation. It puts a face on election fraud and given the time of publication - just three days after the elections in July 2021 - the cartoon delivers a concrete accusation of Borisov and by extension GERB's conduct during the last parliamentary elections. More importantly, this depiction points to Geshev and the justice system he embodies as an accomplice to Borisov and his party's assault on democracy.

Discourse of political collusion extends to all political parties in the National Assembly, painting a select few as beholders of the country's resources.

> The new redistribution of the national wealth begins, and who will acquire and manage what share - this is the real political question. [...] This is the situation. Power gives access to resources, and prescient use of resources gives the right to decide, that is, to rule. (Pras Press, #92, p. 6)

Prompting the reader to reflect with a rhetorical question ("this is the real question"), Pras Press frames "the national wealth" as the locus of political control. Its division in "shares" and their "redistribution" connotes the concentration of "resources" in the hands of a few - the Bulgarian political elite - which the aticle's sarcastic title "*Government of National Salvation*" (Pras Press, #92, p. 6) mocks. The discursive construction underscores this consolidation of control with a number of lexical choices connoting power like "acquire", "manage", "rule", "the right to decide", and "access". Implicit is the public's lack of access to its own recourse ("the national wealth"), which the ruling class seeks to retain ("prescient use of resources"). Embedded in the construction and asserted with an authoritative tone - "This is the situation." - is Pras Press' political stance - such power imbalance is profoundly undemocratic and must be resisted.

The publication actively subverts the political class, leveraging visual satire to counter their image as ethical, trustworthy leaders. One such act of resistance is the illustration of "*Government of National Salvation*" (Pras Press, #92): a cartoon depicting political party leaders

colluding to commit fraud. Boyko Borisov is portrayed as the driver of a car, holding the steering wheel with one hand and pointing to the distance with the other. His speech bubble reads "Do you see these 60 billion?", which is a reference to the EU funds Bulgaria had to return as OLAF, the European Union's anti-fraud office, uncovered their misappropriation (The Sofia Globe, 2022). His accomplices are in the back of the car - the political leaders of various parties, including the Bulgarian Socialist Party, Democratic Bulgaria, and There Is Such a People. Borisov is wearing a formal shirt and a tie but no suit jacket, unlike his passengers in proper for the National Assembly attire, suggestive of a nonchalant demeanor in leading the path to "the national wealth" (Pras Press, #92, p. 6). The politicians' gaze away from the viewer and towards the "60 billion" signifies the public's disempowered position. The takeaway from this political cartoon augments the message of the text: the political class is in complete control of the public's resources, either actively colluding to embezzle national funds, or contributing to the abduction of democracy by passively observing from the back seat. But concrete allegations don't come only through satirical depictions:

> With every crisis over the years, with every instability, with every political upheaval, DPS [the Movement for Rights and Freedoms] always comes up with the original idea of a technocratic government. [...] It seems there is something special about the "expert cabinet" formula, something that takes stealing to the next level. At a level where the really smart and powerful can steal in a matter of weeks as much as other politicians of other nations cannot steal in an entire term. We analyze the idea of a technocratic government in this vulgar way. For vulgar politics - vulgar analysis (Pras Press, #92, p. 6)

Overlexicalization - "crisis", "instability", and "upheaval" in the same meaning unit - foregrounds the unstable nature of Bulgarian politics, while its perpetuity is signified with a temporal marker - "always" (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Proposals for a technocratic government, too, have "always" been on the table, though the motive behind them may be dishonest, as the choice of strong language suggests with the sarcastic "something special" and "takes stealing to the next level". Agency for this dishonesty is attributed both to concrete groups ("DPS … comes up with") and a general other ("the really smart and powerful"), simultaneously establishing a power imbalance between the public and the political elite. Pras Press places itself with the public in this discursive division and breaks the fourth wall ("we analyze"), claiming the classifications of the dominant class ("smart and powerful", "vulgar") as its own. The pronoun

