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# *Investigative journalism in Central and Eastern Europe: autonomy, business models and democratic roles*

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**Citation:** STETKA, V. and ORNEBRING, H., 2013. Investigative journalism in Central and Eastern Europe: autonomy, business models and democratic roles. *International Journal of Press/Politics*, 18 (4), pp.413-435.

**Metadata Record:** <https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/22393>

**Version:** Accepted for publication

**Publisher:** SAGE (© the authors)

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Please cite the published version.

**Title:** Investigative journalism in Central and Eastern Europe: Autonomy, Business Models and Democratic Roles

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**Abstract:** This article presents a comparative study of investigative journalism in nine countries in the Central and Eastern European region (Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovakia). The purpose is both descriptive and analytical. Descriptively, the article charts the presence and provision of investigative journalism across the region and inventories and assesses the various funding forms that exist against the background of the recent (2008-09) financial crisis. Analytically, the article focuses on assessing the relative autonomy (defined as autonomy from external actors) and effects (defined as the removal from office and sentencing of political actors revealed to be engaged in legal and moral transgressions, commonly various forms of corruption). The article finds investigative journalism across the region in general to be weak in terms of autonomy and effects, but stronger in countries that have had more stable and richer media markets (notably Estonia, Poland, and the Czech Republic). The article further finds that in some countries (notably Romania and Bulgaria) alternative news online sources play an increasingly important role as providers of investigative journalism.

**Key words:** Investigative journalism, Central and Eastern Europe, comparative analysis, funding journalism, journalism and democracy

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## Introduction

The ten post-communist countries that have joined the EU since 2004 (i.e. Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia) are as EU members formally integrated with ‘The West’, yet still marked by their authoritarian past. With some notable exceptions (Poland, Estonia and to some extent Slovenia), metropolitan dailies have never enjoyed a very strong financial position, public broadcasting is weak, the occupation of journalism fragmented, often along political lines, and there is certainly no strong cultural impulse for open government. Various studies of corruption, transparency and quality of governance in the region indeed point to the existence of an opposite impulse (e.g. Mungiu-Pippidi 2006; Szekeley 2007; World Bank 2011).

This creates an interesting context for current debates on the business failures of news organizations (newspapers in particular) and the concomitant perceived failure to fulfil the so-called watchdog function of journalism, i.e. holding power (be it political, economic, religious, etc.) to account through critical reporting (see Davies 2009; Downie and Schudson 2009; Hamilton 2009; Hunter and Van Wassenhove 2010; Levy and Nielsen 2010; Walton 2010). These debates generally focus on the situation in the United States and Western Europe, and it could also be argued that the normative underpinnings of the concern over the decline of watchdog reporting are, for lack of a better word, Western (or even Anglo-American) in origin (see de Burgh 2008a, b; Chalaby 1998; Hampton 2010).

But in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe (henceforth abbreviated CEE, and including the ten EU-member nations listed at the outset of this article), the issue under debate has not been whether a true accountability journalism, or investigative journalism in the Western mould, could be sustained in the wake of financially weakening news organizations, but rather whether such journalism could be said to have emerged in the first place, let alone be funded in the wake of the devastating financial crisis that hit much of the region in 2008-09 (see for example Salovaara and Juzefovics 2012). In most CEE nations, news organizations did not as a rule start from a position of strength that have since weakened (like in Western Europe and North America); in most countries it has been a case of *already* resource-weak news organizations becoming even weaker. News organizations in the CEE region have always had a problem with sustaining investigative journalism due to less-developed advertising markets and less audience interest.

For this reason, we believe that comparatively studying accountability journalism, investigative journalism in particular, in this region, can provide an important contribution and corrective to general debates about the democratic role of journalism in a changing

economic and technological context. Our object in this article is threefold: (1) to present a simple, comparative typology of the state of investigative journalism in the region and to inventory the categories of media outlets that engage in this type of journalism; (2) to inventory funding models for investigative journalism used in the region and assess the applicability of the ‘Western’ discourse on this topic, and; (3) to analyze the societal place of journalism as an institution and the relationship between investigative journalism and democracy in the region, particularly focusing on the issue of accountability - does investigative journalism actually contribute to holding persons in power to account? Since relatively little hard primary or secondary data on many aspects of investigative journalism in the region exists, our study is by necessity explorative and qualitative, relying in the first instance on qualitative interviews with actors from the regions as well as expert assessments.

### **Investigative journalism: definition and dimensions of analysis**

Defining investigative journalism is like defining good art or good literature: it is easier to point to examples of its practice rather than to set down a definition. Protess et al. 1992 presents an overview of definitions, mainly those offered by investigative journalists themselves (Protess et al. 1992:4-6). Ettema and Glasser’s work on the topic does not set down an explicit definition of the object of study but instead point to a set of examples of the genre as well as examples of practitioners (Ettema and Glasser 1998; see also Ettema and Glasser 1984, 1988, Glasser and Ettema 1989). While exact definitions vary, there is a great degree of scholarly consensus on what the key elements of this type of journalism are. Reviewing the literature, we suggest a definition with four key elements: investigative journalism is *sustained news coverage of moral and legal transgressions of persons in positions of power* and that requires *more time and resources* than regular news reporting.

Academics and practitioners alike highlight the *sustained*, systematic, often long-term nature of investigative work (Anderson and Benjaminson 1976; Ettema and Glasser 1998:13; Protess et al. 1992:4-5; Walton 2010). Scholars also agree that investigative journalism is about *moral and legal transgressions*, i.e. wrongdoings of some type, legal or otherwise (De Burgh 2008b, Ettema and Glasser 1998, Protess et al. 1992). These transgressions are made by *persons in positions of power*. This commonly means people from the political and economic spheres of society. Transgression(s) may be systemic, but investigative journalism demands an individual or set of individuals that can and should be held responsible (Ettema and Glasser 1998:189). The organizational and economic demands (i.e. the fact that investigative

journalism requires *more time and resources* than other forms of journalism), finally, are not discussed at length in earlier works on investigative journalism, presumably in part news organizations were much more financially secure in the period between the 1970s and 1990s when many of these works were written. These days, however, the question most often asked about investigative journalism is “Who should pay for it?” and we therefore think that it is essential to make the resource-intensive nature of investigative journalism explicit in our definition of the concept.

