

# Commercial Television as a Blind Spot in Emerging Media Systems: Romania and Bulgaria's Cases

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## Abstract

This study explores TV in Romania and Bulgaria, both considered “emerging” media systems in post-communist studies (Sparks, 1995). It uses Hallin and Mancini’s (2004) framework to analyze the central aspects regarding the configuration of commercial TV. The study offers an institutional perspective on TV by exploring the licensing frame and the TV offer. The interaction between commercial TV, politics, and the state underlines the intricate relations through powerful and influential networks involving the interests of a variety of individuals and groups. Currently, commercial TV is the most developed type of media in both countries. Through its empirical contribution, this study fills in the blind spot of media research, aiming to contribute to the understanding of the Romanian and Bulgarian media landscape. It offers a critical perspective on TV systems in relation to the polarized pluralist/Mediterranean model of Hallin and Mancini, considering its explanatory function within the analysis of Eastern European media systems. Elements of the national markets revealed particularities of the TV business, synchronically connected to the contemporary “hyper-television” vision (Scolari, 2009) and the “informational disorder” paradigm (Tambini, 2020).

## Keywords

audiovisual; Bulgaria; commercial TV; Hallin and Mancini’s model; media market; media system; Romania

## 1. Introduction

The post-communist societies experienced a “transition” from a socialist regime to a new democratic system, including a “transformation” of the state media system into a democratic one (Gross & Jakubowicz, 2013).

Due to its primary role in “Babylonian” public spaces, the TV field has been linked to systemic development by mirroring social change and contributing to the liberal-democratic foundation (Bignell & Fickers, 2008; Scolari, 2009).

In the mid-1990s, the dominant European frame of TV was commercial and privatized, after decades of public TV dominance. In Romania and Bulgaria, the TV field was structurally configured from “kilometer zero” of democracy, i.e., 1989, to the present age of “informational disorder” (Tambini, 2020), passing from one or two party-controlled channels to the current pluralist offer that is connected with the global ecosystem marked by “industrial convergence and the appearance of new formats and audiences [that] have re-designed the television system” (Scolari, 2009, p. 7). Between the two extremes, the TV metamorphosis included technical innovation, journalistic pioneers, and new business models. TV proved its great capacity to develop and adjust to the “quicksands” of transition, triggering a constant interest in its normative ground.

Our analysis starts from the tension between the normative liberal frame of TV (pluralist, democratic, private) and the systemic influence of politics or the state, showed by reports (Open Society Institute, 2005, 2008, pp. 5–6). We explore the status of Romanian and Bulgarian commercial TV after the 1990s. Researchers and audiences traditionally understand commercial TV to include private channels, financed predominantly by advertising revenue and focused on entertainment (Casey et al., 2008, p. 45). However, we use the term regarding all types of private TV channels, not only those whose aim is entertainment. Moreover, the digital “outburst” and rapid technical innovation led to the development of a plethora of private channels targeting the public and niche audiences, which focused on entertainment but also on science, culture, education, and current affairs (“news television”). The private initiative represents the main feature of commercial TV as an institution that is supposed not to be state-subsidized or financed.

Less explored in the literature about East European spaces, commercial TV in Romania and Bulgaria could represent the blind spot of the media systems in both countries. Our aim is to present its systemic features in relation to but not limited to the polarized pluralist/Mediterranean model proposed by Hallin and Mancini (2004) in their seminal theory on media systems and its later developments (Brüggemann et al., 2014; Castro Herrero et al., 2017; Hallin & Mancini, 2010, 2012, 2017). Although the Romanian and Bulgarian media systems display a mix of various national and Western elements (business models, infotainment culture, production practices, imported content), the option for the polarized pluralist model is motivated by the powerful role of political involvement in media, with deep roots in national histories (Gross, 2023; Ibrovscheva & Stover, 2017).

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. TV Research Key Points

TV transdisciplinary research (Badenoch et al., 2013, p. 367) considers TV on the normative ground as the main “articulation” point between social structures and mass audiences (McQuail, 1987) and, historically, as an innovative form (1930–1940s), political and governmental actor (1960s), public institution preserving the national cultural heritage (1980s), professional practice and cultural industry (1980–1990s), and a transnational actor (2000s; Bignell & Fickers, 2008, pp. 12–14).

The modern European TV was considered “bipolar” in the Cold War context. The Eastern side corresponds to socialist TV of which Imre (2016) highlighted the mix between entertainment productions and the public service mission, underlining its intellectual-ideological ambivalence. In Romania, “besides national politics, other factors—technological, professional, and institutional factors specific to the medium of European broadcast relations—also played crucial roles in the development of Romanian television” (Mustață, 2012, p. 132). According to socialist TV studies, Eastern TV was—institutionally and technically—synchronic to European TV.

Studies on post-communist spaces focused on public TV. In Europe, “television has been characterized by a public service philosophy since its origins” (Scolari, 2009, p. 4). Only a few studies are on commercial TV, which was indirectly investigated within an eclectic methodological frame, focusing on the commercialization of content and concentration of ownership in a few hands (Donders et al., 2013). In Bulgaria, at the beginning of the 1990s, TV transformed from a source of “definitions and interpretations of the new and sometimes difficult-to-understand social reality” (Bakardjieva, 1995) to a “boom” of TV channels with their “often-questionable quality” (Ibroscheva & Stover, 2017), which now exercise economic and political influence on different social levels. Press freedom and foreign ownership are considered the sources of significant differences between media systems in post-communism (Castro Herrero et al., 2017). In Romania and Bulgaria, foreign investment in the media sector was welcomed, yet “opened a Pandora’s box of issues” (Ibroscheva & Stover, 2007, p. 234).

Present-day TV is marked by liberalization (Roel, 2008), globalization, and technological convergence (Iosifidis, 2007), new business models based on new consumption habits, and digital lifestyle that coexist with the traditional style of production, distribution, and reception (Roel, 2008, pp. 99–101). TV shapes the transnational public space (Livingstone, 2005, p. 7), and remains a “fundamental phenomenon of our civilization” (Eco, 2021, p. 42), part of the “fabric of our social lives” (McRobbie, 1994, p. 112).

