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The Bulgarian “Nuclear Referendum” of 2013 and the independence of the Bulgarian media

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This article analyses the media coverage of the 2013 Bulgarian “nuclear” referendum. We investigate the balance between Yes and No arguments on the construction of the Belene nuclear power plant, nuclear energy in general, and conducting a referendum on the nuclear issue. We also examine the quality of the reasons given and the frequency of government and ruling party sources. We find that the newspapers under examination voiced a diversity of viewpoints and sources. In light of recent assessments of the Bulgarian media, bias in media coverage of the referendum was not significant.

Keywords: referendum; direct democracy; media independence

The greatest benefit of referendums as instruments of direct democracy is that if voters are well-informed, the involvement of all citizens in policy-making may result in a superior (welfare increasing) outcome by guaranteeing policy choices preferred by the majority of voters, compared to representative democracy (Tridimas 2007). In order to make reasoned and informed choices, voters must know the different policy options, and the arguments their supporters and opponents make. While low level of voter knowledge in a representative democracy (Zaller 1992) is an important concern for political scientists, it should be an even greater concern under conditions of direct democracy. If the referendum outcome is to be consistent with the preferences and long-term interests of citizens, the provision of accurate and quality of information should be a priority (Vowels 2012). Because respect for alternative viewpoints is often considered an important precondition for effective deliberation¹ (Steiner et al. 2004, 23), referendum studies often measure whether debates around the issue are balanced (Pilon 2009, 8–10; LeDuc 2011, 559–560). We focus on the balance between the *Yes* and *No* arguments and, more generally, on the quality of debate in four largest circulation Bulgarian newspapers and one online newspaper in the context of the 2013 Bulgarian “nuclear referendum”. We also examine the diversity of sources to investigate whether domestic officials dominated media coverage. Analysis of the media coverage of the Bulgarian 2013 “nuclear referendum” provides valuable insights into the Bulgarian media and the quality of Bulgarian democracy. More generally, we contribute to the discussion of deliberative democracy by evaluating the deliberative quality of media coverage based on content analysis of the major daily newspapers during the referendum campaign period.

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Theorising media independence and the quality of referendum debate

Most recent studies of media coverage of referendum campaigns either evaluate the effects of media coverage on public opinion or turnout (Breen 1998; De Vreese and Semetko 2002, 2004a, 2004b; Neijens and van Praag 2005 and Schuck and de Vreese 2009), or analyse referendum debates (Bright et al. 1999; Hoff 2008, LeDuc, Bastedo, and Baquero 2008; LeDuc 2011; Maia 2009; Pilon 2009). Our analysis contributes to the second body of literature. Similar to Maia (2009) and Pilon (2009), we draw on theories of deliberative democracy to develop criteria for evaluating the quality of the debate. More specifically, we are not primarily interested in full deliberation, but rather whether media coverage of the referendum campaign provided Bulgarian citizens with adequate information for meaningful deliberation. Deliberative democracy has received significant scholarly attention recently, mostly by political theorists. The proponents of deliberative democracy (Chambers 2003; Rosenberg 2005; Thompson 2008) argue that democracy should be more than the aggregation of the fixed preferences of individual voters. Rather, truly legitimate decisions must be justified through a public discussion, where “the giving, weighting, acceptance, or rejection of reason is a public act” (Parkinson 2003, 180). According to Chambers (2003), the preferences of citizens are not entirely fixed; instead, they are formed and discovered through the collective process of deliberation. As Pilon (2009) notes, the systematic study of referendums is a great opportunity to improve our understanding of the mass opportunities for deliberation and to apply in practice the insights of deliberative theory.

The existing literature is not optimistic about the media’s deliberative potential. Many would argue that the media is not and should not be responsible for encouraging deliberation. The need to attract specific audiences and generate advertising revenue (Gunther and Mughan 2000; Nesbitt-Larking 2001; Taras 2001) is conducive to “news as spectacle” rather than to a media driven by social welfare in providing content (Bohman 2000; Chambers 2007). Still, a minority of scholars would argue that despite the media’s frequent failures to serve the public interest, the media should not be considered simply another profit-driven enterprise (Taras 2001; Schudson 2002).

Media independence in Bulgaria?

The negative evaluations of the media are consistent with recent research on the Bulgarian case. In the past few years, organisations such as Reporters Without Borders and Freedom House have reported a heavy and rapid decline in Bulgaria’s ranking in the charts measuring freedom of the press. The Freedom House Freedom of the Press rating of Bulgaria has increased from 29 in 2002 to 37 in 2013 (with lower cores indicating greater freedom). Bulgaria’s status changed from *Free* in 2003 to *Partly Free* (Freedom House, 2013). Freedom House reports note continuing pressure on Bulgarian journalists by economic, political, and criminal interests. Bulgaria’s Reporters Without Borders’s rank dropped from 38 in 2002 to 87 in 2013 (Reporters Without Borders, World Press Freedom Index 2013), which is lower than that of many other South Eastern European countries such as Croatia (64th), Bosnia and Herzegovina (68th), Moldova (55th), Romania (42nd), and Slovenia (35th).

The 2011 municipal and local election campaign also highlighted the recent sharp decline of media independence in Bulgaria. Monitoring by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR) showed that paid coverage was not clearly recognisable, and that the prevalence of institutional coverage, as opposed to election-related topics, put the ruling party *Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria* (GERB) at an advantage.² Following the 2011 municipal and local election campaign,

OSCE/ODIHR recommended the introduction of a public register of broadcast media owners in order to reveal potential ties between rent-seekers and politicians and improper concentration of media ownership (OSCE/ODIHR 2011). According to a number of experts, the growing concentration of media ownership is the greatest threat to media pluralism in Bulgaria. Bulgarian newspapers are controlled by few centres of power.³ In addition, the decline of the advertising market after 2008 has made the print media very financially dependent on state agencies. According to Freedom House, while there are no formal subsidies for the press, the advertising expenses of state agencies constitute the second-largest source of advertising revenue for the print media. This trend of an initial increase of media freedom in the early transition years followed by a sharp recent decline contrasts with developments in Central Europe, but parallels those in other former communist countries. Various methodologies have identified a progressive drop in media freedom in Russia in the aftermath of the 1998 financial crisis, especially after Putin took elected office in 2000 (Oates 2007). Analysis of media trends in the Commonwealth of Independent States identifies a similar trend of a decline of media independence in the late 1990s.

