Corruption and Anticorruption Narratives in Bulgarian Media

Media Monitoring and Analysis Report

January 2021 – December 2022

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1. Introduction

1.1. Media Coverage of Corruption: State and Characteristics

Understanding the media coverage of new about corrupt practices in the Bulgarian public and private sectors requires consideration of the country's complicated media landscape. In this regard, numerous studies and media professionals highlight the following three factors as contributing to the unsatisfactory coverage of corruption in Bulgarian media: the ownership situation, the established business model, and the external pressure by political and non-political groups.

1.1.1. Media Ownership

According to a 2021 study [1], only 15% of interviewees consider the Bulgarian media sector "free from undue influence from business or politics." This is unsurprising given the country's Media Pluralism and Media Freedom score [2]. Three of the "Market Plurality" indicators point toward a particularly high risk ("Media ownership concentration"; "Commercial and owners influence over editorial content"; "Cross media concentration of ownership and competition enforcement"), while two indicators in the "Political Independence" domain point to high risk ("State regulation of resources and support for media sector" and "Political control over the media outlets").

As a result, Bulgarian media outlets provide politicians with practically unlimited coverage to the extent that the former has been described as "a government communication platform" [1]. In this context, as our research shows, it is a common practice for online networks to publish "interviews" with politicians or other statements sent by PR teams in a coordinated manner. Furthermore, some outlets have been "rewarded" with EU and public funding [3] with the effect of encouraging recipients to go easy on the government in their reporting. Bulgaria, like several other countries from Central and Eastern Europe (e.g. the Czech Republic and Slovakia), has witnessed the sale of a few commercial media outlets to businesspersons who used the purchase to "boost their political influence" [4].

1.1.2. Media Business Model

Bulgarian publishers, too, have not been spared the damage caused by the disruption of the traditional media business model [5] and the ensuing issues have been present for the past three decades. The penetration of the Internet and social media have made print unsustainable, with income from subscriptions and advertising left as the only viable option.

However, in 2021 only 12% of news consumers in Bulgaria paid for online news, down by three p.p. compared to 2020 [1], while the majority of ad budgets were streamed towards TV channels [6].

Unable to find financing through "backchannels," the few independent media outlets have invested in different income sources (such as events, online studios, podcasting equipment, etc.).

Nevertheless, this "fight for clicks" is usually marked by low journalism standards and media ethics [7] which has led to the constant publishing of unchecked materials whose phrasing is loaded with bias, mediocre language, and offensive vocabulary. Often, such media items are used to discredit the reporting of corrupt practices or even the reporters themselves.

1.1.3. Judicial Harassment, Political Pressure, and Intimidation

Taking this into consideration, Reporters without Borders (RSF) describes media freedom in Bulgaria as "fragile and unstable," while the country itself is still one of the "most corrupt" in the European Union [8]. According to the organization, "the few independent voices in Bulgaria work under constant pressure" with intimidation from politicians as well as administrative and judicial pressures against publishers and journalists being a common practice. Furthermore, independent media and investigative journalists are regularly victims of abusive procedures, or Strategic Lawsuit against Public Participation (SLAPPs). Apart from judicial harassment of independent media, in 2021, RSF pinpointed two separate occasions of physical violence against journalists, while another investigative reporter received death threats after releasing a documentary about high-level judicial corruption [9].

Another factor that comes into play is the "growing anti-media rhetoric from governments" in Central and Eastern Europe. In Bulgaria, outlets connected to the Open Society Foundation and The America for Bulgaria Foundation are targets of such rhetoric used by politicians and outlets loyal to the government [4].

1.2. Defining Corruption and Anticorruption

International organizations such as the World Bank [10], the International Monetary Fund [11], and Transparency International [12] define corruption as *the abuse of public office for private gain*, while anticorruption is often described as *any efforts to eradicate or prevent the abuse of public office for private gain.* The stories presented in this report could not be classified entirely based on these definitions, as they do not take into consideration the general media monitoring aspect, the Bulgarian media's specific context, and the subjectivity of the public's perception. Therefore, the definitions were expanded as follows: (a) Corruption stories represent actions aimed at the *exposure of the abuse of public office for private gain by Bulgarian or foreign entities and in detriment to Bulgarian citizens, officials, and/or authorities* (in online media, corruption stories begin with the coverage of the action itself—signals, sanctions, etc.) and (b) Anticorruption stories represent *direct actions aimed at eradicating or preventing the abuse of public office for private gain by Bulgarian or foreign entities in detriment to Bulgarian citizens, officials and/or authorities.* In the context of this media monitoring report, anticorruption stories begin with the coverage of such actions—arrests, proposals for new policies, submission of anticorruption bills, etc.

The last two years saw a rise in anticorruption narratives, as during the period January 2021–December 2022, Bulgaria's political life was marked by numerous antigovernment protests that lead to the resignation of the Third Borissov Cabinet, the rise of several new parties, and, most importantly, to a formation of a government headed by an anti-graft party. Consequently, actions against the former Borissov Government were largely perceived as anticorruption efforts.

2. Influence Networks

Influence networks in media are not a new phenomenon - they've existed since the first mass-media conglomerates began to form in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The rise of the Internet and social media platforms in late 1990s and early 2000s has enabled the proliferation of much cheaper and faster means to build clandestine influence networks to shape and manipulate public opinion. The main difference between legacy media influence networks and modern social-media-age influence networks lies in the plausible deniability, decentralized structure, speed, and targeted reach of information dissemination, provided by the latter.

2.1. Main Goals

The specific goals of influence networks in media and social media vary depending on the specific social network, target audience and stage of development, and could include any combination of the following goals:

- **Shaping and manipulating public opinion:** Influence networks aim to shape public opinion by promoting specific narratives, ideas, or perspectives. They can amplify certain messages to make them appear more popular or widely accepted, thereby swaying public sentiment and manipulating public opinion [13].

- **Promoting specific interests:** Influence networks often promote specific political, economic, or social interests. They can be used to support a particular candidate, party, policy, brand, or product by disseminating favorable information and discrediting rivals or competing ideas [14]..

- **Building and maintaining credibility:** Influence networks seek to establish and maintain credibility among their target audience by presenting themselves as reliable sources of information or opinion leaders. By building trust, they can more effectively sway opinions and behaviors [15]

- **Controlling the flow of information:** Influence networks can control the flow of information by dominating the conversation on certain topics, determining which stories get visibility, and suppressing or diverting attention from unfavorable narratives [16].

- **Expanding reach and audience:** Influence networks work to expand their reach and audience by creating content that resonates with their target demographic, leveraging social connections, and utilizing algorithms and other digital tools to enhance visibility [17].

- **Manipulating public discourse:** Some influence networks may engage in manipulation tactics, such as spreading misinformation, disinformation, or using bots and fake accounts to create a perception of public consensus or to disrupt and discredit opposing views [18].

Ultimately, the main goal of an influence network is to exert power and control over public opinion, behavior, and discourse in a way that serves specific interests.

These covert influence networks often involve the use of deception, disinformation, and manipulation to shape public opinion, sow confusion, undermine adversaries, or achieve other political, economic, or ideological goals.

Understanding how the covert influence networks are built, and how they operate in the social-media-age, is the first step towards assessing their scope and impact, including in the context of this report.

It should be noted that not all of the news stories covered in this report have been targeted specifically by influence networks, which provides an opportunity to draw certain conclusions based on their selectivity.

2.2. Operational Model

The foundation of the modern influence networks are the so-called "mushroom websites". These are "impostor" online media outlets, designed to provide anonymity and plausible deniability for their creators, in order to make it difficult to trace the origin of information and attribute responsibility. They are created in bulk by malicious actors with the sole purpose of "seeding" disinformation, propaganda, and fake news. They usually appear in the context of active disinformation campaigns within which they "pop up, multiply, and grow" in a coordinated manner. Once the "dark money rain" is gone, they either disappear or become inactive, until the next disinformation campaign. [19]

Influence Networks: Content "Quality" Lifecycle: Seed, Rinse, Repeat

Tier 1 – International Media & Newswires

- **Publishing propaganda in the form of "refined and polished" disinformation,** enriched with statements by Kremlin affiliated politicians, citing Tier 2 sources or "talking heads on duty" from Kremlin sponsored "Think-Tanks", "Business Organizations" and politicians.
- Publishing manipulative high-budget reports, original works and analysis.

Tier 2 – Regional Media Outlets

- **Publishing disinformation in the form of "rinsed" versions of fake news** mixed with some real facts, usually taken out of context, enriched with comments and "analysis" by "independent experts".
- Editorial publications (often without an author), citing **unclear sources** ("information appeared on the web") or specific Tier 3 and other Tier 2 sources that are part of the same influence network.

Tier 3 – Mushroom Websites & Blogs

- **Publishing disinformation, fake news, conspiracy theories, rumors and wild speculations;**
- **Content without stated authors**, without cited sources (or fake sources), with unclear dating, manipulated or "deep fake" pictures and videos;
- Titles are provocative, formulated as **"click-baits"** to trigger emotions and knee-jerk reactions.
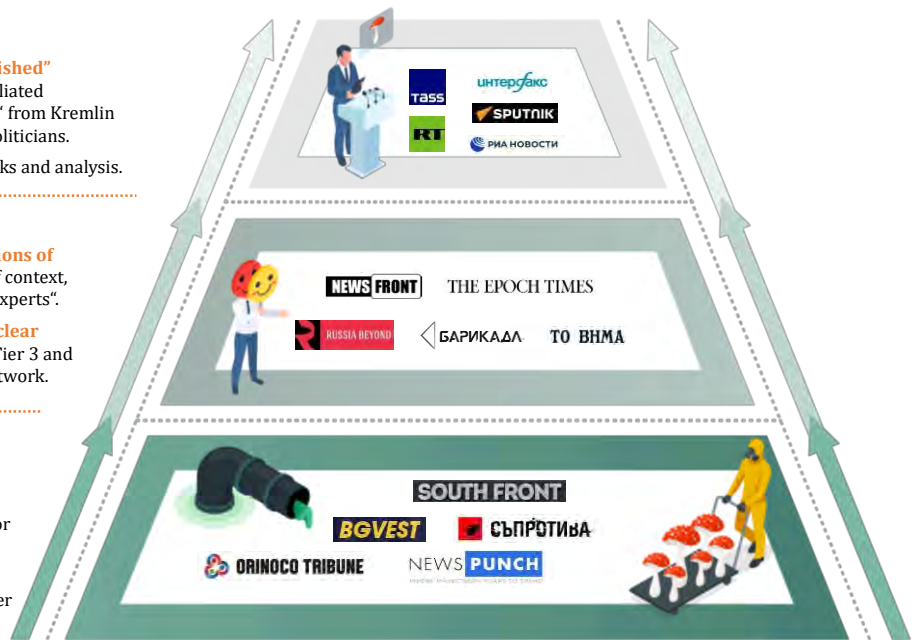
The infographics represents the typical lifecycle of "rinsing" fake news and wild speculations into disinformation, propaganda or smear campaigns, often dominating the public discourse, and distracting the attention both of the mainstream media and the general public.

Influence Networks: Seeding, Distribution, Amplification & Going Viral

Viral Spread

It's all over the news and social media, coming from all kinds of sources and "trusted friends".

IT'S ALL OVER THE NEWS & SOCIAL MEDIA

Organic Amplification

Unsuspecting Social Media Users spread disinformation, propaganda and fake news by sharing posts on their personal newsfeeds, often without reading beyond the headlines.

Targeted Distribution for Artificial Amplification

Troll & Bot Factories (cheap manual labor + automated bots) are spam-sharing and engaging with thousands of groups, pages, forums, **tricking the social media platforms' recommendation algorithms** that the content is viral and it's worth suggesting to users.

Seeding / Implantation

Initial Seeding is done in Tier 3 "mushroom websites" with high degree of automation – the same piece of content is published simultaneously on tens of affiliated websites.

The infographics represents the typical itinerary of a disinformation spread –from seeding in Tier 3 "mushroom websites" to achieving organic viral spread, notavbly without involvement of traceable paid advertisement on social media platforms.

2.3.   Impact

A study from Columbia University and the French National Institute in 2014 found that 59% of links shared on Twitter were not clicked, meaning a majority of users didn't read the full article before sharing or engaging with the shared content in other ways (e.g. commenting or reacting) [20].
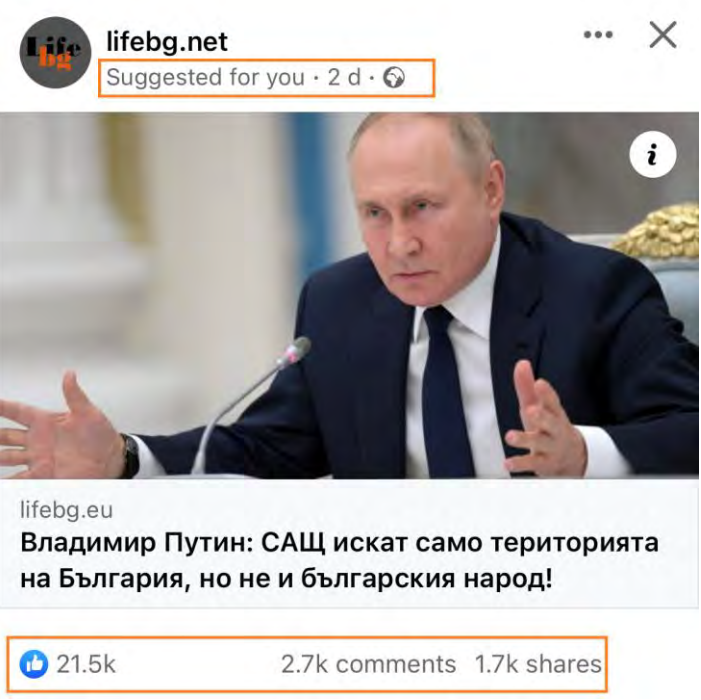
The proportion of users who only read the headlines and interact with articles shared on social media without reading the full content can differ significantly based on factors such as the platform, the particular channel or group, and the users' geographic location or demographic group.