choice "we" also demonstrates confidence in this line of criticism and grants agency, instead of removing it from the publication. Persuasion is driven by emotional language ("vulgar politics - vulgar analysis"), sarcasm ("takes stealing to the next level"), and a comparison with an ideal other ("other nations"). The discursive division is in other words split three ways: "us" - Pras Press and the public; "they" - the domestic power elite; and "they" - other societies with less perceived inequality, where "politicians of other nations cannot steal" as much as Bulgarian politicians do. Juxtaposing the power imbalance at home with the relative equality in foreign societies intensifies the gravity of the tacit claim: Bulgaria is a *captured state*, run entirely against the interest of the public and in favor of a tight elite (Callaghan, Foley & Swilling, 2021).

Pras Press discourse paints Bulgarian democracy hostage to the *zadkulisie* and its agenda but also constructs domestic politics as pliable to foreign subversive influence. The parody short story "*Rumen Radev and the magic green socks*" (Pras Press, #125, pp. 10-11) exposes the president's pro-Kremlin politics and the reach of Russian propaganda to the highest levels of governance in Bulgaria. "The green socks" featured both in the title and the story itself, are one of the president's pejorative nicknames, and a coarse reminder of Rumen Radev's military past: "*zelenite chorapi*" (in Bulgarian: green socks) are part of the Bulgarian military uniform.

> The days passed happily. The president only had to turn five times a day in the direction of Moscow and kneel and bow with passion. This is because in the Balkans "NATO general" means much less than "KGB colonel". [...] His [Radev's] friend[,] the grandma Eleonora from the Embassy of the Chicken Legs[,] told him that he was a very good writer. She even dictated his own memoirs to him often. [...] The president woke up [...] and thought: 'Politics is a complicated game. [...] Especially if Putin has you by the balls.' (Pras Press, #125, pp. 10-11)

President Radev is the main character of this parody short story, which portrays him as a proxy for the Russian regime and its agenda ("Putin has you by the balls"). This power dynamic is most salient in the representation of *transitivity* (Machin & Mayr, 2012) with verb choices like "had to turn", "kneel", "bow", and "dictated", all connoting a unidirectional flow of power from the Kremlin to the Bulgarian presidency. Temporal markers ("five times a day", "often") highlight the president's subordinate position to "Moscow", "Putin", and "grandma Eleonora", which act as *metonymy* (Machin & Mayr, 2012) for the Russian government.

"Grandma Eleonora" refers to Eleonora Mitrofanova, the ambassador of Russia to Bulgaria, who is represented as the Slavic folklore villain Baba Yaga with a classic attribute from the tales - the hut with chicken legs ("grandma Eleonora from the Embassy of the Chicken Legs"). In this comparison is hidden Pras Press' stance on Putin and his regime: it is an evil force, breaching into the depths of Bulgarian politics. Achieved through reimagining the Baba Yaga stories, "the Embassy of the Chicken Legs" is in itself a metaphor for the exceptional mobility of Russian propaganda into "the Balkans" and the region's domestic political life. Rumen Radev is a surrogate for this force, parroting Russian talking points: his agency is withheld and instead shifted to the ambassador's hands, as Mitrofanova often "dictated his own memoirs".

Iterating this power dynamic is a cartoon adjacent to the story. The president is depicted sitting in a chair behind an office desk, about to write the first article of the Bulgarian constitution. With one hand holding down the blank, except for the title, constitution and in the other a pen, Radev's head is turned backward toward the vice president, Iliana Iotova. She is holding a cup of coffee, presumably for him, and asks: "The first article will be for you, right dear?", to which Radev answers: "No, for Vladimir Vladimirovich…". To reflect her inferior position as a vice president, Iotova is depicted fulfilling a mundane task - bringing coffee - but the "dear" with which she refers to the president is suggestive of a closer relationship or their work in tandem. The two, looking at each other, are accomplices in propelling a pro-Russian agenda: Radev - by writing Putin's name into the constitution, and Iliana Iotova - by not obstructing this from happening, as suggested by her still pose and distance from the president in the cartoon. Their shared gaze away from the viewer confirms the power dynamics constructed through a visual logic of equivalence (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001): Putin's regime is an invisible force with a grip on Bulgarian politics so tight that it infiltrates the presidency and the constitution, a force which Radev and Iotova propell, and the citizens are stripped of any control, observing from afar. In conjunction with the short story, this cartoon completes the picture of Bulgarian politics, as seen through the lens of Pras Press discourse: democracy has been hijacked by both local private actors and foreign (in this example Russian) subversive influence which invades all aspects of the country's political life. In exposing these patterns the publication