Direct democracy in Eastern Europe

Direct democracy institutions in Central and Eastern Europe have received little scholarly attention, despite the growing use of referendums around the world and the broad range of direct democracy mechanisms in former communist countries. While the legal basis for referendums is present in most Central and East European countries, there is significant cross-country variation in the prevalence of direct democracy. Direct democracy mechanisms are much more formally recognised in Eastern Europe compared to Western Europe, but besides constitutional and territorial referendums, very few salient and substantive political questions have actually been put to a vote (Budge 2001, 310). Direct democracy instruments have been used more moderately on the national level and more frequently at the local level. While referendums play a prominent role in the political decision-making process in a number of countries such as the Baltic republics and Hungary, they have not had significant impact at the national level in Poland, Croatia, or Slovenia (Butzer 2001). In the Balkan and Eastern Slavonic countries with the exception of Bulgaria, national referendums have been used by presidents as a political weapon in executive-legislative conflicts or, more generally, to maximise presidential power (Brunner 2001, 223). Bulgaria stood out as the only country in Central and Eastern Europe with no precedent prior to the 2013 referendum, the first in its democratic history.

The 2013 “Nuclear” referendum: background

The 2013 referendum, the first exercise in direct democracy in Bulgaria, provides an unprecedented opportunity to evaluate the freedom of the Bulgarian media in the context of direct democracy. The “nuclear” referendum was conducted on 27 January 2013. Bulgarian voters were asked the question: “Should nuclear energy be developed in Bulgaria through construction of a nuclear power plant?”⁴ While it was not explicitly mentioned, it was widely acknowledged that the question referred to the construction of the Belene nuclear power plant (NPP). The initial question in the original *Bulgarian Socialist Party* (BSP) proposal, which was about building a new NPP in Belene, was declared unconstitutional by *GERB*, and the final version only included a general question about building a new NPP.

Even though the BSP and 76 deputies from *GERB* were registered by the Central Electoral Commission as advocates of the “Yes” response, on 6 January, Prime Minister and a leader of *GERB* Boyko Borisov instructed the members of his party to vote “No”. On 9 January 2013, *GERB* officially advocated a “No” vote, clarifying that they were not against nuclear energy in

general. The head of the parliamentary faction of *GERB* Krasimir Velchev underlined that *GERB* was working for the preservation and the extension of the operation of the NPP in Kozlodui and the construction of a seventh block in the power plant. According to the *GERB* leadership, the change in *GERB*'s position was driven by the public association of the question with "Belene", even after the revision, which is a project *GERB* was against (Paunova 2013).

According to Article 23 of the "Law on the direct participation of citizens in state governance and local government", the referendum proposal is accepted if: (1) the referendum turnout is at least as high as the turnout in the last elections to the national assembly and (2) a simple majority of voters voted "yes". If the first condition is not met, the referendum is non-binding. However, if over 20% of eligible voters participated in the referendum, the proposal in the referendum must be submitted to and examined by the legislative assembly within three months. The turnout for the referendum was only 21.8%. Although 61.49% of voters voted "Yes", the turnout did not pass the required 60% threshold, resulting in the referendum becoming non-binding.

Positions of the parliamentary parties

Construction of the Belene power plant started in the 1980s. More than one billion euros had already been spent on the project, when it was frozen by the *GERB* government in 2012. The major arguments in the referendum debate centred around the financial viability of the Belene project, with the *BSP* and *Ataka* supporting the project, and the rest of the parliamentary parties opposing it, with the exception of the *MRF*, which did not take a clear position and did not give instructions to its constituency on how to vote.

While the financial viability of the Belene project received the most attention, other negative and positive evaluations of the "Belene" power plant were also voiced. The environmental consequences of building a new NPP, and the Belene power plant in particular, were an important aspect, with the proponents of the "Yes" position arguing that nuclear power is "clean" and generates little waste, and the proponents of the "No" position arguing the opposite. Human safety concerns were also raised. The proponents of the "No" position argued that it is unthinkable to build a new NPP in a seismic zone, while proponents of the "Yes" position downplayed this concern.

The parliamentary parties also had very different views on other socio-economic consequences of the construction of "Belene". According to the supporters of the Belene project, its construction was necessary due to extra demand for electricity in the future, and because it would provide many new jobs. By contrast, according to the opponents of the Belene power plant, extra demand for electricity was not expected, and the project would lead to job losses in the thermal power stations whose energy will become unnecessary. Political concerns were also raised. Opponents of the Belene project claimed that it would result in energy dependency on Russia and undermine national sovereignty. Supporters of the Belene project argued that the power plant did not make Bulgaria dependent on Russia, but rather independent (Ovcharov 2013). Political parties advocating a "No" vote also argued that Belene is a narrowly partisan corrupt project, which furthered the interests of the "energy mafia" in Bulgaria (Ivanov 2013).

Throughout the partisan and non-partisan discussions about the "Belene" project, the financial viability and profitability of the Belene project was often evaluated relative to that of a future seventh block of the "Kozlodui" NPP, even though the "Kozlodui" nuclear power plant was built in the communist period. According to the *GERB* leadership, the construction of "Kozlodui" was more profitable, as it did not necessitate the construction of accompanying infrastructure and already had highly qualified staff, physical and strategic safety, and connections with all parts of Europe ("Kazusat 'Belene'", 17 January 2013). In a number of interviews, Prime Minister Boyko Borisov stated that a seventh reactor of the Kozlodui power plant would be built. While generally

favourable to the “Kozlodui” NPP, which they did not see as a substitute to “Belene”, members of the *BSP* criticised the project for the seventh bloc of “Kozlodui” on technological grounds (Ovcharov 2013).