 In 2018, a popular satirical news website called The Science Post shared an article titled: Study: 70% of Facebook users only read the headline of science stories before commenting. The article was shared over 120 thousand times, many people not realizing that the body of the article was just filler text written in Latin.

Facebook is by far the most popular social media in Bulgaria In 2022 with 98% market share [21].

The actual impact of the influence networks on the public opinion is often underestimated, due to the fact that most of the "mushroom websites" have negligible traffic share in the overall media landscape. While their website traffic may be quite low, their impressions on social media and the engagement ratios of selected social media posts could beat the mainstream media outlets performance by orders of magnitude.

The following screenshots are made in August 2022 and September 2022 and show the discrepancy between the social media performance and the web-traffic performance of "mushroom websites". Single posts, apparently "boosted" artificially by bots and trolls, achieve disproportionally high levels of engagement, compared to the monthly traffic of the websites the links are shared from.

BGNewsCom.eu (<50K monthly visitors on the website)[1]	LifeBG.eu (<100K monthly visitors on the website)[2]

The examples above are for posts shared by Facebook pages associated with respective "mushroom websites". While most of the posts shared by those Facebook pages gain minimal engagement (in the range of a few to tens of likes and comments) and the associated websites have marginal audience and reach compared to Tier 1 mainstream media, certain posts are being boosted by bots and trolls on the social media. Facebook recommendation engine starts suggesting such posts to unsuspecting users and they become viral, without any paid advertisement. Regardless of the lack of factual and informational value, such headlines trigger emotions and gradually change the perception of the general public on important topics.

[1] SimilarWeb Data for August 2022
[2] SimilarWeb Data for September 2022

2.4. Examples

Identity and Design of Mushroom Websites

In November 2022, Sensika added to its catalog about 400 websites that share similarities not only in design and structure, but in the type of content published. These websites distributed the same piece of content at the exact same time in what seemed to be a coordinated manner.

Coordinated Republishing Pattern
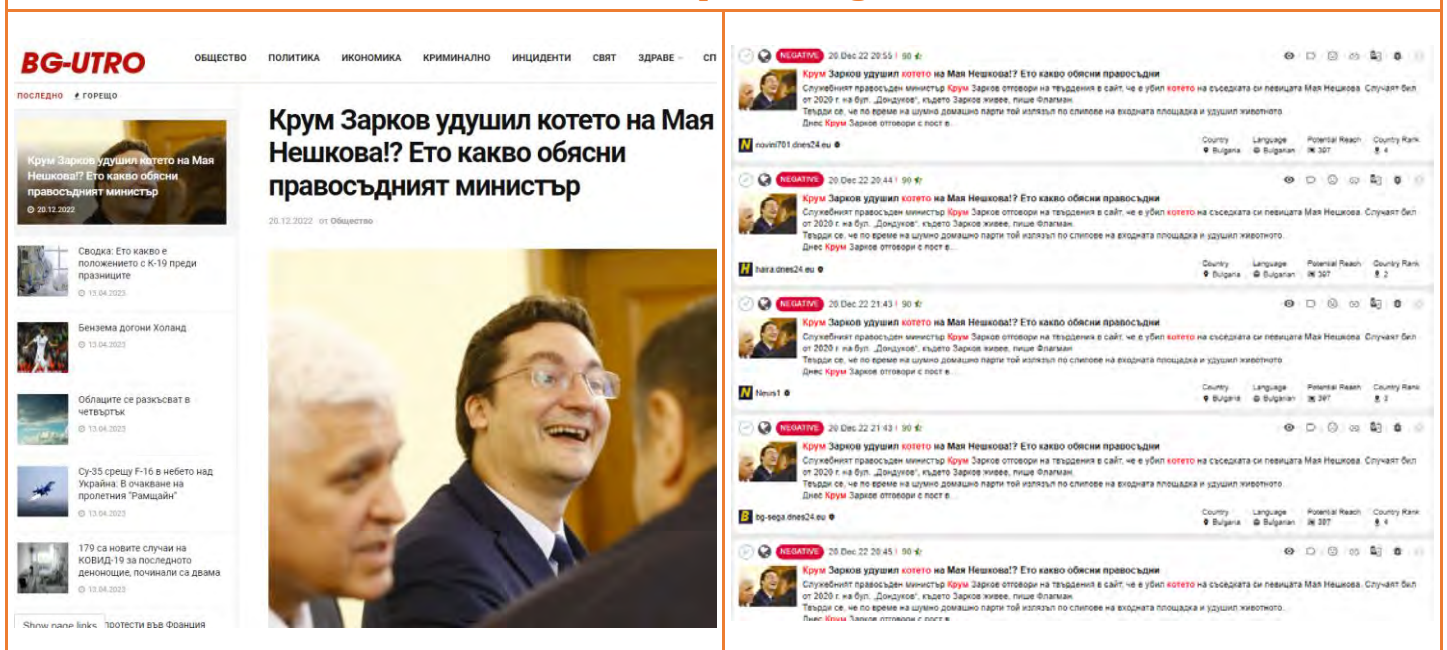
The example above represents a typical case of automated and coordinated publishing (within a few minutes) of identical manipulative articles by multiple "media outlets".

The example exploits typical defamation headline, which represents an unsourced claim as a fact, combined with deliberately selected picture, aiming to harm the reputation and credibility of the Minister of Justice Krum Zarkov as a person. The main narrative of the article does not attack his professional or political activities, but instead instigates negative emotions and moral disgust towards Mr. Zarkov, alleging him of animal cruelty and torture ("Krum Zarkov Strangled Maya Neshkova's cat!? Here what the Justice Minister Explained…").

3.   Research and Methodology[3]

3.1.   Online Media

The data collection process during the first stage of the quantitative research was executed entirely within Sensika's media monitoring platform, which processed over 300,000 articles published in Bulgarian online media outlets over the period January 1, 2021–December 31, 2022. The analysis focused on numerical values and their growth or decline over time. The monitored variables included volume distribution, potential reach, media segmentation, and topics spread, among others.

The primary approach encompassed the detection of all Bulgarian forms of the words "corruption" and "anticorruption" either in the title, or the first three sentences of each article. The attempt was partly successful, as some prominent stories could be discovered easily by a volume peak in the content distribution over time. Several other query structures were also tested (e.g. restricting the search to government-critical or national media; adding a second keyword-based corpus containing the names of institutions, politicians, spokespeople, or even cities often involved in public scandals, etc.), but the result was similar and no other stories could be easily filtered out. At this point, the query structure was entirely reassessed by way of applying qualitative research methods such as content and thematic analysis over a set of articles that described popular corruption cases that did not appear in the initial search. In its final form, the query was comprised of two corpuses with different sets of keywords combined with the Boolean Operator AND. The first was expanded to include words such as arrest, scheme, bribe, etc., while the second incorporated words such as ministry, directorate, agency, public office, tender, and others[4].

Consequently, a deep-dive analysis allowed for the detection of all stories. For the purpose of the analysis, the top ten corruption and top six anticorruption stories are chosen as the most outstanding ones in terms of volume. After a story was defined, a custom dimension was created for the extraction of all articles published on the issue. Accordingly, the stories were assigned either to the topic of corruption or anticorruption. The following story analysis is based on the overall number of media items related to it. It is important to note that the dimensions that were applied over feeds no longer included the initial query used to detect the stories at the starting point. This means that the stories are constructed based on keywords that are relevant to the topic, even if they do not include corruption or corruption-related terms. In doing so, the full scope of the given story could be outlined. However, it was intriguing to examine whether the terms "corruption," "anticorruption," and their related keywords appeared in the stories. As a result, additional dimensions were created solely for these keywords and grouped them accordingly.

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[3] In order to analyze the portrayal of corruption and anticorruption cases in Bulgarian media, Sensika used a mixed methods research, utilizing both qualitative and quantitative approaches.

[4] Due to the taxonomy organization, some cases of civil crime were inevitably detected as well. However, they were not discussed in the context of the monitored stories.

Volume Comparison (per month) – Corruption-Associated Keywords vs. Corruption Keywords vs. Anticorruption Keywords
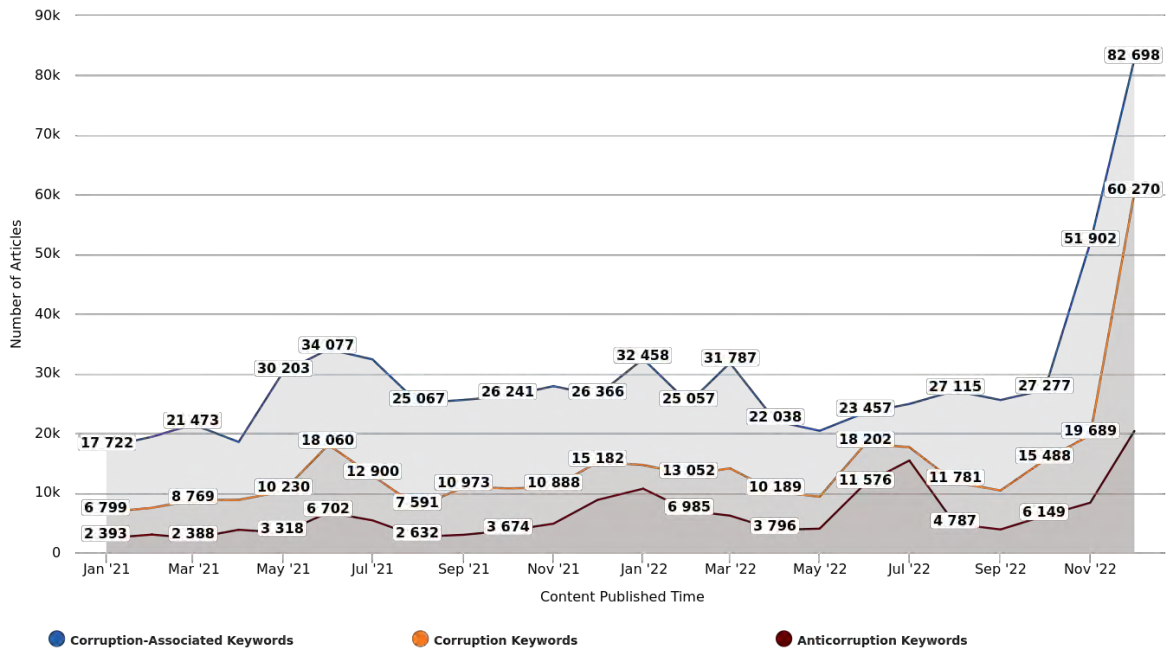
The chart represents the volume distribution for the three monitored keywords sets during the entire coverage period. The initial search confirmed that, in most cases, media outlets do not use the word "corruption" directly. Instead, they prefer vocabulary traditionally associated with crime, including words such as "arrest," "scheme," "bribe," etc. Moreover, the content dedicated to anticorruption turned out to be significantly less. The content volume rise towards the end of the period is essentially due to an accumulation of "mushroom websites" in the online media.

Potential Reach Comparison (per month) – Corruption-Associated Keywords vs. Corruption Keywords vs. Anticorruption Keywords

The chart represents the potential reach distribution for the three monitored keywords sets during the entire coverage period. The potential reach distribution pattern is similar to the volume distribution of the content.

3.1.1. Top Corruption Stories

Top Corruption Stories (by volume)	Top Corruption Stories (by potential reach)

Top Corruption Stories (by volume):
- Rejection of Bid to Schengen Area — 18 672
- Magnitsky Sanctions — 15 211
- Gemcorp Scandal — 10 273
- Bulgargaz-Gazprom Supply Issues Controversy — 4 160
- Irregularities in construction of National Children's Hospital — 3 859
- Corruption and Russian Influence in Turkish Stream — 2 073
- OLAF Finds Breaches in Police Cars Purchase Contract — 1 860
- Illegal organ transplant scandal at Lozenets Hospital — 1 745
- Krasno Selo mayor investigated by CACIAF — 1 334
- Irregularities in Street lights Public Order — 895

Top Corruption Stories (by potential reach):
- Magnitsky Sanctions — 39 866 145
- Rejection of Bid to Schengen Area — 7 902 326
- Gemcorp Scandal — 7 683 253
- Corruption and Russian Influence in Turkish Stream — 7 519 890
- Irregularities in construction of National Children's Hospital — 7 038 642
- Bulgargaz-Gazprom Supply Issues Controversy — 6 809 755
- OLAF Finds Breaches in Police Cars Purchase Contract — 4 531 138
- Illegal organ transplant scandal at Lozenets Hospital — 3 411 925
- Krasno Selo mayor investigated by CACIAF — 3 114 400
- Irregularities in Street lights Public Order — 2 326 657

3.1.2. Top Anticorruption Stories

Top Corruption Stories (by volume)	Top Corruption Stories (by potential reach)

Top Corruption Stories (by volume):
- Boyko Borissov's Arrest — 18 284
- Establishment of Revision Commission — 16 922
- Abuses in the Construction of Hemus Motorway — 12 812
- Kapitan Andreevo Border Checkpoint Scandal — 5 562
- Parliament Passes Two Anticorruption Bills — 2 241
- Visit by Chief Prosecutor Laura Kövesi to Bulgaria — 1 265

Top Corruption Stories (by potential reach):
- Boyko Borissov's Arrest — 41 094 922
- Establishment of Revision Commission — 35 833 761
- Abuses in the Construction of Hemus Motorway — 19 015 285
- Kapitan Andreevo Border Checkpoint Scandal — 11 640 592
- Visit by Chief Prosecutor Laura Kövesi to Bulgaria — 5 877 086
- Parliament Passes Two Anticorruption Bills — 1 513 287

Corruption Stories (1-5/10)
Volume Comparison by Source Type

Rejection of Bid to Schengen Area
- Tier 1: 2 342
- Tier 2-3: 1 314
- Influence Networks: 14 220
- Media Aggregators: 804

Magnitsky Sanctions
- Tier 1: 8 384
- Tier 2-3: 2 474
- Influence Networks: 1 186
- Media Aggregators: 3 165

Gemcorp Scandal
- Tier 1: 2 175
- Tier 2-3: 1 020
- Influence Networks: 5 674
- Media Aggregators: 1 404

Bulgargaz-Gazprom Supply Issues Controversy
- Tier 1: 2 083
- Tier 2-3: 843
- Influence Networks: 303
- Media Aggregators: 930

Irregularities in construction of National Children's Hospital
- Tier 1: 2 001
- Tier 2-3: 726
- Influence Networks: 90
- Media Aggregators: 1 043

Number of Articles

Legend: ● Tier 1   ● Tier 2-3   ● Influence Networks   ● Media Aggregators

There were two outlier stories among the first Top 5 narratives about corruption, which drew disproportional attention from the anonymous influence networks – the "Rejection of Bid to Schengen area" (76% of the volume) and the "Gemcorp Scandal" (55% of the volume). Both stories seem to be of particular interest – the first one by supporting the long-standing Kremlin narrative about the "EU hypocrisy" that would lead ex-Soviet bloc countries to switch back to Russia's side, and the second one by spinning a narrative about "Kiril Petkov's government hypocrisy" for dealing with companies backed by Russian capital. Stories about local economic corruption were barely covered by the same influence networks.