#### *Dimensions of analysis: specificities of the CEE region*

Since our focus in this study is primarily descriptive and explorative, we have chosen a fairly simple analytical framework for describing and assessing investigative journalism in the CEE region. We will examine *individual*, *organizational* and *institutional* aspects of investigative journalism, thus differentiating broadly between three analytical levels: the *micro* level of the people actually involved in the production of investigative journalism and their relative autonomy (i.e. the individual aspect), the *meso* level of the organizations involved in the production of investigative journalism (i.e. the organizational aspect) and the funding models used, and the *macro* or institutional level, where we discuss the functional role of investigative journalism in society as a whole based on its visible effects, if any.

On the *individual* level, we wish first to simply estimate how big the community of investigative journalists is in the examined countries. Given what we know about the generally weak media markets and limited resources of news organizations in CEE (compared to their Western counterparts), we do not expect investigative journalism (which, as we have said, demands more resources than other forms of journalism) to be as widespread in the region as it is in many Western countries. We would, however, expect investigative journalism to be more widespread in countries where media markets are stronger and more stable (notably Poland).

Analytically, we also assess how *autonomous* investigative journalists are in our studied countries. Autonomy is considered to be a key facet of journalistic professionalism as well as a crucial dimension of the democratic role of journalism (Altschull 1997; Hanitzsch 2007, Kovach and Rosenstiel 2001; McDevitt 2004; Merrill 1974). We take autonomy to mainly mean autonomy from *external* forces seeking to influence the news, including political (e.g. state actors, political parties) as well as commercial (e.g. influential business people) forces. To some extent we also deal with autonomy from forces that could be describes as *internal* to the media, notably *media owners*. In the CEE region, so-called instrumentalization

of the media (Hallin and Mancini 2004: 37, 56f) is rampant and many ‘media moguls’ are active mostly in other business sectors or in politics and only involve themselves with media businesses in order to further these other interests (Stetka 2012; Örnebring 2012b).

On the *organizational* level, we first chart which media outlets (if any) engage in investigative journalism on a regular or semi-regular basis. Are there any patterns in the provision of investigative journalism? In particular, what is the relative importance of traditional media organization vis-à-vis online/new media outlets? The key dimension of assessment here is that of *economic sustainability*, particularly in light of the devastating impact that the 2008-09 financial crisis had on the CEE region in general and its media sector in particular. These issues have been tackled in a number of recent articles and reports (e.g. Salovaara and Juzefovics 2012, Hume 2011, Rudusa 2010) and it is in the context of this research that we also present an inventory of funding models for investigative journalism, such as they exist across the CEE region.

On the *institutional* level, we have chosen to focus on the *accountability* role of investigative journalism, specifically in how successful investigative journalism is in contributing to removing corrupt officials and other actors from power. Effects of media coverage are always tricky to assess, so we focus on the removal from office and sentencing of public transgressors and wrongdoers simply because it in many ways the most visible and transparent result of investigative journalism. We do bear in mind, however, that removal from office and sentencing are not tasks of the media *per se* but of the judiciary and other accountability bodies, but it is the case that such accountability functions can often only be fulfilled after the media have brought the transgression to public attention. Removal from office and sentencing of wrongdoers are rarely effects *only* of media coverage but requires concerted action from other accountability bodies – thus we do not suggest that this is strictly a ‘media effect’ but rather an outcome where the media are often an important contributor. Given the general weakness of accountability institutions (e.g. the judiciary, anti-corruption authorities, public audit systems) in the CEE region and the prevalence of clientelism in the political systems (Örnebring 2012b; Karklins 2005), we would in general expect investigative journalism to be less ‘effective’ (in this limited sense) in the CEE region and therefore potentially locked into a negative spiral of decreasing trust and legitimacy, and increased weakness – with likewise potential far-reaching consequences for the institutional strength and societal role of investigative journalism.

## Methodology of the study

Facing the challenge of a research area which has not yet been subject to much systematic analysis in the Central and Eastern European region, this study followed an inductive approach and was mainly based on a qualitative-exploratory research design (Stebbins 2001). Utilizing methodological triangulation, which is a particularly recommended strategy for understudied topics (Greene and McClintock 1985; Tarrow 1995: 473-4), the study combined face-to-face elite interviews with a small expert survey, while complementing both with secondary data about media markets and journalistic cultures in the region. The elite interviews were conducted as part of the project Media and Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe which since 2009 has been interviewing senior media and political figures, as well as independent observers, in the ten CEE countries that have joined the European Union since 2004 – Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia.<sup>1</sup> During the fieldwork conducted in summer 2012, the authors of this article interviewed altogether 18 investigative journalists or ex-journalists in eight of the above-mentioned countries (except Slovenia and Hungary). The expert survey was conducted among persons with a first-hand experience with investigative journalism in a given country, either having worked as investigative journalists/reporters themselves, or having systematically observed this field in a position of media scholars, commentators or activists. Despite their well-known limitations (Dorussen, Lenz and Blavoukos 2005), expert surveys have recently become a popular method employed in comparative cross-national research, especially in studies on political parties, democratic accountability or quality of governance (Huber and Inglehart, 1995; Benoit and Laver 2006; Whitefield et al. 2007; Kitschelt et al. 2009) but lately also in studies on journalism and media systems (Popescu 2012), as they present a cost- and time-effective method of obtaining information about areas “where hard data is either unreliable or unavailable” (Halperin and Heath 2012: 275), which is particularly well fitting in case of investigative journalism in Central and Eastern Europe.