actively participates in political discourse and pursues its own counter agenda (Day, 2011; Terdiman, 1989).

Summary

Pras Press constructs a discourse that paints Bulgaria as a captured state susceptible to the interests of politicians, oligarchs, and foreign states. The publication subverts key democratic institutions, including the autonomy of the presidency, the integrity of the electoral process, and the efficacy of the judiciary system. Bulgarian democracy is represented as hostage to the collusive relationships between political parties in the National Assembly and the consolidation of power in the hands of an elusive elite. The discursive division underscores the power imbalance in society and segregates it into two segments: on one side is Pras Press and the public that is stripped of agency, and on the other is a malicious 'they' - the *zadkulisie* and the Russian propaganda machine. A juxtaposition of this reality against a second discursive 'other' - Western societies with less perceived inequality - prompts the audience to contest the state of democracy in Bulgaria and drives the counter-discursive agenda of Pras Press. In this way the satirical newspaper platforms a critical perspective and assumes the roles Dahlgren (2013) envisions for traditional media in the mainstream sphere: as facilitator of idea exchange and as deliberative arena.

Chapter V: Conclusion

In contrast to their simple appearance, political cartoons deliver pungent social commentary, unraveling the complexity of which requires the application of theoretical tools (Walker, 2003, p. 20). Their sociological importance need not be sought in some presumed hypodermic needle effect; instead, "providing a clear analysis of both the political regime and the ownership of the media together clearly has the potential to establish parameters for a study that might actually bear fruit" (Walker, 2003, pp. 20-21). This thesis sets forth a case study designed to examine the role of political cartooning and satire in the Bulgarian public sphere, with attention to the sociopolitical context and peculiarities of satirical publications. It demonstrates Pras Press' alternative media role, discernible in its content, mode of production, and independence from state interference (Atton, 2010). Contending with systemic censorship, the newspaper has adapted to the hostile Bulgarian mediascape and pursues its counter-discursive agenda not only through satire and "the offensive art" (Freedman, 2008, p. 2) of political cartooning but also with online dissemination, reducing external pressures to a minimum (Leon, 2017).

> in the era of the Internet and the various social media, absolute censorship in democracies is impossible. Still, censorship in the mainstream media persists as a problem. In almost all circumstances, it should be resisted (Freedman, 2012, p. 108).

Since the abolition of communist censorship, press freedom in Bulgaria has had limited progress and "media controlled by political elites fail to perform their function as watchdog monitoring the state's actions" (Toneva-Metodieva, 2018, p. 36). Bulgarian media exhibits "severe structural deficiencies" (Toneva-Metodieva, 2018, p. 41), namely political and economic dependencies, corruption, collusion, censorship, and self-censorship, despite that such suppression is prohibited in the Constitution:

> (1) The press and the other mass information media shall be free and shall not be subjected to censorship.
> (2) An injunction on or a confiscation of printed matter or another information medium shall be allowed only through an act of the judicial authorities in the case of an encroachment on public decency or incitement of a forcible change of the constitutionally established order, the perpetration of a crime, or the incitement of violence against

anyone. An injunction suspension shall lose force if not followed by a confiscation within 24 hours (Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria, Article 40).