Corruption Stories (6-10/10)
Volume Comparison by Source Type
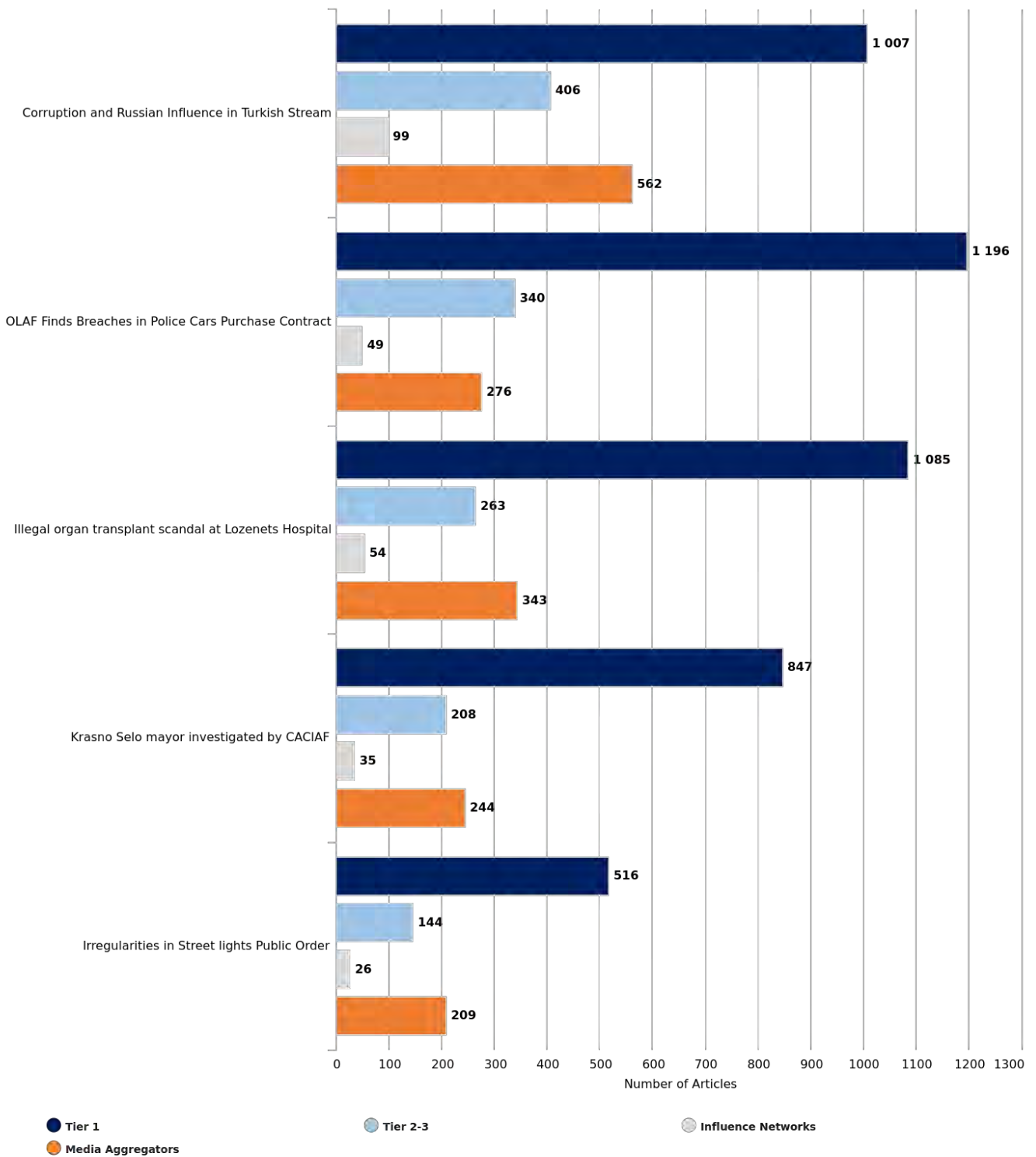
As evident from the chart above, the influence networks generated only between 2% and 5% of the total volume on each of the Top 6 to Top 10 corruption narratives, which is in stark contrast with their overwhelming volume of stories that support Russia's geo-political interests.

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Anticorruption Stories (6/6)
Volume Comparison by Source Type

Boyko Borissov's Arrest
- 8 739
- 3 181
- 1 915
- 4 454

Establishment of Revision Commission
- 10 544
- 2 809
- 709
- 2 849

Abuses in the Construction of Hemus Motorway
- 6 060
- 2 240
- 1 922
- 2 587

Kapitan Andreevo Border Checkpoint Scandal
- 2 843
- 1 111
- 180
- 1 427

Parliament Passes Two Anticorruption Bills
- 546
- 207
- 1 185
- 304

Visit by Chief Prosecutor Laura Kövesi to Bulgaria
- 632
- 226
- 36
- 372

Number of Articles

● Tier 1   ● Tier 2-3   ● Influence Networks
● Media Aggregators

The influence networks were really active only on selected stories, mostly trying to undermine anticorruption actions or initiatives that represent direct threat to the corruption satus-quo (e.g. "Boyko Borissov's Arrest", "Abuses in the Construction of Hemus Motorway" and the "Parliament Passes Two Anticorruption Bills"), while keeping relative or complete silence on other topics (e.g. "Kapitan Andreevo Border Checkpoint Scandal" or "Laura Kovesi visit to Bulgaria").

3.2.   Social Media (Facebook)

Due to the current EU data protection law and, specifically, its General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), Sensika has access only to publicly available content from Facebook. Therefore, the extracted stories cover explicitly the content from public pages. During the initial research, the system extracted over 30,000 Facebook posts and 34,000 comments from Bulgarian profiles or in Bulgarian language for the monitored period. Thus, the online stories' dimensions were applied on the Facebook content as well. However, they were slightly amended to address the specifics of social media (use of slang, informal language, common spelling mistakes, etc.). Here again, it was interesting to analyze the occurrence of the terms "corruption," "anticorruption," and their associated keywords in the stories on Facebook.

Volume Comparison (per month) – Corruption-Associated Keywords vs. Corruption Keywords vs. Anticorruption Keywords
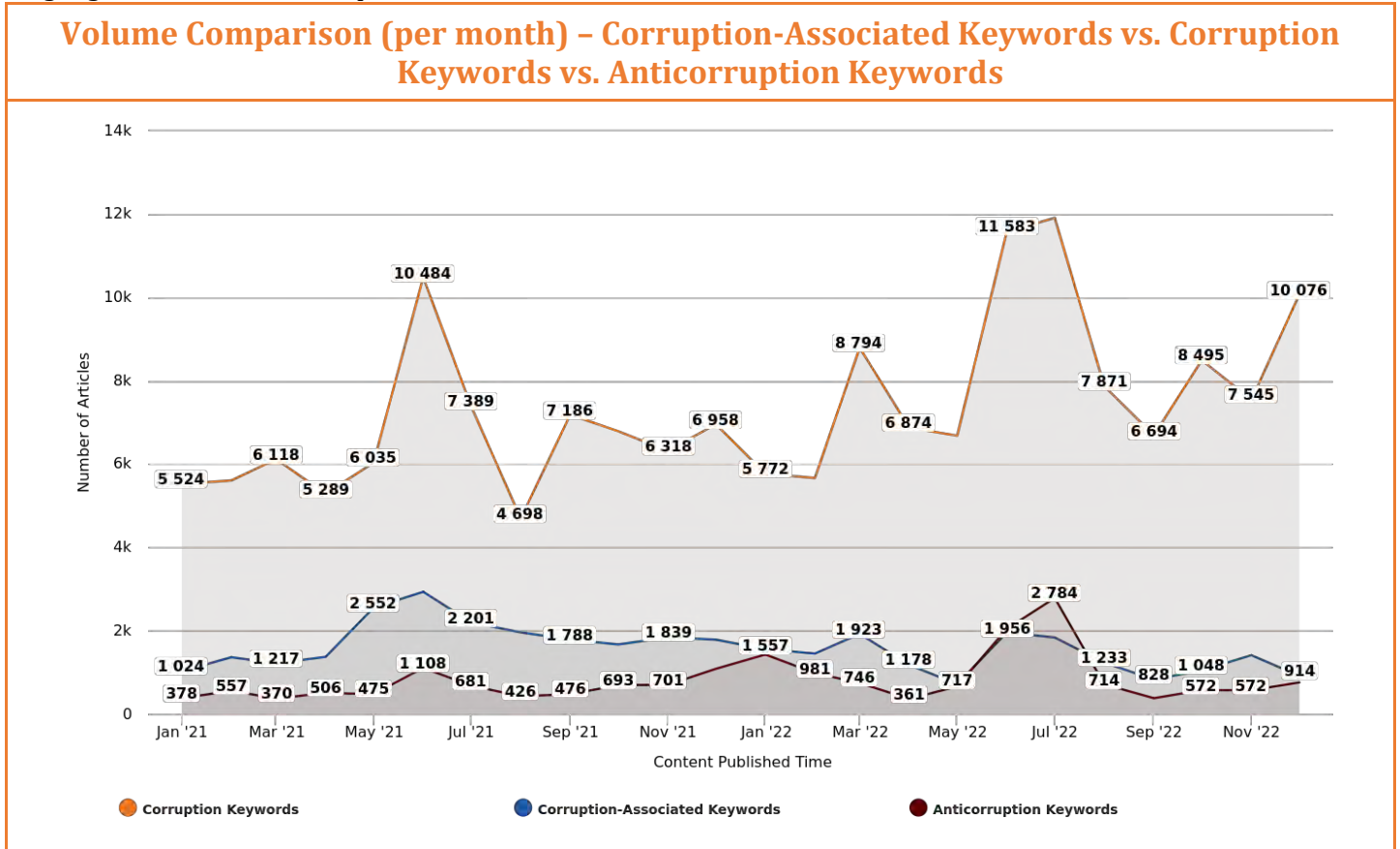
The chart represents the volume distribution in Facebook for the three monitored keywords sets during the entire coverage period. The research findings are in contrast to the content in online media, as they reveal that a significant majority of social media users refer directly to "corruption." The term "anticorruption" is used the least, suggesting that the audience is more interested in sensational news. Additionally, the audience appears to be less interested and engaged with "anticorruption," which is more abstract in nature, relating to new policies or legislation, and therefore, harder to understand and connect with.

Top 10 Corruption Stories
Volume Comparison (Facebook)

Story	Number of Articles
Magnitsky Sanctions	9 772
Corruption and Russian Influence in TurkStream	6 515
Irregularities in construction of National Children's Hospital	3 373
Rejection of Bid to Schengen Area	2 160
Gemcorp Scandal	1 814
OLAF Finds Breaches in Police Cars Purchase Contract	1 250
Illegal organ transplant scandal at Lozenets Hospital	555
Krasno Selo mayor investigated by CACIAF	383
Abuses Behind Gazprom Supply Cuts	344
Irregularities in Street lights Public Order	180

Top 6 Anticorruption Stories
Volume Comparison (Facebook)

Story	Number of Articles
Boyko Borissov's Arrest	8 794
Establishment of Revision Commission	5 729
Abuses in the Construction of Hemus Motorway	4 311
Kapitan Andreevo Border Checkpoint Scandal	841
Visit by Chief Prosecutor Laura Kövesi to Bulgaria	311
Parliament Passes Two Anticorruption Bills	256

4.   Corruption Narratives

4.1.   Rejection of Bulgaria's Bid to Join the Schengen Area

4.1.1.   Background

Although at the beginning of December 2022, national media reported that Sweden had backed Bulgaria's bid to join the Schengen area [22], almost immediately after it became known that the Netherlands had opposed it due to the Bulgaria's "lack of a system capable of fighting corruption and organized crime" [23]. While initially some websites used neutral language to describe the situation, others deemed it "discriminatory" [24]. In addition, following the announcement, persons of note made multiple statements on the matter, which were often presented with a different tonality. For example, the newspaper Capital published an interview with Ivan Demerdzhiev, Minister of Interior in the Third Undertaker Cabinet, who explained that "the Hague wants clear commitments from the Bulgarian side on an anticorruption legislation" [25]. A number of articles however, quoted him saying that "instead of European solidarity, we get neglect and discrimination" [26].