Without striving for representativeness, we have distributed a small e-mail questionnaire containing nine primarily open-ended questions (see Appendix) and aimed at obtaining basic information regarding four main dimensions of the state of investigative journalism in a given CEE country, namely: 1) presence of investigative journalists and investigative media in a national media system; 2) dynamics of this incidence over time, particularly with respect to the effect of the economic crisis; 3) autonomy of investigative journalism, or independence from undue political or economic influences; and, finally, 4)

political impact of investigative journalism, that is, its ability to hold politicians and other people in power accountable. Ten experts were identified for the initial sample in each of the ten CEE countries (approximately half of them being active journalists, the other half academics, commentators or media activists); the response rate was 39 per cent,<sup>2</sup> further increased by including responses from the 18 journalists interviewed face-to-face, which were asked the same questions as those contained in the questionnaire (in addition to other topics). A more detailed composition of the sample is displayed in the Table 1, summarizing selected results from the survey.

### **Mapping the field: “real” investigative journalists and the others**

According to the experts’ assessments, as summarized in Table 1, the presence of investigative journalism across the CEE region is generally rather low, with a cross-national average of around sixteen journalists estimated to be working more or less full-time with investigative journalism for nation-wide media in most countries (including online outlets). The countries with more investigative journalists than the sample average are Estonia (25), Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary (20 each); on the bottom part of the scale there are Slovakia, Poland and Lithuania, each with an average estimate of about ten investigative journalists. Apart from the issue of operation costs, the low number of investigative reporters in Slovakia (complemented by one of the sample’s lowest number of nation-wide investigative media as well – less than five on average) has been connected by some of the interviewees with potentially harsh penalties the media are facing if sued for libel; in one of the respondent’s words, “investigative work is too expensive for both commercial and state media due to litigation costs”.<sup>3</sup>

A combination of economic reasons and possible concerns about legal actions following the publishing of investigative stories have been quoted in relation to the perhaps surprisingly low numbers of investigative journalists in Poland as well. In the opinion of one expert, investigative journalism is in the state of crisis:

“This is not only due to the fact that many investigative journalists were sued for their work (e.g. Anna Marszalek and Bertold Kittel from *Rzeczpospolita*, and most recently Cezary Gmyz



from *Rzeczpospolita* and Maciej Duda from *TVN 24*), but also due to decreasing interest of quality media outlets in this type of journalism.”<sup>4</sup>

Although the alleged chilling effect of libel laws in both countries might implicate a correlation between the presence of investigative journalism and the level of media freedom in the country, such assumption does not hold against the data from our nine countries. Leaving aside Estonia, the other three countries with above-average numbers of investigative journalists – Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania – are all at the bottom among EU countries in the Freedom of the Press Index composed by Freedom House, all being classified as “partly free” only. This obvious disparity highlights rather stark differences in the (self-) perceived quality and independence of journalists subsumed under the “investigative” label, which was something both our interviewees and survey respondents frequently indicated and commented on. While estimating the overall number of investigative journalists to be relatively high, the experts from the above quoted countries were often quick to point out “a great divergence in the quality and depth of these investigations”, as well as to emphasise the distinction between what they perceived as “real” investigative journalism and the “so-called” or “pseudo” investigative journalists, or “people who call themselves investigative journalists” but are either directly working on behalf of their owners’ political or economic interests,<sup>5</sup> or simply publish leaked information without much of an effort to cross-check and elaborate on it analytically (this distinction between real and ‘semi-investigative’ journalism has also been noted by Kovačič and Erjavec, 2011). As one interviewee put it,

“We have something called ‘folder journalism’. You’re just given a folder and you’ll make an ‘investigation’, so-called. But in fact, everything is in this folder and you’re not trying to look for other information. You’re not looking for contacts.”<sup>6</sup>

Similar practices are however reported from most other countries as well, being described by the experts as a norm rather than an exception:

“In Latvia what has often been offered by news media as investigative journalism is in fact commentary, analysis or simply leaked documents without any journalistic effort put to verify it, provide context, etc.”<sup>7</sup>

“Unfortunately, in Romania, journalists make two, three additional phone calls to a report done by a prosecutor, and they call this ‘investigative story’”.<sup>8</sup>

“If you look at the real investigative reporters and the people that really perform the job, they don’t just take a file from the local police precinct and republish it in the paper. Because, unfortunately, that’s very often called here ‘investigative reporting’ as well”.<sup>9</sup>

The above quoted remarks certainly point to the necessity of combining the mapping of the sheer amount of investigative journalists with the assessment of both their autonomy and working practices, as indeed many of the interviewees and respondents indicated. As for the former, there was an agreement among the expert about the relative autonomy the majority of investigative journalists enjoy in both Estonia and Slovakia; less of concord in case of the Czech Republic, Poland and Lithuania, however still predominantly inclining towards the autonomous pole of the scale. Bulgaria, on the other hand, was almost unanimously described as a country where most investigative reporting serves somebody’s political or commercial interests, be it the owner or his/her political or business allies. Referring to the controversial process of concentration of the majority of news media in the hands of a single media group with allegedly close ties to the government,<sup>10</sup> one of the interviewees described the situation as follows:

“Unfortunately, most of them [‘investigative’ journalists] work very closely with the police, and when I say they work together with the police I don’t mean that they have police officers as their sources. It is a political decision of the Prime Minister and the Minister of Interior to publish a story through these media”.<sup>11</sup>

In Hungary, too, several experts have expressed their concern over political independence of investigative journalists:

“Some ‘investigative journalists’ are pseudo-investigative journalists, by which I mean they serve different parties and as a consequence of it their articles are ‘pro forma’ investigative stories.”<sup>12</sup>

Based on the prevailing assessment, the remaining countries can be placed between these two poles, as there appears to be a balance between those investigative journalists working under conditions of relative editorial autonomy, and those fulfilling somebody else’s will and

wishes. The relationship between the presence and autonomy in the nine countries of our sample is depicted in Table 2:

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

### **From newsrooms to cyberspace? Platforms and types of funding**

Exploring the organizational background of investigative journalism in the CEE region, we aimed to find out what kind of national news media outlets give at least occasional space to investigative reporting, and what kind of business models for sustaining this genre are prevalent, especially in context of the economic crisis. With regards to the first issue, it is possible to divide the CEE countries in our sample roughly into two types: one where investigative journalism – despite the above-quoted concerns about its quality – is still largely domain of the established, mainstream media organizations, and the other one, where a substantial amount of investigations – and possibly the majority of the “real ones” – is done by alternative, predominantly Internet-based outlets and projects, or even by individual bloggers.