## 2.2. Comparing Media Systems

The research of the media systems from a comparative perspective has seven decades of tradition in Western Europe (Siebert et al., 1956) and is marked by Hallin and Mancini’s (2004) theoretical framework based on four dimensions: political parallelism, journalistic professionalism, the role of the state, and media market. The analysis of Hallin and Mancini was conducted solely in Western hemisphere countries and proposed three media models: (a) liberal or North Atlantic, (b) democratic corporatist or Northern European, and (c) polarized pluralist or Mediterranean (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). The contribution of Hallin and Mancini became—in only one decade after publication—a “cornerstone in the field of comparative communication research” (Brüggemann et al., 2014), followed by numerous developments (Hallin & Mancini, 2010, 2012, 2017). Hallin and Mancini (2012, pp. 4–5) observed that many media systems combine important features (commercialization and politicization) of the liberal and polarized pluralist systems. They underlined that East European scholar observed the “Italianization or Mediterraneanizing of East European media systems in the post-Soviet period” but also noted the EU’s influence on media policies (Hallin & Mancini, 2012, pp. 4–5). De Albuquerque (2012, p. 73) noted that the peripheral media systems are defined with reference to central models. Within Hallin and Mancini’s model, public broadcasting is a variable in two major dimensions: political parallelism and journalism’s professionalization. Commercial TV is not included in their original model or later developments.

Castro Herrero et al. (2017, p. 4797) tested the Hallin and Mancini framework in 11 countries from Central and Eastern Europe, concluding that there is no “unique type of East-Central European media system.” However, the authors mentioned the similarities between the countries in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) regarding political parallelism and public service broadcasting and the differences related to the variables of press freedom and foreign ownership. Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania are included in the “Eastern cluster” characterized by:

The highest levels of political parallelism combined with the lowest investments in and the lowest audience of PSB...the lowest rates of press freedom and relatively high levels of foreign ownership...the lowest levels of online news use, professionalization of the journalists, and regulation of media ownership. (Castro Herrero et al., 2017, p. 4810)

Romania is mentioned as “having weak party systems with a tendency to politically use the media” (Castro Herrero et al., 2017, p. 4811), while both Romania and Bulgaria share a history of strong media censorship and state control during communism. At a more general level, the authors conclude that public service broadcasting (among other dimensions) has a “high explanatory power” for all the countries in CEE (Castro Herrero et al., 2017, p. 4813).

One of the key features that have driven criticism of Hallini and Mancini’s proposal seems to be the rapid development of digital media and communication worldwide and the varying pace at which these media evolved in different countries (Maniou, 2023, p. 1940). For Romanian and Bulgarian media, the conceptualization of Hallin and Mancini matches especially for its historical-contextual value: the legacy of advocacy-oriented journalism, the centrality of electronic media, the political interference, the state origin of TV as a political actor, etc. Nevertheless, the studies revealed that the polarized pluralist/Mediterranean model could not be applied very easily to Romania and Bulgaria (Gross, 2023, p. 62; Indzhov, 2021; Marinos & Spassov, 2023), and there is still a need for debate related to new dimensions of analysis. We consider that an evaluation of the functioning of commercial TV is needed to advance in proposing a more adequate media model for Romania and Bulgaria.

### 3. The Research

#### 3.1. Research Questions

By considering the explanatory potential of Hallin and Mancini’s framework for CEE’s media, the specificity of the media systems in Romania and Bulgaria, and the existing criticism of the polarized pluralist/Mediterranean model, we formulate four research questions. The first explores the possibility of using commercial TV as a significant variable in Hallin and Mancini’s model applied to CEE. Then, we focus on the main systemic features of commercial TV in both countries. A comparative perspective is envisaged in the third question. Further, the fourth question discusses the possible conceptual approach to understanding the current realities of commercial TV in Romania and Bulgaria. The research questions are the following:

RQ1: Why does commercial TV represent a variable with explanatory function in Romanian and Bulgarian media landscapes?

RQ2: What are the central features of commercial TV in Romania and Bulgaria?

RQ3: What are the differences and similarities between the two East European TV models?

RQ4: Which approach is proper for understanding the realities of commercial TV in both countries within the Hallin and Mancini framework?

### 3.2. *The Methodology*

The research is explorative and descriptive (Babbie, 2020), using secondary analysis, recognized for its validity in similar social-historical contexts such as post-communism in Romania and Bulgaria. The secondary analysis frame was used to select, adjust, and (re)combine similar data series from primary/official sources to reframe the commercial TV field in both countries. The data gathering (conducted between July and September 2023) focused on three major dimensions suggested by previous research on Hallin and Mancini (2004): broadcasting system and media market, political factor and media system, and media professionalization.

For data about the broadcasting system and media market in Romania, the annual reports from 2002–2023 of the National Audiovisual Council of Romania (Consiliul Național al Audiovizualului [CNA], n.d.) represented the major source of information. The legal framework—Law 48/1992, 504/2002 (Parlamentul României, 1992, 2002), Decision 220/2011, and Decision 320/2012 (Consiliul Național al Audiovizualului, 2011, 2012)—was also analyzed. The technical infrastructure and content formats were also informed by CNA annual reports (CNA, n.d.). Main categories extracted: TV licenses (number/years, radio-TV licenses), legal functioning (authorization decisions, retransmission approvals), and types of broadcasting (TV): cable TV, terrestrial TV, and satellite TV (CNA, n.d., 2024). We gathered data on the media market from Initiative Media (2022, 2023) reports. From specialized media, we took information on the TV industry (Ghițulescu & Noel, 2007; “Marca Florin Calinescu,” 2001). A recent country report (Meza et al., 2023) was used to present data on TV consumption and media concentration. For Bulgaria’s broadcasting system, we extracted data from the official website of the Council of Electronic Media (n.d.) and the National Statistics Institute Bulgaria (2022). The media market was presented with data from the Bulgarian Association of Communication Agencies (BACA) and other European sources (BACA, 2023; Eurobarometer, 2022; GK Services, 2022).

