

Driven towards the exit

Government influence within Bulgaria's media has seen a number of high-profile journalists pushed out of their jobs, says **Victoria Pavlova**

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HAIL A TAXI on the streets of Sofia and you might get the surprise of finding that your driver is Miroluba Benatova, who until recently was one of the most famous investigative reporters on Bulgarian television.

Benatova was regularly seen on screen and is best known for her eponymous investigative programmes looking into organ harvesting, trafficking of children and political corruption, among other issues.

The journalist, who in 2011 was voted one of Bulgaria's most influential women by Capital magazine, says cab driving affords her a different perspective on life in the country.

"Driving lets me speak to tens of people a day and lets me see how they interpret the media narrative," Benatova said.

Since June, she has been using her social media platform to retell the personal stories of everyday people, impacted by the rampant corruption in the country.

"I can't predict how the media environment will develop over the next few years," she said.

"But at the moment, media content is completely synchronised with the government's narrative. There are no dissenting voices. And,

yes, this worries me. This warped media environment influences all of society."

Benatova believes her rapid fall out of the limelight was spurred by a change in ownership at her employer Nova Broadcasting Group, the country's second largest national media network, in March last year. The group was acquired by brothers Kiril and Georgi Domuschiev – wealthy industrialists with documented ties to Prime Minister Boyko Borisov and members of his administration – through their Advance Media Group. In June, Benatova was told she would have to accept new terms of employment, known in the business as a "rejection offer", effectively making her freelance.

"I was offered a switch to a civil contract – essentially a freelance arrangement – where I was to pitch pieces and the network has the freedom to accept or reject them," she said.

She believes the proposed contract change was linked to the content of some of her reports making uncomfortable viewing for the new owners.

"I received pushback from the network for a brief interview with [then Bulgarian MP] Tsvetan Tsvetanov," recalled Benatova. "The original investigation wasn't mine, but the network didn't approve of certain questions I asked."

The investigation in question implicated Tsvetanov in a corruption scandal, which saw him, alongside family members, acquire six properties in Sofia between 2004 and 2009. Benatova was not investigating anything particularly controversial when she was asked to switch contracts. "But overall, my journalistic profile did not correspond to the new editorial direction."

The personnel changes have continued into 2020. On 30 January, Nova confirmed the departure of caricaturist Valdes Radev, known for his sharp critiques of the government.

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Radev's contract was cancelled by Nova. A day later, journalist and anchor Lora Krumova announced her resignation, motivated by "processes at the network".

The year-long reshuffle began with the hiring of Milyana Veleva in May 2019 from Kanal 3, a news network controlled by MP Delyan Peevski.

"The current leadership of Nova is completely insensitive to the standards of independent journalism and shows all signs of a plant, rather than an actual owner," states a prominent Bulgarian journalist who has been covering the personnel changes since they began. The journalist requested not to be named.

"It is very clear to see that the news and reporting division is controlled by associates of Delyan Peevski."

Benatova was not alone in being handed a rejection offer by Nova. At the same time, Genka Shikerova and Marin Nikolov, veteran investigative reporters with the group, were told they were being made freelance.

Faced with this demotion, the two journalists resigned, preferring to look for work elsewhere. Shikerova left the network that month while Nikolov left in September.

"The conditions of my new contract were intended to make me resign – they were designed to make it impossible for me to continue working for Nova," said Shikerova.

Nikolov stated that, in the conversation between him, Shikerova and Veleva, the network executive cited diminished productivity – fewer segments produced by Nova's investigative team between 2018 and early 2019.

"I can't comment on the motivations of the network, but after 15 years with the network, the sudden offer of a change in contract felt like

a lack of recognition for my work at the very least," Nikolov said.

When asked about the reasons behind the 2019 and 2020 reshuffles, a Nova representative stated that "there were no firings in 2019". The network did not respond to further questions.

This move is part of a pattern of what anti-censorship body Reporters Without Borders (RSF) describes as rampant "corruption and collusion between media, politicians and oligarchs" in Bulgaria. RSF annually publishes a World Press Freedom Index. In 2006, Bulgaria ranked 36 out of 180 countries in the index. By 2019, it had dropped to 111, the lowest position of any EU country.

This happened amid a series of assassinations and attempted assassinations of journalists and a wave of cost-cuts that left a number of veteran journalists unemployed, as well as the distinct lack of media pluralism. →





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→ It also happened in an environment where politicians think it is fair game to mock and threaten journalists. This February, for example, RSF called on the authorities to stop trying to intimidate journalists after Borisov likened them – especially women journalists – to turkeys during a press conference. “And then, in a surreal attempt to mock them, tried to imitate the gobbling of a turkey for several seconds, ignoring the protests of the journalists present,” RSF said in a statement.

While some journalists welcome a change to freelance status, for many it can mean they lose valuable protections enjoyed by employed staff, and it can lead to financial insecurity. As well as driving a cab, Benatova also writes online features for several outlets in order to scrape by. Meanwhile, Shikerova continues her reporting work, producing investigative pieces, but she is frequently out of pocket.

“[During an investigative project] we calculated how much tickets, hotels and travel

would cost, and the media group covered these post-factum,” Shikerova explained.

“Broadcast reporting on a freelance basis is impossible. These are boutique productions, because the production of video content is expensive. This is not a functional business model – it isn’t sustainable.”

The Union of Bulgarian Journalists – an affiliate of the European Federation of Journalists – has expressed concern over the changes at Nova.

“We are worried about the proposition to change the working status of the aforementioned

investigative journalists and their effective transition to freelancing arrangements, offering their productions to the network,” the organisation said.

“This gives the network the power to accept or reject proposed investigations, and implies that during the course of their work, the journalists represent only themselves and do not have the defence of an authoritative media.”

Lada Price, a lecturer in journalism at Sheffield Hallam University in the UK, said: “The traditional business model for mainstream media, not just in Bulgaria but in many other countries, is under threat and most are finding it hard to survive from sales and advertising.

“The global financial crisis in 2008-09 made the situation worse. The crisis allowed the oligarchs to gain more influence. The German publisher WAZ left Bulgaria in 2010 mostly because of the intertwining of politics and economics, according to its owners. Bulgaria is the most corrupt country in the European Union and that has a negative impact on media and journalism. One of the main problems is that nobody knows who’s behind the media, who finances them. It is no surprise that trust in the media is so low.” ❌

Victoria Pavlova is a freelance journalist from Varna, Bulgaria

ABOVE: Miroluba Benatova next to the taxi she drives after losing her contract as a full time investigative journalist

CREDITS: Miroluba Benatova