The first group is best represented by Estonia, where most of the main national print media have their own investigative desks, each with several reporters on board (the country’s biggest daily newspaper *Postimees* is currently employing eight investigative journalists),<sup>13</sup> and both the public service broadcaster (*ERR*) and the main commercial television channel (*Kanal 2*) run their own investigative programmes as well. In Poland, all major national news media are reported to run investigative stories “from time to time”, the biggest ones on a more regular and serious basis (*Gazeta Wyborcza*, *Rzeczpospolita*, *Dziennik*, *TVN 24* being among the most quoted ones). In Slovakia, the little investigative journalism there is according to the experts, it tends to be found almost exclusively in a handful of traditional news media (mainly the daily *SME*, weeklies *Trend* and *Týždeň*, and the public service television *STV*).<sup>14</sup> In the Czech Republic, although there are some promising alternatives in the cyberspace (for example the online dailies *Česká pozice* and *Insider*), investigative journalism remains in the realm of the mainstream – or its limited part (mainly the dailies *MF Dnes* and *Hospodářské noviny*, weeklies *Respekt* and *Euro*, plus *Česká televize*, the public service television).

In other countries of the sample, investigative journalism is more dispersed in terms of its institutional background as well as in terms of media platforms, as investigative reporting is often pursued by journalists working for smaller, mostly online-operated outlets. The

proliferation of the latter seems to be clearly correlated to the perceived lack of the “real” investigative journalism in the mainstream, even though the “so-called” version of this genre (as discussed above) may still thrive in some of the bigger media. A telling example of this mixture is Bulgaria, where the quality and independence of investigative work of most of the mainstream outlets tends to be questioned, but where there has recently been a notable increase of autonomous, low-budget internet projects assuming on the role of democracy watchdogs, with websites like *bivol.bg*, *afera.bg* or *offnews.bg* counting towards the most followed ones. In Hungary, the investigative outlets quoted by the local experts in the first place were specialized (and largely commercialized) internet news portals like *origo.hu*, *index.hu* or *hvg.hu* (the last one being the online version of the political weekly *HVG*). In Latvia, aside from the investigative programmes run by a couple of television channels (weekly shows “De facto” on the public service station *LTV1*; “Nekā personīga” on the main commercial channel *TV3*), the bulk of independent investigations are conducted by the small news magazine *IR* (established by former reporters of *Diena*, who left the paper in 2009 following the change of ownership and subsequent editorial interferences), news portal *Pietiek* as well as by *Re:Baltica*, a non-profit centre for investigative journalism. The last example invites for a comparison with the situation in Romania, where according to one of the experts

“majority of investigative work is done outside newsrooms, being project-based rather than [an outcome of] a steady editorial policy. Media sometimes ‘host’ these investigations, rather than generate”.<sup>15</sup>

Probably the most active “generator” of investigative reports in Romania is the centre for investigative reporting *RISE*, existing as part of a broader Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) and, in words of one of its founders, playing the role of “a hub between investigative reporters, activists and hackers” in Romania.<sup>16</sup> The *RISE* project currently supports 12 investigative journalists, whose work is published on the project’s website (<http://www.riseproject.ro/>) and often also in one of the mainstream media the project collaborates with. Although some of these outlets are known to be very much biased, favouring the owners’ political or business interests, they still are willing to shelter “enclaves” of quality investigative reporting “in order to gain credibility for the entire station or newspaper” – providing, of course, “that these reports do not touch the owners’ interests”.<sup>17</sup>

*Over the troubled waters: effects of crisis on economic sustainability*

The examination of outlets giving shelter to this type of journalism must be put within a broader context of the current economic situation of news media in the region, which has been seriously affected by the 2007/8 global financial crisis. The crisis hit Central and Eastern European region particularly hard; apart from Poland, the only country in the EU to have avoided recession, all other CEE countries have experienced a considerable growth reversal, with the real GDP growth dropping by 8 per cent on average in 2009 (twice as low as the EU-27 average). In all three Baltic countries, the recession was measured in double digits, with Latvia (annual growth rate of -18 per cent between 2008 and 2009, see Örnebring 2012a) ultimately being forced to seek assistance by the International Monetary Fund in 2009 (as was Hungary, in 2008). This had a direct effect on advertising revenues for news media, particularly in the print sector, where the revenues dropped by double digits, down by fifty per cent or even more (Rudusa 2010, Örnebring 2012a). Inevitably, such radical attack on news organizations' budgets had to be followed by equally radical responses, which mostly took the form of staff and/or salaries cuts, reductions of output and investment in programming, and in some cases of closing down the news operations entirely. Unsurprisingly, investigative journalism, together with international and regional reporting, was one of the first victims of the crisis, resulting in "lower quality, lesser frequency and narrower range of topics in investigative reporting" (Rudusa 2010: 10).

