

BULGARIA:
BOBOKOV – Case Narrative
As of August 16, 2020

Prefatory Note

This material is distributed by the Alexandria Group International on behalf of Atanas, Plamen, and Hristina Bobokov. Additional information is available at the Department of Justice, Washington, D.C.

Overview

After ten years in power, Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borissov has grown increasingly corrupt and contemptuous of the rule of law. The ongoing protest movement on the streets of Sofia is a direct manifestation of the Bulgarian people's dissatisfaction with and contempt for his regime. Borissov has responded to the weeks of demonstrations with police violence and by shuffling his Cabinet and proposing that Parliament elect a "grand national assembly" to make changes to the constitution. Protesters immediately dismissed the latter plan as inadequate. Barring extraordinary parliamentary support for these "reforms," Borissov has vowed to continue in office until his electoral mandate ends in April, 2021. Meanwhile, he and his governmental allies and crony-capitalist henchmen continue to consolidate power and accelerate reversals in Bulgaria's democratic progress. Under Borissov's leadership, Bulgaria is rapidly returning to authoritarianism. In a solid break from its troubled communist past, the country is now politically oriented toward the west, but is no longer a democratic polity. Under Borissov, its prior pro-Soviet interests have evolved into promotion and protection of a class of governmental and socio-economic elites who dominate the nation in every sphere and control its interests at the expense of citizens' rights. The country's markets are ostensibly free, but the Prime Minister's coterie exploits them by legal and extra-legal means in order to enrich itself. Today, international rights organizations rank Bulgaria at the very bottom of Europe for corruption and lack of press freedoms.

Borissov established – and governs with – a group of oligarchs in a mutually beneficial relationship. The most prominent is Delyan "Potbelly" Peevski, who operates above the law and holds extraordinary financial and political power. Legitimate Bulgarian business leaders victimized by the current regime identify him, together with the Prosecutor-General Ivan Geshev and Borissov himself, as the key architects of Bulgaria's democratic decline and devolution into a criminal state. Since Borissov returned to power in late 2014, the bulk of public commercial tenders have been awarded to Peevski-controlled companies. Although the Prosecutor-General's office is formally a part of the judiciary, Borissov holds "regular [weekly] consultations" with Geshev.

Through systemic corruption, Borissov's oligarchs and other courtiers enjoy the benefits and rewards of their association with his government, while perceived political opponents and business owners who reject or resist association with the regime and its illegal acts are increasingly being targeted for punishment. Having amalgamated political, executive, police, and judicial power under Borissov and his extra-state enablers, the Bulgarian regime has recently

turned its attention to Bulgaria's legitimate major business enterprises in an attempt at "criminal capture" of their assets and future earnings. Its tools include physical harm, intimidation, malicious prosecution, attempted extortion, racketeering, character assassination, trial by state- and crony-controlled media, and other abuses of the rule of law. Its chief instrument is Prosecutor-General Geshev, who falsely charges businessowners with nebulous felonious offenses – such as "engaging in a major criminal enterprise" – backed only by unreliable, unsound, or manufactured evidence. In democratic states, these enterprises thrive in open markets; in Bulgaria, they are targeted for extortion and ruin. Since May, 2020, Geshev has targeted Atanas and Plamen Bobokov and their businesses. Self-made, enterprising, and model citizens, the Bobokovs stand accused of environmental offenses under Bulgaria's penal code and of the vague crime of "influence-peddling." Plamen has been released after posting the largest bail in Bulgarian history, but remains under constant threat of re-arrest for additional manufactured offenses. Atanas is now in its twelfth weeks in "inhumane" and "degrading" conditions in Sofia Prison, where his general health is suffering and where he continues to be denied proper treatment for potentially life-threatening conditions. The Bobokovs' consumer-based enterprises are also in jeopardy as the Borissov regime escalates its attempts at criminal capture.

A recent prominent victim of the regime's program of criminal capture is Vasil "The Skull" Bozhkov, the owner of the country's largest legal gambling interests. Bozhkov, who is now in the Middle East for fear of returning to Bulgaria, is seeing his life, reputation, and businesses ruined by the Bulgarian regime. Recently, he vowed to run for parliament in the country's April, 2021, elections. Meanwhile, genuine crimes and allegations backed by tangible evidence – such as Borissov's possession of vast numbers of suspicious banknotes, his criminal past in car trafficking gangs, acquisition of a valuable vacation house in a Greek resort, regularly scheduled shakedowns of Bozhkov and similar criminal approaches to other businessmen in evident attempts to extort them, his imposition of a party loyalty test for government employment, and illegal use of the tools of government to manipulate still others – remain uninvestigated formally or informally by Prosecutor-General Geshev.