Bulgaria ranked the lowest out of all EU states on the World Press Freedom Index in 2021 and several SLAPP (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation) cases against independent media have emerged since, posing existential threat to these outlets with "the staggering amount of damages sought" (Reporters Without Borders, 2020; n.d.). Similar to what Belyakov (2009) has observed in Ukraine, communist censorship in Bulgaria is replaced by "censorship by money" (p. 603), making the media system semi-restricted: mass media in the country is *de jure* free but *de facto* censored not by the state itself but by the oligarchs practically in control of it (Antonov, 2013; Trifonova Price, 2018; Toneva-Metodieva, 2018). While the indistinguishable-from-the-state *zadkulisie* can bring defamation suits against individual investigative journalists or news media, censoring a satirical newspaper like Pras Press is more challenging because its comedic mode justifies the malice in representing public figures unfavorably:

> Political satire, then, must be protected as a derivative of the principle of free speech. More than that. Free speech faces limits in law and ethics when it is accused of malicious distortion and exaggeration, but satire, as a condition of its existence, distorts and exaggerates, and is usually malicious—all of which are justifiable on the grounds that the intent is humorous (Freedman, 2008, pp. 164-165).

For Pras Press, satire and political cartooning are pivotal mechanisms with which the publication circumvents censorship and propels its counter-discursive agenda. The distinctly condensed form of imagery in cartoons surpasses the limitations of text communication by offering a concise, relatable, and easy to digest message, which is "licensed to mock" (Manning & Phiddian, 2004, p. 14) under the guise of entertainment (Davis and Foyle, 2017; Walker, 2003). Visual and textual elements work in symbiosis to strengthen each other's message or deliver an additional layer of meaning (Genova, 2018). Pras Press discourse performs a corrosive reconception of domestic politics, key democratic institutions, including mainstream media, and a number of pressing social issues through both written satire and its visual forms (Terdiman, 1989). To amplify the in-text messages of state capture, Pras Press deploys its political cartoons: they are a site for the symbolic denigration of mass media, oligarchs, and politicians,

undermining their image by magnifying their most grotesque features (Bal et al. 2009; Danjoux, 2007; Desousa & Medhurst, 1982).

Pras Press is "actively constructed in opposition to mainstream media" (Atton, 2010, pp. 169): despite being produced by professional cartoonists and journalists, the publication aligns itself with the public interest and through satire challenges the ideological effect of mass media. Under scrutiny are the lack of journalistic integrity and media pluralism, opaque ownership, political parallelism, institutionalized corruption, and the resulting low press freedom (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2015; Herrero et al., 2017; Štětka, 2012; 2013; Trifonova Price, 2018; 2019). These issues are often personified, imputing responsibility to particular journalists, media outlets or owners, and politicians, in a persuasive tactic to prompt reflection on dominant narratives. An "us versus them" discursive division echoes Pras Press' antagonistic positioning to the media, the state, and the *zadkulisie* (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Fairclough, 2010). The satirical newspaper leverages its authority as an institution to voice critical opinions, thus assuming the watchdog role that the handicapped mainstream media ought to fulfill (Dahlgren, 2009; Jamieson & Waldman, 2003). Most salient is the discourse about systemic corruption in Bulgaria: through textual and visual representations of quotidian issues, the newspaper exposes the covert interests of politicians, oligarchs, and civil servants. Pras Press publicizes taboo-for-mass-media subjects, links corruption to its perpetrators, and draws attention to the *zadkulisie*'s grip on government bodies, thus diversifying the range of perspectives in the public sphere (Dahlgren, 2013; Trifonova Price, 2018). Beyond condemning institutionalized corruption, Pras Press discourse seeks to dismantle naturalized paradigms by subverting the electoral process in Bulgaria. Its 'captured state' discourse disparages democracy in the region, unmasking the political collusion plaguing the National Assembly and the volatility of the state in the face of foreign or private interests (Toneva-Metodieva, 2015; Voinea, 2015).