This general description matches the individual accounts given by our interviewees, as well as the answers by the survey respondents (see Table 1). In three countries of the sample – Poland, Romania and Slovakia – the experts have almost unanimously agreed on a clear decline in both investigative media and investigative stories over the past couple of years, referring to diminishing resources (Poland), legal restrictions (Slovakia)<sup>18</sup> as well as owners' interests and pressures (Romania) as the main reasons for this tendency. In most other countries, while often mentioning similar problems, the assessments of the trend varied between perceived decline and stability; only in Estonia (the quickest of all CEE countries to have bounced back from recession to growth) and the Czech Republic, an increase in the number of investigative stories has been reported.<sup>19</sup> However, even a declared "stability" of the number of investigative outlets within a given media system can in fact be hiding an internal dynamics, as production of investigative reporting could have moved to some extent

from the mainstream outlets to alternative platforms, as discussed previously. This was suggested by several comments, including the following one by a Hungarian expert:

“Since the 2008 financial crisis most news outlets have been downsizing and often lack human and financial resources to run big, time-consuming investigative stories. Also, the restrictive media legislation adopted in 2010 has had a chilling effect on reporting and often leads to self-censorship. At the same time, there is a pool of able and dedicated investigative reporters who publish stories; they are often supported by NGOs”.<sup>20</sup>

Whether a direct consequence of the financial crisis or a pre-existing condition, the lack of funding for investigative journalism has been one of the most frequently quoted characteristics of the current state of this genre across the region (with Estonia being the only exception). This prompts us to construct a basic typology of existing funding models for investigative journalism used in the region, and briefly discuss their sustainability and potential for serving democracy. Looking at the data from the nine countries of the region, it is possible to distinguish between two main general funding models (i.e. for-profit and non-profit).

[TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

Thus we find that profit-oriented traditional media are still strongholds of investigative journalism – or what remains of it – in countries with richer and more stable media markets (particularly Poland, Estonia, the Czech Republic). In other countries, however, these media are progressively pulling funding for investigative journalism, mainly but not exclusively because of the financial crisis. Similarly, in these same richer and more stable countries, public service broadcasting also still engages in investigative journalism on a regular basis – a kind of ‘double advantage’ for these nations. Overall, however, we find that the state-funded media are less engaged in investigative journalism than traditional commercial media providers.

In some countries (notably Bulgaria and Hungary), online-only news providers have taken on an important role in providing investigative journalism. As these organizations have significantly less resources than their legacy media competitors, their continued commitment to investigative journalism may be precarious and some journalists speak of working

essentially on a ‘hobby’ basis, subsidising the production of investigative journalism by seeking other paid work (journalistic or otherwise).

Besides the so-called legacy media, public service broadcasting, and various commercial online-only initiatives, there are also a number of independent projects concerned with providing investigative journalism, all essentially funded on a charity basis. The Open Society Foundation is a key provider here, funding initiatives in Latvia, Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania. Also, in Bulgaria, several news projects have been recently established which are funded on a community-basis, i.e. by its members and contributing writers. This, for example, is the case of *offnews.bg*, an independent medium born out of the website run by and for the community of Bulgarian off-roaders, OFFRoad-Bulgaria.com. There is no doubting the competence and commitment of these journalists, though – many of them have extensive experience of investigative journalism from working in legacy media outlets, but have left them and turned to charitable-funding initiatives simply because they see it as the only alternative to get to do any investigative work at all.

Finally, we must not forget a very specific type of funding that supports some investigative journalism, namely what we call ‘proprietor funding’. This refers to the situation when the media owner is independently wealthy and/or has significant other business interests, and subsidises a media outlet with private money or money from these other business interests. Such funding model exists elsewhere in the world and can indeed provide quality journalism if the owner(s) are committed to it; the most famous examples include Al Jazeera (which is backed by the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa) and Le Monde (since 2010 owned by a trio of French businessmen, Pierre Bergé, Xavier Niel and Matthieu Pigasse). In the CEE case, however, this type of funding is known to predominantly serve instrumental purposes – a news outlet helps the owner intervene in politics and is seen as a way to protect other businesses. In the view of our respondents, such outlets may produce journalism that is nominally ‘investigative’ but which mainly serves the purpose of smearing political opponents and business rivals (see also Örnebring 2012b).

## **Toothless watchdogs? Limited power of investigative journalism**

The final theme to be discussed is the effects of investigative journalism in the region. We are aware that ‘effects’ is a highly contested concept in media studies, and therefore we use it in a rather limited, operational sense: to what extent does investigative journalism in the region *contribute to* (if not directly cause) societal accountability by ‘activating’ other accountability institutions like police, courts, other investigative services, state oversight bodies, etc? We asked our respondents and the experts in the expert survey specifically about high-ranked public officials a) being forced to step down, and b) actually being sentenced by courts for their transgressions.

The overall result (see Table 1) is that there is a weak direct effect of investigative stories across the region. Public officials revealed to be corrupt can often stay in their position, or leave it temporarily only to come back later when media interest has moved on to other things. And if politicians are forced to step down and court proceedings may be initiated against them, only rarely does this lead to sentencing. In most countries, there has been barely one person sentenced in the last five years following a journalistic investigation; the only exception seems to be Poland with about 3 people sentenced in the last 5 years. In Latvia, one expert pointed out that some of the politicians who have stepped down as a result of investigative reporting have later been re-elected<sup>21</sup>. “An exquisite investigative story, most of the time, not always, but most of the time, it is not enough to have somebody removed from the office,” as one of the respondents from Romania puts it.<sup>22</sup>

Investigative journalism seems to have the least effect in Bulgaria, despite the above-average number of investigative journalists. While we have emphasised the need to be cautious when interpreting these results, we do note that this is broadly consistent with reported patterns of quite endemic corruption and entrenched political/criminal interests in Bulgaria,<sup>23</sup> and indeed also with Bulgaria’s score on the Transparency International’s Corruption Perception Index, the worst of the region (see Table 1).

Some respondents also pointed out that “Stepping down in most cases cannot be directly linked to the article”<sup>24</sup>, meaning that the effect of investigative journalism is hard to measure – other factors, like for example internal party politics, often play a role. As one respondent from Slovakia said, “...there were cases of ministers resigning, but it was more likely due to ‘political games’ rather than media/public pressure”<sup>25</sup>. As noted in the previous section, there is always the question of autonomy of investigative journalism lurking behind



the numbers: “[It is] difficult to discern cases where leaks were a prelude in some power game from real instances of investigative journalism bringing officials down”<sup>26</sup>.

