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LORDS OF THE AIR

A CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF THE BULGARIAN TV SHOW *GOSPORADI NA EFIRA*

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Abstract: This article explores the trajectory of one of the most popular comedy shows in Bulgaria, using a cultural-historical analysis approach. While *Gospodari na Efira* started as the Bulgarian version of an Italian news parody show, it assumed its own trajectory to become a distinct amalgamation of social satire, political humor and investigative journalism. The show's formula for success can be linked to its status of an institution, earning legitimation through the trust of audiences at a time when other institutions in Bulgaria were failing to fulfill their responsibilities.

Keywords: news parody, television, Bulgaria, post-socialism, *Gospodari na Efira*, *Striscia la Notizia*

1 Introduction

In Eastern Europe, the communist control over all forms of media underscored the use of comedy and humor as a means of intellectual resistance as well as a coping strategy for survival. Following Mikhail Bakhtin's ¹reminder that laughter is a form of resistance to power, and parody serves as a critical means of confronting and deconstructing discourses of authority, the present study offers a cultural historical analysis of a Bulgarian show—*Gospodari na Efira* (translated as *Lords of the Air*), which was the highest-rated and longest-running news parody TV show in post-communist Bulgaria. Given Bulgarians' record low trust in institutions and their eroding trust in media,² the show became a legitimate and credible site of exposing the failures of Bulgarian institutions and a tool to hold the corrupt state, the lackey media, and hypocritical politicians in check.

Although there is a wealth of research on the influence of comedy shows in the West,³ the impact of such shows in a post-communist context has not been given a lot of scholarly attention. A thorough review of the literature underscored the dearth of attention to this TV format in post-communist societies. In spite of the popularity of news parody formats on a global level,⁴ there is only one study on the effects of humor in Hungary⁵ and another one on the effects of a fake news show in Romania,⁶ both published as part of a 2012 special issue of *Popular Communication*. After a ten-year gap, the present study is an attempt to continue the scholarly exploration of television satire in a post-communist context.

We are purposefully eschewing the designation of “fake news” because we believe that, while useful in some instances, this label does not capture the essence of the genre as applied in the context of post-communist societies like Bulgaria that lack a tradition of “real” news due to the heavily ideological, lapdog function of media during and immediately after communism.⁷ We also wish to point out that, while *Gospodari na Efir* carries some similarities to the “fake news” format popularized by *The Daily Show*, its significance and effects could be fully understood when situated within Bulgaria’s cultural, economic and socio-political milieu.

We argue that, while *Gospodari na Efir* (*Gospodari* henceforth) started as the Bulgarian version of an Italian news parody show,⁸ it assumed its own trajectory to become a distinct amalgamation of social satire, political humor and investigative journalism, to eventually assume the status of an institution, earning legitimation through the trust of audiences at a time when other institutions in Bulgaria were failing to fulfill their responsibilities. Our reliance on an in-depth interview with the main producer, over 100 hours of archived content available on gospodari.com, press releases, media interviews and reports spanning over fifteen years as well as our own experiences with the show, inform the present cultural-historical analysis. In doing so, we want to offer a reflexive account of the cultural context, including reliance on our own lived experiences, that can illuminate the transformation of the show’s format from humor and jest, into truth-seeking on behalf of disenfranchised Bulgarians.

2 Humor During and After Communism: the Bulgarian Case

Many would argue that humor was a quintessential part of everyday communist life. While some scholars have observed that political humor tends to emerge in authoritarian societies,⁹ communism is perhaps the only political system to create a unique brand of everyday comedy, whose anonymous creators steadily supplied “alluring new products and carefully constructed rebellious images.”¹⁰

Humor during communism played a vital role—especially since the lack of political freedom made humor the only platform to express uncensored public opinions, and some would go as far as to argue that it is possible to tell “the whole history of communism in jokes.”¹¹ The content of communist jokes varied to include all aspects of daily life, such as the long queues, the personality cults of the leaders, the propaganda of the media, Marxist theories, among so many others. It is important to note that the success of these communist jokes was predicated on the tragic contradiction between the ideal and the real that was fully embraced by a disillusioned audience, which came to realize that the bright socialist future would materialize only in the words of lofty party slogans and serve as a great foundation for political jokes. As Boyer and Yurchak¹² pointed out, exaggerating political forms reveals the logic that undergirds them. Yet, these exaggerations were only possible within fluid parameters set forth defining private and public humor, frequently guided by markedly different sets of rules. In his analysis of the importance of humor in politics, Rose noted that in socialist societies, distinguishing between private, official and semi-official humor was critical, as the communist regimes themselves sanctioned certain forms of humor and deployed it, with strict ideological censorship, following the logic that “jokes can be harnessed and put to good use.”¹³ As such, communist governments allowed the circulation of satirical publications, although government attempts to preempt jokes often appeared “heavy, banal, and propagandistic.”¹⁴ Over time, as the socialist parties across the Eastern bloc developed an understanding of the social function of jokes, the attitude towards the role of humor evolved—from sending joke tellers to the gulag to seeing jokes “as a safety valve letting off social tension and discontent.”¹⁵