The only role that facts and the law play in the regime's corrupt practices is to be twisted or manufactured to the benefit of its criminal actors. In Bulgaria, which Transparency International ranks as the most corrupt country in the European Union (EU), the real major criminal enterprise is the Borissov regime. In contravention of the findings of the European Court of Human Rights, the jurisdiction of which Bulgaria accepts, the office of Prosecutor-General continues to operate with unprecedented and unchecked powers. Meanwhile, freedom of the press continues to suffer severe curbs. For three years in a row, Reporters Without Borders has ranked Bulgaria at the bottom of European Union-member nations and, indeed, 111th in the world on its index of press freedoms.

Unless the United States and the major European powers persuade Borissov and his coterie to cease their criminal acts and restore democracy and a civil society in Bulgaria, the Bobokovs' and other businessowners' investments in U.S. and western European jobs and other contributions to democratic societies will be lost. So, too, will be those societies' investment in Bulgaria's future as the current regime sacrifices democracy, liberty, and the rule of law to its architects' primitive quest for naked power and brutal oppression.

Thirty years ago, thousands of brave Bulgarian citizens took to the streets to end the scourge of communism. Today's protesters seek and deserve democratic governance and an end to the nation's endemic corruption. The Bobokovs and other like-minded Bulgarians stand proudly in their footsteps and pray for a return of truth and justice to their society. Please support them in their vital quest.

Background on the Bobokovs

After initiating its criminal capture of Bulgaria's gambling industry, the Borissov regime quickly targeted Atanas and Plamen Bobokov, brothers who own successful companies that produce a wide range of industrial lubricants and manufacture batteries primarily for motor vehicles, shipping vessels, and even space rockets. Based in the brothers' home region of Russe, a northeastern city on the Danube, these enterprises produce two of Bulgaria's largest exports.

After university, both Bobokov brothers entered the workforce as financial-market traders. Atanas, who is now sixty years-old, worked in New York, but returned to Bulgaria during the major downturn in U.S. markets in the early 1990s. In 1995, Atanas and Plamen, who is now fifty-one, bought the Bulgarian state's battery-manufacturing factory, which had collapsed amid spiraling debt under the communist system and which the government had failed to privatize successfully. They installed new technology, bought a lead-producing factory in New York and an assembling facility in Mexico, and fully revamped the enterprise. Today, "MONBAT" is the third-largest motor-vehicle battery-producer in Europe; it operates seven plants and three recycling plants on the continent. Its factory in Germany is one of two lithium-ion producers in Europe. Specialized MONBAT batteries are used on land, sea, and in the air, including in NASA rockets and motorized vehicles and as part of other countries' space programs, as well as on submarines, ships, and other maritime vessels. Today, the Bobokov brothers own half of MONBAT. The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development currently holds bonds in the company and remains a solid stakeholder with excellent relations with the brothers and their companies. Until recently, a Hong-Kong based British-American hedge fund owned twenty percent, but it recently sold its interest to banks and a similar fund. The Bulgarian state pension fund owns the remaining thirty percent. Following his arrest and detention, Atanas resigned as MONBAT's Executive Director in order to ensure preservation of the company's good name and facilitate a smooth corporate investigation.

Also in 1995, the brothers launched "Prista Oil," a petroleum-products company, from scratch. Prista is now the biggest enterprise in Russe. Their quality products quickly attracted international attention from other western producers of oil-based products for consumers – including Texaco, which bought a one-quarter interest in the company in 2000. Six years later, a hedge fund bought its share. Since 2018, the brothers have been the sole owners. Today, Prista makes 150 types of lubricants for motor-vehicle and other industrial uses. It holds a licensed manufacturer's brand agreement with Chevron to produce lubricants under the Texaco brand. These and other Prista products are sold in 45 countries on four continents.

The Bobokovs are not oligarchs, who are created by and engaged in a symbiotic relationship with authoritarian state rulers; they are self-made businessmen who became successful by providing quality products for use by consumers on free and open markets in Bulgaria, western Europe, and beyond. They launched their businesses at the ground level as

small- to medium-sized enterprises and expanded them through their vision, hard work, business acumen, and entrepreneurship. As Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Krassimir Karakachanov, whose political party is a minority coalition partner with Borissov's, has written, the Bobokovs are "enterprising, hardworking people" who began their business careers with nothing other than a small plot of provincial land. Neither they nor their forebears have been members of any political party; nor have they used politicians or the political system to advance their businesses or their financial interests. In spite of Bulgaria's lawless political system under Prime Minister Borissov, the Bobokovs have operated their business enterprises without resorting to corrupt practices. Indeed, the country's Anti-Corruption Fund (ACF), the predominant nongovernmental watchdog, which is funded by the America for Bulgaria Foundation, has conducted more than 40 major investigations involving the government, businesses, and other enterprises and has never had cause to investigate the Bobokovs or their companies.