While the construction of the Belene power plant received the most attention, several related issues became the subject of a heated debate. One such question was whether the development of nuclear energy issue should be put to referendum. The leader of the *BSP* argued that ordinary citizens are no less competent than Prime Minister Boyko Borisov or the Director of NPP “Kozodui” (Ovcharov 2013), and encouraged Bulgarian citizens to vote in the referendum, which was “an opportunity for direct democracy” (“Obvineniya i zakani v parlamenta za ‘Belene’”, 11 January 2013). Leaders of the right and parliamentary represented “Blue Coalition” countered that the referendum would legitimise all of the corrupt practices and investments in the project by prior governments (“Edinstvo I DSB obviniha v lazha BSP za proekta AETS Belene”, 15 January 2013). Lachezar Toshev from the “Blue Coalition” proposed that the national assembly cancel the referendum, because the issue on the ballot was not subject to a referendum: according to the Direct Citizen Participation in State and Local government, decisions on the construction of NPPs fall under the jurisdiction of the Council of Ministers, not the parliament (“Deputat ot ‘Sinyata Koalitsiya’ iska otmiana na referendumata”, 8 January 2013). There was divergence of opinions within *GERB* on the desirability and legitimacy of the nuclear referendum. While President Rossen Plevneliev described the referendum as “a big success for democracy and civil society” (Plevneliev 2013) and summoned Bulgarian voters to participate (“Plevneliev smiata yadreniya referendum za smislen I prizova za aktivnost”, 21 January 2013), Prime Minister Borisov described the referendum as “pointless” (“Obvineniya i zakani v parlamenta za ‘Belene’”, 11 January 2013) multiple times and stated that the outcome of the referendum would not change anything, because there was no money to build the Belene power plant (“Kakvoto I da pokazhe referendumat, Borisov niama da stroi AETS Belene”, 25 January 2013). There was a split within the ruling party not only on the desirability of the referendum, but also on the advocated position. Despite Borisov’s instruction to vote “No”, the speaker of parliament Tsetska Tsacheva and two other deputies from the Pleven region, where “Belene” is located, as well as the leader of the parliamentary branch of *GERB* Krassimir Velchev, announced they would vote “Yes”. The divisions within *GERB* and its position switching, largely driven by the unexpected effects of its initiative to edit the question on the ballot, seem to have contributed to a more open discussion in the media dominated by political parties as an unintended consequence.

Another aspect that received significant attention was the phrasing of the question on the ballot. The phrasing of the question was criticised not only by a large number of politicians from the opposition, but also by many analysts and sociologists. A major critique of the question was that it did not allow the supporters of nuclear energy in general, who do not approve of or do not have a position on the Belene project in particular, to express their position through a “Yes” vote, because such a vote would imply support for “Belene”. Conversely, because Kozlodui was portrayed by the ruling party as a better alternative to “Belene” during the public debates, the opponents of nuclear energy were similarly deprived of a meaningful vote, because a “No” vote could be interpreted as support for the competing “Kozlodui” project. As a result, the referendum outcome could be interpreted in many different ways. One of the very few positive evaluations of the referendum question was that by President Plevneliev, according to whom the question was logical and sensible (“Plevneliev smiata yadreniya referendum za smislen I prizova za aktivnost”, 21 January 2013). Even though the original question specifically targeting the “Belene” project was transformed into the more general question about the development of nuclear energy by *GERB*, it was criticised by *GERB* members, who participated in the reformulation of the question, as “not well composed juridically” (Chervenkondeev 2013).⁵ Throughout the

debates, significant confusion remained on the meaning of the question on the ballot. According to a public opinion poll conducted by Alpha Research in December 2012, despite the reformulation of the question, which excluded the reference to the “Belene” power plant, 45% of voters were still convinced that they would be voting “for” or “against” Belene (Paunova 2012). The revision of the question, the possible multiple interpretations of the meaning of the question on the ballot, and the accusations of manipulation for narrow party purposes cast a shadow on the first exercise of direct democracy in Bulgaria. These developments seemed to give credence to previous claims that the devices of direct democracy in Bulgaria have been diminished to instruments of party politics, because the existing legal mechanisms for referendums allow representative bodies to determine both the timing and subject matter of referendums (see Smilov 2001).

In addition to these issues, the referendum generated debate on the advantages and disadvantages of nuclear energy, even though this issue received less attention compared to the others. Regarding the party positions on nuclear energy in general, members of the *BSP* argued that the development of nuclear energy would allow Bulgaria to take advantage of its nuclear energy specialists (“Kazusat ‘Belene’”, 17 January 2013) and would lead to lower energy prices compared to the price of energy from thermal and hydroelectric power stations (Ovcharov 2013). While *GERB*’s leaders expressed support for nuclear energy, Boyko Borisov highlighted the issue of nuclear waste (“Borisov and ekolozi za energiiinoto badeshte na stranata”, 13 February 2013).

Involvement of other actors

In addition to the parliamentary parties, parties not represented in the parliament and other groups also played a part in the referendum campaign. The environmentally oriented and non-parliamentary *Green Party* emphasised environmental concerns, particularly the seismic risks associated with Belene, in addition to the project’s financial non-feasibility. An important non-party player was the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (BAS), whose position significantly evolved over the years, if one could even speak of a unified BAS position. In 1990, BAS published its study of and position on NPP “Belene” (Bulgarian Academy of Sciences 1990) based on the research of over 70 scholars, which acknowledged high seismic risks as well as the financial infeasibility of the Belene project. The government did not request an updated position on Belene prior to the 2013 referendum. In early 2013, the newly elected chair of BAS Stefan Vodenicharov headed the initiative committee that requested a referendum on the fate of the Belene NPP in the spring of 2012 and subsequently headed the initiative committee in support of Belene along with the leader of the *BSP* Sergey Stanishev. In mid-January 2013, the Bulgarian Energy Forum organised a conference on nuclear energy jointly with BAS and the Municipality of Belene, where most domestic and foreign participants expressed unequivocal support for nuclear energy in general and the “Belene” project in particular. A small number of individual BAS members voiced their opinions in the media, downplaying the seismic risks and described “Belene” as a project promoting economic and technological progress (see, for example, “AETS ‘Belene’ shte drapne darzhavata napred”, 14 January 2013), which contrasted with views by other BAS members expressed in the 1990 position and in the years preceding the referendum (see Pre-slavova 2010; Pateva 2011). Public statements of BAS members during the referendum campaign supported the “Belene” project. However, opponents of “Belene” referred to the BAS 1990 position during the campaign as evidence of the project’s seismic risk and unprofitability (see for example, “Boyko Borisov: Ubedeni sme che triabva da ima vtori lift na Bansko”, 16 January 2013). Thus, while BAS’s public position at the campaign stage opposed that of the governing party, its overall impact on the vote is not straightforward. *Za Zemyata* is another non-party actor that had been actively involved in the campaign against “Belene” for over 10 years.

While the views of *Za Zemyata* were occasionally voiced by the media preceding the referendum, it received virtually no coverage during the referendum campaign, and its leaders complained that public debates were again “occupied” by politicians and that civic organisations were not given the opportunity to express their positions. Overall, the involvement of these non-party actors contributed to the diversity of viewpoints voiced in the media.