In the case of Bulgaria, as Genova¹⁶ argues, humor in underground totalitarian jokes consisted mostly of ridicule and sarcasm, which created a sharp distinction between “us” and “them”, the people versus the privileged members of the Communist Party. It is also important to note that Bulgaria has a rich tradition of joke-telling that preceded the use of humor to counteract the often absurd realities of communism. An illustration of this folklore craft of joke telling, ineptly co-opted by the cultural wing of the communist party is the House of Humor and Satire in the Bulgarian town of Gabrovo. Renowned for

its knack for jokes with a focus on thriftiness and street smarts and dating back to the 19th century, this museum of Bulgarian joke-telling also served as a stiff example of how jokes can be used as a means of controlling the national narrative and a tool of ideological manipulation. As Rose¹⁷ recounts, in 1961 the Bulgarian government declared that the purpose of humor “is to collaborate with the Bulgarian Communist party in solving the economic and other problems of the nation, and in bringing up the workers in the spirit of communism...In the struggle of building the socialist society, our humor and satire must be a sharp ideological weapon.” This investment on the part of the Communist regime in elevating the role of humor in the project of building the national character was nothing more than a testimony to the bureaucratic and unimaginative way in which the Communist Party attempted to harness humor’s potency and channel its power.¹⁸

With the arrival of Gorbachev’s glasnost to Bulgaria, however, joke telling evolved into the dominant mode of political imagination under the guise of an unsanctioned form of political resistance, which slowly, but surely, contributed to the increasing dystopia of the communist regime. A seminal satirical show called *Ku-Ku* (the title signifies the sounds of a cuckoo bird, but is also a colloquialism for “crazy”) appeared soon after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. From its inception in January of 1990 till its end in 1994, the *Ku-Ku* show was instrumental in providing a critical lens on the sweeping changes that accompanied the transition from totalitarianism to democracy. The show featured a puppet as an announcer, called Mr. Ku-Ku, that redefined the newly-liberated Bulgarian television space with poignant social commentaries delivered through creative experimentation with formats. One of the most noteworthy examples was a 1991¹⁹ segment in which the *Ku-Ku* crew orchestrated a breaking news report allegedly covering the failure of Bulgaria’s nuclear power plant, causing mass panic among viewing audiences with documented reports of people insulating their homes or jumping in their cars to evacuate the country.²⁰ In a world without cell phones or the Internet, the *Ku-Ku* satirical approach to showing the failure of the central powers to adequately react to a potential nuclear meltdown constitutes a most telling example of what outcome the mix of satire and news amidst a tense, political reality can produce.²¹ Television satire especially, as media scholar Imre²² pointed out, is permeated by suspicion about authority. In periods of rupture, “satire becomes a potent means of enunciating critiques and asserting unsettling truths that an audience may need or want to hear.”²³ As such, the *Ku-Ku* show paved the way for novel TV entertainment formats that offered a powerful mix of social critique, investigative reporting, and unforgiving satire directed towards a long line of inept governments. The lasting legacy of the *Ku-Ku* show can be linked to several very successful, post-communist offshoots, but its direct connection to the *Gospodari* show can be traced through Vasil Vasilev-Zueka, who was one of the puppeteers behind Mr. Ku-Ku and a performer in the Ku-Ku band.



Figure 1. The iconic puppet Mr. Ku-Ku.

Source: <https://www.bgdnes.bg/Article/5228508>

Due to space constraints, this study will not examine in detail the commercialization of the Bulgarian news space after the fall of communism or the continued absence of independent and informative news sources since these developments have been documented in a 2017 *VIEW* article by the authors and other in-depth studies.²⁴ Examining the trajectory of the *Gospodari* show, on the other hand, provides us with an opportunity to use it as a case study to focus attention on the role of news parody in this Eastern European society after the fall of communism.