Some respondents related the low effects of journalistic investigations to the weakness of other accountability institutions, notably the courts and the police. One Slovak respondent pointed to how the police cannot or do not make proper use of the information collected and published by the media<sup>27</sup>. Adding a personal experience with the ineffectiveness of the courts, Bulgarian investigative journalist Rossen Bossev added:

“Twice a year, I’m called to go to the prosecutor in order to give information about the articles I wrote because they have opened investigation based on the facts that I have revealed. But after that, past one two years and nothing happens, so [that means] there was no political decision to tag those people”<sup>28</sup>.

This weakness of other accountability institutions may be why some respondents report that politicians in their countries simply do not care if the media reveals their transgressions<sup>29</sup>.

There are, nevertheless, some important exceptions in this regard; notably Poland, where investigative journalism has, directly or more indirectly (as one of several factors), led to the downfall of several leading politicians. The most notable case in this regard is probably the so-called Hazard Scandal (*Afera hazardowa*, 2009; referring to illicit political lobbying in connection with the 1992 changes in the Gambling and Betting Act, revealed only in 2009) that led to the firing or resignation of a number of political officials (although some of these people have returned to politics since). In the Czech Republic, too, respondents have pointed to a heightened activity of investigative journalism in the recent years, forcing some top politicians out of office, with however varying longer-term impact on their careers. One of the biggest media-induced corruption scandals in the recent years saw the then-Minister of Environment Pavel Drobil stepping down in 2010, only to be ‘promoted’ by his Civic Democratic Party into the role of a Head of its Programme Section shortly after. In another high-profile case, the Minister of Transportation Vít Bárta was sentenced for bribery (first revealed by the daily *Mladá Fronta Dnes*) and consequently resigned from his post in 2012; however the appeal court cleared him off the charges a year later, enabling him to stay in high politics as an MP.

## **Conclusions: weak investigative journalism, weak democracy?**

Although data collected from the interviews and expert survey should be seen as merely indicative, they enable us to get a fairly comprehensive view of the current state of investigative journalism in Central and Eastern Europe. With respect particularly to the dwindling numbers of journalists and media committed to sustained, in-depth investigative work, and the arguably limited impact of their reports on the position of power holders, it appears that the position of investigative journalism in this region is generally weak, and possibly even further weakening under the impact of the economic crisis, still far from being over. While not entirely unexpected, this finding might still come out as a disappointment, especially when juxtaposed to earlier hopes that accountability journalism will flourish in maturing media markets, and, in line with the normative assumptions, that it will take on its democratic ‘watchdog role’, holding public and private institutions and power holders to account (Ettema 2007:144). However, as we have learned in this study, investigative journalism can only really play that role if it is a) autonomous and b) accompanied by other well-functioning accountability institutions, particularly police, prosecution authorities and courts. If not autonomous, any contribution to political or other accountability will be accidental at best, and increased accountability for some actors may come at the price of decreased accountability for others – not speaking of the overall low credibility of such revelations in the eyes of the public (which is particularly true for media owned by local business tycoons, regardless of whether they interfere with the editorial process or not). If not accompanied by police and courts doing their job, the “sustained news coverage of moral and legal transgressions of persons in positions of power”, as we have defined this genre of journalism, will remain toothless, representing no real threat to public officials who engage in those activities, and possibly even deepening the disillusionment of the citizens with democracy and its institutions, as the persistently low public trust in politics in this region suggests, among other indicators (Rose 2009). In other words, while there is a general agreement about the importance of investigative journalism for democracy, we suggest that the reverse relationship is treated as equally important, namely that established and properly operating democratic mechanisms are vital for the investigative journalism to perform its normative function. This thesis largely supports observations stemming from research on the accountability role of watchdog journalism in Latin American (Waisbord 2000; Porto 2012) and we believe it might be inspirational for studying the impact of media on political accountability in other regional contexts as well.

Looking at the patterns of similarities and differences across the region, it can be claimed that autonomy is an issue of financial resources but also an issue of journalistic culture. In countries where legacy media has enjoyed a stronger position, where the media landscape overall has been more stable, and where public service broadcasting has been relatively stronger (this is the case of particularly Estonia, Poland and the Czech Republic), journalistic autonomy has had a better chance to develop as there have been a number of different outlets where committed journalists could work. While we would not presume to draw conclusions about causality, it is clear that there has been some kind of mutually reinforcing effect where organizational commitments to investigative journalism have matched the commitment of individual journalists. As an issue of journalistic culture, it is also clear that investigative journalism in some countries may de facto “hinge on” just a handful of dedicated individuals who are determined to work with this form of journalism and who will fund it via personal subsidy if necessary. In order for investigative journalism to be sustained, there needs to be a ‘critical mass’ of practitioners, and historically speaking it seems like it has largely been the traditional commercial media and to some extent public service broadcasting who have provided that critical mass. Many of the individuals who today work in various foundation-based and community-funded investigative initiatives in the region (Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania and Latvia in particular) have previously worked with investigative journalism for traditional media outlets.

In some countries, Internet-based media play a very important role as providers of investigative journalism. In the Western context, there has been concern that online providers would not be able to replace or even complement the investigative provision of traditional media (D'Ambroiso 2008; Walton 2010), but in the CEE context it is clear that online media do in fact replace the investigative journalism provision of other media when these withdraw from this form of journalism, or when they lose autonomy in the hands of influence-seeking owners. In many cases it also the openness and difficulty to censor or otherwise interfere with publication that has drawn journalists and funders to online media, thus fulfilling the early promise of the Internet as an open and free medium. However, it is likewise clear that the online providers are much more contingent and precarious as they commonly operate on a fraction of the budget of legacy news organizations. Their long-term survival and success will, therefore, depend on their ability to find a sustainable funding model, which, in turn, will be inevitably tied with the support for this kind of journalism on the side of the public.