National media also cited President Rumen Radev, who shared his thoughts on Facebook: "Recently, three Bulgarian policemen were killed, protecting the external border. Today, PM Mark Rutte unacceptably suggested that one could cross this border for EUR 50. Instead of receiving European solidarity, Bulgaria receives cynicism!" [27]. Moreover, former Prime Minister and co-chairman of We Continue the Change (PP) Kiril Petkov posted the following on social media: "I emphasized PP's readiness to work for these goals [overcoming corrupt practices], regardless of our position in the Parliament, as well as to guarantee the security of our borders. Bulgaria deserves to be a full member of Schengen" [28]. The two men, however, did not see eye to eye when it came to the execution of the tasks that would ensure the membership. The Debati media platform even noted the "tension" between We Continue the Change and President Radev, in light of Petkov's earlier comments that "the Cabinet does not have control over the security services because the President is the only one with complete control at the moment. I am almost certain that we will not be admitted in Schengen in December since our external partners are not satisfied with our work, especially on the security level" [29]. Petkov also tied the outcome to past corruption-related scandals such as "the schemes at Kapitan Andreevo and Rosenets" [30]. His view was supported by Asen

Vassilev, co-leader of We Continue the Change, who was of the opinion that "President Radev is the main factor behind the rejection of Bulgaria's Schengen bid" [31].

Other politicians also made public statements concerning the developments. PP's Daniel Lorer highlighted that "instead of debating corruption, we spent a whole week discussing the paper ballot" [32]. In a similar context, the Acting Minister of Justice Krum Zarkov said in an interview that "Mark Rutte's statement does not reflect Europe's position," with many websites circulating another part of the abovementioned conversation during which he warned Rutte "to be careful as we will not let his remarks pass" [33]. Iliana Iotova, Bulgaria's Vice President, criticized the rejection as well: "The Netherlands just made the best Christmas present to the Eurosceptics, the populist parties, and all those who do not want a strong Europe. Its decision signifies double standards, which are not at the basis of the European Union" [34]. In addition, the political scientist Ognyan Minchev commented that "beyond the practical significance of the Schengen membership, separating Bulgaria from Romania and leaving Sofia in lonely isolation from the common territorial space of Europe is the biggest Russian victory over the country since Radev's election as President in 2016" [35]. Others even went as far as to consider the failed bid to be the circumstance, which would "bring Revival to power" [36]. Furthermore, another political scientist, Associate Professor Milen Lyubenov, posed a rhetorical question: "How can we expect from the Netherlands to approve Bulgaria's entry to Schengen, when a person sanctioned under Magnitsky is still a member of the National Assembly?" [37].

Not only did both national and regional sources cover the early reactions, they also followed the subsequent events surrounding the case. In this regard, various websites cited Ivan Geshev, Bulgaria's Chief Prosecutor, who said: "We will request from our Dutch partners, in accordance with the rules for international legal assistance, evidence that our border with Turkey can be crossed with a EUR 50 banknote. Bulgaria is a country governed by the rule of law and as a EU member, upon receiving such evidence, the Prosecutor's Office will take immediate action" [38]. In the meantime, We Continue the

Change's press center announced that the party "would submit to the National Assembly a draft declaration for the urgent adoption of essential laws that would facilitate the country's admission to the Schengen area" [39].

What is more, according to the Bulgarian Telegraph Agency, Acting Minister of Foreign Affairs Nikolay Milkov and the Dutch ambassador to Bulgaria, H.E. Simon van der Burg, discussed the position of the Netherlands towards Bulgaria's admittance to Schengen. During the meeting, Minister Milkov clarified that "Bulgaria fulfills all membership criteria, which has been repeatedly confirmed by the European Commission and by the reports of additional expert missions conducted on Bulgarian territory" [40]. For her part, European Commissioner for Home Affairs Ylva Johansson confirmed that "Bulgaria, Romania, and Croatia underwent a thorough check that showed they met all requirements to join Schengen. The additional checks requested by some countries showed that Bulgaria and Romania have further increased the protection of their external borders. We do not have any information that the Bulgarian border can be crossed in exchange for EUR 50" [41]. Bulgarian outlets [42] also circulated the view expressed by POLITICO's Anton Pisaroglu, who wrote that "denying Romania, Bulgaria, and Croatia's Schengen bid will weaken the EU," specifying that "not admitting these countries based on flimsy excuses, and despite the loyalty and reliability they've demonstrated against Russian President Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine, wouldn't just go against EU unity, it would also be a strategic mistake that could send euroskepticism flaring across Europe's sensitive east—and at the very worst possible geopolitical moment" [43].

In this context, on December 5, the Bulgarian digital platform Fact Check released its own findings: "While it is true that the Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte mentions the sum of EUR 50 in a comment on the security of the Bulgarian borders, he actually explains that he wants the European Commission to make sure that the border cannot be crossed for this amount of money. Rutte explicitly emphasizes that he is not claiming that such a thing is happening, but rather wants to establish that it has not happened previously." The piece even observed that "the topic was widely covered by the media, but the EUR 50 in question appeared for the first time in the comments of Bulgarian politicians. This detail is not present in the announcements made by the major news agencies that wrote on the subject" [44].

At the same time, the local media republished a report by Sky News, which revealed that, just before the announcement of the final decision on Bulgaria's entry to the Schengen, a young refugee had been shot near the Bulgarian-Turkish border by Bulgarian border control agents. The materials were presented after a joint investigation by Sky News, Lighthouse Reports, The Times, Le Monde, ARD Studio Wien, Domani, and RFE/RL Bulgaria [45]. Soon after, Minister Demerdzhiev made an official comment, saying he was "disappointed by such manipulations on the eve of the Schengen decision. Neither is the Bulgarian border being crossed for EUR 50, nor are people crossing it being shot at" [46].

At the same time, a number of reports placed the Schengen case within the broader frame of Bulgaria's attempts to defeat corruption or the country's general economic outlook. For instance, the news website Club Z noted that "the National Assembly would discuss two bills related to the anticorruption legislation. This is happening while it is becoming clear that Bulgaria will most likely not be accepted into Schengen. The first bill is the Anticorruption Law Draft presented by Kiril Petkov and other MPs. The second is a draft law on countering corruption among persons holding high public positions, introduced by the Council of Ministers" [47]. On the other hand, the Chairman of Bulgaria's Association of Industrial Capital, Vassil Velev, warned that "the rejection of the Schengen bid means unfair competition in various industries and more expensive Bulgarian businesses," encouraging people to boycott Dutch goods and universities [48].

On December 8, media agencies officially announced that the EU Council had "expectedly" rejected the proposal for Bulgaria and Romania to become Schengen members, with Austria and the Netherlands opposing the decision [49]. Various outlets also quoted Eric van der Burg, Dutch State Secretary for Justice and Security, who said that "Bulgaria should adopt more laws and start implementing them. Bulgaria's problems are related to human rights and the fight against corruption" [50]. Meanwhile, Milen Mateev, a PP representative, remarked: "If Kiril Petkov's reformist government had not been overthrown, we would have actually stood a chance to be admitted into the Schengen space" [51]. For his part, Minister Zarkov considered the outcome and its potential implications: "Who is to blame for the fact that Bulgaria does not fully meet the European standards for the rule of law? Everyone, to some extent. Whoever ruled the longest is the guiltiest. Right now, we should vote in favor of the necessary

bills. They would certainly ease our entry to Schengen and the removal of the monitoring mechanism. Besides, Bulgarian citizens, too, need these laws in order to live in a regulated country" [52].

Revival's leader Kostadin Kostadinov thanked Austria and the Netherlands "for their position, with which the representatives of these two European countries clearly and categorically exposed the hypocrisy of the EU as a whole" [53]. In a similar context, some outlets predicted that "the Bulgarians will switch to the Russian side after the EU's Schengen blockade" [54].

Finally, in the middle of December, or approximately a week after the final decision had been announced,

President Radev declared that the country would be accepted into the Schengen area in 2023, explaining that "this means a lot less losses for the transport industry, which accounts for a large part of the GDP. It also means an end to the queues at our borders. We deserve to take our rightful place in the European family" [55]. A number of outlets, however, circulated the views expressed by the political scientist Iskren Ivanov that "Bulgaria does not stand any chances of entering Schengen," adding: "The main reason why two-thirds of the community support us is because big countries like Germany and France realize that similar [corruption] problems exist all over the EU, but unlike the Netherlands, they do not deny it" [56].

4.1.2.   Online Coverage

4.1.2.1 Overall Metrics and Volume Comparison

The online coverage of the story reached more than 18,500 articles, making it the largest one in terms of volume included in this research. It is a great example of the operational model of Mushroom Websites, which produced over 70% of the overall content. This result comes as no surprise, considering that the story reflects an issue of great importance to Bulgaria's national interest. Additionally, Mushroom Websites primarily distribute their content through Facebook, the most widely used social media platform in the country.

Prominent Sources came second in terms of volume (around 2,000 articles). Nevertheless, their potential

reach far exceeded that of the rest of the monitored source types. They gained most of their traffic through direct clicks (around 38%), and through a search engine (29%). The Less Prominent Sources gained most of their traffic through direct clicks (85%), while Media Aggregators through a search engine (88%).

In general, the utilization of the word "corruption" exceeds the use of words associated with corrupt practices, and this trend is reflected in the potential reach generated by all media sources. Notably, Deutsche Welle featured two articles that directly linked the story to corruption concerns in the country, and this media channel has a high potential reach rate.


Top Keywords (by volume)

Top Keywords (by volume)

A tag-cloud representation of the most frequently used keywords or phrases within the monitored story. The size of each word in the cloud is a relative indicator of the term's popularity, thereby allowing for the discernment of the most prominent and widely-discussed topics of interest. In this case "Schengen," "Bulgaria," and "the Netherlands" were the most frequently mentioned keywords. "Romania" is another keyword that stands out, as the media focused on the news of the Netherlands initial intention to support Romania's bid, in contrast to its rejection of Bulgaria's bid.

Many of the frequently mentioned keywords stem from headlines that were repeatedly published by Mushroom Websites, focusing on statements made by various politicians. For instance, "Bulgaria deserves" is derived from a statement by former Prime Minister and leader of We Continue the Change, Kiril Petkov, on Facebook. In this statement, Petkov highlighted his government's efforts to combat corruption and expressed readiness to further work on this issue, as well as ensure the security of Bulgaria's borders, based on his conversation with the Dutch Prime Minister, Mark Rutte. Another notable phrase is "there is no way that Bulgaria," which is related to Chief Public Prosecutor Ivan Geshev's statement that Bulgaria cannot become an EU member if it fails to meet the rule of law standards.

Volume Comparison – Corruption Keywords vs. Corruption-Associated Keywords
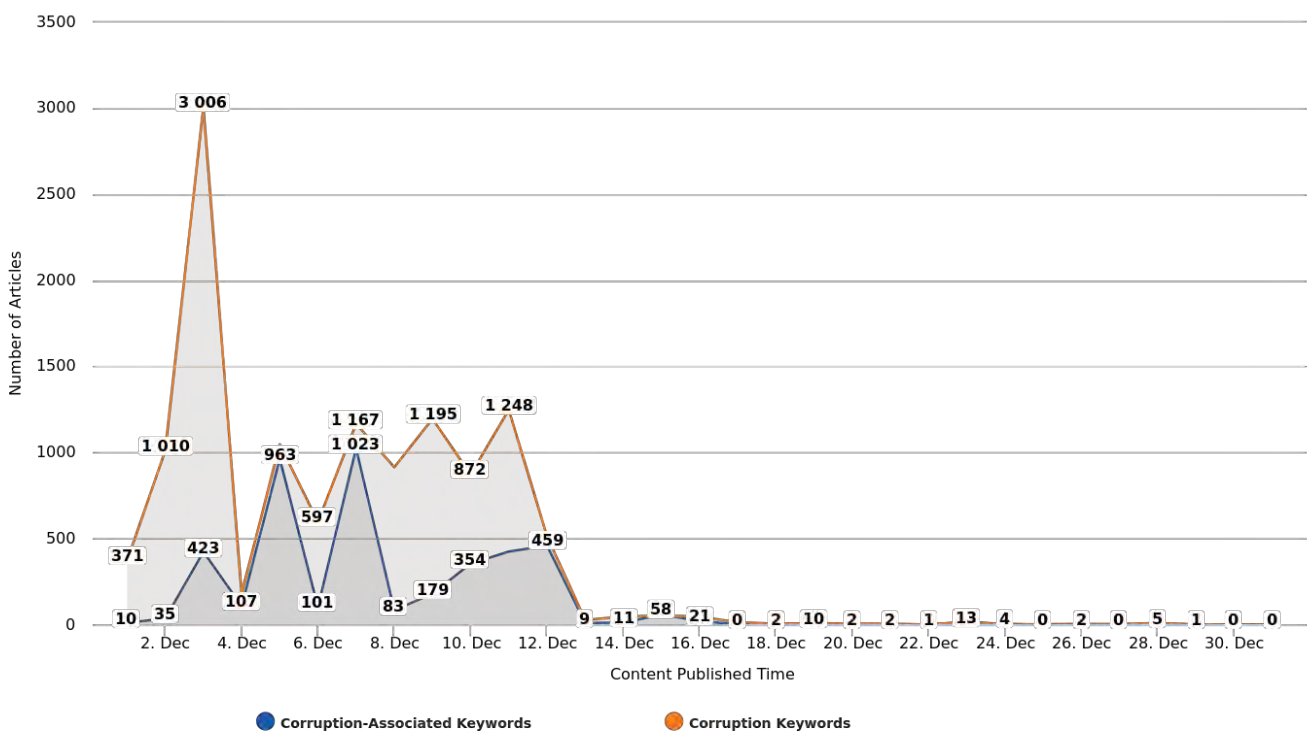
An analysis of the volume distribution of the pieces of content that make reference to corruption directly or indirectly. Overall, the direct use of the word "corruption" was more prevalent than words associated with corrupt practices. The chart above shows a peak in the content referring directly to corruption. Notably, an interview from December 7th with Vassil Velev, Chairman of the Association of Industrial Capital's Board, drew significant media attention and generated a peak of content referencing corruption indirectly. In this interview on Nova TV, he highlighted the adverse effects of the rejection of Bulgaria's bid to join the Schengen area on local businesses and called for a boycott of Dutch products.