2.1 The Trajectory of *Gospodari na Efir*

While *Gospodari* is not the first Bulgarian show to espouse political humor, it is the show that deserves attention due to its longevity and popularity.²⁵ The big debut of *Gospodari* on national television took place in 2003, when it aired on NOVA Television, which, at that time, acquired the status of the second privately-owned national channel in Bulgaria. An earlier version of the show was in circulation as early as 2001, but budgetary disagreements stood in the way of airing it on the first private channel - bTV.²⁶ The main producer of the show, Judy Halvadjian, believes that the show could not have appeared earlier given the fledgling state of democracy in the country.²⁷ The initial conceptualization was to deal exclusively with the *faux pas* of TV channels, anchors, reporters, directors and cameramen from the recorded and live programming on the newly-liberated Bulgarian broadcasting space.²⁸ The title of the show serves as a direct reference to the assumed status and power of these figures, “them” being “the lords of the air,” until they commit a gaffe.²⁹ In this sense, in its early conception, the show continued the “us” versus “them” function of humor during communist times because media and government were inextricably linked.

Halvadjian’s biography illuminates the subsequent path of the show. Halvadjian was born in Bulgaria but emigrated to Italy at the age of 14. In 2002, together with his brother, Magarditch Halvadjian, and Asen Chankov he created the successful production company within **Global Group**, which is an umbrella company for five enterprises and continues to be one of the most successful production companies in Bulgaria. As an Italian-educated producer, Halvadjian was well aware of the impact of the popular Italian show entitled *Striscia la Notizia*, which can be roughly translated as “shredding the news to pieces.”³⁰ *Striscia la Notizia* started in 1988 as a source of audience liberation from “the cultural and ideological constraints of state television,” but had the larger strategy of gaining audience shares for Berlusconi’s channels.³¹ Due to Italy’s strict regulatory framework, the private networks were prohibited from broadcasting news programs up until 1990, which prompted creative experimentations with news and entertainment that ultimately produced the longest-running news parody show in the world.³² The Italian show is described by its producer as employing a “unique comedic-satirical style... to show the gaffes in all spheres of life – political, cultural and social.”³³ Antonio Ricci, the show’s producer, called *Striscia* “telemass... for Italy who eats in front of the TV.”³⁴

2.2 Early Stage

For the first two years, *Gospodari* had its own unique formula, but then the producer decided to license the format with the creators of *Striscia la Notizia*.³⁵ In many aspects, the early version of *Gospodari* follows the format of its Italian counterpart. In a similar fashion to a newscast, two hosts sit behind a desk and deliver reports that have been prepared in advance. Unlike its Italian counterpart, however, the show is not aired during primetime to compete with the national news. The 30-minute daily episodes, aired during late prime time, can be best described as a compilation of disconnected segments, with some recurring rubrics. While in the Italian version the hosts announce the video segments and comment exclusively on them, in the Bulgarian version the range of rubrics and topics is much wider.³⁶ *Gospodari*’s producers were originally unsure how Bulgarian audiences would respond to a rotating set of hosts, yet that approach proved to work in a Bulgarian context as well.³⁷ Most of *Gospodari*’s hosts are well-known comedians and actors that the audience is accustomed to seeing on TV. They bring a sense of familiarity and trust, which, we argue, become key assets of the show. The most powerful duo in the history of the show has been Dimitar Rachkov and Vasil Vasilev-Zueka. The long list of *Gospodari* hosts includes two women, with TV personality and sports journalist Maria Ignatova on the permanent list of hosts since 2008.



Figure 2. The producer of the show (middle) with Rachkov (left) and Zueka (right).

Source: <https://gospodari.com/produtsentat-dzhudi-halvadzhiyan-nadyavam-se-da-ne-posledvam-zueka/>

The resemblance of *Gospodari* to the Italian version is also reflected in the choice of incorporating female dancers in the show called “Adrenalinkite” [“adrenaline girls”]. “Adrenalinkite,” just like the “Veline” in the Italian version, are picked through a nationwide casting. The tenure of each duo of dancers lasts around two to three years but they all share the common characteristics of being young and attractive-looking. “Adrenalinkite” present dance numbers throughout the show that usually end on top of the anchor’s desk.

Although less ideologically charged than the “Veline” designation, which references state propaganda during the Fascist era,³⁸ “Adrenalinkite” have received an iconic status, which, we believe, serves several functions. At one level their function can be perceived as purely “decorative” and entertaining, yet their presence on the show can be interpreted as a not-so-subtle commentary of the triviality of TV, a reminder of Neil Postman’s view of television news as a form of entertainment and his sharp critique of the image-based nature of television and its power to define reality.³⁹ This is especially the case in Bulgaria where 68% of people see television as their main source of information and only 2% indicate trust in newspapers or radio.⁴⁰

Following the Italian format, *Gospodari* presents two awards on a monthly basis. While the staple of the Italian show is the Golden Tapir, the Bulgarian version features the Golden Skunk to represent the stench of a public figure who has committed the most incompetent or inadmissible act for the given period. Through its symbolism, the award becomes a tool for the show to add critique on important topics (and the people associated with them) without taking sides or becoming too political.⁴¹ Seen as an early credibility builder for the show, the Golden Skunk has been awarded to many prominent politicians for their failure to lead the country on a successful path toward political and economic resurgence after the fall of communism in 1989. The newly established show had a breakthrough moment in 2003 when it brazenly awarded the Golden Skunk to then prime minister Simeon Saxecoburgotski,⁴² who came to power



Figure 3. "Adrenalinkite" on the Gospodari show.