Publicizing critical views necessarily places Pras Press on the peripheries of the Bulgarian mediascape as an alternative to (more) censored media, simultaneously making the satirical newspaper an active participant in political discourse (Day, 2011). Highly politicized satire is an *ad hoc* route to the augmentation of the public sphere through an expansion of available viewpoints, exhibiting conspicuously the unfavorable conditions under which Pras

Press, mainstream media, and the public persist (Dahlgren, 2013). These very conditions are a mirror of the country's political system and the quality of democracy (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2015, p. 17), the ideological contestation of which is a primary objective for Pras Press (Davis & Foyle, 2017; DeSousa & Medhurst, 1982; Freedman, 2008). In this sense the satirical newspaper's counter-discursive patterns are a direct result of low democratic standards and political culture in Bulgarian society, which the media system inevitably reflects (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2015; Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Simultaneously, the presence of these diverse perspectives in the public sphere is indicative of hegemonic struggle and a revitalized deliberation process (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Dahlgren, 2013; Fairclough, 2010). Platforming political dissent, voicing alternative perspectives, and challenging hegemonic discourses, albeit at the cost of censorship, effectively contributes to media pluralism and impacts democracy (Dahlgren, 2009; 2013).

Its status as an alternative media jeopardizes the viability of Pras Press as a print publication and compels the transition to online dissemination. Recalling that the newspaper became digital after two years of unstable print distribution, this was a tactical yet not entirely voluntary choice to remain on the market (BNR, 2019). The Internet presents an opportunity for publishers to reach a wider audience, produce at a higher speed and lower cost (Norris, 2001; Papacharissi, 2010), and, in the case of Pras Press, guarantees autonomy from state (or shadow state) interference as digital media is virtually unregulated in the country (Reporters Without Borders, 2018). More than that, the absence of *digital prior restraint* from online infrastructure owners in Bulgaria makes censoring Pras Press, at least on the Internet, exponentially more arduous for the *zadkulisie* (Balkin, 2018; Reporters Without Borders, 2018). Political talk thus shifts from the constrained environment of legacy media in the *mainstream sphere* to the digital realm where citizens may obtain uncensored information (Dahlgren, 2013). This case study, then, suggests online communication in Bulgaria may facilitate democratic renewal in an unorthodox way: while the Internet can and does offer the infrastructure for egalitarian information circulation and new forms of civic engagement via social media or online forums, Pras Press is not a grassroots organization but a genuine media with (at least some) loyal audience (Bessant, 2014; Dahlgren, 2009; 2013; Norris, 2003). The satirical newspaper thus benefits from disseminating digitally in another way - it gains an uninterrupted route to its audience, bypassing

censors. That is, online communication assumes a strong role not only in the *societal sphere* but also in the Bulgarian *mainstream sphere,* or rather, the Internet fosters the formation of a parallel (to traditional media) sphere where the press can fulfill its democratic duties and participate in political discourse freely (Dahlgren, 2013). At the same time this leads to a shift for political cartooning on a domestic level from a dependency on print media to online self-publishing (Danjoux, 2007; Leon, 2017). *In lieu of* "dying out" (Davis & Foyle, 2017, p. 6) the genre morphs into a new digital form, less vulnerable to political or commercial interests, and more accessible for a wide audience (Leon, 2017).

This study has also demonstrated a new role for political cartoons and satire in the Bulgarian public sphere. Previous studies on satirical publications in 20th century Bulgaria, such as *Starshel* (Hornet), attest to their use as a propaganda tool to propel the Bulgarian Socialist Party's doctrine, similar to what *Krokodil* (Crocodile) was for the Soviet Union (Etty, 2019; Paraskevov, 2012; Valkova, 2020). Beyond the government-approved satirical press, Davies (2007) and Hart (2007) have uncovered a body of anti-regime jokes emerging from the oppressed people of communist eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Pras Press embodies an analogous brand of resistance humor but carries it into the visual range of Bulgarian readers, inciting the ideological contestation of dominant narratives and the status quo. Political cartoons are tasked with assuming a counter-discursive position against the *zadkulisie*, the state, and even foreign interest groups - a role which cartoons have been traditionally taking on in more 'democratic' societies that permit dissent (Freedman, 2008; Terdiman, 1989). Aiello, Krstić, and Vladisavljević (2020) reported similar findings in Serbia, which has comparable to Bulgaria limitations on free speech (Reporters Without Borders, n.d.), based on their analysis of cartoons by Dušan Petričić who, through his art, criticizes Aleksandar Vučić and his rule. Viewed in conjunction with their findings, this thesis may be suggestive of a broader pattern in post-communist/socialist European states that future research can investigate.