Methodology

This article analyses the debate in the referendum as reflected in four print (*Trud*, *Standart*, *24 Hours*, and *Telegraf*) and one online newspaper (*Dnevnik*). *Trud*, *24 Hours*, *Standart*, and *Telegraf* are the four largest-circulation Bulgarian print newspapers. *Trud* and *24 Hours* are published by Media Group Bulgaria Holding. *Telegraf* is published by New Bulgarian Media Group, and *Standart* by *Standart News*. *Dnevnik* has been an online-only daily newspaper since 2011 and is published by EconoMedia. We included in the analysis all articles that discussed the various aspects of the referendum published between 1 November 2012 and 25 January 2013. This period includes the whole awareness-raising campaign which started on 27 December 2012. A total of 122 articles were hand-coded. Twenty-five articles (20%) were coded by two coders. There was 86% agreement in the coding of the two reviewers, which gave us confidence in the reliability of our coding scheme. The articles were coded at the level of statements within each article. More detail on the coding is provided in the relevant sections.

The balance of debate

We first analysed the balance in newspaper coverage between support for and opposition to the referendum proposal in its various interpretations. We analysed balance both across and within newspapers. Our measure is based on coding individual statements within articles. We examined the number of pro- and anti-statements, taking into account all expressions of viewpoints in an article and including statements that were rebutted by the article author. [Figure 1\(a\)](#) shows the overall balance of pro and con arguments on the different aspects of the nuclear issue. See [appendix](#) for examples of pro- and con-statements on the different aspects of the nuclear issue. The figure demonstrates the general lack of balance in the coverage across newspapers – the negative views on “Belene” received disproportionately more coverage – the material was framed in one direction on all aspects of the issue. The number of statements against the “Belene” NPP (78) significantly outnumbers the number of statements favouring it (44). This is confirmed by the balance indices presented in [Figure 1\(b\)](#). The index varies between -1 (where all statements favour the “Yes” position) and $+1$ (where all statements favour change). A value of 0 indicates perfect balance. The divergence between the number of statements in favour of conducting a referendum on the development of nuclear energy through the development of a NPP was also significant – 11 articles for and 29 articles against. This empirical pattern allowed us to reject the null hypothesis that the true proportion of pro statements in the population is 0.5 at the 0.05 significance level.⁶ Opinions on building an additional block of the “Kozlodui” power plant were also not balanced, but in the other direction: the number of statements in favour outnumbers the number of statements against. With 21 statements in favour and seven statements against, the null hypothesis of no difference between pro and con statements in the population was rejected at the 0.05 significance level. The same was true for statements on nuclear energy in general, but the null hypothesis that there is no difference in the number of pro and con statements in the population could not be rejected at any significance level (there were 11 statements in favour and six against). These patterns were confirmed by the balance indices presented in [Figure 1\(b\)](#). Generally, most statements across the

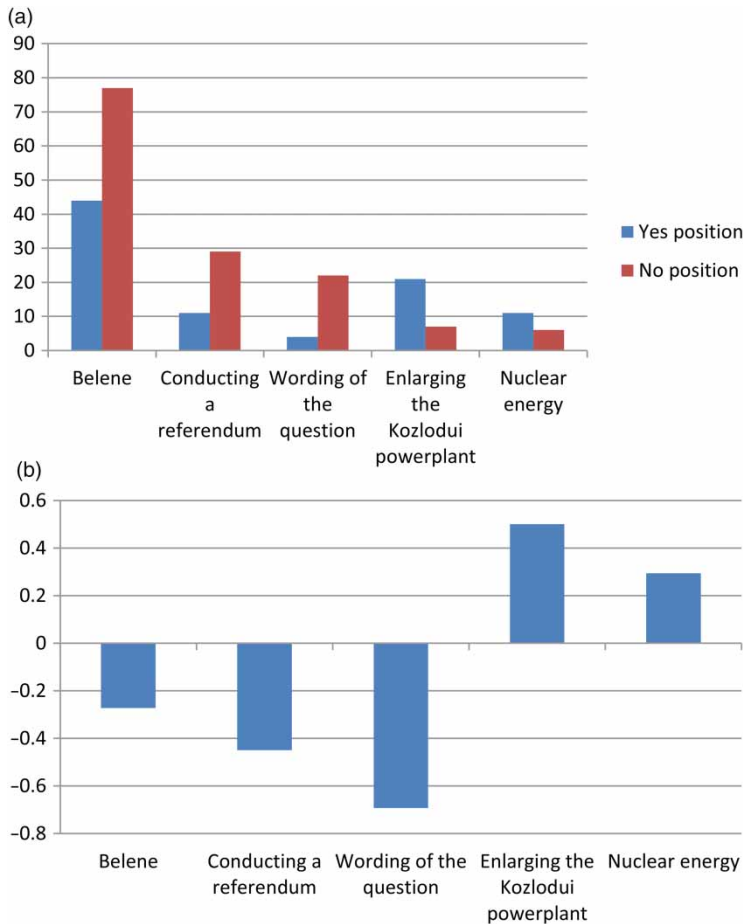


Figure 1. (a) The balance of debate across newspapers (*Dnevnik*, *Trud*, *24 Hours*, *Standart*, and *Telegraf*). (b) Balance indices in all five newspapers.

newspapers included in the analysis were consistent with the positions expressed by the ruling party *GERB* and Prime Minister Boyko Borisov: the majority of statements were against the construction of the “Belene” power plant, against conducting a referendum, and in favour of the construction of a seventh bloc of the “Kozlodui” NPP and nuclear energy more broadly.

Next, we analysed the balance of debate within the five newspapers included in the analysis. Here we focused on the debate on the construction of the Belene power plant, because there was a sufficiently large number of pro and con arguments on this particular issue to allow drawing meaningful conclusions. The balance of debate in *Dnevnik* was lower than the average balance of debate across newspapers (Figure 2(a)). With six statements in favour of the “Belene” project and 19 statements against it, the null hypothesis that the number of pro statements is equal to the number of statements in the population was rejected at the 0.05 significance level. The balance index for *Dnevnik* (Figure 2(b)) was lower compared to the average (-0.52 and -0.27 , respectively). The balance of debate on “Belene” was the lowest possible (-1) in *Telegraf*. The balance of debate in *24 Hours* was quite low as well (-0.6). Somewhat surprisingly, its sister newspaper, *Standart*, was close to perfect balance between *pro* and *con* statements (21 and 19, respectively); the balance index for *Standart* was 0.05. The debate in *Trud* was also