Source: <https://bulevard.bg/pictures/823/11490/gospodari-na-efira-2004-g>

in 2001 with the (failed) promise to bring change in 800 days. Throughout the years, the recipients of the Golden Skunk have included major political figures from every government and period. Some of the names are worth mentioning because they are the faces of the pervasive failure of the post-communist transition: Petar Stoyanov, President of Bulgaria from 1997 to 2002, Ivan Kostov, Prime Minister from 1997 to 2001, Roumem Ovtcharov, minister of Economy and Energy from 2005 to 2007,⁴³ Plamen Oresharski, Deputy Prime Minister from 2013 to 2014, Hristo Biserov, Member of Parliament and Parliament Speaker in 2013,⁴⁴ Sergei Stanishev, prime minister from 2005-2009, Traycho Traykov, Minister of Economy and Energy from 2009 to 2012, Valeri Simeonov, Deputy Prime Minister of Bulgaria in charge of the economy and demographic policies from 2017 to 2018, and Boiko Borissov, whose government has been accused of corruption and suppression of freedom of speech.⁴⁵ By staying above politics and holding all politicians and institutions accountable, the show capitalized on the distinction between "us" and "them" or the people versus the privileged members of the government.



Video 1. The most distinctive Golden Skunk awards (in Bulgarian):



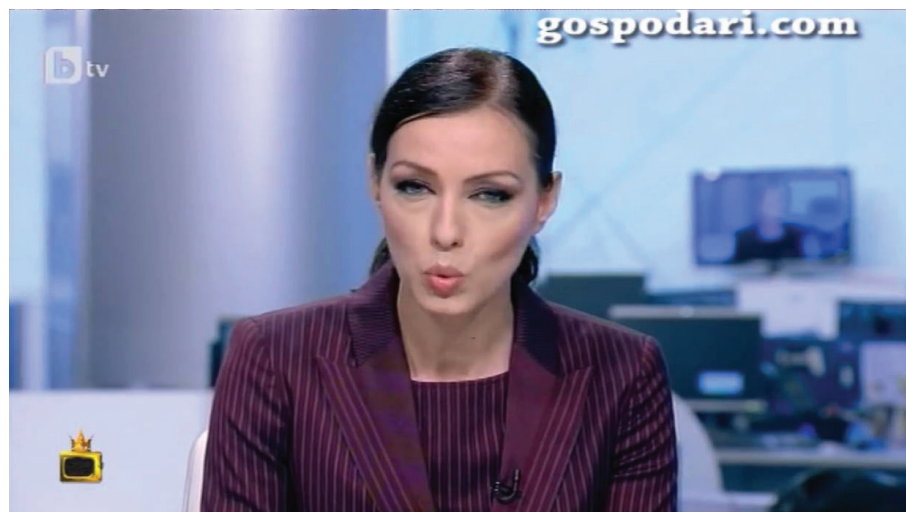
Figure 4. Rachkov (left) holding the Golden Skunk and Zueka (right) holding the White Swallow.

Source: <https://nova.bg/accents/view/2018/11/02/230852/димитър-рачков-и-васил-василев-зуюка-отново-заедно-в-господари-на-ефира>

As a departure from *Striscia la Notizia*, *Gospodari* features another award, the White Swallow. The award has a powerful symbolic significance to all Bulgarians since it's a direct reference to a famous story by beloved writer Ivan Iovkov where the white swallow is represented as a symbol of hope. Viewers vote on the award, which has been given to Olympic gymnasts or ordinary citizens who make positive contributions to society. In a 2021 interview, the producer of the show shared that he would award the White Swallow to all medical workers who are at the forefront of the fight against COVID, while the Golden Skunk would go to all politicians for the failed 30-year transition.⁴⁶