For both countries, the second variable (political factor) was informed by NGO reports (Active Watch, 2023; Antonov, 2023; “Structurile de proprietate,” 2007; Open Society Institute, 2005, 2008; Valkov, 2020, 2022) and by Euromedia Ownership Monitor reports (Meza et al., 2023; Zankova & Tsoncheva, 2023). We used the Freedom House reports to understand the features of media professionalization in Romania and Bulgaria (Freedom House, 2022, 2023).

In addition, one of the Romanian authors conducted 10 non-structured interviews with key players in TV (newsroom managers, top TV journalists) in Romania during 2018–2019, published in a Romanian book (Bălășescu, 2021), using the methodological frame of “*récit de vie*” (Bertaux, 2010) and unstructured interview (Babbie, 2020). The interviews were contextually used for specific information connected to the dimensions of Hallin and Mancini’s model (such as access to the profession, state control, organizational culture, owners-employees relation, the political factors, the commercialization of TV, the balance of news-entertainment, the advertising and TV market, and the journalistic values). The interviews offered a

unique critical inside perspective on the TV system, giving background for historical milestones, structural-functional indicators, the political (internal and external) factors, and professionals' self-representation. The political frame appeared to be dominant in TV.

### 3.3. Aspects Related to the Technical Field and Regulatory Framework

#### 3.3.1. Romania's Case

Founded in 1992, the CNA acts as the regulatory body for the TV industry, overseeing its development. The first Romanian audiovisual law was also issued in 1992 (Parlamentul României, 1992). In the first years, the “legislators had no idea about how the media legislation was supposed to look like” (Centrul pentru Jurnalism Independent, 2007, p. 4). As one of the first members of CNA recalls, the regulatory framework was built from scratch when private channels appeared on the market (Bălășescu, 2021, pp. 30–31). In 2002, Romania closed The Culture and Audiovisual Politics chapter of the European Directive—Television With No Borders—by reviewing the audiovisual law (Parlamentul României, 2002).

The Romanian audiovisual strategy was to encourage a diverse TV offer and a national system aligned with the European framework. In the annual report of 2002 (CNA, n.d.), CNA reported the first signs of economic interest in the TV market. The market experienced a dynamic evolution from zero private/commercial TV stations to hundreds, making it one of CEE's most developed audiovisual markets (Boshnakova & Dankova, 2023; CNA, n.d.).

The EU pre-integration years were marked by cable TV, which experienced a local and regional “blossoming” (CNA, n.d.). According to official data, the configured system has been diverse, stable, and mature since 2015 (Figure 1). The licenses were granted for nine years, so there were two main periods: 2002–2005, when all channels were granted licenses on a well-defined frame, and 2015–present when all channels were supposed to continue their activity by getting re-licensed under well-defined conditions.

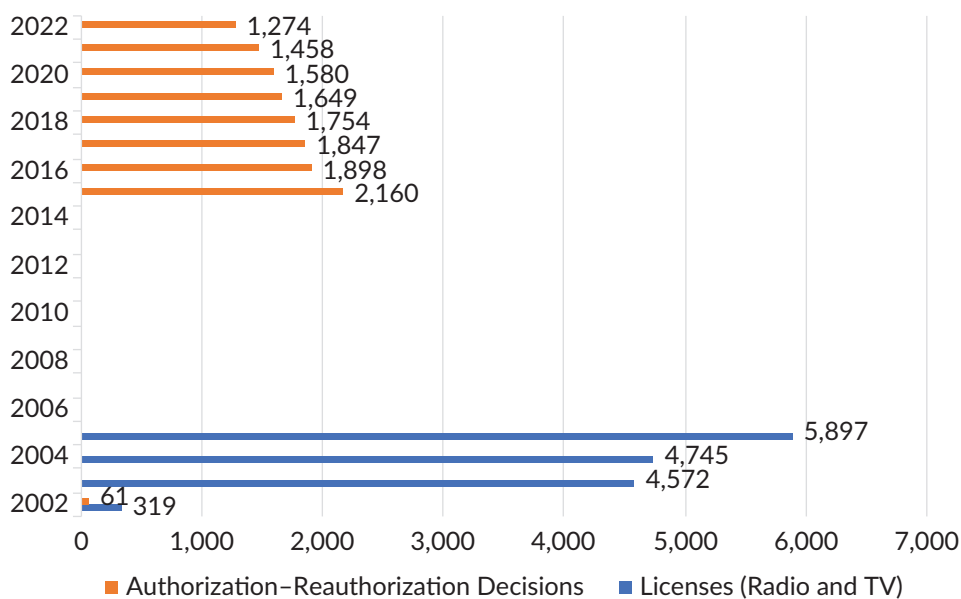


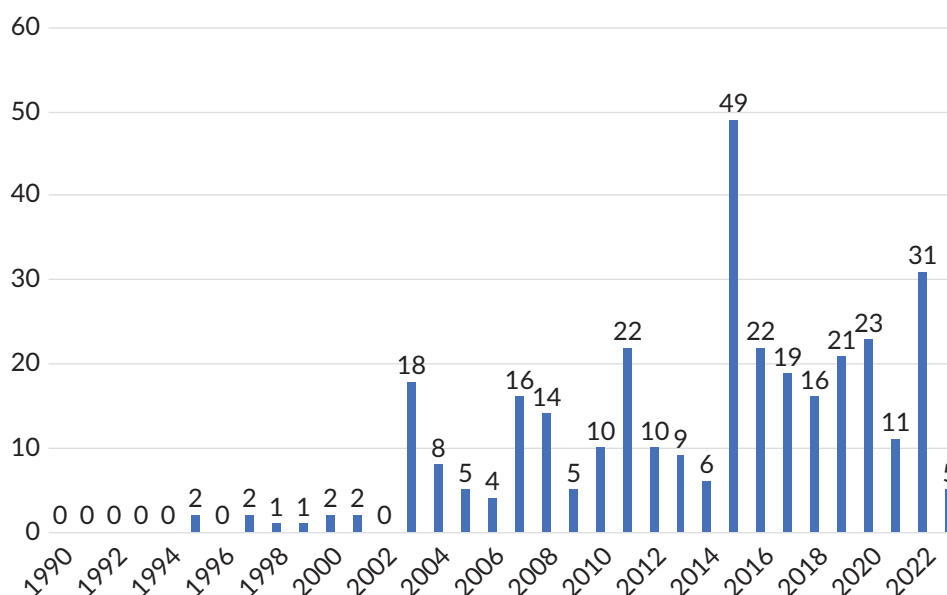
Figure 1. The Romanian audiovisual framework: radio and TV (2002–2022).