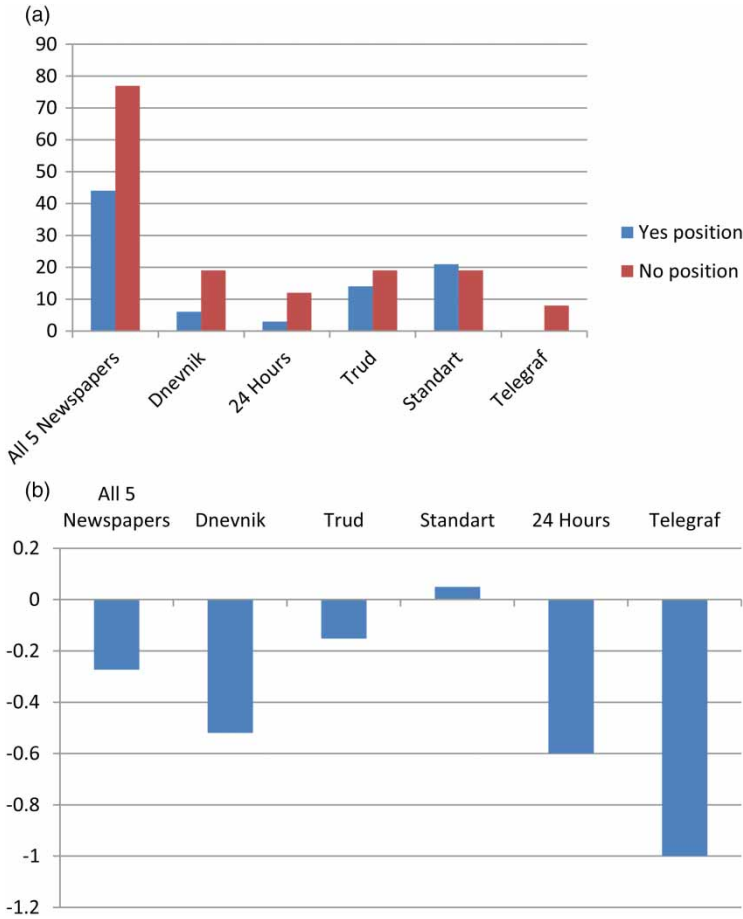


Figure 2. (a) The balance of debate on Belene within newspapers (*Dnevnik*, *Trud*, *24 Hours*, *Standart*, and *Telegraf*). (b) Balance indices, the debate on Belene within newspapers (*Dnevnik*, *Trud*, *24 Hours*, *Standart*, *Telegraf*).

very balanced (14 statements in favour of the “Belene” project and 19 against it; balance index of -0.15).⁷ These results demonstrate that while across newspapers the debate on Belene was not balanced, there was significant variation across newspapers. The balance of debate in two of the major print newspapers and in *Dnevnik* was low; however, in two of the major print newspapers, the debate was very balanced. Using Fisher’s exact test for difference in proportions, we obtained a significant result at the 0.05 level for the difference between the proportions of pro-Belene statements in *Standart* and *Dnevnik* and *Standart* and *Telegraf*. The difference in those proportions between *Standart* and *24 Hours* and *Standart* and *Trud* were statistically insignificant.

The quality of debate

Next, we turned our attention to the quality of debate and the sources used. In this part of the analysis, we again focused on the debate on “Belene” because the number of articles was large enough to allow drawing meaningful conclusions. Drawing on Habermas’s notion of validity

claims, Steiner et al. (2004) apply the insights of deliberation theory to develop a Quality of Deliberation Index (QDI). The index is a four-category distinction of the “levels of justification” used by legislators in making speeches: no justification; inferior justification; qualified justification; and sophisticated justification (Steiner et al. 2004, 57–58). Drawing on Renwick and Lamb’s (2013) operationalisation of DQI, we used the coding categories “No Justification”, “Single Linkage”, and “Multiple Linkages”.⁸ A statement was assigned to the category “No justification” if the speaker expresses a positive or a negative opinion, but no reason was given. For instance, Boyko Borisov’s statement “Belene is a failed project ...” (“Borisov: Referendumat e bezmyslen” 11 January 2013) was coded as “No Justification” because no further explanation was provided as to why this was a bad project. A statement was assigned to the category “Single Linkage” if the speaker provided one linkage as to why developing the “Belene” project is desirable or undesirable. Ivan Kostov’s claim that Belene would produce electricity at prices higher than those of the electricity produced by the “Kozlodui” power plant and for this reason there would be no demand for it (“Debata za Mezdinniya Doklad za AETS “Belene” – v stil “Noviya Kashpirovski”, 23 January 2013) was coded as “Single Linkage”. A statement was classified as “Multiple linkages” if it contained two separate justifications why “Belene” should or should not be built. An example of that is a claim that argues against the construction of “Belene” because the electricity it would produce would be too expensive and the seismic risk is too high (“Borisov and ekolozi za energinoto badeshte na stranata”, 13 February 2013). Our results regarding the quality of debate quality painted a mixed picture.

As Table 1 demonstrates, a small number of statements offered no justification. In other words, the quality of debate, as evaluated using this measure, is relatively high across and within newspapers, and did not vary widely across positive and negative opinions. While the frequency of linkages was high, the frequency of multiple linkages was not very high. Overall, this shows a moderate quality of debate. The pattern did not significantly vary across newspapers.

We should note that our assessment of the quality of debate remains incomplete. A satisfactory assessment would include an evaluation of whether the reasons offered are well grounded; in other words, whether the arguments against or in favour were actually correct. In the context of the Bulgarian nuclear referendum, however, any assessment of accuracy is open to significant legitimate contestation. Assessing whether the advantages of building the “Belene” NPP outweigh the disadvantages requires significant technical expertise. To complicate matters further, there was no consensus on the issue even within the expert community. While a large number of energy experts claimed that the “Belene” project is financially viable, a large number of energy experts argued the opposite. The same holds for the social and political aspects of the debate on “Belene” as well as for the other aspects of the nuclear debate. There is no reasonable yardstick against which to judge whether the “Kozlodui” project had greater merit compared to “Belene”. Assessing the merits of nuclear energy faces even greater challenges. Because it is

Table 1. The quality of debate on “Belene”.