> It may be possible to have freedom of expression and a free press without much freedom of political cartoonists, but we cannot think of any instances where this has been so. Their presence is always a healthy sign, even if their work does sponsor some public cynicism. (Manning & Phiddian, 2004, p. 28)

A study on political cartoons or satire grounded in another eastern European semi-restricted media system such as those of Albania, Hungary, Romania, or Bosnia and Herzegovina could provide much needed insight into the counter-discursive potential of cartoons in new and transitional democracies. More research on alternative digital media in Bulgaria is also needed to explore the effects of online communication on democratic deliberation under conditions of censorship (Toneva-Metodieva, 2018; Trifonova Price, 2018; 2019). Finally, the results of this study are based on a relatively small sample set and thereby not conclusive - a larger project including a bigger data set spread across a longer time frame can offer more substantive evidence for the role of political satire in the Bulgarian public sphere in the 21st century.

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Endnotes

[1]All translations in this thesis are the author's, unless stated otherwise.

Sources

The table below offers a complete list of all sampled Pras Press issues and a key to their in-text citation for this thesis.

Publication	In-text citation	Volume	Year (of publishing)	Publishing date
Pras Press	#92	07(92)	5	7.04.2021
	#93	08(93)	5	21.04.2021
	#99	14(99)	5	14.07.2021*
	#100	15(100)	5	28.07.2021
	#105	20(105)	5	10.11.2021
	#106	21(106)	5	24.11.2021
	#125	17(125)	6	12.10.2022
	#126	18(126)	6	26.10.2022
	#137	07(137)	7	05.04.2023
	#138	08(138)	7	19.04.2023

*Pras Press #99 was published with an editor's error: although the cover states the issue was released on 14 June 2021, a cross-check with the official website shows that the actual publishing date is 14 July 2021.

Appendices

Appendix A: Codes and Themes

Name	Files	References	Created on	Created by	Modified on	Modified by
The Government	10	438	6/28/2023 4:47 P	EKH	6/26/2023 12:17 AM	EKH
Political parties	10	1129	6/28/2023 4:47 P	EKH	6/26/2023 4:02 PM	EKH
Political Collusion	10	156	6/28/2023 4:47 P	EKH	6/28/2023 4:47 PM	EKH
international affairs	10	154	6/28/2023 4:50 P	EKH	6/26/2023 5:31 PM	EKH
Human & Minority Rights	10	60	6/28/2023 4:47 P	EKH	6/26/2023 5:57 PM	EKH
Foreign Subversive Influence	10	155	6/28/2023 4:47 P	EKH	6/26/2023 6:06 PM	EKH
Foreign politics	10	386	6/28/2023 4:46 P	EKH	6/26/2023 5:31 PM	EKH
Elections & Results	10	341	6/28/2023 4:46 P	EKH	6/26/2023 6:06 PM	EKH
domestic affairs	8	83	5/3/2023 9:20 PM	EKH	6/26/2023 5:59 PM	EKH
COVID-19	9	61	6/28/2023 4:46 P	EKH	6/26/2023 5:24 PM	EKH
Corruption	10	343	6/28/2023 4:46 P	EKH	6/26/2023 6:06 PM	EKH
Climate Change	4	16	6/28/2023 4:46 P	EKH	6/22/2023 2:04 PM	EKH
Bulgarian Mass Media	9	97	6/28/2023 4:46 P	EKH	6/26/2023 5:22 PM	EKH
Bulgarian Mafia & Crime	10	79	6/28/2023 4:45 P	EKH	6/26/2023 6:06 PM	EKH