They are good family men and law-abiding business owners who, through a combination of hard work, sound judgment, and good fortune and providence have enjoyed happy marriages and raised smart children who are poised to lead productive adult lives. For the more than twenty-eight years in business and in their private lives, the Bobokov brothers have never faced legal charges – until now. Atanas is divorced and has three children – a daughter who works for a private company in Sofia, a son in high school, and another son who is eight months-old. Plamen has been married for 22 years and also has three children – one in college and two in high school. The brothers also assist in providing for their elderly parents. In addition to his business and familial responsibilities, Plamen serves as the Honorary Consul of Ukraine in Bulgaria.

In the coming days, Wolf Theiss, an Austrian firm that specializes in investigative audits and has extensive experience in Bulgaria, will complete a comprehensive report on the Bobokov enterprises. The Bobokovs will release these findings publicly. Their goal is to enable U.S. and other foreign policymakers, fair-minded and independent journalists, concerned nongovernmental organizations that monitor rights and freedoms, and ordinary Bulgarian citizens to be able to make their own judgments regarding the brothers' character, integrity, and business practices – and respond accordingly and appropriately.

Arrests, Charges, and Detention

Evgeni Dainov, a leading professor of politics, has written that, after a break of thirty years, Bulgaria again has "de facto political prisoners." Among them are Atanas and Plamen Bobokov. For a quarter of a century, they worked diligently to build their Bulgarian businesses and successfully turned them into soaring European enterprises. Their life's effort was shot back down to earth last May, when they were arrested by special agents under the direction and control of Prosecutor-General Ivan Geshev. Eventually, they were charged with "influence-peddling" and illegal importation of garbage from Italy and improper disposal of the waste in Bulgaria. These charges are patently false, spurious, and specious and are supported only by "testimony" by paid whistleblowers and hysterical media reports that create and inflame societal resentment of the country's successful business-owners and wallow in lurid accounts of their purported lifestyles.

Beyond greed and systemic attempts at criminal capture, the Borissov regime's motivation for targeting the Bobokovs may lie in their professional relations with the Prime Minister's chief political rival, President Rumen Radev, who opposed Geshev's candidacy for Prosecutor-General who is the biggest institutional and personal obstacle to the regime's total capture of the Bulgarian state. While the Bobokovs are formally apolitical and belong to no political party, as major businessmen, they do indeed have contact and good relations with the President. The Prosecutor-General is attempting to distort this interaction, which is commonplace in normal societies, by charging the brothers with "influence-peddling."

Although Plamen has had a clean legal record throughout his life, he has been arrested three times since the Prosecutor-General began his campaign of persecution of the Bobokov brothers. Upon his first arrest, for alleged illegal international transport and disposal of garbage, Plamen voluntarily surrendered his cell phone, as well as its passwords and codes, to the arresting agents, only to have Geshev manipulate its contents to manufacture false charges against him and try him extrajudicially. He was subsequently released on an extortionate one million-leva (\$600,000) bail-bond – the largest in Bulgarian history. He was rearrested for not paying this bail, but released upon producing the court's receipt for his payment. The order on which Plamen was rearrested was issued and dated one day after he paid the bail in question. In early July, Plamen was arrested a third time, ostensibly to add a charge of "influence-peddling," and re-released 30 hours later. The court also reduced a second million-leva bail to 10,000 leva (\$6000). From the beginning, he vowed not to flee and instead to face the charges against him, no matter how absurd.

At an August 11 hearing, the court finally announced bail arrangements for Atanas and his alleged "co-conspirators," but the three accused men remain in prison and subject to a determination by the Specialized Appeals Court following an official hearing scheduled for August 18. It remains to be seen when and if they will be released, and whether the court will concoct a different excuse to continue to hold them. If the Appeals Court upholds the recommendations of the original court, Atanas will be required to post bail of 700,000 leva (\$421,000) for the alleged environment-based offenses. A young manager from a MONBAT plant will be made subject to 300,000 leva (4180,000) bail, while the Deputy Environment Minister who is accused of being part of the criminal enterprise will be assessed 50,000 leva (\$30,000). The appeals court has the power, however, to reduce these bails or deny bail to the accused and continue to detain them.

When the prosecution presented its charge of "influence-peddling" at the brothers' first July court hearing, the judge stated that the state's evidence – that Plamen was sent a photograph of an impending written decision by a Bulgarian court -- was in the public domain and is therefore insufficient to justify the charge. (The prosecution then stated that it would produce additional proof of wrongdoing, and the judge admonished the state that it would need to do so in order to succeed.) The written decision concerned the theft by a Bulgarian criminal group – many believe the very same gang who criminally captured IZAMET (see below) – of a Libyan oil tanker from the Black Sea. At the time of the tanker's disappearance and at the behest of a number of his Libyan business contacts, Plamen, who does significant trade with Libya through Prista Oil and who knows many Libyan businessmen and government officials, had attempted to make inquiries about the whereabouts of the ship. Plamen's "improper" possession of "state

secrets” turned out to be information that had been published by the Bulgarian Telegraph Agency, a wire news service.