	<i>Dnevnik</i>	<i>Trud</i>	<i>Standart</i>	<i>24 Hours</i>	<i>Telegraf</i>	All
<i>Pro statements</i>						
No justification	2	2	2	0	0	6
Single linkage	1	10	15	3	0	29
Multiple linkages	3	2	4	0	0	9
<i>Con statements</i>						
No justification	7	1	4	0	1	13
Single linkage	8	17	13	9	6	53
Multiple linkages	4	2	4	3	2	15

virtually impossible to assess the accuracy of claims in the context of the “nuclear debate” in Bulgaria, our claims about the quality of debate are compared to those about balance.

Sources

In order to assess the independence of the Bulgarian media, we also examined the sources used in the newspapers under investigation. According to all normative models of a “free press”, a certain level of diversity of sources is desirable – a broad range of viewpoints is necessary for the pursuit of truth and good governance (Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm 1956; McQuail 1983). From the point of view of representative democracy, it is crucial that the news provide multiple viewpoints in order to reflect the diversity of opinions in society (Tuchman 1978; Bagdikian 1997). Using multiple sources not only provides verification, but also protects journalists from possible accusations of bias. Research coming primarily from the USA and Western Europe has found that elite sources are used in 70–85% of the news. This has important implications for effective governance as the overwhelming use of official sources could allow domestic politicians to advance their own political agenda (Wanda 1997) and frame public debate in ways that serve their political interests. Previous work on the American media found that while journalists look to government officials as sources for much of the news they report (Bennett 1994), the range of sources used and viewpoints voiced is a function of the level of elite dissensus. Elite dissensus is reflected in media coverage, giving space to non-official sources (Bennett 1990; Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston. 2007).

Not surprisingly, analyses of media performance in Eastern Europe have identified an overwhelming reliance on official sources (members of the government or bureaucracy serving in a formal capacity) and lack of breadth of information in countries with varying levels of economic development and “civicness” (Milton 1996). A recent study of Bulgaria examined the type of sources used in the media coverage of the 2009 parliamentary election in Bulgaria and found an overwhelming predominance of domestic politicians as sources (Dimitrova and Kostadinova 2012).

To investigate the type of sources used, following Dimitrova and Kostadinova (2012), we coded each article for source or sources used and calculated the frequency of statements by domestic politicians; non-partisan and academic experts; and other sources. In addition to those categories, we calculated the frequency of statements by members of the ruling party (*GERB*) and by Prime Minister Boyko Borisov.⁹ We started out with a comprehensive list that included additional categories such as media analysts, international politicians, spokespersons for unions, and ordinary citizens. Since those sources were never used, we collapsed them into the category “Other”. Domestic politicians were sources that were members of Bulgarian political parties and were either identified as such within the article or were widely known as such. Expert sources were non-partisan or academic sources such as sociologists, political scientists, and representatives of public opinion poll companies.

Regarding the prevalence of domestic politicians as sources, our findings are similar to those of Dimitrova and Kostadinova (2012). We found that domestic politicians constitute an overwhelming majority of sources in all newspapers, with percentages ranging from 69% in *Standart* to 100% in *Telegraf* (Table 2). Non-partisan and academic or other sources were used infrequently, with percentages ranging between 0 and 17. While the identified prevalence of domestic politicians as sources was in line with previous findings, the identified frequency of statements by the ruling party and Prime Minister Borisov diverged from previous findings. Multiple previous assessments of coverage during the electoral campaign for the municipal and local elections found that the opinions of politicians affiliated with *GERB* were voiced significantly more often compared to those by politicians from other parties. Tsekova (2011) identified a tendency of the Bulgarian media to transmit uncritically the position of the government and Prime Minister Borisov in particular.

Table 2. Source use in the media coverage of the referendum (as percentage of all sources).

Source	<i>Dnevnik</i>	<i>Trud</i>	<i>Standart</i>	<i>24 Hours</i>	<i>Telegraf</i>	Average
Domestic Politicians ^a	89	75	69	71	100	81
Prime Minister Borisov	24 ^b	15	23	17	60	28
<i>GERB</i> members	34	25	27	42	100	46
Non-partisan/acad. experts	5	11	17	13	0	9
Media analysts	0	2	0	4	0	1
Other	5	13	15	13	0	10

^aMembers of the ruling party and Borisov are included in the category “Domestic Politicians”; Borisov’s statements are included in the category.

^bPercentages do not add up to 100 due to rounding.

Somewhat surprisingly, the pattern across newspapers we identified demonstrates that while the opinions of *GERB* members received significant attention, they constituted a little over a half of all sources used on average. As Table 2 demonstrates, domestic sources accounted for 81% of the sources used in all five newspapers on average, while *GERB* members accounted for 46% of all sources. In all five newspapers, domestic politicians constituted an overwhelming majority of sources. In three newspapers (*Dnevnik*, *Trud*, *Standart*), statements by the ruling party accounted for no more than 34% of all sources. In *24 Hours*, domestic politicians accounted for 71% of all sources used, and 59% of these (42% of all sources) were *GERB* members. *Telegraf* relied on the ruling party as a source exclusively: all used sources were affiliated with *GERB*. Across newspapers, statements by Prime Minister Borisov accounted for 28% of all sources. In four of the newspapers (*Trud*, *Dnevnik*, *24 Hours*, and *Standart*), Borisov accounted for no more than 25% of all sources and no more than 33% of all domestic politicians sources. This was a significant percentage but not as high as expected. In *Telegraf*, however, Borisov accounted for 60% of the sources used. Regarding the frequency of *GERB* statements across pro- and con-“Belene” arguments, virtually all statements by *GERB* members were against the “Belene” project, while most statements by politicians affiliated with other parties were favourable of the “Belene” project.

In the context of Tsekova’s (2011) findings, the balance between the voiced opinions of members affiliated with the ruling party and those affiliated with opposition parties may seem surprising. We think that this contrast is driven by the peculiar circumstances surrounding the referendum – the switch in Borisov’s position, the division between the party leadership and the MPs from the Pleven region on the Belene project itself, and the division between Borisov and President Plevneliev on the value and desirability of the nuclear referendum itself. We believe that Borisov’s inconsistent statements and the clear dissensus within the ruling party reduced the usual official pressure on the Bulgarian media and allowed it to express more diverse viewpoints and consult non-official sources. The involvement of non-party actors seems to have also contributed to a more open debate in the media.