EKH   36 Items

Retained codes after the second stage of thematic coding. In red brackets are highlighted the five main themes found across samples- *Political Collusion, Foreign Subversive Influence, Elections & Results, Corruption,* and *Bulgarian Mass Media* - which were discussed in the analysis. The remaining codes were kept to aid navigating the dataset and follow recurring subjects, characters, or public figures in Pras Press discourse. Below is a breakdown of all aggregate nodes:

Name	Files	References	Created on	Created by	Modified on	Modified by	
The Government	10	438	6/28/2023 4:47 P	EKH	6/26/2023 12:17 AM	EKH	
The President	10	121	6/28/2023 4:47 P	EKH	6/26/2023 4:45 PM	EKH	🟢
Prime Minister	8	34	6/28/2023 4:47 P	EKH	6/25/2023 7:42 PM	EKH	🟣
National Assembly	10	44	6/28/2023 4:47 P	EKH	6/26/2023 4:40 PM	EKH	
MVR	5	20	6/28/2023 4:47 P	EKH	6/26/2023 12:16 AM	EKH	
Chief Public Prosecutor	8	71	6/28/2023 4:47 P	EKH	6/26/2023 4:54 PM	EKH	🔵
Caretaker Government	10	56	6/28/2023 4:47 P	EKH	6/26/2023 4:37 PM	EKH	
Political parties	10	1129	6/28/2023 4:47 P	EKH	6/26/2023 4:02 PM	EKH	
There Is Such A People	10	108	6/28/2023 4:47 P	EKH	6/26/2023 6:06 PM	EKH	
Revival	9	59	6/28/2023 4:47 P	EKH	6/26/2023 6:06 PM	EKH	
PP (We Continue the Chan	8	79	6/28/2023 4:47 P	EKH	6/26/2023 6:06 PM	EKH	
Other	9	139	6/28/2023 4:47 P	EKH	6/26/2023 12:09 AM	EKH	
Movement for Rights and	10	117	6/28/2023 4:47 P	EKH	6/26/2023 5:15 PM	EKH	
Delyan Peevski	8	46	6/28/2023 4:47 P	EKH	6/26/2023 6:06 PM	EKH	
GERB–SDS	10	514	6/28/2023 4:47 P	EKH	6/26/2023 6:06 PM	EKH	
Борисов	10	339	6/28/2023 4:47 P	EKH	6/26/2023 6:06 PM	EKH	
Democratic Bulgaria	9	23	6/28/2023 4:47 P	EKH	6/26/2023 6:06 PM	EKH	
BSP for Bulgaria	10	61	6/28/2023 4:47 P	EKH	6/26/2023 6:06 PM	EKH	
Foreign politics	10	386	6/28/2023 4:46 PM	EKH	6/26/2023 5:31 PM	EKH	
Russo-Ukranian War	6	174	6/28/2023 4:46 PM	EKH	9/4/2023 2:00 AM	EKH	
MK-BG relations	6	32	6/28/2023 4:46 PM	EKH	6/26/2023 5:30 PM	EKH	
Eurozone accession	5	24	6/28/2023 4:46 PM	EKH	6/26/2023 5:35 PM	EKH	
Bulgarian Mass Media	9	97	6/28/2023 4:46 P	EKH	6/26/2023 5:22 PM	EKH	🟣
Pras Press	7	31	6/28/2023 4:46 P	EKH	6/26/2023 12:18 AM	EKH	🔴

Systematic monitoring of the various figures, institutions, and public affairs issues in Pras Press content facilitated data interpretation via establishing the interconnections between discursive elements. The above codes are not an exhaustive list of all Pras Press discursive components - they reflect the most salient points.

Appendix B: Codebook

To ensure consistent application of codes across samples the process was guided by a codebook with definitions, detailed below. In order to retain simplicity in the coding framework without omitting nuance, codes are applied in combinations with each other where applicable. That is, some excerpts from the data are simultaneously assigned to multiple codes. For instance, references to the former prime minister Boyko Borisov are coded as both "GERB-SDS" (Borisov is the party leader) and "Prime Minister", since these codes are not sufficient individually. Similarly, references to another former prime minister - Kiril Petkov - are attributed to the codes "PP(We Continue the Change)" and "Prime Minister".