Potential Reach Comparison – Corruption Keywords vs. Corruption-Associated Keywords
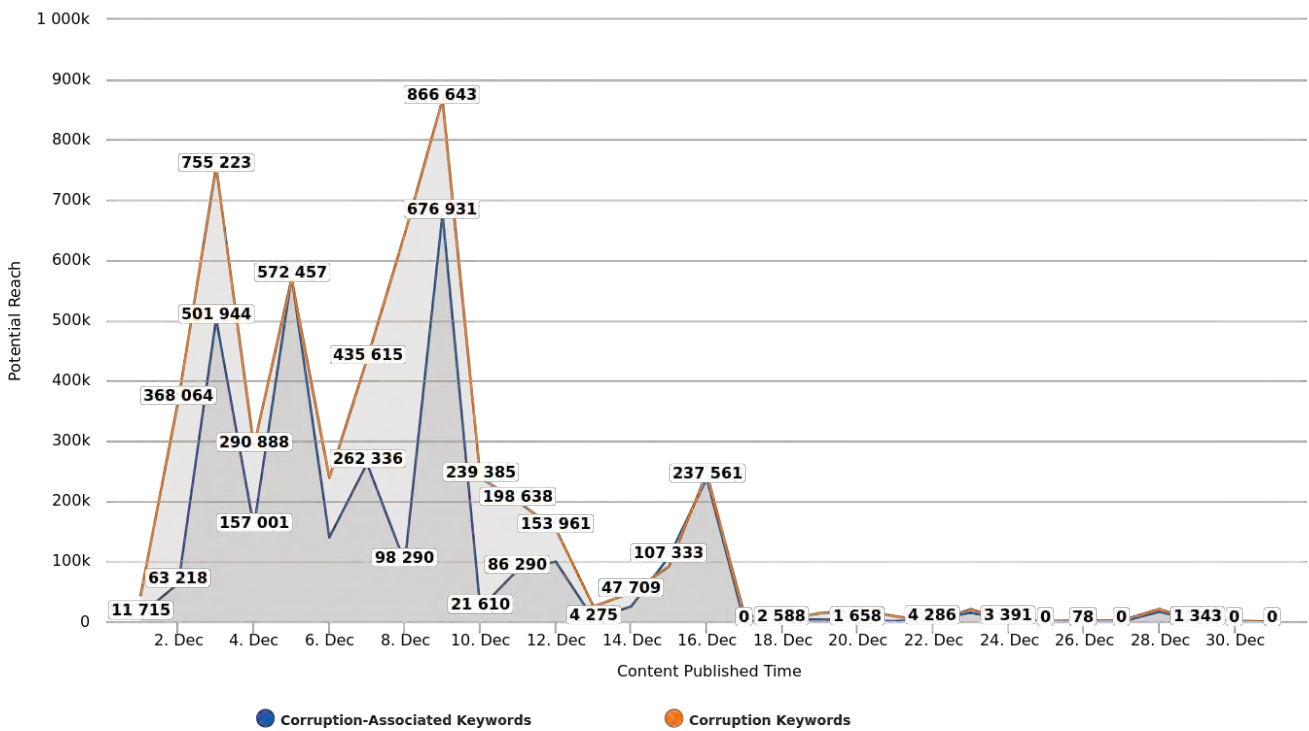
Potential reach distribution of the pieces of content, which reference corruption either directly or indirectly. The potential reach distribution pattern is similar to the volume distribution of the content. There was a clear peak of the content that used the word "corruption" directly on December 9th when Deutsche Welle published two articles – an analysis by the Bulgarian journalist Alexander Andreev named "Four Reasons That Left Bulgaria Outside of Schengen" [57], and another by Die Welt's reporter Dirk Schümer titled "Irrational and Hypocritical: Foreign Media on Bulgaria and Schengen" [58].

Stacked Volume Comparison (by source type)
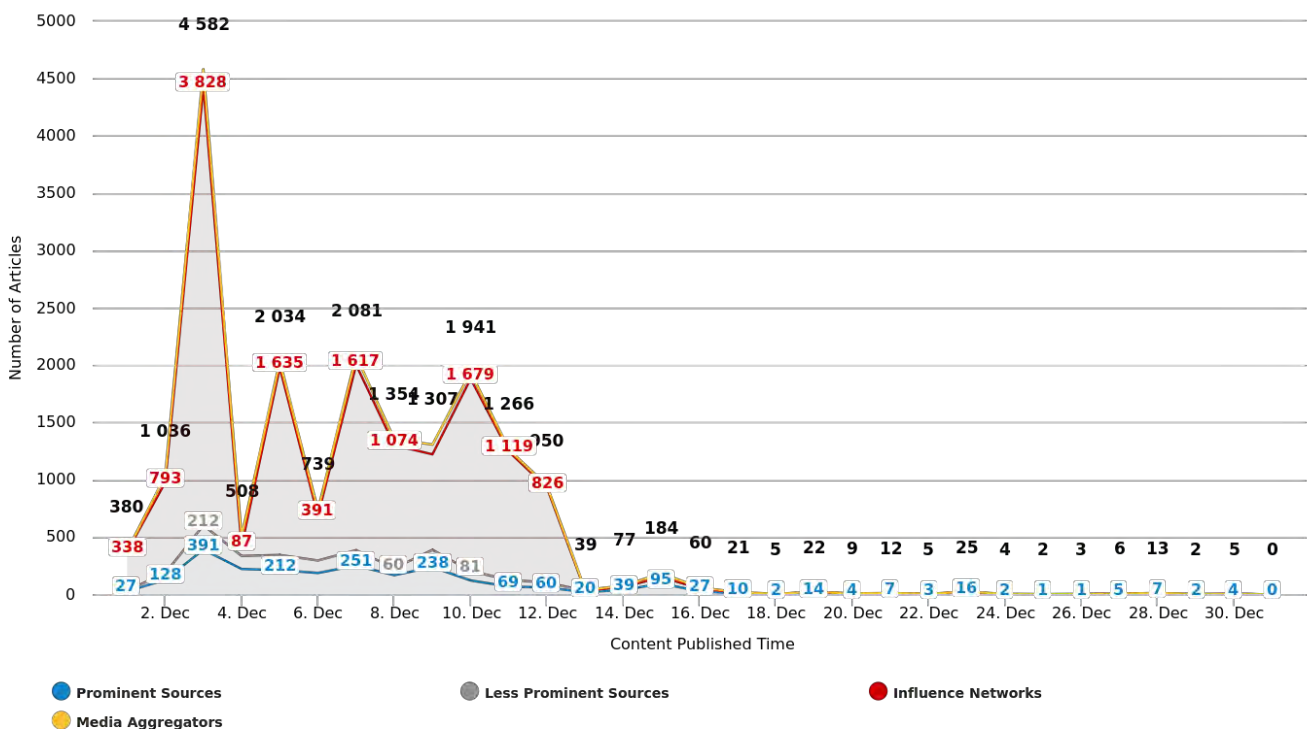
Stacked volume distribution of the story per type of sources. The chart illustrates the substantial engagement of Mushroom Websites with this story, significantly surpassing other types of sources in terms of volume. This exemplifies a core

Stacked Volume Comparison (by source type)

characteristic of this type of websites – selecting statements from various politicians and public figures and generating hundreds of repetitive articles on them, thus creating the perception that a certain headline is all over the news. Prominent sources published more content than Less Prominent Sources and Media Aggregators, but all of them generated peaks around December 8, when the EU Council's official decision to reject Bulgaria and Romania's bids to the Schengen area was announced.

Stacked Potential Reach Comparison (by source type)
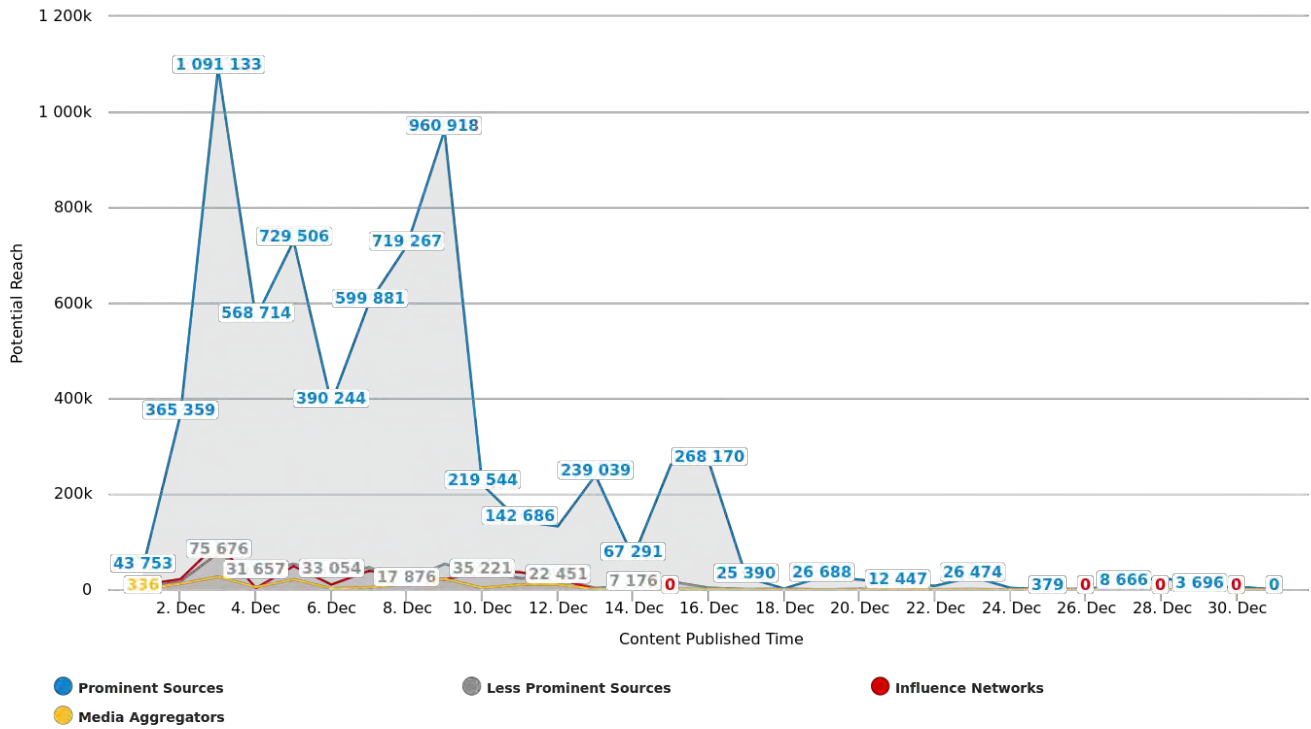
Stacked potential reach distribution of the story per types of sources. The chart clearly shows the dominant potential reach of Prominent Sources, which overshadows the rest of the source types. One of the reasons for the high potential reach of the Prominent Sources is the fact that the Bulgarian section of German international broadcaster Deutsche Welle released several pieces on the story.

Volume Comparison - Regional vs National Sources

Volume distribution of the story in the National and Regional Media. National Media published nearly three times more content related to the story compared to Regional Media.

Potential reach Comparison - Regional vs National Sources
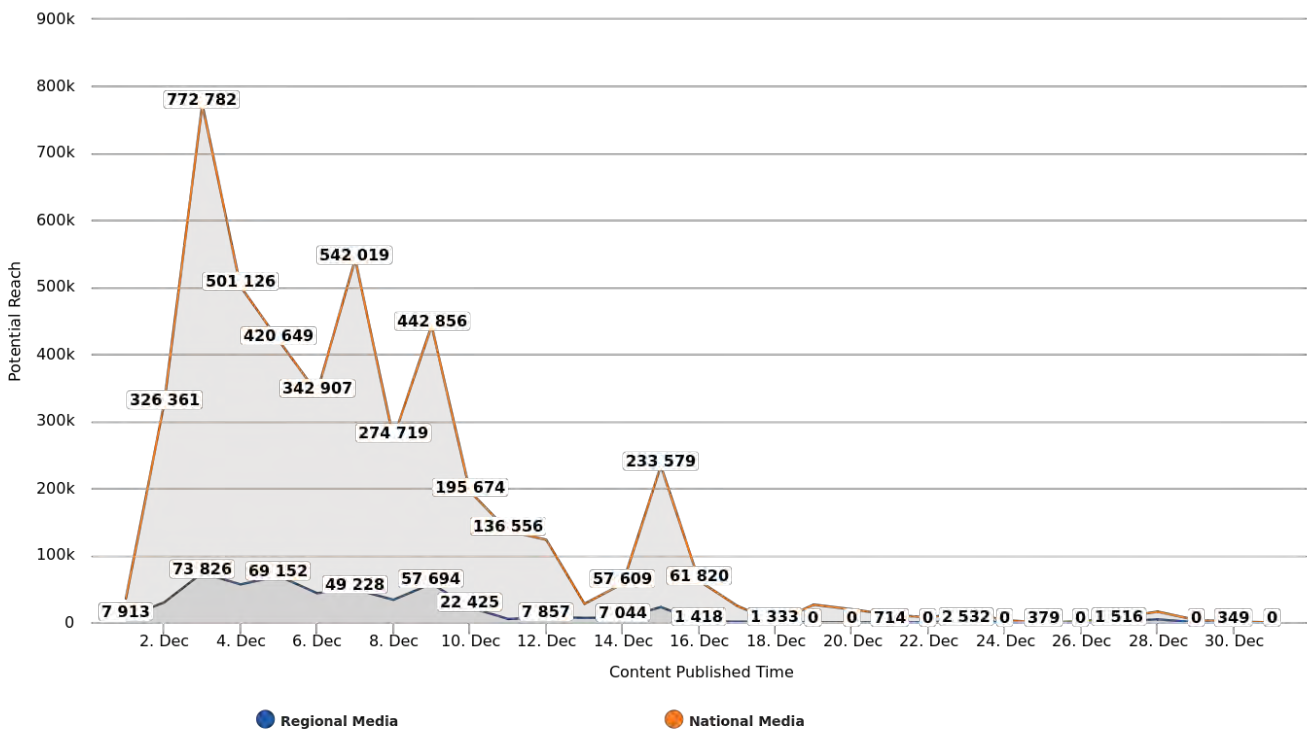
Potential reach distribution of the story in the National and Regional Media. The potential reach of National Media sources far exceeds that of Regional Media, due not only to the more limited audience of Regional Media, but also the lower amount of published content.