Central to the *Gospodari* show during its early period has been their relentless scrutiny of the Bulgarian broadcasting landscape. From technical issues to on-air mistakes to blatant omissions in coverage, the *Gospodari* show aimed to expose the unprofessional and biased nature of the broadcast institutions that so many Bulgarians rely on despite their not-so-distant use as a tool of communist propaganda. In those early days, a group of 30-40 people would watch the main channels in shifts to cover the entire 24-hour period with the goal of identifying share-worthy moments.⁴⁷ While this is not a unique feature of *Gospodari*, and there is ample scholarship documenting the watchdog function of fake news reports around the globe and, in particular, of such institutions as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*,⁴⁸ the importance of *Gospodari*'s undertaking needs to be placed in a post-communist context. Cosentino, Doyle and Todorova⁴⁹ argue that this was a “key innovation” that the show brought to the Bulgarian mediascape, making it function as a “foil to all other programs, a type of meta-television and super genre.” In the context of Bulgaria's ideological and formulaic TV landscape, *Gospodari* challenged the long-standing claim of mainstream journalism as “the purveyor of truth”⁵⁰ and the voice with the highest authority. In this sense, shows like *Gospodari* adopted the function of a watchdog of the (presumed) watchdog and thus assumed the stature of a “fifth estate” that kept the “fourth estate,” mainstream media, in check, given its dismal failure to hold the powerful into account and fulfill its essential function of informing the citizenry.⁵¹

After a period of six years on the fledgling NOVA television (from 2003 to 2009), *Gospodari* moved to the more popular, at the time, bTV channel where it aired from 2009 to 2012. The bTV period was in many aspects similar to the early NOVA period, with *Gospodari* enjoying an iconic status and high ratings, surpassing those of the official news broadcasts and sometimes garnering 1.2 mil. viewers out of the 2.6 mil. total viewers.⁵² According to its producer, *Gospodari* was particularly popular among the segment of urban, educated audiences, between 18-49 years, supporting similar findings with regard to the audiences of *The Daily Show*⁵³ and confirming the global appeal of news parody formats to this segment of the audience.



Video 2. Compilation of technical gaffes on the main Bulgarian terrestrial channels (in Bulgarian).

In April of 2012, however, *Gospodari* decided to leave bTV, stating as the main reason attempts at censorship over the topics and materials of their show, which, they underscored, were never successful.⁵⁴ The censorship pressure, they argued, was also applied to other shows where certain guests were not allowed because they were “not on our team.” Among the examples the producers shared were threats of pulling the show off the air for choosing to award a Golden Skunk to actors or hosts who had popular shows on the parent bTV channel, or discontinuing a new “blitz” segment featuring 2011 presidential candidates under the premise of being “hidden political advertising.” Citing their decision to seek legal action, the producers pointed out bTV’s failed contractual obligation to move the show to primetime and the subsequent financial pressure, which started mounting when the censorship attempts failed.⁵⁵ Added to the official reasons for the departure of the show were speculations that *Gospodari* was not favored by then-President Georgi Parvanov,⁵⁶ a claim that was later confirmed by the producer of the show.⁵⁷ Contributing to Parvanov’s ill will toward the show was *Gospodari*’s humorous imitations of the long-time President, with the biggest blow being their revelation that Parvanov repeated the exact same words in his New Year’s address to the nation for the ten years he was president.⁵⁸

2.3 Late Stage

After the bTV fallout, *Gospodari* returned to the rival NOVA television, where they remained from the fall of 2012 till December of 2018. Adding to the dramatic transition of the show to NOVA was a scuffle between the two top broadcasters about the proper licensing of the show with regard to the Italian version.⁵⁹ Thus, by adopting a new production set and an updated format in 2012, *Gospodari* took strides in distancing itself from the Italian *Striscia La Notizia*.⁶⁰

During what we call “the second NOVA stage,” *Gospodari* placed greater emphasis on timeliness, relevance, informative function and investigative journalism. Whereas the show’s early focus was placed on gaffes and entertaining situations, with a two-week gap between the recording and airing of each episode, *Gospodari* evolved into a daily show with an emphasis on quick reactions to key events, well-timed political satire, topical reports and investigative pieces.⁶¹ The appeal of their focus was reflected in their popularity. According to Nielsen Atmosphere data, during their 13th season, which started in the fall of 2015, the show attracted three times as many urban viewers between the ages 18-49 as their competitor bTV.⁶²