In addition to this so-called evidence, the prosecution leaked to regime-friendly media an e-mail that Plamen sent to President Radev to congratulate him on a successful trade mission. There is nothing improper, let alone criminal in the note – no request, no demand, no suggestion of any sort of transaction between the two officials. The only “evidence” it contains is demonstrable proof that Plamen is a polite and well-mannered person. The prosecution also leaked an illegally obtained recording in which the President and Plamen discussed the potential appointment of Bulgarian ambassadors to countries in which the brothers do business. Again, Plamen was not currying any sort of favor with the President. He was merely sharing his views on diplomatic matters as the Honorary Consul of an allied country and as a Bulgarian businessman who is professionally active in many dozens of countries. Even if he had been promoting the candidacies of particular individuals, this action would not have been criminal, unethical, or otherwise inappropriate.

The charge of criminal environmental offenses by the brothers are the most absurd, but also the most problematic because they are ostensibly grounded in valid Bulgarian laws. As part of its operations, MONBAT buys and collects used batteries from northern Italy and trucks them under state permit to Bulgaria, Romania, and Serbia, where they are recycled. This enterprise provides the apparent basis for the Prosecutor-General’s charge that the Bobokovs have imported foreign garbage without proper state permits. In fact, the Bobokovs do not traffic in garbage, even though regime-friendly television network reports have “illustrated” the pollution-related charges against them with footage of garbage trucks collecting trash from Bulgarian residences. In addition, all of their battery recycling operations are conducted with the proper permits and in accordance with all valid laws and regulations. Plamen has credible grounds to suspect that the Prosecutor-General will buy testimony against MONBAT – exactly what Geshev’s judiciary claims to be preventing by denying bail to Atanas – and manufacture evidence in order to prove these otherwise empty charges and violations.

Atanas also pledged not to flee and surrendered his one and only passport, but has repeatedly been denied bail and is now in his twelfth week of detention under deplorable conditions. While initially denied bail as a flight risk, his most recent denial is based on absurd fears that, if physically outside of prison, he would tamper with witnesses. His family members are uniformly worried about his overall physical condition and medical state, but their immediate concerns are (a) severe infection and inflammation of his right knee, part of which was replaced in surgery in November, 2019; and (b) the prospect of permanent disability due to his being denied physical rehabilitation. The family is gravely worried that this infection, which is for now localized, could lead to gangrene and potentially fatal consequences if it spreads to the bloodstream. As this writing, Atanas is being given only an antibiotic to address the unascertained cause of his symptoms. On July 22, the relevant court in Sofia granted him access to the prison hospital (after his request was refused at the outset of his long detention), but, once again, he was denied specialist attention, appropriate medication, and necessary medical tests to diagnose and treat his condition.

On July 23, Atanas was abruptly returned to the general prison population. Like most other detainees in Sofia, he is sharing the space in his dirty twelve square-meter cell with three other inmates, four undersized bunks, and a toilet. According to numerous international human

rights organizations, the maltreatment that Atanas is experiencing in these “overcrowded” conditions is “inhumane and degrading,” and, as the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (“Helsinki”) has concluded, the norm in Bulgaria’s detention system. So, too, is the denial of medical treatment altogether, or, as in Atanas’ case, the denial of appropriate and effective treatment.

In response to a July 24 letter to Bulgaria’s state Ombudsman, officials visited Atanas in prison and made as yet undisclosed recommendations to the Ministry of Justice. In the meantime, Atanas remains in medical jeopardy, without the benefit of appropriate medical care and attention or any timetable for remedial actions based on whatever recommendations that the Ombudsman has made to the Ministry of Justice.

In direct contravention of their rights as citizens of the European Union, the detention orders used in the Bobokov cases fail to state the cause of their detention. According to Helsinki and other rights organizations, this denial constitutes an additional common deficiency in Bulgaria’s judicial system. So, too, is the corrupt practice of charging defendants, as the Bobokovs have also experienced, with one charge, allowing the clock to run on their detention (up to eight months on felony offenses), then bringing a serious new charge and restarting the clock.

Endemic Corruption and Erosions of Democracy

Bulgaria managed to win admission to the EU in 2007, but, after ten years of rule by Prime Minister Borissov, it has rolled back the rights and freedoms that constitute a democratic nation. In its new annual report, Freedom House categorizes Bulgaria as a “Semi-Consolidated Democracy” – or “hybrid regime” that “continues to struggle with political corruption and organized crime.” (Fellow backsliding EU-members Croatia, Poland, and Romania receive the same rating, while Hungary, the sick man of the union, is only “Partly Free.”)