4.1.2.2 Online Coverage by Source Type
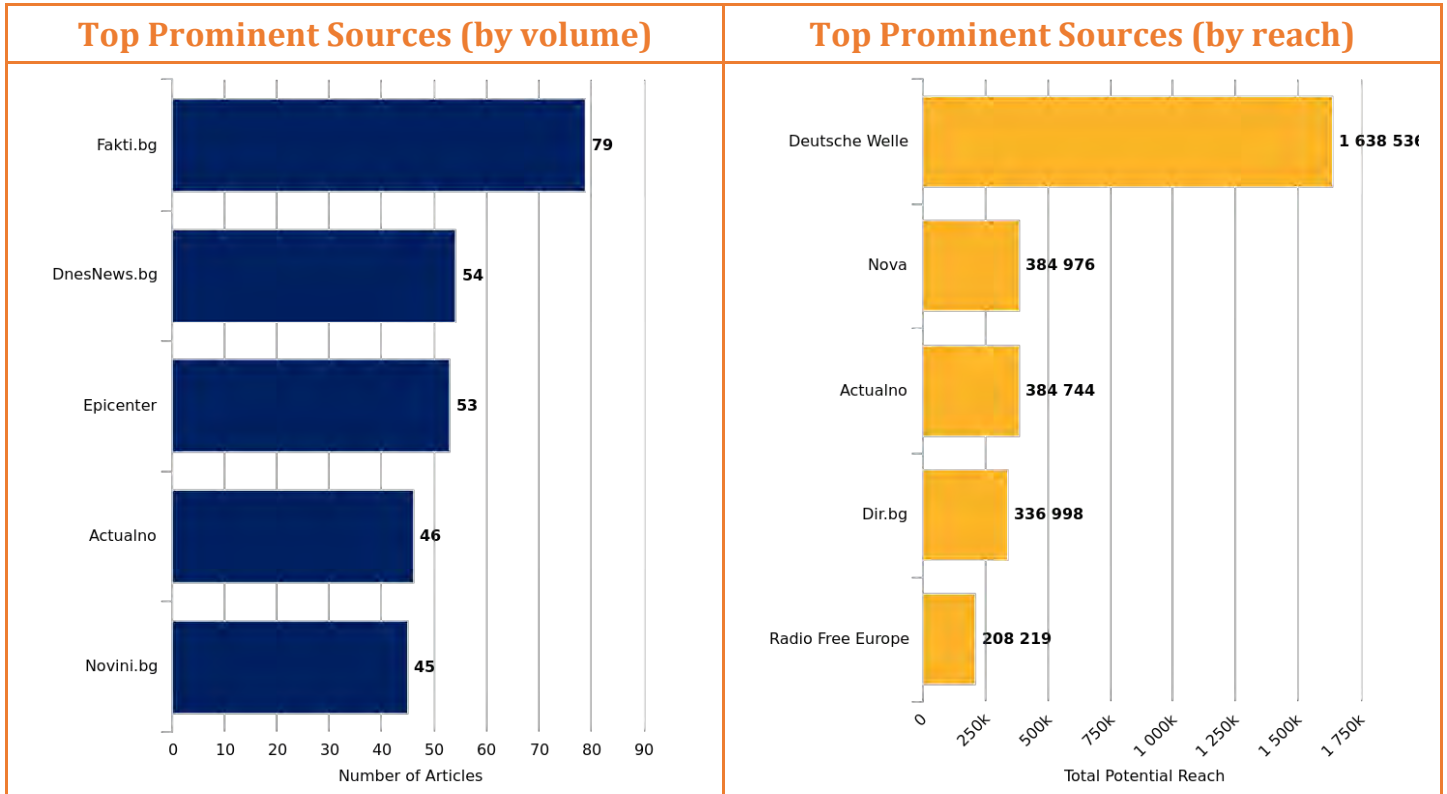
Top Prominent Sources (by volume)

Source	Number of Articles
Fakti.bg	79
DnesNews.bg	54
Epicenter	53
Actualno	46
Novini.bg	45

Top Prominent Sources (by reach)

Source	Total Potential Reach
Deutsche Welle	1 638 536
Nova	384 976
Actualno	384 744
Dir.bg	336 998
Radio Free Europe	208 219

The chart on the left displays the Top Prominent Sources (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Prominent Sources (by potential reach). The numbers point to the conclusion that even though some sources publish less in terms of volume, they manage to reach a considerably wider audience.

Top Less Prominent Sources (by volume)

Source	Number of Articles
The news today	74
Novinite-Dnes.eu	52
Sliven24	42
NovinitevBulgaria.com	41
NovinarBG.com	39

Top Less Prominent Sources (by reach)

Source	Total Potential Reach
The news today	92 870
Varna24.bg	39 907
Blog.bg	28 816
news.bg	22 589
vijti.com	21 882
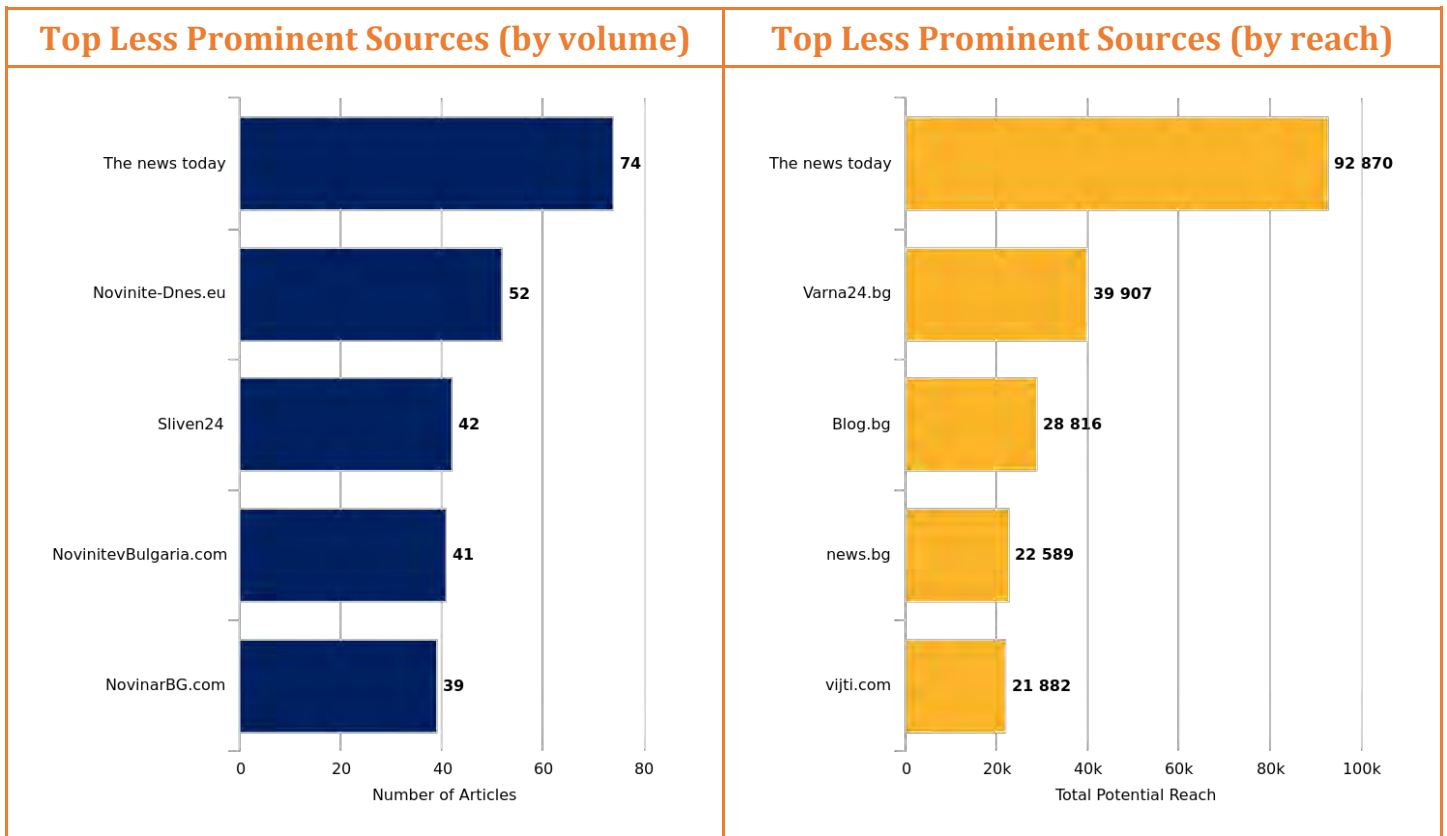
The chart on the left displays the Top Less Prominent Sources (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Less Prominent Sources (by potential reach). "The News Today" published the most content on the story and accumulated the highest potential reach.
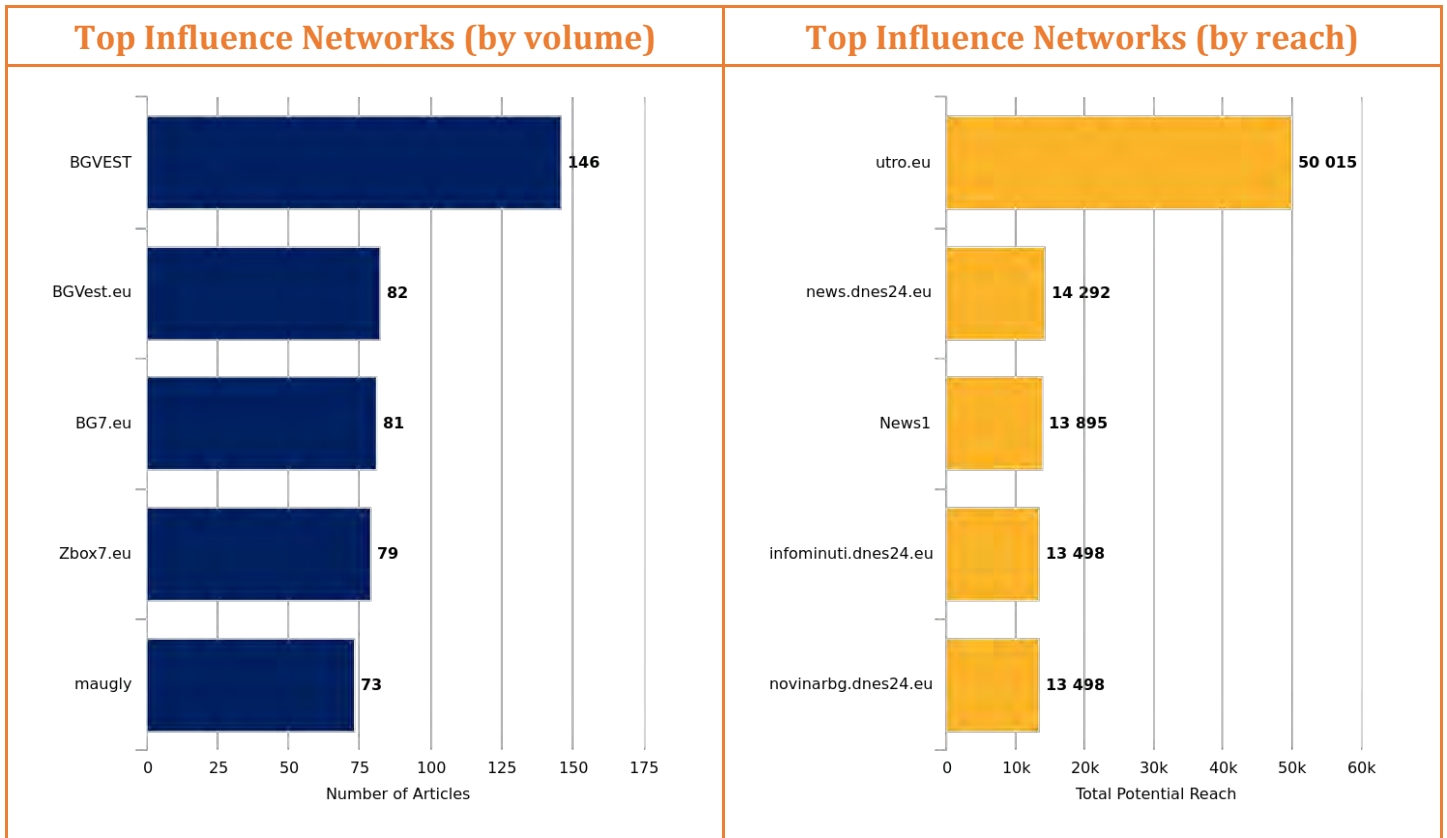
Top Influence Networks (by volume)

	Number of Articles
BGVEST	146
BGVest.eu	82
BG7.eu	81
Zbox7.eu	79
maugly	73

Top Influence Networks (by reach)