Technically, the liberalization of telecommunications services in 2003 and the introduction of optical fiber in cable networks allowed the entrance into the market of pay TV programs and integrated packages of TV content, telecommunications, and the internet (Consiliul Național al Audiovizualului, 2012). The national audience measurement system was introduced in 2004. Between 2006–2012, new digital systems (DTH, IPTV, TV cable, web TV, and TV on internet services) were introduced, which started the transition from analog to digital terrestrial signal transmission.

At the content level, in 2011, the Regulatory Code of Audiovisual Content was introduced (Consiliul Național al Audiovizualului, 2011), which established the normative environment for pluralism, free expression, and other democratic values. Nevertheless, CNA was confronted with many direct or indirect violations of the regulatory code. In 2018, for example, the activity of CNA consisted of 989 monitoring reports on 50 TV channels with 10,762 hours of content (CNA, 2018, p. 11, 84). In 2022, CNA monitored 45 TV stations' programs, 3,993 TV programs, and 4,221 broadcasted hours, releasing 1,318 monitoring reports (CNA, 2022, p. 80). The interest in TV is high in Romania: In 2014, the Romanian media reported 2,500 news reports about CNA's activity (CNA, 2014), and in 2022, approximately 990 media reports (CNA, 2022). As CNA reports:

Between 1992 and 2022, 1,672 audiovisual licenses were granted for terrestrial and electronic communications networks (including satellite) broadcasting of television program services. Of these, at the end of 2022, 334 audiovisual licenses were in force for terrestrial digital broadcasting and through electronic communications networks (including satellite) of television program services owned by 205 companies in 89 localities distributed in all the counties of the country, including Bucharest. (CNA, 2022, p. 30)

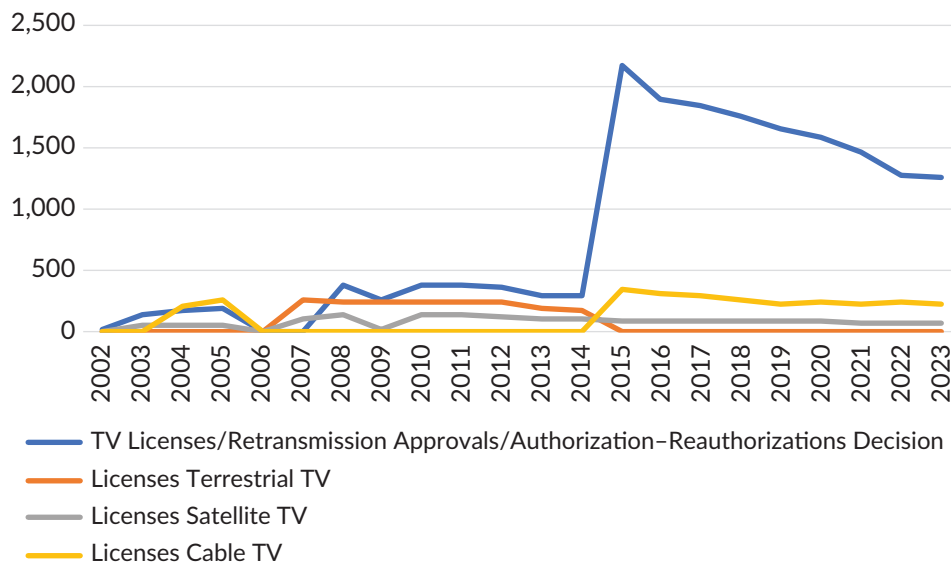
The first Romanian private TVs were granted licenses in the early 1990s, but the field's main development in terms of licensed programs took place between 2010 and 2020 (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Romania TV licenses for programs' distribution (1990–2022).



Cable TV of the early 2000s could be considered the real beginning of TV as a player in the media market. Currently, the three forms of TV in Romania are cable, terrestrial, and satellite in various technical parameters of programs' distribution (SD, HD, DVBT, VHD, HD, 3K; CNA, 2022, p. 22). Up-to-date technology improved the distribution networks and led to the diversification of services. The Romanian territory is fully covered by at least one form of TV. The major cities are poles of electronic networks for signal transmission. According to data, cable TV still represents a national characteristic (Figure 3).



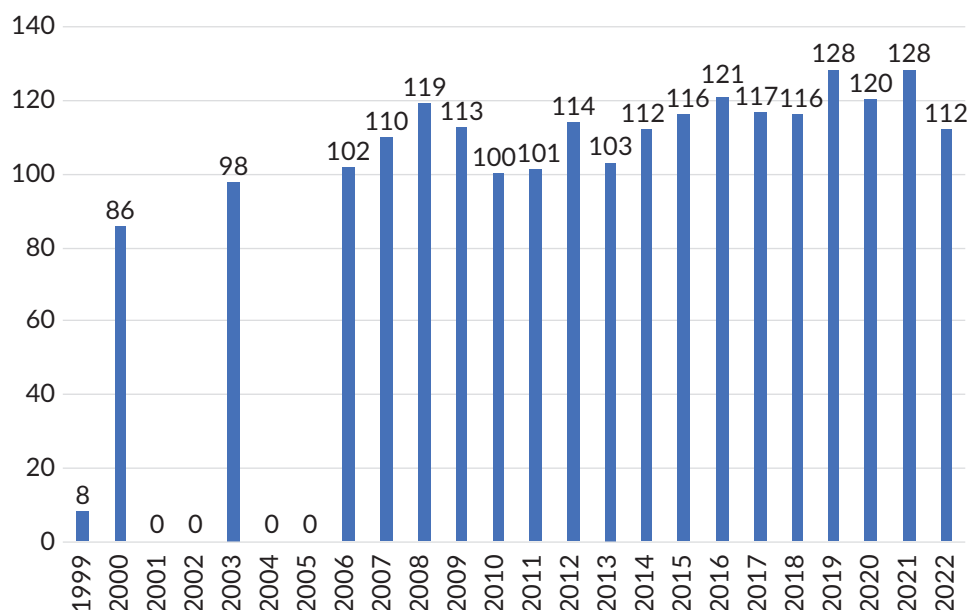
**Figure 3.** Romania: terrestrial, satellite, and cable TV by legal framework.