In spite of the protests against him, Borissov and his autocratic “GERB” political party are now in an additional phase of restoring the systemic abuses of Communist-style government. As *Politico EU* recently observed, “Bulgarians complain that jobs in the public administration – be it as cleaners or mid-level officials – increasingly require ties to the GERB network.” According to the Brussels-based publication, “Companies also complain that they are asked to pay sweeteners.”

In its most recent annual monitoring report, the ACF stated that “the fight against political corruption in Bulgaria often seems not only unsatisfactory but also worrying.” In a Washington, D.C. meeting of the organization in November, 2019, James Pardew, a former U.S. Ambassador to Sofia and former Army Colonel, noted that the U.S. government is in a “strong position” to exert influence over the Bulgarian government through instruments such as withdrawal of visas for corrupt officials. Unfortunately, to date, Washington has done so only in the case of one corrupt judge – the first such action against an official in a EU-member state – and the EU has done even less.

Criminal Capture

In “How to dismantle a democracy: the case of Bulgaria” (*OpenDemocracy.net*, June 15, 2020), Professor Dainov writes of Bulgaria’s gangs of “strong men” enforcers who worked for

private individuals and criminal groups in the 1990s, then came to power. (Borissov worked as a bodyguard and firefighter. Geshev was a beat policeman.) Once they were in office, Dainov continues, “anyone who disobeyed or complained would see their business driven into the ground by the combined might of tax inspectors, fire safety inspectors, health inspectors, and the whole panoply of ‘control institutions’ (more than seventy in all) of the state.”

Since 2017, the government has escalated its interference in the economy and used the new “Specialized,” “para-legal” judicial system to “strengthen the regime’s grip over key economic sectors and players, and also to make examples of companies that refused to toe the line.” The Bulgarian regime’s assault on the Bobokov brothers and their businesses fits this general pattern and is also eerily similar to two of the largest known criminal capture cases in Bulgarian history: the destruction of Vasil Bozhkov’s gambling businesses and the extortion of the country’s largest manufacturer of elevators.

In December, 2019, the Borissov government legally expropriated part of Bozhkov’s business empire by passing a new law to give the state a monopoly on lotteries. Not content with this effective seizure of Borissov’s private business capital and future profits, the Prosecutor-General quickly charged Bozhkov with twelve offenses, including extortion and tax fraud. Bozhkov has responded by claiming innocence and stating that he has material evidence to prove it. At the same time, he says that he in fact the victim of extortion on a breathtaking scale by Borissov and Finance Minister Vladislav Gouranov, to whom Bozhkov says he has paid 60-million leva (\$40 million) in “comfort fees” on their direct orders. Borissov collected on these systemic shakedowns by dispatching Sevdalina Arnaudova, his personal assistant, to Bozhkov’s office on a monthly basis. Bozhkov has stated that he has recordings, witnesses, documentation, and other evidence to support his claims. Borissov and Arnaudova deny the allegations. Meanwhile, rather than investigate these charges and Borissov’s private possession of large stashes of gold bars and 500-euro banknotes, Prosecutor-General Geshev has only launched a probe into the incriminating photos and videos, which he dismissed as “fake” and “photoshopped” even as qualified technology experts have uniformly authenticated them.. Geshev is reportedly not even exploring the origins of the egregious lapse in Borissov’s personal security that centered on someone photographing and filming him as he slept in his bedroom.

Unlike the Bobokovs, Bozhkov was tipped off before Geshev agents could arrest him. Also unlike the Bobokovs, Bozhkov, who was on a business trip to the Middle East at the time, has elected not to return to Bulgaria and holds personal political ambitions. Purportedly in pursuit of evidence, prosecutorial agents ransacked Bozhkov’s offices. Laying claim to collateral for Bozhkov’s supposed tax debts, they also seized his vast and unparalleled personal collection of Thracian art, which he stored and displayed to museum standards regarding humidity, temperature, and lighting, and carted the items away in cardboard boxes and plastic garbage bags, purportedly as collateral for Bozhkov’s supposed tax debts.

Like Bozhkov, Iliya Zlatanov fled Bulgaria for his life after his entire multimillion-dollar business and life’s work and savings were stolen in a conspiracy led by former prosecutors, judges, and police officers. Now in an undisclosed foreign location, Zlatanov has stated, “This isn’t a ‘Specialized Criminal Court’; it’s a ‘Specialized Criminal Group.’” Beyond possible gullibility in not realizing that the legal system in Bulgaria is far from legal, his only mistake was to seek counsel in resolving a bitter dispute with his son over the management (ownership?) of their elevator-manufacturing company. As revealed in an extensive investigation by the ACF, the

criminal group first demanded half-ownership of the company, then took all of it after threatening the life of Zlatanov's ailing son. The very institutions that were established in accordance with the Bulgarian constitution are now in the control of bandits who threaten innocent civilians' lives and who serve as the instruments of criminal capture of the country's legitimate businesses. Zlatanov, the ACF, and others have made repeated attempts to persuade Geshev to investigate the IZAMET case and bring charges against the conspirators, but he will not, perhaps because the guilty parties are still associated with Geshev and his office. At a minimum, these "former" agents of law and order learned their criminal tactics while still on the job. Unless they and Geshev himself are stopped, Zlatanov's life's savings will remain lost, and he will remain in exile from his homeland. In Bulgaria's lawless society, he has no other recourse.