Given Bulgarians' low trust in institutions and low trust in media⁶³, we argue that *Gospodari's* key ingredient to success was its role as a champion of the people. Mixing elements of entertainment and investigative journalism, the show adopted a unique brand of investigative comedy, which became their biggest legitimation tool among disenfranchised Bulgarian audiences. As the producer of the show observed: "*Gospodari* won the love and trust of the viewers and became an institution because of its investigative pieces."⁶⁴ In the absence of working institutional mechanisms, ordinary citizens chose to put their faith in a comical TV show to solve their everyday problems. As one of *Gospodari's* viewers aptly summarized their impact: "you are the only institution in this country that pays attention to people's problems and takes them at heart."⁶⁵ The show's approach was to use real reporters, not actors, who often wore hidden cameras and relied on casual language to uncover rampant corruption and illegal practices in all spheres of Bulgarian society. The reports were sometimes delivered with funny sound effects and humorous visual elements that enhanced their comedic tone in spite of the serious subject. Moreover, the aggressive questioning style and relentless pursuit of answers became a key characteristic of the *Gospodari* reporting style, together with the reporters' black suits and white shirts. In this sense, the style of investigative comedy is reminiscent of the one practiced at that time by *The Daily Show* or *The Colbert Report*, where reporters were told by Colbert to "hang their soul at the door" because, to put it in Colbert's words, when "you are in the field you are in a character of a correspondent who has no interest other than getting what he needs out of the person he's interviewing."⁶⁶ Supporters of *The Daily Show's* brand of investigative comedy argue that this type of attitude delivered nothing but the truth,⁶⁷ bringing real changes to health policies for veterans, highlighting issues with migrant labor in front of Congress or showcasing the absurdity of campaign financing laws in the US.⁶⁸

In a similar vein, the *Gospodari* show remained committed to expanding the relevance and scope of their investigative reports throughout the years, throwing jabs at the inadequacies of Bulgaria's main institutions. Some of *Gospodari's* most memorable pieces include bringing a grenade launcher into the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (which made international headlines), catching a university professor in soliciting sexual acts from female students in exchange for passing grades, seeking justice for patients who suffered from rampant medical malpractices at an oncology institute, uncovering a pedophile ring with connections in Russia and Italy as well as digging into numerous cases of gross misappropriation or misuse of funds. Given the lack of response from law enforcement and a legal system that had morphed into a lapdog to powerful oligarchs, shows like *Gospodari* emerged as the institution that common people could turn to when they had a problem.⁶⁹ Under the maxim "For the benefit of people," *Gospodari* reporters perceived their role not as detached stenographers on issues, but as someone who understood the cause of people's pain and worked to solve their problems, which, in many instances, had been ignored for months or years.⁷⁰ In this sense, the newsworthy aspect of *Gospodari's* investigative comedy pieces took backstage to the goal of getting results, having something resolved "for the benefit of the people."⁷¹



Video 3. Granatomet, korupcia, aresti - nai zapomniashtite se reportazhi (Grenade launcher, corruption and arrests - the most memorable stories).

In 2015, *Gospodari*'s impact was felt at the national level when the show initiated a vocal public campaign to create a Zoopolice in Bulgaria as a tool to reinforce the law for the protection of all animals. *Gospodari*'s campaign ran for several months and generated over 91,000 signatures, culminating in a letter from the Minister of the Interior to *Gospodari* acknowledging the seriousness of the issue and reaffirming the government's commitment to establishing a special unit within the Ministry of the Interior to investigate atrocities against animals.⁷² Cognizant of its impact, *Gospodari* often featured follow-up reports on its investigative pieces, which highlighted the positive outcome of their actions and ended with a big red stamp of "job done" that further underscored their commitment to bringing results in a country where the problems and pains of the ordinary person were consistently ignored.

Although Bulgaria has the legal framework to produce quality investigative pieces as well as the financial structures to finance serious journalistic investigations, gaining publicity and achieving the desired effect become serious obstacles due to corrupt media and pressure from authorities. As an in-depth report by *Reporters Without Borders* observes:

For a motivated journalist in Bulgaria it is easy to detect, investigate and collect proof of corruption and abuse of power. But currently, when making their findings public, instead of gratifying applause, journalists encounter great chances of hitting a wall of silence, facing authorities with "eyes wide shut", or even worse: being followed, intimidated, discouraged through smear campaigns and labeled "Enemy of the State."⁷³

In this intimidation game, the state has a powerful tool since it's one of the biggest media advertisers. Using government funds and EU money as leverage, the government makes it hard for media outlets to critically examine its practices.⁷⁴ State-funded media continue their function of government mouthpieces, while private channels remain reluctant to invest into costly investigative pieces with dubious outcomes.⁷⁵ Although each of the main TV channels in Bulgaria has its own investigative show that covers a wide variety of important topics, they are careful not to target the high echelons of power.⁷⁶ It is within these parameters and limitations that the *Gospodari* show was allowed to fulfill its role of champion of the people by "examining problems and absurdities...through a comical stance."⁷⁷

The show has received over 15 awards recognizing its contributions to professional journalistic practices, which serve as a validation of its role within the limited media space. Among the numerous awards are recognitions for tackling socially relevant topics and work "for the benefit of society." In 2015 alone, the show was awarded the prestigious "Sveti Vlas" ("Saint Vlas") award for outstanding broadcast journalism, recognized by VIP Media Awards for overall contribution to society as well as received recognition from the Executive Agency on Forests and the Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds. In 2018, three of *Gospodari*'s reporters were recognized by the Foundation "Radostina Kostadinova" for their investigative work, with the top award going to Bobbi Vaklinov for his examinations of corruption within the National Revenue Agency.