Finally, we believe our analysis has opened avenues for future research in the field of investigative journalism, both in the CEE region itself as well as in other transition countries and post-authoritarian democracies. Given the merely inductive approach we adopted for the studying of the individual, organizational and institutional aspects of investigative journalism, the tentative results and typology emerging out of this research should further be tested applying a more deductive design, particularly in journalist surveys – still lacking in most CEE countries – which would also enable to assess the character and position of investigative journalism in a broader context of the journalistic community in a given country. Complementary to such macro-perspective, a detailed case-study approach, focusing at particular corruption scandals, might be useful to track down and better understand the role of journalistic investigations and their impact on political accountability.

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<sup>1</sup> During the first two years of the project, a total of 293 key informants were interviewed, with over a hundred representing journalistic community, media executives and owners, or media regulators. For further details see the project's website at <http://mde.politics.ox.ac.uk>.

<sup>2</sup> On average, there were six responses per country, which is considered an acceptable number for an expert survey (see Huber and Inglehart 1995). No responses came from Slovenia, which was consequently taken out of the study.

<sup>3</sup> Respondent ID\_31, Slovakia.

<sup>4</sup> Respondent ID\_10, Poland.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Yana Burher Tavanier, Sofia 19 September 2012. According to another expert, “In Bulgaria we have about 30 investigative journalists but many of them serve to the corporate interest of the media owner and maybe 7 to 10 people are really dedicated to fair investigativer journalism” (Respondent ID\_35, Bulgaria).

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Yana Tavanier, Sofia 19 September 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Respondent ID\_55, Latvia.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Dan Turturica, Bucharest, 14 September 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Paul Radu, Bucharest, 12 September 2012.

<sup>10</sup> The New Bulgarian Media Group (NBMG), established only in 2007, has quickly grown into Bulgaria's most important media player, owning a number of national newspapers and cable television channels, as well as majority of newspapers distribution network (see Stetka 2011).

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Rossen Bossev, Sofia, 18 September 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Respondent ID\_22, Hungary.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Aivar Reinap, Tallin, 18 May 2012.

<sup>14</sup> Although there are no specific online investigative outlets in Slovakia, it does not mean investigative reporting is entirely absent from the Slovak cyberspace. As one expert observed, in the last few years there has been “an

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increase of semi-investigative piece by bloggers. This is helping public control of the powerful, as if we had one or two extra media outlets” (Respondent ID\_51, Slovakia).

<sup>15</sup> Respondent ID\_12, Romania.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Paul Cristian Radu, Bucharest, 12 September 2012.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Paul Cristian Radu, Bucharest, 12 September 2012.

<sup>18</sup> “In last 3 years all commercial TV stations stopped producing their investigative programmes. These were of good quality and were regular winners of journalistic awards. However, they attracted lawsuits.” (Respondent ID\_31, Slovakia).

<sup>19</sup> In one of the respondent’s opinion “it’s a boom of pieces focused on corruption, fraud, mismanagement” (Respondent ID\_28, Czech Republic).

<sup>20</sup> Respondent ID\_21, Hungary.

<sup>21</sup> Respondent ID\_14, Latvia.

<sup>22</sup> Respondent ID\_47, Romania.

<sup>23</sup> See for example the report “Corruption and anti-corruption in Bulgaria (2011-2012)” by the Centre for the Study of Democracy, at [http://www.europolitics.info/pdf/gratuit\\_en/321123-en.pdf](http://www.europolitics.info/pdf/gratuit_en/321123-en.pdf) (last accessed 29 September 2012).

<sup>24</sup> Respondent ID\_7, Hungary.

<sup>25</sup> Respondent ID\_12, Slovakia.

<sup>26</sup> Respondent ID\_19, Hungary.

<sup>27</sup> Respondent ID\_51, Slovakia.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Rossen Bossev, Sofia, 18 September 2012.

<sup>29</sup> Respondent ID\_35, Bulgaria; Respondent ID\_30, Estonia.

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**Table 1: Composition of the sample and selected results from the expert survey**

	Nr of respondents	Number of investigative journalists			Number of investigative media		Trend: investig. media <sup>b</sup>	Trend: investig. stories <sup>c</sup>	Officials stepping down <sup>d</sup>	Officials sentenced <sup>e</sup>	Autonomy	Media freedom <sup>f</sup>	Corruption perception <sup>g</sup>
		Total (J/A) <sup>a</sup>	Range	Mean	SD	Range	Mean	Range (mode)	Range (mode)	Range (mean)	Range (mean)	Range (mode)	(2012)
<b>Bulgaria</b>	6 (3/3)	10-30	20	7.7	4-9	6	a-c (c)	a-c (b)	0-2 (1)	0-2 (0.3)	c	36 (PF)	3.3
<b>Czech Rep.</b>	5 (2/3)	10-30	15	11.5	4-12	6.5	a-b (b)	a	n.a. <sup>h</sup>	n.a.	a-b (a)	19 (F)	4.4
<b>Estonia</b>	4 (1/3)	12-45	25	16.1	6-10	7.5	b	a-b (a)	4-10 (7)	1-2 (1.5)	a	18 (F)	6.4
<b>Hungary</b>	7 (5/2)	10-30	20	14.1	6-10	7	a-c (b)	a-c (b)	1-5 (2.4)	0-3 (0.6)	b-c (b)	36 (PF)	4.6
<b>Latvia</b>	9 (5/4)	5-20	12	5.3	2-6	4.6	b-c (b)	b-c (b)	0-20 (6.1)	0	a-c (b)	27 (F)	4.2
<b>Lithuania</b>	6 (3/3)	2-20	10	7.3	3-9	4.7	a-c (b)	a-c (b)	0-5 (3)	0-3 (0.5)	a-c (a)	23 (F)	4.8
<b>Poland</b>	6 (3/3)	1-20	10	3.7	5-20	11.5	c	c	5-7 (5.3)	0-5 (3.3)	b-a (b)	25 (F)	5.5
<b>Romania</b>	6 (3/3)	5-50	20	19.5	2-25	14.3	c	c	1-3 (2.5)	n.a.	b-c (b)	41 (PF)	3.6
<b>Slovakia</b>	8 (5/3)	5-25	10	8	3-8	4.7	b/c (c)	b/c (c)	1-8 (3.5)	0-3 (0.6)	a-b (a)	21 (F)	4
<b>Total / Avg.</b>	<b>57 (30/27)</b>		<b>15.8</b>	<b>5.6</b>								<b>27.3</b>	<b>4.5</b>