The agents who provide Geshev with the muscle to control his fiefdom and make ordinary citizens fearful are his "personal army" or "Praetorian Guard," as a Bulgarian investigative journalist recently wrote. Its troops protect him and terrorize the victims of his court. These agents, extra-legal heirs to the Communists' dreaded State Security Service (known as "Derzhavni Sigornost" in Bulgaria, the "Stasi" in East Germany, and "Securitate in Romania), execute Geshev's orders to arrest his targets in the dead of night, beat them, and seize their personal effects. These are the men who came for the Bobokovs at 2:00 a.m. one spring night, who grabbed Bozhkov's priceless artworks, who ransacked Yavor Zlatanov's offices and stole his family's gold, and who stole valuables from scores of other Bulgarian citizens who have found themselves in Geshev's crosshairs. This protection force was created not only to facilitate the prosecution service's conduct of its legitimate work, but also to keep trial witnesses safe from criminal attempts to harm or otherwise intimidate them. In yet another perversion of the law, however, Geshev has corrupted it and turned it into the strong arms of his personal para-police and judicial apparatus. Institutions that are meant to bring criminals to justice and protect innocent civilians are instead twisted into instruments of state theft and corruption.

Press Freedom and Trial by Media

As is often the case in closed societies, the Bulgarian regime has used its control of mass media, especially television, effectively to deny press freedoms, suppress dissent, and try its opponents in the court of public opinion. Bulgaria's record should match that of other European nations, but it is instead on a par with many second- and third-world countries that strictly limit their citizens' political rights and civil liberties. According to Reporters Without Borders, for the past three years, Bulgaria's press freedom ranking has been 111th of the world's 180 countries – making it not only the "black sheep of the EU," but also placing it firmly below that of many second- and third-world nations. Even the Balkan countries outside of the European Union (EU) ranked far higher than Bulgaria. The United States' International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX) includes Bulgaria in its "unsustainable mixed media" category due to the inability of journalists to report freely and fully. It notes that journalists impose self-censorship in order to protect themselves from political, corporate, and criminal pressure. The diminishment of freedom of speech in Bulgaria, IREX continues, reflects the overall weakness of the rule of law, the selective application of laws, and the political system's protection of certain citizens from persecution.

The EU Commission's press monitoring report attributes the "sharp" deterioration in Bulgaria's post-accession media environment to "inadequate transparency, accountability to the public, and public access to reliable information." In the past three years, the Borissov regime has purged all reputable investigate journalists and independent-minded anchors from the country's three major television stations. In November, 2019, Bulgaria's steep decline in press freedom led Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty to relaunch its reportorial coverage of the country after an absence of fifteen years.

Media coverage of the ongoing street protests in Sofia and other cities encapsulates the near-universal criticisms of the state of media freedom in Bulgaria today. Bulgarian National Television did not report on the ongoing mass street protests against Prime Minister Borissov until they were in their second week, and, even then, the demonstrations were cast as insignificant gatherings orchestrated by disgruntled "sore losers" from the opposition Socialist Party. The country's second television network, which is owned by Delyan Peevski, depicted the protests in exactly the same light. While protesters and bystanders have repeatedly caught police brutally beating and harassing demonstrators, the national and Peevski networks portrayed these actions as necessary responses to violent protesters intent on fomenting chaos and willing to break the law in order to destroy the social order and undermine the country's legitimate government.

As Freedom House finds in its new annual report on Bulgaria, the "media sector remains pluralistic, "but "ownership concentration is a growing problem." The report continues, "News outlets often tailor coverage to suit the interests of their owners." In addition to misrepresenting the Sofia protests and their significance, ignoring evidence of Borissov's own wrongdoing, and suppressing criticism of his government, the regime's and allied media are trying and convicting the Bobokovs in the court of public opinion. The Bobokovs are invariably portrayed as callous, greedy plutocrats who use their power and wealth to buy politicians, pollute the environment, exploit the Bulgarian people, and enrich themselves still further. With family holiday photographs lifted from Plamen's telephone as illustration, these media depict the brothers' lifestyle not as one distinguished by constant hard work and dedication to their business and their employees, but rather as a nonstop pursuit of pleasure and indulgences in luxuries such as champagne, yachts, and jewels. The brothers' spouses are consistently portrayed as vacuous and degenerate "rich housewives of Sofia" and "trophy wives" whose primary, if not sole pursuits are ostentation and frivolity. The Bobokov brothers included Hristina in the Alexandria Group's representation of their interests solely due to the constant attacks on her character by media obedient to the regime.