### 3.3.2. Bulgaria's Case

In Bulgaria, the Law on Television and Radio was issued in 1998. The Council for Electronic Media faced political interference and pressure from commercial channels, making its activity irrelevant. The audiovisual regulator was involved in several significant socio-political scandals (including the licensing of the first private national TV in 2000). The Law on Television and Radio has been continuously changed (most recently in 2022)—it regulates the functioning of public and private TV stations. Important changes were made in 2010 when product placement in TV content became regulated. After that amendment, the production of Bulgarian TV films and TV series by private TV stations began to explode (from 1989–2010, six TV series on private channels). In 2010, the requirement that independent producers shall not provide the same operator with more than two external productions simultaneously was eliminated, which opened the way for TV stations to potentially become dependent on certain producers (Figure 4).

The ban on owners of advertising agencies being involved in the property of electronic media was also removed. It is argued that the first private national TV (BTV) had a hidden ownership from the very beginning through the owner's consultant and the most powerful person in TV advertising, Krassimir Gergov (Spasov, 2012, p. 35). The same person obtained 80 out of 100 available TV frequencies, only based on the volume of advertising during 2009–2011. Gergov is also involved in TV ratings companies (foreign co-owners), which reportedly distorted data for TV ratings targeting advertising profits. In 2012, TV stations expressed their public dissatisfaction with that situation (Etrud, 2012). Until 2020, private TV broadcast





**Figure 4.** Bulgaria TV licenses for programs' distribution (1999–2022). Note: 2001, 2002, 2004, and 2005 data are not available.

gambling was not regulated by the Law on Television and Radio. Through gambling, knots of political, media, and business influence were entangled, which also affected the TV content: “According to statistics, in the last six years, the three national TVs received over BGN 182.8 million from hidden gambling advertising, although it was officially prohibited” (Mitov, 2020).

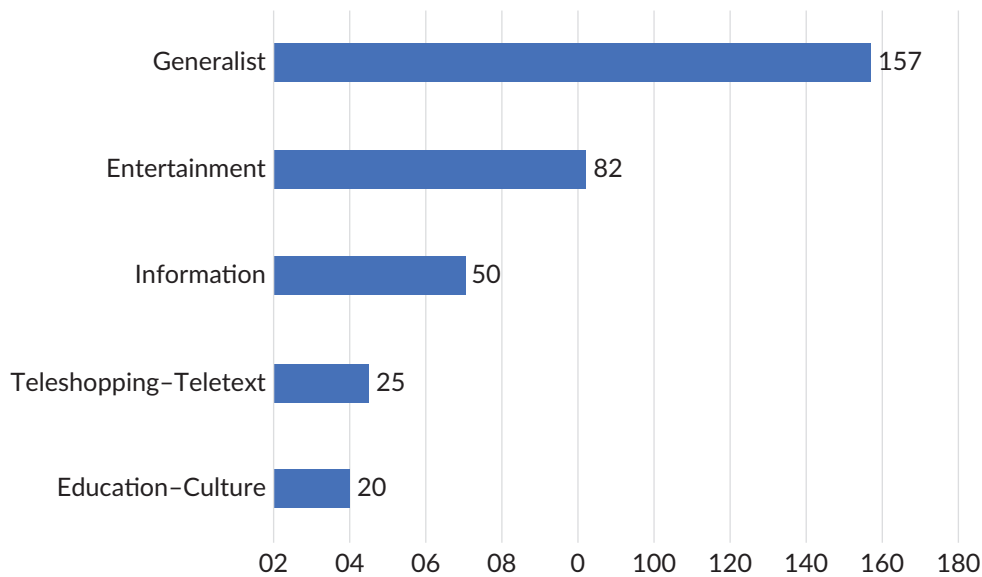
### 3.4. The Market: Illustrative Elements

#### 3.4.1. Romania's Case

In 2022, economic growth in Romania increased by 4.8% (Institutul Național de Statistică, 2023), and the media market reached a total of €657 million (Initiative Media, 2023, p. 12), being considered “stable and predictable both in terms of demand and revenues” (Initiative Media, 2023, p. 38). The TV market attained €350 million for a second year, although there are indicators of an “audience erosion” (Initiative Media, 2023, p. 38). In 2022, the top three TV stations were all commercial and generalist: Pro TV, the market leader, with a broader spectrum of target audiences; Antena 1, with a consistent editorial long-term strategy; and Kanal D, with a prominent female audience and broad national coverage. They are followed by three news stations (Romania TV, Antena 3 CNN, Digi 24) and three thematic ones (Digi Sport 1, Happy Channel, and Antena Stars). TVR (public TV) is only in seventh place after commercial TV (Initiative Media, 2023, p. 15).

For 2022, according to CNA data analysis, TV channels are generalist (157) or niche channels: entertainment (82), information (50), and education/culture (20; see Figure 5).

Almost 96% of the budgets for TV are provided by 10 industries: healthcare, retail (food and beverages), cosmetics and personal care, eCommerce, telecommunications, betting and gambling, household products, financial services, and HoReCa (Initiative Media, 2022, p. 17).



**Figure 5.** Types of TV channels under the CNA license.

The first TV audience measurements were made in the early 2000s, but only since 2014 has there been one national measurement entity. The Romanians are heavy TV viewers, with around five hours daily (Statista, 2021). TV dominates as the primary news source, at 5% above the European average, and the TV distribution market is considered to have a “high concentration” with an index of 5.041 (Herfindahl-Hirschman index; Meza et al., 2023).