Legend:

<sup>a</sup> (J) number of journalists, (A) number of academics/commentators/activists

<sup>b</sup> trend in investigative media over last 2-3 years (a- increasing, b- stable, c- decreasing)

<sup>c</sup> trend in investigative news stories over last 2-3 years (a- increasing, b- stable, c- decreasing)

<sup>d</sup> number of high-profile public officials losing power following investigative reporting in last 5 years

<sup>e</sup> number of high-profile public officials sentenced by court following investigative reporting in last 5 years

<sup>f</sup> country score on the Press Freedom index, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report-types/freedom-press> ; F = free press, PF = partly free press

<sup>g</sup> country score on the Corruption Perception index, <http://cpi.transparency.org/cpi2011/> (the lower score the higher perceived corruption)

<sup>h</sup> score not available (less than 4 responses)

**Table 2: Relative presence and autonomy of investigative journalism in Central and Eastern Europe**

<i>AUTONOMY</i>			
<i>PRESENCE</i>	<b>High</b>	<b>Mixed</b>	<b>Low</b>
<b>High</b>	Estonia	<i>Hungary Romania</i>	<i>Bulgaria</i>
<b>Medium</b>	Czech Republic	<i>Latvia</i>	
<b>Low</b>	Lithuania Poland Slovakia		

**Legend:** presence categorized by the average estimated number of investigative journalists (0-10 low; 11-19 medium; >20 high)  
autonomy categorized by the prevailing position on the autonomy scale (mainly autonomous – balanced – mainly dependent)

*Note: countries in italics are those where an important part of investigative journalism is done by online media and independent journalistic projects*

**Table 3: Funding models for investigative journalism in the CEE region**

General funding model	Subtype	Examples of media outlets*
Profit-oriented	Traditional media/ legacy media	<i>Gazeta Wyborcza</i> (Poland), <i>MF Dnes</i> (Czech Republic), <i>Postimees</i> (Estonia), <i>SME</i> (Slovakia), <i>TV3</i> (Latvia)
	Online-only media	<i>Origo.hu</i> , <i>Index.hu</i> (Hungary), <i>Aktualne.cz</i> , <i>Ceskapozice.cz</i> , (Czech Republic), <i>HotNews.ro</i> (Romania), <i>Dnevnik.bg</i> (Bulgaria)
Non-profit oriented	State funding, i.e. public service broadcasting	<i>CT</i> (Czech Republic), <i>TVP</i> (Poland), <i>ERR</i> (Estonia), <i>LTV</i> (Latvia)
	Foundation/charitable funding, i.e. independent projects and initiatives	<i>Re:Baltika</i> (Latvia), <i>Atlatszo.hu</i> (Hungary), <i>RISE</i> (Romania), <i>MediaPool</i> (Bulgaria)
	Member funding, i.e. community projects	<i>offnews.bg</i> , <i>bivol.bg</i> (Bulgaria)

\*only examples quoted by at least two respondents/interviewees were included

**Appendix: questionnaire for the expert survey**

1. In your opinion, approximately how many journalists in [YOUR COUNTRY], working for nation-wide media, engage in investigative journalism on a regular or semi-regular basis? By “investigative journalism” we mean systematic, fact-based coverage that exposes wrongdoings by people in positions of power (e.g. corruption of public officials, corruption in business).

.....

2. Likewise, approximately how many particular national news media outlets (including online media) in [YOUR COUNTRY] currently engage in investigative journalism, at least occasionally?

.....

3. Can you name those news media outlets in [YOUR COUNTRY] who are, in your opinion, most prominent representatives of investigative journalism? Please list at least three (if applicable):

.....

.....

4. Would you say the number of national news media engaging at least occasionally in investigative journalism has been rather increasing or decreasing in the last 2-3 years? Please highlight one of the following choices:

- a. The number of investigative media outlets has been on the rise in the last 2-3 years.
- b. The number of investigative media outlets has remained very much the same for the last 2-3 years.
- c. The number of investigative media outlets has decreased in the last 2-3 years.

5. In terms of individual investigative stories or reports appearing in the news media, would you say their number has rather increased, decreased or stayed the same in the last 2-3 years? Please highlight one of the following choices:

- a. The number of investigative stories or reports has significantly increased in the news media in the last 2-3 years.
- b. The number of investigative stories or reports has remained very much the same in the last 2-3 years.
- c. The number of investigative stories or reports has significantly decreased in the news media in the last 2-3 years.

6. Concerning the impact of investigative journalism, approximately how many cases in the last 5 years can you recall in [YOUR COUNTRY] of high-profile public officials losing power (e.g. by stepping down / being removed from office, even if only temporarily) for their actions which have been first exposed by an investigative article or report (series of articles/reports)?

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7. Likewise, approximately how many cases in the last 5 years can you recall in [YOUR COUNTRY] of high-profile public officials being sentenced by a court for their actions which have been first exposed by an investigative article or report (series of articles/reports)?

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8. How do you generally assess the autonomy of investigative journalists in [YOUR COUNTRY]? Would you say they are mostly working independently and are driven mainly by their professional ethos, or they are largely fulfilling somebody else's will and wishes (be it political or economic actors)? Please highlight one of the following choices:

- a. For their most, investigative journalists in [THIS COUNTRY] are working independently from vested political or economic interests.
- b. There is approximately an equal number of those investigative journalists who are working on behalf of other actors, and those who are working independently.
- c. The majority of investigative journalists in [THIS COUNTRY] are working on behalf of vested political or economic interests.

9. If you have any other comments or additional information on the subject of investigative journalism in your country, we would be grateful if you could share them with us:

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