The Bulgarian court in which the Bobokovs are being tried has criticized itself for humiliating a defendant Deputy Mayor of of the "Mladost" region of Sofia for staging a "perp walk" in which she was made to appear in handcuffs before cameras, yet both Bobokovs were also filmed while cuffed and forced into a "perp walk."

Call records appropriated from Plamen's cell phone have also been used to try the brothers' extrajudicially for "influence-peddling." Television reports include suggestions that Plamen exploited his relations with President Rumen Radev to influence state appointment of ambassadors to countries in which the brothers conduct business. In fact, Plamen has engaged with the President exclusively on a social basis or on legitimate terms as a good citizen of Bulgaria, major business owner, and diplomatic representative of Ukraine. In any case, like

many other personnel recommendations for official posts, Plamen's fell on deaf ears. Similarly, rather than proving this nebulous legal notion of peddling of influence, the media's leak of a thank-you e-mail from Plamen to Radev instead demonstrates his gratitude and good manners upon the conclusion of a successful international trade mission.

Along with material from Plamen's voluntarily surrendered cellphone, Geshev is using evidence obtained in his agents' illegal search of President Radev's offices. In a statement on July 13, at the height of the street protests in Sofia and other Bulgarian cities, U.S. Embassy Sofia wrote: "Every nation deserves a judicial system that is non-partisan and accountable to the rule of law. We support the Bulgarian people as you peacefully advocate for increased faith in your democratic system and promote the rule of law in Bulgaria. No one is above the law." Diplomatic politesse aside, the Borissov regime does indeed believe itself to be above the law – and acts accordingly. Prosecutor-General Geshev has publicly declared himself "an instrument of God." As many western journalists and prominent Bulgarians have noted, Geshev is indeed more powerful in key respects with the Prime Minister. While Geshev's office is ostensibly part of an independent judicial system, Borissov has boasted that he and Geshev engage in "regular [weekly] consultations." Former Bulgarian Foreign Minister Daniel Mitov recently wrote, "For thirty years, the Prosecution service has been used as a tool for political repression, character assassination, and business-raiding." It is "still a Soviet-style" body that "in the past five to seven years has gradually increased the level of institutional abuse," Mitov continues. "Those of us who raise questions about constitutional amendments [to correct the constitutional flaw of making it extremely difficult to stop Geshev's abuse of office] and the need for institutional reform have all been attacked by the prosecutors." Eleven years ago, however, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), the jurisdiction of which is accepted by Bulgaria, found that the office of the Prosecutor General is over-empowered because (a) its dominance over rank-and-file prosecutors means that the officeholder cannot be properly or effectively investigated and (b) there is no established legal procedure for investigation of the officeholder. In 2019, the Venice Commission supported the ECHR's findings and echoed its calls for reform. There are many ways – constitutionally, legislatively, through executive action, state regulations, etc. – to address these dire needs, but, to date, neither deficiency has been remedied. More generally, Bulgaria has consistently failed to meet the benchmarks established by the EU's Cooperation and Verification Mechanism, a transitional means to facilitate judicial reforms (such as those cited by the ECHR and Venice Commission) and combat corruption and organized crime.

To remain in power (until his electoral mandate ends in April, 2021) in spite of the ongoing street protests to demand of his resignation, Borissov recently proposed that Parliament elect a "grand national assembly" to enact reforms to the constitution. In a best case scenario, its would take weeks to garner the necessary two-thirds support of the Parliament to make these changes, which are, in any case, superficial and fail almost entirely to address European oversight bodies' concerns. For example, one of Borissov's proposal is that Prosecutor-General Geshev be made more accountable by shortening his term in office from seven to five years.

For his part, Peevski, Borissov's oligarch-in-chief, has created a media and financial empire and generates "alternative facts" to fuel it. In addition to Bozhkov, several victims of the regime's attempts at criminal capture of their businesses point to Peevski as the ultimate puppet-master. After Peevski studied law at university, his mother obtained extremely large bank loans to purchase a number of Bulgaria media companies. (The bank eventually went bankrupt and