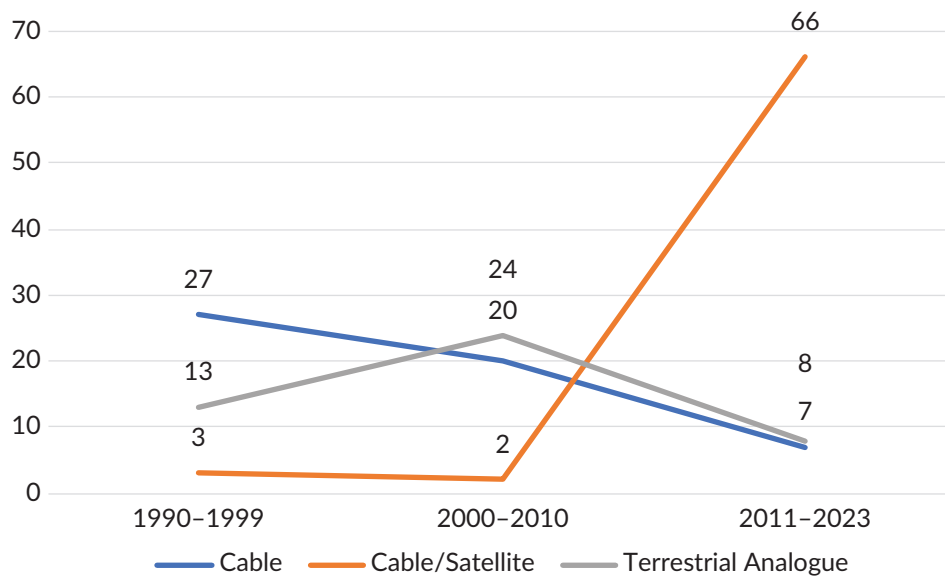
### 3.4.2. Bulgaria's Case

Bulgaria’s economy is presented as a “neoliberal laboratory” (Marinos, 2023, p. 17). After BACA (2023), advertising investments in the media market (2022) were about €234 million, with TV being the first with a 53.6% share. In 2022, Nova TV had a 54.6% market share, BTV 37.7%, and BNT 1.6% (GK Services, 2022).

At present, TV is the main news source for 86% of the public (on average, 75% for the EU). The private TV channels are more popular than public TV (Eurobarometer, 2022). According to the Reuters Institute of the University of Oxford for 2023 (Antonov, 2023), TV news is ranked by consumption as follows: Nova TV (61%), BTV (59%), BNT (37%), Nova News (27%), Bulgaria on Air (14%), Euronews Bulgaria (9%), 7/8 TV (6%). Trust in media news stands at 28%, ranking 41st out of 46 market surveys. The audience share by TV groups (generalist and niche channels) is Nova Group (45.9%), BTV Group (31.3%), Discovery (7.2%), BNT (6.4%), and others (9.2%; GK Services, 2022). The public BNT is in third place.

In terms of signal transmission, the dominant forms in Bulgaria are cable and satellite (Figure 6).

According to the National Statistics Institute Bulgaria (2022), there are 112 TV operators. Among them, providing national coverage, there is public TV (BNT) with three channels: the private BTV, Nova Television, and Bulgaria On Air. BTV was founded in 2001 as the first private national TV channel by News Corp, and sold in 2010 to Central European Media Enterprises, before being resold in 2020 to PPF. Nova Television



**Figure 6.** Bulgaria cable, cable/satellite, and terrestrial analogue TV.

was founded in 1994 as the first private broadcast TV in Sofia by Multimex ID. It was sold in 2000 to Antena TV, transforming it into a national TV channel (2003). In 2008, it was sold to Sweden’s MTG, then to Advance Media Group (2019), and to United Group (2020). Bulgaria On Air was founded in 2011 as a national private TV (owned by Investor Media Group). Private TV surpassed public TV in viewership at the beginning of 2001, when the audience of BTV surpassed BNT on a national scale: BTV (32.2%), BNT (29.9%), Nova Television (3.9%; “Rating for February,” 2001, p. 2). Since then, private TV stations categorically dominated.

Recent research shows that Romania and Bulgaria have the highest TV consumption in CEE. In Bulgaria, TV attracts more than 80% of the total advertising expenditure. Over 50% of people trust TV in both countries (Boshnakova & Dankova, 2023, p. 172).

### 3.5. Political Influence: Journalistic (De)Professionalization

#### 3.5.1. Journalism: Profession, Professionalism, Professionalization

While journalism is generally considered “the business or the practice to produce and disseminate information about contemporary facts of public relevance and interest” (Schudson, 2003, p. 11), the term “professionalization” in journalism is still controversial. The studies (related to professional orientation and organizational frame) considered central in professionalization: the universal role of journalism, the mandatory mission of public information, and the ethical dimension (Allison, 1986, pp. 8–13). The influences that affect media organizations limit the autonomy of journalists, exposing them to vulnerabilities (Shoemaker & Reese, 1997). The new communicational set-up maintains the difficulty of framing various practices (multimedia techniques, online journalism, global distribution) within journalism’s professionalization.

### 3.5.2. Romania's Case

The CNA currently regulates the political actors' presence in news programs and political debates during (non)electoral periods (Consiliul Național al Audiovizualului, 2011). Despite this, many violations of the law were observed and sanctioned. In 2018, for example, the CNA sanctioned 42 cases related to a lack of pluralism and freedom of expression (CNA, 2018, p. 86). Over the years, the CNA has presented unbalanced news coverage and biased political debates as a habit in the TV sector rather than isolated cases.

One of Romania's first private TV stations was Tele7abc, founded in 1994 as a generalist channel covering the Bucharest area. The journalists left public TV, especially for political reasons, such as the head of the news department, R.C., who was dismissed from the position of editor-in-chief. Back then, private channels came on the market with the promise of supporting Western values, democracy, pluralism, and freedom of speech. Their news agenda covered the relevant political spectrum to provide an informational alternative to the obedient voice of public TV (Bălășescu, 2021, pp. 23–62).