The Government - References to the Bulgarian government, its institutions, and their conduct.

> **The President -** References to presidents of Bulgaria, former or sitting, and their conduct.

> **Prime Minister -** References to any former or sitting prime ministers of Bulgaria and their conduct.

> **National Assembly -** References to Bulgaria's National Assemblies, dissolved or in mandate, their conduct, and legislative activity.

> **MVR -** References to the Ministry of Interior of Bulgaria (abbreviated MVR), its personnel and various subdivisions (including but not limited to the border and interior troops, national police, the Gendarmerie directorate, and the specialized force for combating terrorism), and their conduct.

> **Chief Public Prosecutor -** References to Bulgaria's Chief Public Prosecutors, former or in office, and their conduct.

> **Caretaker government -** References to caretaker governments appointed by president Rumen Radev, their institutions, and conduct.

Political parties - References to Bulgarian political parties or their individual members, and their conduct.

GERB–SDS - References to the political party GERB-SDS or its members, and their conduct.

BSP for Bulgaria - References to the political party BSP for Bulgaria or its members, and their conduct.

Movement for Rights and Freedoms - References to the Movement for Rights and Freedoms party or its members, and their conduct.

There Is Such A People - References to the political party There Is Such A People or its members, and their conduct.

PP / We Continue the Change - References to the political party We Continue the Change (abbreviated PP) or its members, and their conduct.

Democratic Bulgaria - References to the political party Democratic Bulgaria party or its members, and their conduct.

Revival - References to the political party Revival or its members, and their conduct.

Other - References to political parties or their leaders and members, and their conduct, other than the above listed.

Political collusion - References to the alleged collusive relationships between political parties and/or individual politicians, or references to the alleged collusive relationships between political and private actors, including oligarchs, moguls, magnates, organized crime groups, etc.

International affairs - References to public affairs issues at the international level, such as war and conflict, global economics, international relations, current events, pop culture, or domestic issues concerning foreign (to Bulgaria) societies.

Human & minority rights - References to issues of human and minority rights, including but not limited to women's rights and LGBTQ+ rights.

Foreign subversive influence - References to the alleged subversive foreign (mainly Russian) influence on Bulgarian politics, economics, and culture.

Foreign politics - References to foreign states' domestic politics or foreign policy.

> **Russo-Ukrainian War** - References to the Russo-Ukrainian War and foreign military aid to Ukraine.

> **MK-BG relations** - References to the North Macedonia-Bulgaria bilateral relations and social attitudes from both sides about contested history, ethnic and national identity, and the origins of the Macedonian language/dialect.

> **EU / Eurozone accession** - References to general EU politics and/or Bulgaria's path to Eurozone accession.

Elections & Results - References to any past or future referendums; parliamentary, presidential, or general elections in Bulgaria, their results, and their integrity.

Domestic affairs - References to public affairs issues concerning Bulgarian domestic politics, economics, pop culture, or current events.

COVID-19 - References to the COVID-19 epidemic, related policies, and public health measures.

Corruption - References to corruption (alleged or verified) in Bulgaria's both public and private sectors, including but not limited to the police, military, judicial system, mass media, healthcare system, education sector, and other governmental institutions.

Climate Change - References to issues of climate change, its effects, or related policy and activism.

Bulgarian Mass Media - References to Bulgarian mass media, its censorship and/or corruption, the working conditions of journalists, and the freedom of speech in the country.

> **Pras Press** - References to Pras Press, its position in the Bulgarian mediascape, and the publication's struggles against censorship.

Bulgarian Mafia & Crime - References to organized crime groups or networks in Bulgaria, their criminal activity, prosecution (or lack thereof), and their influence on domestic politics. References to criminal cases, not connected to organized crime such as domestic violence incidents, circulating in the Bulgarian media space.

Appendix C: Pras Press Discursive Map

The discursive map below is a visual representation of Pras Press content. Reflected are the most salient moments/nodal points of the publication's discourse.