was exposed to be a ponzi scheme rather than a legitimate financial institution. Its chief executive fled to and remains to this day in Serbia, a non-EU-member state that does not have an extradition treaty with Bulgaria.) Peevski launched his political career in the youth movement of King and Prime Minister Simeon. He was later elected to Parliament as part of Bulgaria's pro-ethnic-Turkish Movement for Rights and Freedoms. In the face of increasing reports of Peevski's criminality, party leader Ahmed Dogan arranged for Peevski to be head of the country's National Security Service, but Peevski resigned amid growing street protests against the appointment. All the while, Peevski, who is now 40 years-old, continued to expand his media empire, which now controls almost eighty percent of Bulgaria's print media distribution. His publications are used to promote the Borissov regime, but Geshev has never investigated Peevski or his business interests, even though his entire career has been characterized by "influence-peddling." An investigation by Geshev's predecessor was initiated, but later dropped. In its 2018 annual report, Reporters Without Borders accused Peevski of corruption. The U.S. Senate Homeland Security Committee is currently investigating Peevski's attempt to disguise illegal payments from intermediaries to hire U.S. lobbyists to attempt to improve his reputation. The Committee is also investigating the lobbying firm's possible violations of the Foreign Agents Registration Act.

U.S.-Bobokov Business Interests

In recent months, the Bobokovs have targeted the United States and Africa for major expansion of their business interests. New investments, joint ventures, and concomitant job-creation are now imperiled by the Borissov regime.

As mentioned above, the Bobokovs are sole owners of Prista Oil Company, which has a licensed manufacturer's brand agreement with Chevron to produce lubricants sold under the Texaco name. (Chevron, a U.S. corporation, is one of the world's largest oil companies and a successor to Standard Oil. Texaco is also a major U.S. corporation and a subsidiary of Chevron.) Prista pays royalties to Chevron under this twenty-year joint venture. Prista currently sells to consumers in 45 countries on four continents.

In its current phase of expansion, Prista is launching three significant joint enterprises with U.S. partners and investors. The Bobokovs will own approximately a one-third stake; the other two-thirds will be held by U.S. partners. All three projects are to include the construction and operation of refineries to utilize newly patented technology to recycle petroleum-based lubricants. The two larger plants, each of which will ultimately have a 100,000-ton annual capacity, will be built in Maryland and Texas, and the smaller one will be constructed in Nebraska. The projects represent a \$70-million-total investment to date and will create approximately 300 U.S. jobs that range from the skilled-worker level to managerial and executive.

U.S. investors' two-thirds stake in these three projects include the ten percent owned by the inventor of and holder of U.S. patents on the newly advanced technology that makes this method of recycling and refining possible. Please note that all three are dependent upon Prista Oil, which uniquely possesses the technological capabilities and business and financial interest, wherewithal, and motivation to make them operational. In addition, each of these major projects is in train and on track to rapid completion. The only realistic impediment to their completion is

force majeure – most prominently, the prospect of the Bulgarian regime’s deliberate infliction of tangible harm to the Bobokov brothers and their businesses.

In addition, the Bobokovs are major partners in a \$277-million port-expansion and power project in Liberia. Through a wholly owned subsidiary, Prista Oil is in a partnership with U.S. investors to build, develop, and operate for 25 years a modern sea port and electric power plant around the city of Buchanan. “Prista Port Buchanan” is the anchor project in a Free Trade Zone that will become the largest in west Africa. The zone will also include a hospital and two schools, one of which will be for industrial training of adults. As with the U.S.-based projects, U.S. investors are the majority owners, as are the builders: NRD, a Nebraska corporation and world leader in port and power-plant construction. (Engineering and construction expenses will constitute approximately seventy percent of the project’s costs.) The project owners are contracting with Jay Hodges, a U.S. (Maryland-based) company to provide security services. The U.S. Department of Commerce has advanced and advocated for the project through U.S. Embassy Monrovia. W. Patrick Wilson, the Department’s politically appointed Director of the Office of Business Liaison, is a U.S. governmental point-person for the project in Washington. The legal counsel for the project is Husch Blackwell, a Nebraska-based national firm that is also providing advocacy services through its Washington, D.C., office. John Bray, a career member of the U.S. diplomatic service who served most recently as U.S. Consul General in Lagos, Nigeria, was recently engaged by Prista to serve as strategic adviser for this project.

Lastly, as noted above, MONBAT produces unique batteries for the U.S. space program. If the company’s production is slowed or halted as a result of actions by the Borissov regime, NASA will be forced to redesign the affected rockets and other vehicles.

Conclusions

Since Marshall Harris and his firm, the Alexandria Group International (AGI), began to represent the Bobokov brothers, they have been approached by victims of three additional criminal-capture cases. In addition to the Bobokov matter, Professor Dainov cites eight additional, exemplary cases. On behalf of all of these victims, the Bobokovs, Harris, and his AGI colleagues urge you to join them in supporting Atanas Bobokov’s release from detention, bringing the perpetrators of these crimes to justice, backing the Bulgarian people’s efforts to purge the country’s leadership of its criminal class, and restoring the country on its rightful path to democratic governance and a civil society in which its citizens enjoy full political rights and civil liberties. Thank you.