	Total Potential Reach
utro.eu	50 015
news.dnes24.eu	14 292
News1	13 895
infominuti.dnes24.eu	13 498
novinarbg.dnes24.eu	13 498

The chart on the left displays the Top Influence Networks (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Influence Networks (by potential reach). An intriguing observation is that although most Mushroom Websites have a relatively similar potential reach, "Utro" significantly outperforms the rest. "BGVest" was the most active in terms of publishing content, however, its cumulative potential reach remained low.
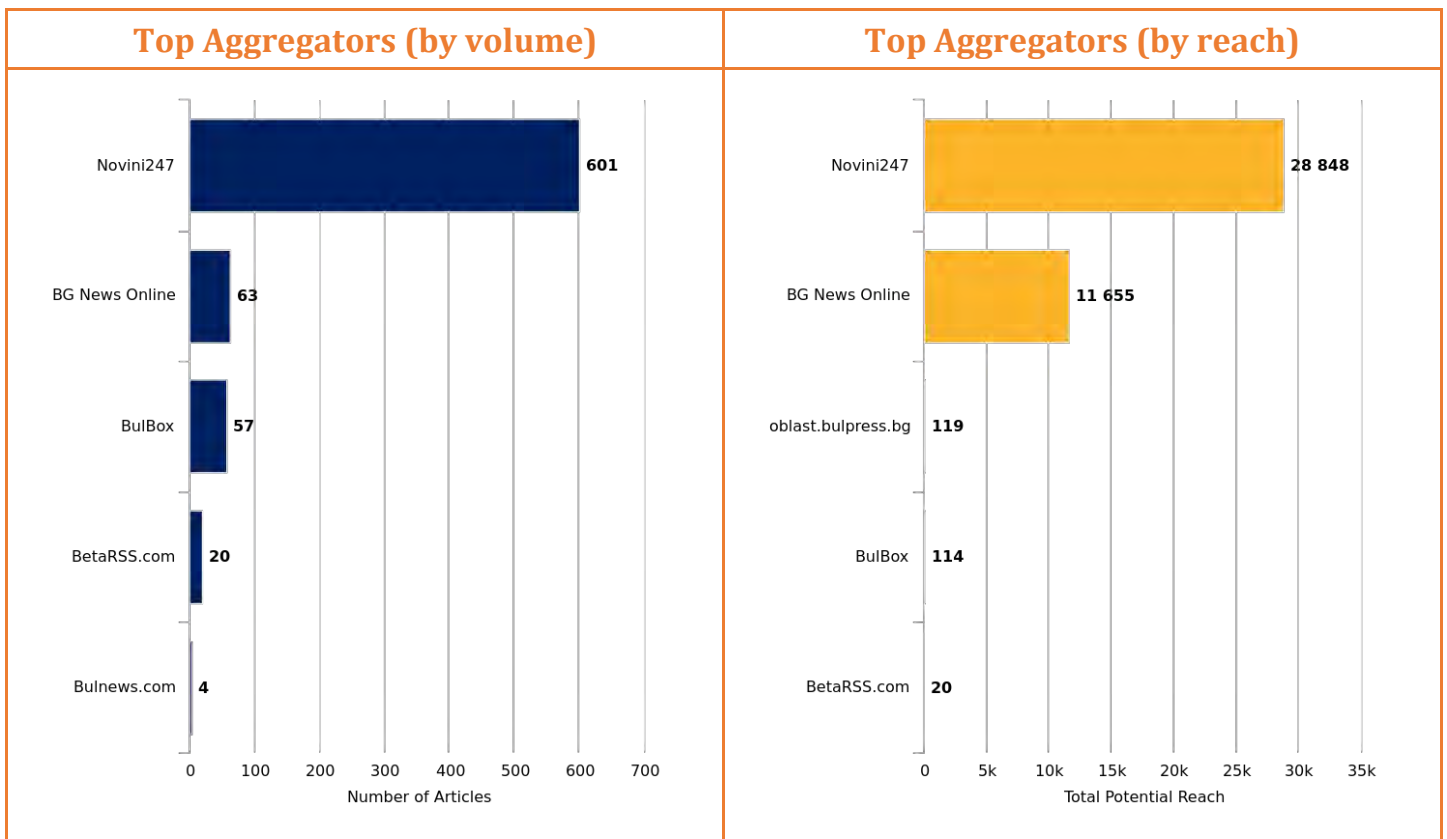
Top Aggregators (by volume)

	Number of Articles
Novini247	601
BG News Online	63
BulBox	57
BetaRSS.com	20
Bulnews.com	4

Top Aggregators (by reach)

	Total Potential Reach
Novini247	28 848
BG News Online	11 655
oblast.bulpress.bg	119
BulBox	114
BetaRSS.com	20

The chart on the left displays the Top Media Aggregators (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Media Aggregators (by potential reach). "Novini247"came first in terms of volume and potential reach.

4.1.2.3 Online Coverage: Source Audience
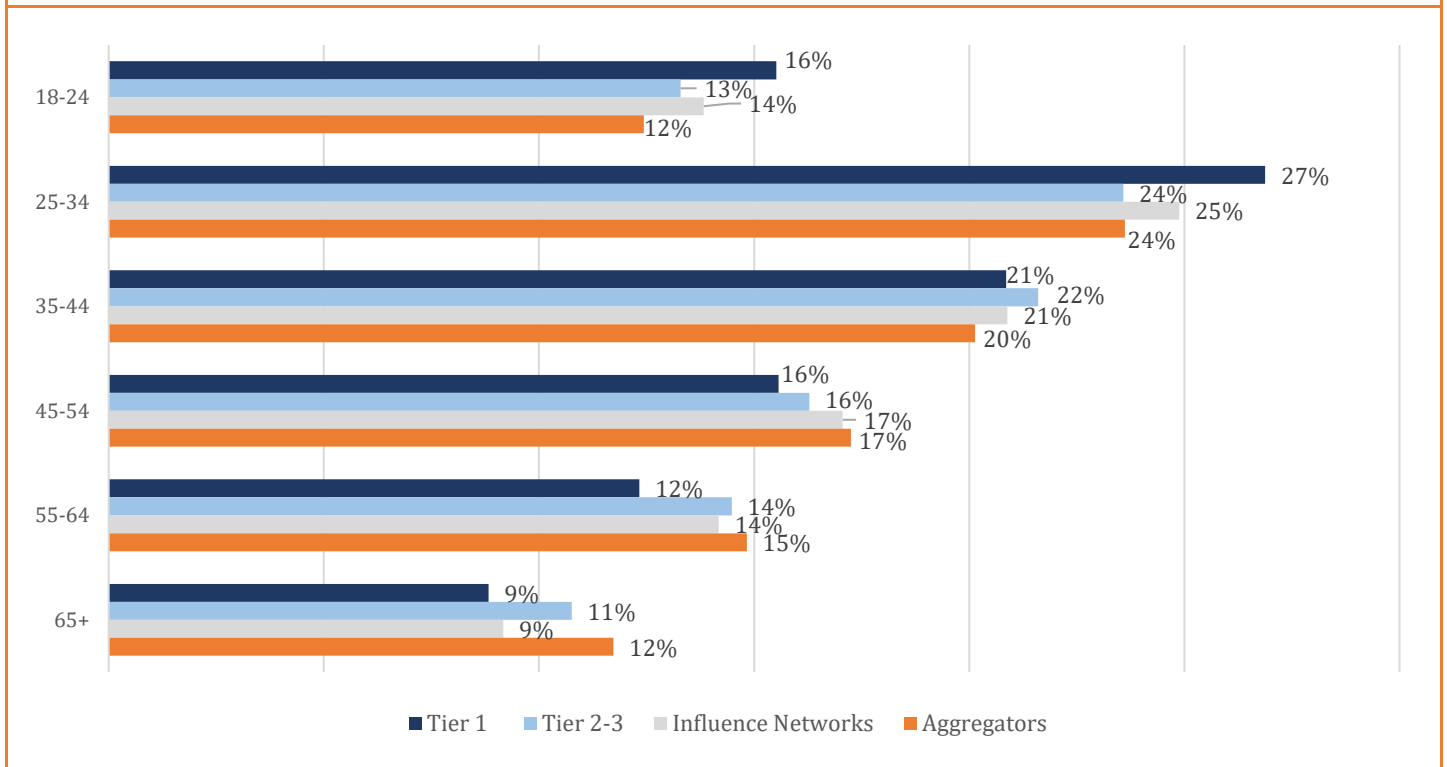
Source Audience by Age per Source Type

The chart illustrates the different level of engagement with the four types of monitored sources (Prominent Sources, Less Prominent Sources, Media Aggregators, and Influence Networks) among six age groups. The result shows that people who are most interested in the story are between the age of 25 and 44. The people above 65 years of age comprise the lowest audience percentage, and in this case engaged the most with Less Prominent Sources and Mushroom Websites.

Source Audience by Top Countries per Source Type
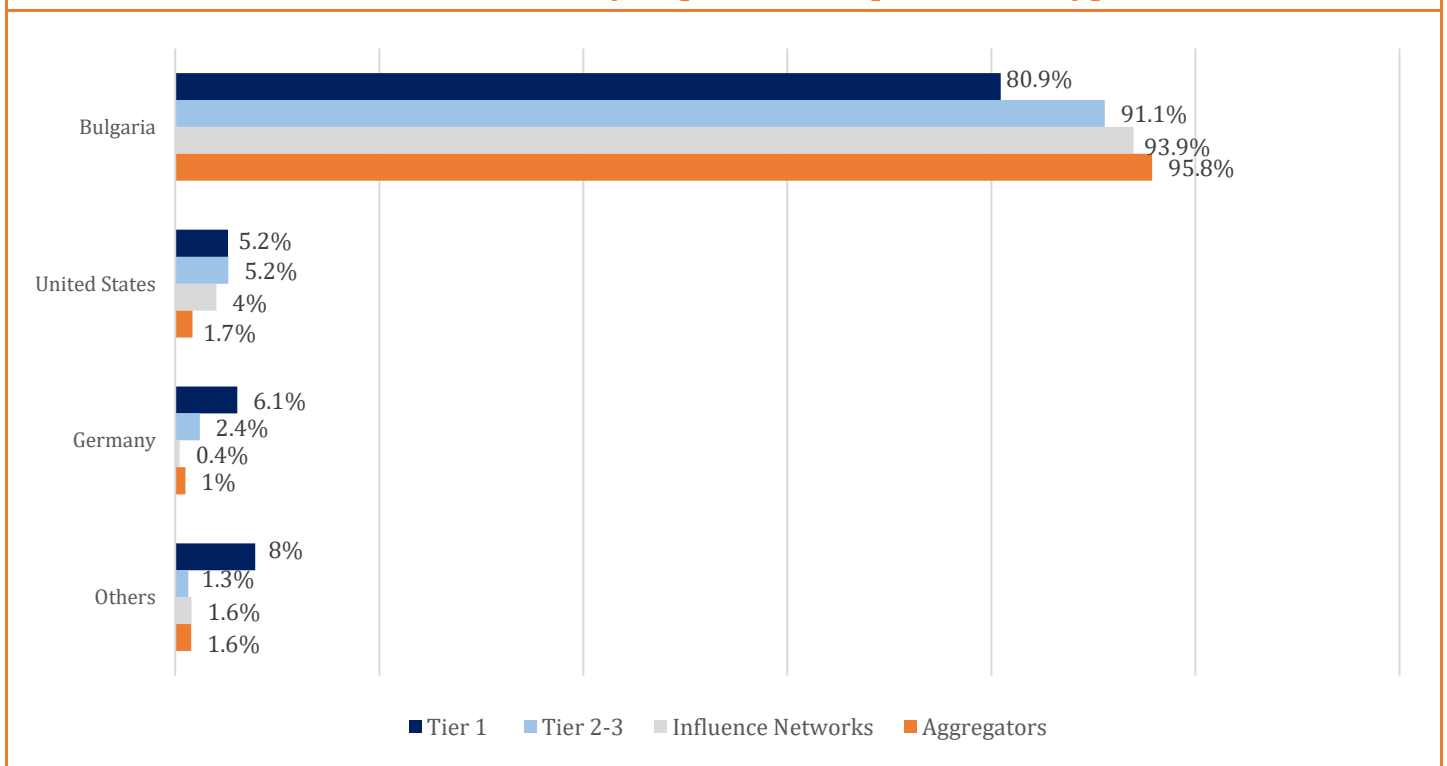
The chart displays the geographical distribution of the websites' visitors per source type. The traffic comes mostly from Bulgaria, with United States taking either the second place, or the third among all source types.
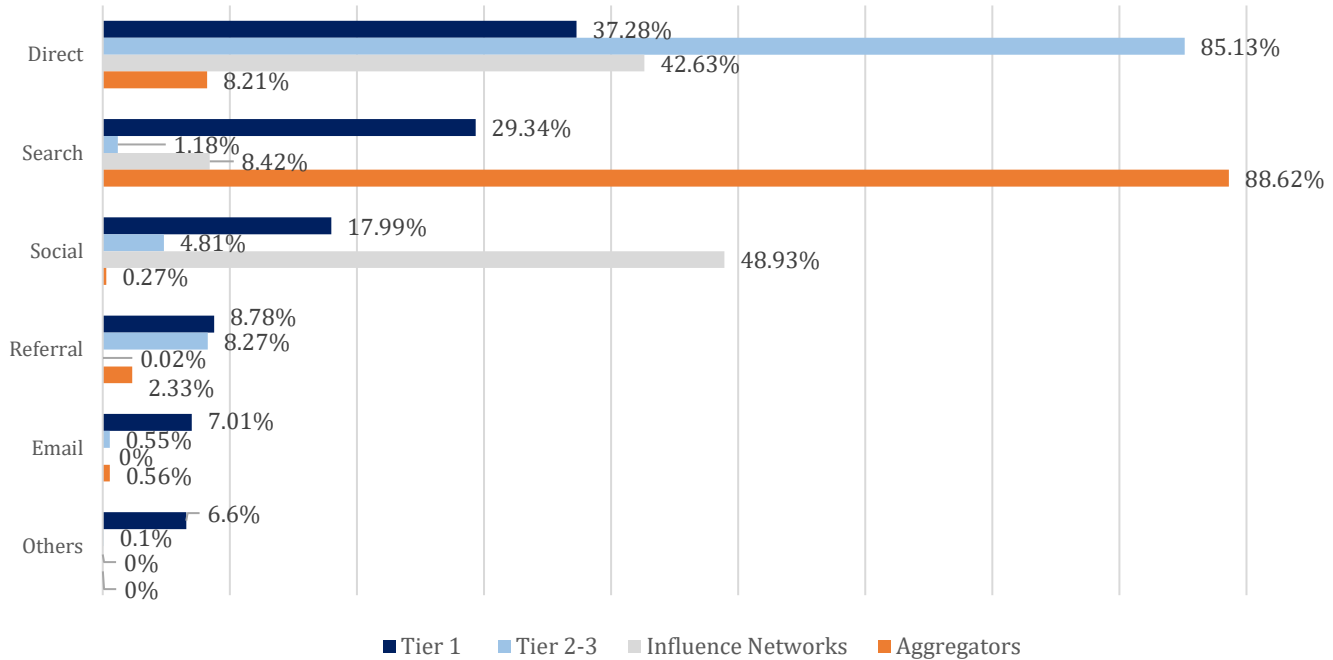
Source Audience by Traffic per Source Type