Pro TV, the market leader since its launch in 1995, is 100% branded as commercial TV focused on entertainment/infotainment. In the early 2000s, it got involved in public agenda setting by producing a TV show, *Chestiunea Zilei* (translated to *Topic of the Day*), one of the most successful in terms of audience ("Marca Florin Calinescu," 2001). The show moderator, F.C., a well-known Romanian actor, became involved in politics after leaving TV and ran for the Bucharest City Hall elections.

In the 2000s, the commercial TV landscape also included the first news channels with ownership connected to the political field: "Most of the major media owners have close connection with business or political circles" (Open Society Institute, 2008, p. 36). According to the Centre for Independent Journalism, media concentration determined an almost "incestuous relationship between media and politics...Media owners use media operations to promote and disseminate the political opinions and exploited the politicians to reach the corporate goals" ("Structurile de proprietate," 2007, para. 1). More recently, the media investigations and NGO reports presented the direct links between public money and media (Active Watch, 2023, p. 6):

The cohabitation between the media and politics is long-standing. In the recent history of the media, there have been numerous episodes in which some media institutions turned into simple PR or political marketing agencies and were instrumentalized to serve partisan interests at the expense of the public interest. (Active Watch, 2023, pp. 11–12)

Many journalists oscillated between journalism and politics. The former mayor of Bucharest (G.F.), a former radio journalist and moderator at public TV (in the 1990s), became the spokesperson of the prime minister (in the 2000s) and returned to TV as a news anchor and moderator. In 2016, she won the elections for Bucharest City Hall. The case of a leading journalist of a private news channel (R.B.) who became vice-president of the Liberal Party and won the European Parliamentary mandate is relevant, too.

In Romania, the news TVs, always placed around the top 10 most watched channels, became very active in setting the public agenda, supporting or criticizing the government mostly from the perspective of one side. For example, in the case of Romanian street protests from August 2018, the news coverage on commercial

TV was mostly biased. The Romanian society was polarized for or against the prime minister of the left government. A study on TV coverage of the protests showed a distorted perspective, arguing the political bias in the protests' coverage on two prominent commercial news channels. It represents a good illustration of the lack of pluralism and balance in news reporting. The polarized TV coverage may have contributed to the polarized public opinion (Bălăşescu, 2019).

### 3.5.3. Bulgaria's Case

In the Bulgarian legislation, there is no explicit ban on allowing TV stations to become “mouthpieces” of political parties. One example is TV SKAT, founded in 1992 as a regional cable TV channel. It broadcast the TV program *Attack*, whose moderator founded a nationalist party with the same name in 2005 and entered the Parliament. In 2009, the leader of *Attack* left TV Skat and started Alfa TV, which was initially registered as a public broadcaster. TV Skat remains the party TV of the National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria (nationalists), which managed to join the Parliament (2014 and 2017) and the coalition government (2017–2021). Other examples include Bulgaria 24, founded in 2014 as a national polythematic cable private TV, close to Bulgarsko Natsionalno Dvizhenie-VMRO (nationalists); Bulgarian Free Television, founded in 2019 and owned by the Bulgarian Socialist Party (formerly BKP); and 7/8 TV, a private cable/satellite pay-TV with national reach, affiliated with the “7/8” political party, represented in the Parliament, and winner of the parliamentary elections (July 2021). The political interference in commercial TV can be divided between (a) conflict of interest and roles (confusion among TV hosts and politicians) and (b) political pressures.

Regarding the conflict of interest and roles, from the 1990s, TV popularity was used as a political resource. The audience's interests are harmed because of the distorted coverage of reality. One case refers to the host of the morning show on BTV, who left public TV for the private TV 7, around which the party Bulgaria Without Censorship was formed. He eventually became an MEP (2014–2019). In 2014, another BTV host announced “on air” that he was starting a political career in Bulgaria Without Censorship. In 2019, the most popular TV showman also announced “on air” the departure of his team from BTV (after several shows suspended by the management for political reasons). He later founded 7/8 TV and entered politics. In 2023, the director of news and current affairs at BTV announced that he would be a candidate for one of the leading political parties (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria).

As for political pressures, the increasing influence of private TV stations (from 2001) also increased the frequency of the cases of political pressure on journalists and TV hosts. One example, which happened in 2022, refers to the former head of news at BTV, who admitted that he faced political pressure during his management (2014–2020) of the Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria party (“Godini nared bTV,” 2022). Although political interference cannot be directly proven, it is considered intimidation of journalists and is talked about in professional circles and among the public. The international media owners of the main players do not guarantee the independence of journalism but open new directions of analysis for their hidden political connections with local leaders. This process first started with the newspapers and the monopolization of the market by the German newspaper company WAZ (in Bulgaria, between 1997–2010), which then extended to TV. The mechanisms for political power over TV, the “captured media” (Mitov, 2020), operate through advertising contracts, owners close to political leaders, gambling, sports, and banks (Mitov, 2020).

The examples from Romania and Bulgaria were selected from a broader spectrum of situations that raise obvious dilemmas related to values of editorial independence, political autonomy, ethics, and access to resources as power exercises. They could be taken as evidence of the party's colonization of the media, as argued by Bajomi-Lázár (2014, p. 29). TV journalism is heterogeneous, with tension between national vs. local and between professional roles such as anchor vs. reporter. At the same time, TV journalism is negatively affected by external factors (politics, ownership, infotainment) and internal ones (the belief that journalism requires talent and “hands-on” experience, access to the profession by influence networks, and low-standard content). The lack of solidarity among journalists adds a negative factor to professional vulnerability. The journalists' social perception changed from heroes of democracy (in the 1990s) to employees on the market after the 2000s (Avădani, 2017).