Conclusion

We assessed the quality of debate and diversity of sources in the media coverage in the context of the first exercise in direct democracy in Bulgaria following the collapse of communism. Our analysis relied on the analysis of the referendum debate in four print newspapers with the largest circulation and one online newspaper. While the analysis focused on the coverage of a single event, an advantage of this analysis is the use of a more systematic and objective measure of media content compared to the most widely used measures such as the Freedom House Freedom of the Press score, which relies on subjective evaluations by regional experts

and scholars.¹⁰ In contrast to previous extremely negative evaluations of the independence of the Bulgarian media, our results paint a mixed picture. We find that while the balance of debate was low across newspapers, there was significant variation across newspapers. While the debate in *Standart* and *Trud* was quite high, the balance of debate in *Telegraf* was extremely low. Regarding the quality of debate, across and within newspapers, most opinions contained reasons, which indicates a relatively high quality of debate. On the other hand, most reasoned opinions contained single linkages. Regarding the prevalence of opinions of members of the government and the ruling party, we find that in contrast to previous assessments, their number did not generally outnumber the number of statements by members of other parties. *Telegraf*, a print newspaper with very large circulation, which only voiced the opinions of the members of the party in power, was an important exception to this pattern.¹¹

The relatively high quality of debate in at least some of the largest circulation newspapers is somewhat surprising in light of recent assessments of the Bulgarian media as very biased and dependent on the party in power. An obvious explanation for the difference in evaluations is the fact that we focus on the media coverage of a referendum, in contrast to the evaluations of the Freedom House, Reporters Without Borders, or OSCE, which take into account general election campaigns. The higher stakes in general elections may explain the greater party involvement compared to referendums, which, given the concentration of media ownership and the dependence of major media cartels on public funding, could explain the greater bias in the coverage of general elections. Another possible explanation is the general lower salience of referendum issues. General elections are contested by long-established issues and determine which party or coalition of parties will form the government. Referendums, on the other hand, decide particular issues (Sartori 1987, 237). The construction of the “Belene” power plant, however, is generally a high salience issue, which continues to be the subject of heated debates. After the *GERB* government abandoned the project following the non-binding outcome of the referendum, the current Oresharski government announced in July 2013 that an expert commission will re-evaluate the merits of the “Belene” power plant. Despite the high salience of the project, the lower level of party involvement and pressure on the media during the educational campaign could be explained by the overwhelming *GERB* majority in the previous parliament and the multiple announcements by the prime minister that the “Belene” power plant would not be built regardless of the outcome of the referendum.

The relatively balanced debate and diverse sources we identified, as well as the general pattern of voting in the Bulgarian “nuclear referendum”, have implications for recent developments in Bulgarian politics. While generally voters followed party instructions, a significant number of voters defected from the party line (“Dopitvaneto ha granitsata na 20-te protsenta s rezultat 60:40 v polza na AETS”, 27 January 2013). This is consistent with the broader comparative empirical evidence, which shows that many voters do not adhere to the party line (Pierce, Valen, and Listhaug 1983; Siune and Svensson 1993; Kobach 1994; Magleby 1994; Trechsel and Kriesi 1996; Midtbo and Hines 1998; De Vreese 2006; Hobolt 2006, 2009, 135–160) and that issue positions are an important determinant of vote choice in referendums (Hobolt 2009, 75–79). If vote choice is mostly determined by issue positions, and parties exert lower pressure on the media, direct democracy exercises such as referendums have even greater merit in a country undergoing a political crisis such as Bulgaria.

This concentration of political power in *GERB* in the aftermath of the 2011 elections was described by some as a comeback of the bipolar model,¹² where the *BSP*, despite its losses, has reaffirmed itself as an alternative on the left and *GERB* represents the right (Radeva 2011). Others argued that the bipolar model has become obsolete, as Bulgaria has entered a post-ideological phase, where the most important party resources are organisation as opposed to ideological (Krastev 2011). In any case, the elections demonstrated the dearth of viable ideological or organisational alternatives to

GERB due to the weakness of the traditional Left and Right driven internal struggles and the marginalisation of the other parties, with the exception of the *MRF* (see, for example Krastev 2011; Nikolov 2012). In the background of declining media independence recognised by both domestic and international observers, this was seen as a threat to political pluralism in Bulgaria.

During the summer of 2013, Bulgaria experienced mass anti-government protests for over 60 days, accompanied by much less numerous protests in support of the government. During a political crisis, where all parties are deeply unpopular and society is deeply polarised, with about 40% of voters opposing the government and a similar percentage opposing it (Gallup poll from August 2013), referendums on the pressing issues of the day could resolve some of the political deadlock. If, similar to the “nuclear referendum”, those led to a relatively open discussion in the media, this could be a source of mild optimism for the political development of Bulgaria.

More broadly, a number of studies of direct democracy in Eastern and Central Europe (CEE) from the early 2000s noted that the abundant legal opportunities for direct democracy in CEE will possibly make it an important feature of political life in the future, but expressed scepticism towards referendums in CEE due to the weakness of civil society, constitutional features that limit the accessibility to instruments of direct democracy, and the ability of political parties and representative bodies of state power to manipulate referenda and referendum initiatives (Auer and Butzer 2001). In this context, the media coverage of the Bulgarian nuclear referendum of 2013 strikes a moderately positive note. Voters could, at least to some extent, gain a critical appreciation of the choices they had; the debate was relatively balanced.

The case of the Bulgarian referendum offers valuable insights to the students of media freedom and direct democracy. It demonstrates that under conditions of inconsistent government position and elite dissensus, the media is able to improve voter knowledge and allow meaningful deliberation by voicing diverse viewpoints and sources. To some extent, the lower party pressure on the media in this case was due to the lower stakes, as it was clear that the outcome of the referendum was unlikely to determine the final political outcome. Nevertheless, the ability of the media in the first exercise of direct democracy to play its crucial and essential role in a setting with concentrated media ownership and traditional reliance on government sources is still an important development.

Notes

1. Similar to Renwick and Lamb (2011), we are not interested in “full deliberation”, which implies participants engaging in deliberations together, a condition absent in media debates. We are mostly interested in whether the media provides voters with information necessary for informed choices.
2. A similar development, in particular, a rise in hidden advertising (the inability to distinguish between paid and regular coverage), was observed in Russia from 1995 on as well as in Moldova and Ukraine (see Oates 2007, 1289 and Nikolayenko 1998, 668).
3. One of those is New Bulgarian Media Group led by Irena Krasteva, which has expanded steadily in the past few years and today controls several newspapers and TV channels including the dailies *Telegraf*, *Monitor*, and *Politika*. The other major media group is Media Group Bulgaria Holding, which publishes major newspapers such as *Trud*, *24 Hours*, and *168 Hours*.
4. According to the explanatory memorandum for the referendum, a vote “Yes” indicates that the voter is for the construction of a new NPP in the Republic of Bulgaria. A vote “No” indicates that the voter is against the construction of a new NPP in the Republic of Bulgaria. According to article 1.53 of the amendments to the “Safe Use of Nuclear Energy Act”, a nuclear power plant is a power plant, where energy is generated by one or more nuclear reactors, which may include the equipment for the management of nuclear waste and the produced nuclear energy located in an area with provided general physical safety and emergency planning.
5. On 24 October, a majority of lawmakers voted in favour of the edited question.
6. We conducted *Z*-tests for population proportion where the sample size was large enough. In the cases where np or $n(1-p) < 10$, where n stands for the number of cases and p stands for the number of

successes, we used a binomial probability small-sample test for population proportion. The results presented in the text are for two-tailed tests.