Another key feature of the show is its accessibility, which stands in direct contrast to the often hostile, prohibitively bureaucratic and confusing corridors of power ordinary citizens have to go through to get their issues resolved. *Gospodari* features prominently an active phone line in each show and has a web form on their website where audiences can submit tips or funny content. These tips often become the starting point of wider investigations, which occasionally lead to the discovery of major corruption schemes.⁷⁸

The results from a public opinion study conducted by the Open Society Institute illuminate the state of affairs in Bulgaria circa 2018. As the report observed, there is a misalignment between the government's priorities and the Bulgarian people resulting in dismal evaluations: 86% of the respondents believe that the government is not addressing poverty, 85% believe that the government is not addressing corruption, while 67% indicate that they do not trust the government.⁷⁹ The reason for these results, the report explains, is the widespread belief that nepotism and wealth, not qualifications, serve as the primary factors in appointing top government officials. The deep distrust in Bulgaria's legal institutions is further evidenced by the fact that every three out of four respondents (76%) believe that the laws are not applied consistently to everybody. Nevertheless, in spite of their eroding trust in institutions, Bulgarians remain convinced that democracy is the best form of government for the country (45%).



Figure 5: The Gospodari Na Efir reporting team.

Source: <https://pronewsdobrich.bg/2019/05/30/za-sobstveno-predavane-s-polozhitelni-novini-i-sabitia-mechtae-viktoria-simeonova-ot-dobrich/>

After 16 years on the air, we believe that the formula for *Gospodari*'s popularity is linked to its ability to capture the trust of its audiences on matters of public interest. By becoming champions of the ordinary people, who often saw *Gospodari* as their last resort in their attempt to get a resolution to their problems, the show's popularity rested on its status of a "fifth estate" that kept in check, at least in appearance, the fourth estate and the rest of the failing state institutions. Yet the show suffered a serious blow to its credibility in September of 2018 when one of its reporters created a big controversy around the level of physical violence he purportedly suffered while reporting on an investigative piece involving a distributor of expired foods. The case was widely publicized in Bulgarian media and elicited a statement from then-Prime Minister Boyko Borissov who called for the application of the full force of the law to resolve this controversy. While there was evidence of the reporter, Dimitar Varbanov, being pushed out of the warehouse under investigation, footage from the security cameras revealed that the reporter fell on the ground in an exaggerated manner and lay there until the arrival of the police authorities.⁸⁰ The *Gospodari* show attempted to do damage control by firing Varbanov and by presenting the Golden Skunk to its producer Halvadjian, but the incident left a dark stain on the show's untarnished stature as a purveyor of truth. Not surprisingly, this blow to *Gospodari*'s credibility was reflected in its ratings, with reports that only 300,000 viewers were tuning in to the show in comparison to the 900,000 viewers who followed its long-time competitor, *Slavi's Show*, broadcasting during the same time slot on bTV.⁸¹

Gospodari's last on-air episode was on December 31, 2018, among speculations about the exact turn of events. After a five-month hiatus, *Gospodari na Efir* appeared on the web under the title *Gospodari na Weba* (Lords of the Web) which is currently "continuing the mission of the show" in a web format. The *Gospodari* web space contains a rich archive of old episodes mixed with new rubrics that highlight fresh faces. New content gets added monthly but with a drastically reduced number of reporters and hosts. If the number of views can be used as an indicator of their popularity, new content gets, on average, a few thousand views, with a heavy emphasis on entertainment.

In a 2019 interview on the *Day with Veselin Dremdjiev* show, Judy Halvadjian presented the following explanation for the turn of events:

The process of suffocating the media started in 2011-2012 so that the truth does not come to the surface⁸²...The political situation in the country does not allow for free productions, for productions like *Gospodari* that always say the truth, help the people. This is not comfortable for those who are in power...The two big broadcasters can afford the *Gospodari* financially, but politically, at this moment, they cannot ...This is the truth.”⁸³

As part of the interview, Halvadjian also recognized instances of self-censorship, noting that in 60% of the time the pressure is external not to say or do certain things, but the rest of the time the show had to resort to self-censorship due to fear. Without naming specific actors, Halvadjian concluded that they stifle a lot of independent media and are working on suffocating the small number that is left. Then he added: “I hope they do not succeed. I hope the new owner of bTV - Peter Kelner - does not succumb. This is the only hope for one big media (outlet) to remain free. “ Halvadjian concluded by noting: “We’d prefer to be on national television, but if the political situation is unfavorable, we have no other choice.”