#### 4. Discussion

We analyzed the commercial TV from Romania and Bulgaria using the dimensions considered by the Hallin and Mancini model as relevant for understanding the media system: regulatory framework, technical field, market, political influence, and aspects of professionalization in journalism. The findings showed a rapid post-1989 evolution, a well-developed technical infrastructure, the diversity of TV formats and contents due to high levels of TV consumption, and technological alignment to digitization. The 1990s context was favorable for commercial TV development in both countries due to the rejection of communist “paternal” relations between the state and TV and the public “appetite” for media consumption. Born under the profit logic, commercial TV became the most developed media in a few years, surpassing public TV by far. In parallel with its effervescent development, the institutions regulating the audiovisual were founded in both countries. Based on liberal values, the regulators were less efficient in monitoring and sanctioning. Commercial TV contributed to the development of post-1989 societies and their polarization because political interference was not limited to public TV. There are strong indications of political bias within the content of commercial TV (news bulletins, debates), with a high potential effect on social and political polarization.

Considering the central aspects of commercial TV in Romania and Bulgaria, we argue that it constitutes a blind spot in media research. Although Hallin and Mancini (2004) focused on public TV, we showed that commercial TV could have an explanatory function in describing the media model after 1989. TV represented a “primary definer” (Hall et al., 1978) of the democratic realities and the main source of information during the last three decades.

The historical development of both countries shares more similarities than differences. The Romanian and Bulgarian media industries saw explosive development around the year 2000. Since then, it has continued to acquire the systemic elements that contributed to the irreversible replacement of state TV by a pluralist spectrum of TV channels that claimed to provide unbiased coverage of public affairs. Despite the viewership statistics that indicate a relatively stable audience distributed across urban and rural populations (BACA, 2023; Initiative Media, 2022), commercial TV is confronted nowadays with the challenges of maintaining its audience level in the social media context of attracting younger audiences and adapting to a fragmented media market.

Situated at the crossroads of post-communist regimes and EU directions, Romania and Bulgaria are considered dynamic TV markets in CEE, reportedly pluralist and based on free competition. However, commercial TV

is exposed in many ways to political factors and economic pressures underlying the limits of the national advertising markets and regulatory institutions. The relevant difference between Romania and Bulgaria is the degree of political involvement and the financial pressures on private TV. The Romanian market, larger than Bulgaria's, benefitted from the earlier implementation of internationally audited audience measurement.

We argue that the future analysis of both countries should consider commercial TV due to the prominence of electronic media in the public space and the centrality of commercial TV in audience and advertising companies' preferences. The mix between the political field and journalism is also present at the level of commercial TV, not only in print media and public broadcasting, as underlined by Hallin and Mancini's model. TV journalism is vulnerable regarding professional norms, values, and procedures. A pluralist TV market, regulated by national and European legislation, does not guarantee journalists' autonomy. The political elites are still interested in exerting influence over private TV because of the high audience rates.

The original model of Hallin and Mancini (2004) played an important role in the analysis of public audiovisual and neglected commercial TV, most probably because of its secondary position compared to public TV in the 1980s in Western Europe (Bourdon, 2011) or its focus on entertainment (considered to be a sort of "second-hand" content in the normative perspective of TV). Our argument builds on considering commercial TV as a dimension to broaden the research on comparative emerging media systems such as Romania and Bulgaria.

The polarized pluralist/Mediterranean model was initially considered to have the most explanatory power in emerging media systems because of the political integration of media and low level of professionalism. Previous research—less academic and more "think thank" directed—criticized commercial TV and ignored its relevance as a social actor and the biggest player in the media market. The Hallin and Mancini model served as a comparative pattern but had its "procrustean" limits that prevented the analysis of critical aspects of modern TV in the context of global business, production, and distribution.

Hallin and Mancini's framework was used to analyze the media landscape in Romania and Bulgaria. Indzhov (2021) discussed the state funding of media, including advertising, and argued that the media system had visible similarities with the polarized pluralist/Mediterranean model and several marks of the liberal model. Furthermore, Indzhov (2021) found the "captured media" concept more adequate to explain clientelism and media corruption. Petrova (2023) also underlined the hybrid character of the media system, but she went rather to revitalizing the authoritarian model of Siebert et al. (1956). Marinos and Spassov (2023, p. 14) concluded that "the same big media companies entered the countries of Southeastern Europe and imposed the same standards and content." In Romania, private media channels, alongside the public TV and radio, supported the "government narratives," while the whole media sector bore the influence of political and economic interests (Boshnakova & Dankova, 2023, p. 178).

TV distribution and access to TV technologies, as well as the emphasis on free and global market values, open the way for considering elements from the liberal model (commercial media) and the democratic corporatist model (the co-existence of commercial media with the social and political interdependent media; Maniou, 2023, p. 1940) in proposing a tweaking of the polarized pluralist/Mediterranean model.



## 5. Conclusion

Commercial TV is less explored in its systemic dimension in CEE, even though it has replaced public TV from its first-place position as a source of information and “window” to the world. In Romania and Bulgaria, commercial TV represents one of the most important dimensions of the media system, considering the market factors (consumption figures and advertising expenditures) and the systemic features (technological requirements, global networks of production and distribution, and integrated business models). Its development was influenced by the structural “void” of the post-communist emerging media system, a tremendous social need for information, and the politicians’ interest in media. In only a few decades, TV “burnt” historical milestones, effacing the public service model and rapidly adopting the commercial one. Nevertheless, even in commercial TV, political influence remained strong, and this could be considered a feature of the media in both countries, partly due to ownership concentration and the need to control access to important audiences.

Our study aimed to fill in the blind spot of media research on Romanian and Bulgarian TV by offering a critical perspective on its relation to the polarized pluralist/Mediterranean model of Hallin and Mancini (2004). We argue that commercial TV should be considered a dimension with an explanatory function within CEE media systems’ analysis. The features of commercial TV displayed in Romania and Bulgaria (ideologically homogeneous, driven by profit, and influenced by politics) led to the necessity of critically assessing the polarized pluralist/Mediterranean model to explain the 21st-century context. We open the way for considering elements from the liberal and democratic corporatist models for future analysis of both countries and advocate for the critical assessment of the polarized pluralist/Mediterranean model in CEE countries.

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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