7. For both *Standart* and *Trud*, the null hypothesis that the proportion of pro-statements in the population is 0.5 is rejected at the 0.05 significance level.
8. Renwick and Lamb (2013) use the coding category “Incomplete reason” for statements that contain a reason, but that do not contain an argument as to how the opinion and the reason are linked. Since we identified many cases where the distinction between complete and complete justification was blurred and rather subjective, we code all statements that contain a reason as “Single Linkage” or “Multiple Linkage” depending on whether they contain single or multiple linkages respectively.
9. We also calculated the frequency of statements by members of the government, but have not presented those results here, because this percentage is very highly correlated with the percentage of statements by *GERB* members.
10. The widely used measures of media freedom have been criticised for being “more of a projection of a particular national tradition of the media (typically that of the USA) on media systems in countries around the world (see Oates 2007, 1279).
11. The low balance and quality of debate in *Telegraf* as well as the tendency to exclusively voice the opinions of members of the ruling party *GERB* would not surprise many observers of Bulgarian politics. Most of the New Bulgarian Media Group publications are financed through the Corporate Commercial Bank (CCB), which possesses significant assets of state-owned companies of the Ministry of the Economy, in addition to the assets of other state-owned companies. According to a media monitoring analysis of the Media Democracy Foundation, the media group of Delyan Peevski [Krasteva’s son] was supporting three major parties – *GERB*, *BSP*, and *MRF* (Foundation Media Democracy 2012). The report further suggests that the leading line aims at legitimising *GERB* as the major party in power and *BSP* and *MRF* as the only alternatives to the governing party.
12. A model characterised by a strong party on the left and the right, which described well most of the Bulgarian post-communist transition where the *BSP* and the *UDF* were the dominant parties on the left and the right, respectively.

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Appendix

To clarify the coding scheme, we provide examples of statements classified to different coding categories to evaluate the balance of debate.

The “Belene” power plant

Pro statement:

... because those smarties appeared that suspended the most profitable economic project for the construction of a nuclear facility in Bulgaria, and in the European Union [in reference to Belene]. (Ovcharov, Rumens. *Dnevnik*, 22 January 2013.)

Con statement:

Hey people, you will bring the state to bankruptcy [in reference to Belene], you will threaten security, in order to implement a project nobody needs ... (Dimitrov, Martin. *Dnevnik*, 23 January 2013)

Conducting a referendum on the nuclear issue:

Pro statement:

I believe anyone of us can contribute to a better Bulgaria, for example, by voting in the upcoming referendum. Even if fewer voters vote than those that voted in the last legislative elections, this would not make it [the referendum] unsuccessful or pointless. To the contrary, the referendum has great value and is a big success for democracy and civil society. (President Plevneliev, speech on the occasion of a one-year anniversary of inauguration, published by *Dnevnik* on 21 January 2013).

Con statement:

[Zachari] Petrov [from the *Radical Democratic Party*] called the referendum ‘a fraud by the *BSP*’ because ‘very few people have the necessary competence to go and vote. Moreover, for every reasonable voter, there are thousands that do not know what a billion or a megawatt mean, but do know how to steal electricity and will vote in the referendum in order to eat a few *kebabcheta*’. (“Kabaivanov: Niakoi hora ot ‘Sinyata Koalitsiya’ se izcherpaha, vreme e da se ottegliat” *Dnevnik*, 21 January 2013).

Wording of the question on the ballot:

Pro statement:

The question is logical and has a point, similar to referendums in many other countries. (President Plevneliev, speech on the occasion of a one-year anniversary of inauguration, published by *Dnevnik* on 21 January 2013).

Con statement:

The current question is fraught with many unknowns because it did not become clear what those nuclear facilities are. (Stoyanov, Valentin. “Dvizhenie Bulgaria na Grazhdanite: Rezultatat ot referendum shte bade izpolzvan ot premiera”, *Dnevnik*, 21 January 2013).

Enlarging the Kozlodui power plant:

Pro statement:

We are for building a seventh reactor, eight reactor, for increasing the capacity at NPP ‘Kozlodui’, because this is the place where the whole world knows that there is a nuclear power plant, there are over a 1000 engineers, specialists, nuclear repositories, built infrastructure. (Interview by Boyko Borisov for Nova TV, published by *Dnevnik*, 08 January 2013, “Deputati ot “Sinyata Koalitsiya” iskat otmiana na referendum).

Con statement:

But what ‘Kozlodui’ are you asking me about? [in response to the question “So after all, is it better to build ‘Kozlodui’ or ‘Belene’?”] There [at ‘Kozlodui’] we will be able to start building a new bloc in 10–12 years at the earliest. And why overload the ‘Kozlodui’ site – it is overloaded already ...

(Interview for *Dnevnik* with Yanko Yanev, Director of the Institute on the Management of Nuclear Knowledge in Viena, 20 January 2013)

Nuclear energy in general:

Pro statement:

“Let’s show on January 27 that we can do without *GERB* and Boyko Borisov, but we cannot do without ‘Belene’ and nuclear energy” said Peter Dimitrov from *Coalition for Bulgaria* today in parliament. (“Koalitsiya za Bulgariya: Da dokazhem che mozhem I bez *GERB*, no ne I bez “Belene”, *Trud*, 18 January 2013).

Con statement:

I was lucky to have very good professors, including several Nobel laureates and what I learned is that you can have a peaceful atom, but there is no safe atom. I want to emphasize that the position of the *Green Party* is more extreme than the position of *GERB*. We declare that there is no safe nuclear power. (Statement by Georg Tuparev, co-chair of the Greens, *Dnevnik*, 18 January 2013 “Borisov I ekolozi za energichnoto badeshte na stranata”).)