3 Postscript

One of the main reasons why political humor resonates around the world is because it presents a poignant critique of society.⁸⁴ In the West, comedy shows such as *the Daily Show*, *the Colbert Report*, and *Saturday Night Live*, have been described as weapons of political protest and even credited with winning elections for some candidates, while contributing to the spectacular demise of others. Some media and cultural scholars are now referring to the “Daily Show effect”⁸⁵ when talking about the efficacy of comedy on the political knowledge and public attentiveness of the electorate. We think that, in the case of Bulgaria, *Gospodari na Efira* left a lasting cultural legacy that underscores the role of news parody in this Eastern-European society after the fall of communism—an observation further exemplified by the fact that nearly a quarter of Bulgarian teenagers preferred to watch shows such as *Gospodari* instead of traditional news content.⁸⁶

Capturing the history of the iconic *Gospodari na Efira* news parody show provides us with an opportunity to use it as a case study to reflect on the changes in the post-communist media environment. The latest report from *Reporters Without Borders* indicates that the country has slipped in ranking, and is now 112th in the world becoming the only EU country with “bad” or red ranking.⁸⁷ Bulgaria’s ranking is way below that of Hungary, which is the European country with the second lowest score with a rank of 97. Bulgaria held 87th rank in 2013, but its ranking has been steadily slipping since then, in the backdrop of political, administrative, and judicial pressures against publishers and journalists.⁸⁸ The country’s low ranking prompted visits by *Reporters Without Borders* representatives who presented 10 specific recommendations on how to “rescue press freedom” and turn press freedom into the “subject of a national debate,” which, unfortunately, were ignored by the Bulgarian government. Among them are recommendations to “protect the media from judicial harassment in the form of arbitrary lawsuits or criminalisation of their work and distribute the public advertisement and communication funds according to clearly defined and transparent criteria.”⁸⁹

The history of *Gospodari* would be incomplete without a mention of the latest developments. In the late summer of 2021, Vasil Vasilev-Zueka decided to leave Bulgaria with his family. While his exact location has been the subject of speculations, Halvadjian has been very transparent about the reason why one of the most legendary *Gospodari* hosts, and the face of satire since the fall of communism, chose to leave his home country. Confirming that Zueka was very disappointed by *Gospodari*’s disappearance from the national air and “fed up with everything that’s going on in this country.”⁹⁰ Rachkov, on the other hand, was given the chance to continue his comedic career on NOVA with a new show called *Zabranenoto Show na Rachkov (Rachkov’s Forbidden Show)*, which airs every Sunday at 8 p.m. Capitalizing on Rachkov’s popular appeal, the show represents a “palette of guests, different topics, sketches, music performances and many surprises,” with a strong emphasis on entertainment.⁹¹ Apart from its rebel title, Rachkov’s show represents a tame homage to a cliché variety show format that lacks the socially significant approach of *Gospodari*.

Toward the end of its second season, *Rachkov’s Forbidden Show* provided a nostalgic experience for the *Gospodari* fans by bringing together its producer, Judy Halvadjian, and many of the hosts, reporters and dancers. It became an

emotional time of reminiscence of its 16-year legacy on national TV, concluding with Rachkov's call to action: "we were fighting for change years ago. Change of morality, change of institutions... It's not enough just to watch, one must act. Otherwise, we will continue down the same path. And, as you see, it's not good."⁹²

Gospadari na Efira offers a glimpse of the role of satire and humor in a post-communist transition, while maintaining a very specific Bulgarian context. When Kimmelman observed that "of all cultural forms, humor — whether written, visual or stand-up — seems the clearest illustration of the greater truth that not everything translates from one society or era to another, even, or perhaps especially, in an age of globalization,"⁹³ he signaled that Bulgaria's own peculiar history of humor as a mechanism of political survival and resistance accentuates and exemplifies the mix of cultural and political forces that shaped the emergence of the new public-media-politics axis of the post-communist transition. In Bulgaria, the volatility of the public sphere in the post-communist period, coupled with a disfranchised citizenry with broken trust in the political processes, produced the media ecology in which a news parody show functioned as a "fifth estate," and adopted the status of a celebrated and trusted (at least for a while) source of investigative journalism. In its quest to provide an alternative reality, albeit one drenched in satire and crude jokes, *Gospadari na Efira* demonstrated that humor can be "challenging rather than dictating; questioning rather than answering; exploring rather than hiding beneath the covers of accepted wisdom."⁹⁴

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