Direct
- Tier 1: 37.28%
- Tier 2-3: 85.13%
- Influence Networks: 42.63%
- Aggregators: 8.21%

Search
- Tier 1: 29.34%
- Tier 2-3: 1.18%
- Influence Networks: 8.42%
- Aggregators: 88.62%

Social
- Tier 1: 17.99%
- Tier 2-3: 4.81%
- Influence Networks: 48.93%
- Aggregators: 0.27%

Referral
- Tier 1: 8.78%
- Tier 2-3: 8.27%
- Influence Networks: 0.02%
- Aggregators: 2.33%

Email
- Tier 1: 7.01%
- Tier 2-3: 0.55%
- Influence Networks: 0%
- Aggregators: 0.56%

Others
- Tier 1: 6.6%
- Tier 2-3: 0.1%
- Influence Networks: 0%
- Aggregators: 0%

Legend: ■ Tier 1 ■ Tier 2-3 ■ Influence Networks ■ Aggregators

The chart compares the source of traffic and its volume generated by the four monitored source types. The Prominent Sources and the Less Prominent Sources in the context of the story gained most of their traffic directly. The Mushroom websites also received most of the traffic directly, as well as through the social media platform Facebook, which serves as their main tribune. Media Aggregators, on the other hand, gained most of their traffic via a search engine.

Source Audience by Social Network per Source Type
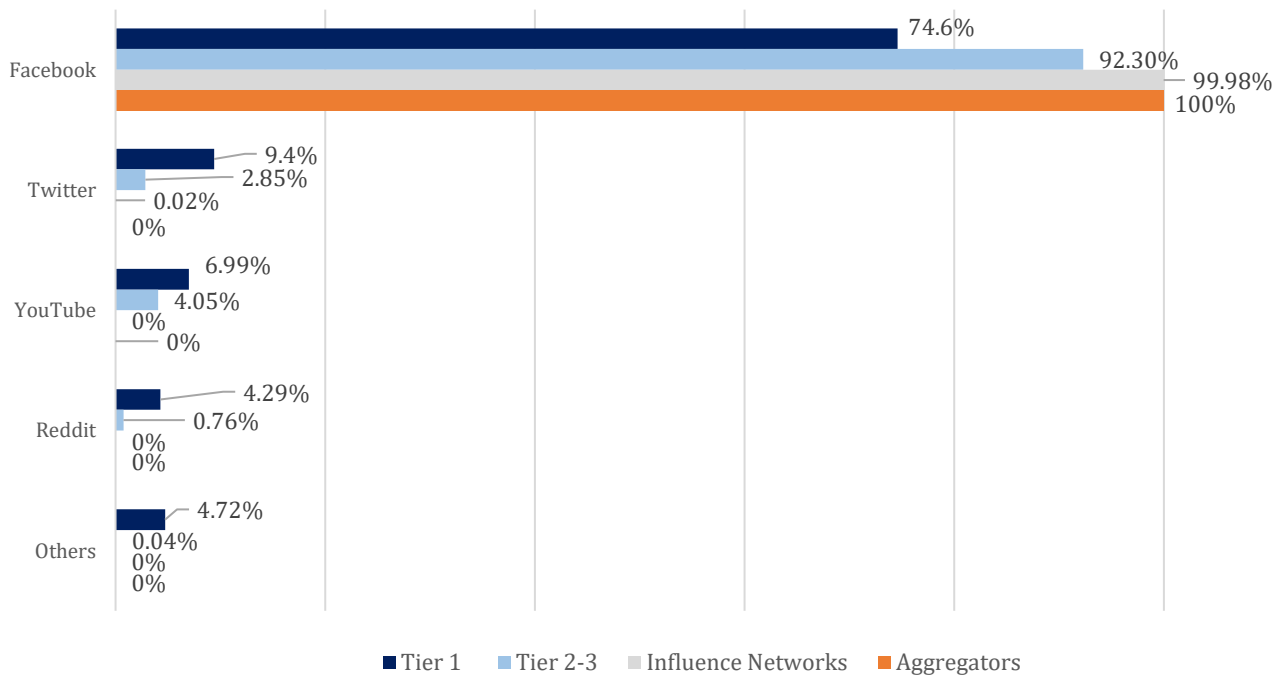
Facebook
- Tier 1: 74.6%
- Tier 2-3: 92.30%
- Influence Networks: 99.98%
- Aggregators: 100%

Twitter
- Tier 1: 9.4%
- Tier 2-3: 2.85%
- Influence Networks: 0.02%
- Aggregators: 0%

YouTube
- Tier 1: 6.99%
- Tier 2-3: 4.05%
- Influence Networks: 0%
- Aggregators: 0%

Reddit
- Tier 1: 4.29%
- Tier 2-3: 0.76%
- Influence Networks: 0%
- Aggregators: 0%

Others
- Tier 1: 4.72%
- Tier 2-3: 0.04%
- Influence Networks: 0%
- Aggregators: 0%

Legend: ■ Tier 1 ■ Tier 2-3 ■ Influence Networks ■ Aggregators

The chart illustrates the source audience distribution according to the traffic of the website gained via social network per source type. The findings highlight Facebook's dominance in all monitored types of sources.

4.1.2.4 Online Coverage: Political Parties (by volume)
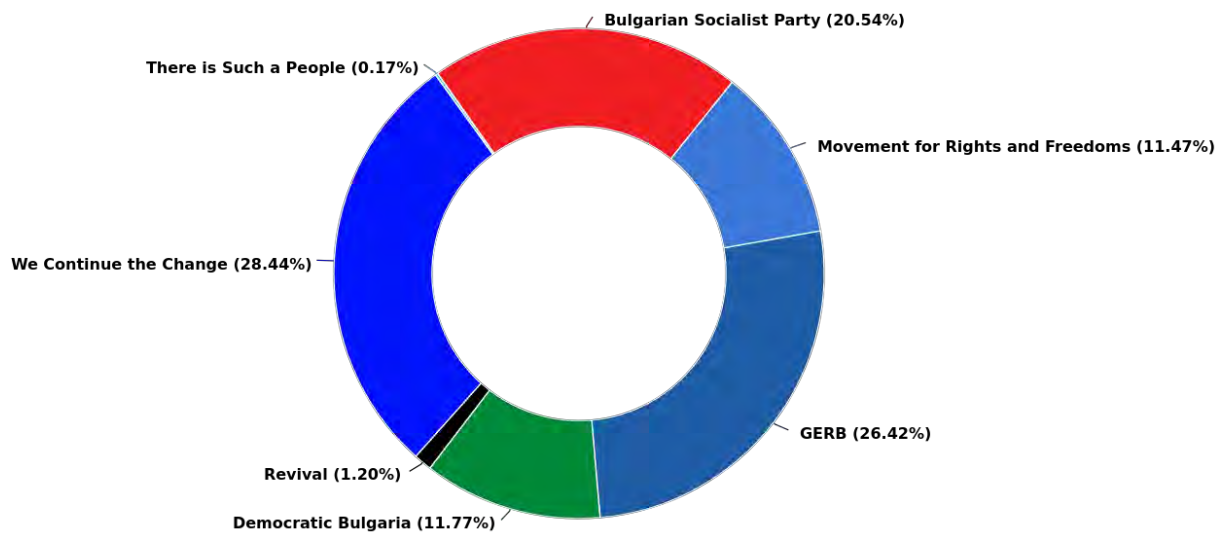
Top Mentioned Political Parties

The chart presents the most mentioned political parties in the context of the story. The findings emphasize the predominant mentions of We Continue the Change (PP) (34%), as party leaders Kiril Petkov and Asen Vassilev made various statements on the matter. A predictable observation is the high rate of mentions of Revival, taking into consideration its leader Kostadin Kostadinov's negative stance toward EU policies. The remaining parties were mentioned relatively equally in the context of the story.

4.1.3. Social Coverage (Facebook)

This analysis highlights the engagement of social media users with the story related to Bulgaria's bid to enter the Schengen area, and its associated discourse. The findings show that social media users expressed diverse opinions on the matter and their interactions were concentrated predominantly in December 2022. Media outlets' official pages and personal pages of journalists received significant engagement for their posts on the story. The most commonly used keywords were related to Bulgaria, Schengen, corruption, and negative associations with certain political figures. Political parties, including GERB, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms, and We Continue the Change, were frequently mentioned, with GERB being the most commonly referenced party. Users associated GERB with corruption and believed that Bulgaria's ability to join Schengen is linked to the removal of Borissov and his party from power.

Overall Volume (per month)

Overall, the Schengen story generated significant volume, with the majority of interactions occurring during the month of December 2022. Numerous Facebook pages published content related to the story, and it garnered a great deal of interest from social media users. The content saw a significant surge in December, following the Netherlands' opposition to Bulgaria's bid to join the Schengen area. Many social media users expressed their dissatisfaction with the Netherlands' decision, while others believed that Bulgaria deserves the rejection due to its problems with corruption.

Top 10 Social Authors (by volume)
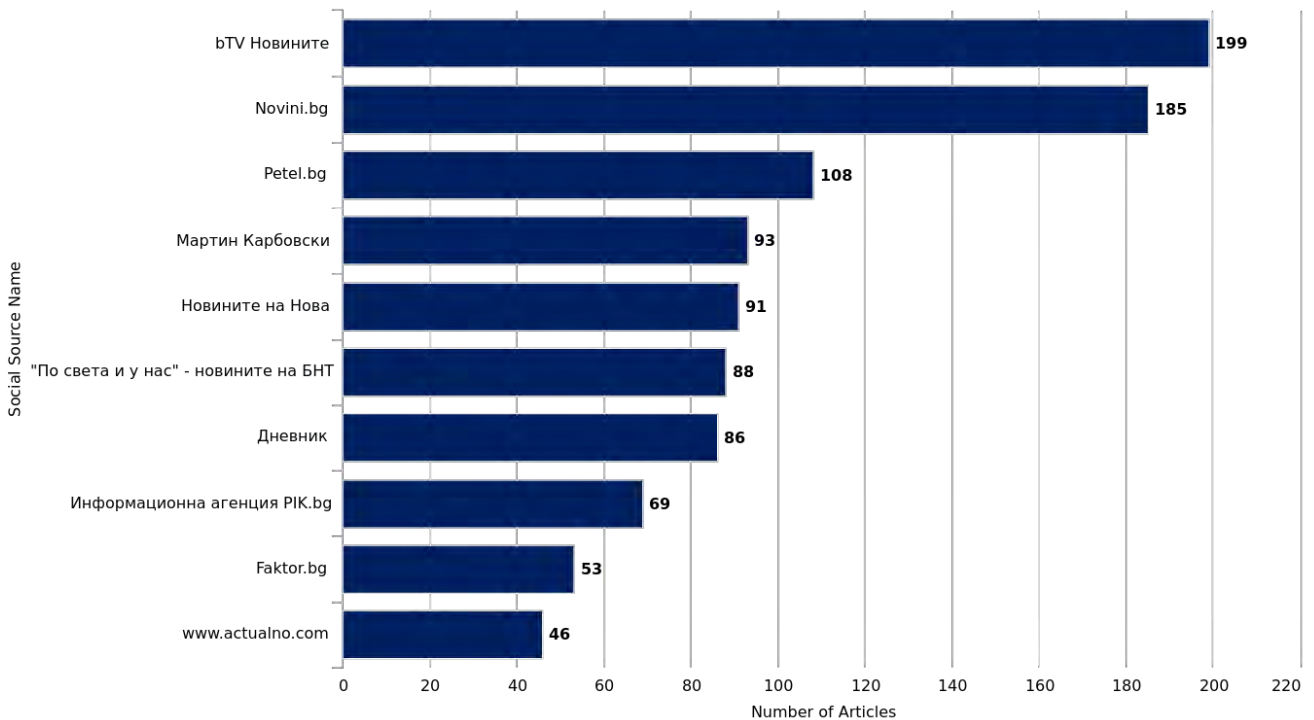
Numerous media outlets' official pages covered the Schengen story's latest developments. Notably, Bulgarian journalist Martin Karbovski's personal page garnered significant engagement for his posts on the story. Karbovski attributed the rejection to Bulgaria's status as a poor and corrupt country, primarily due to the governing policies of the political party GERB.

Top Keywords (by volume)
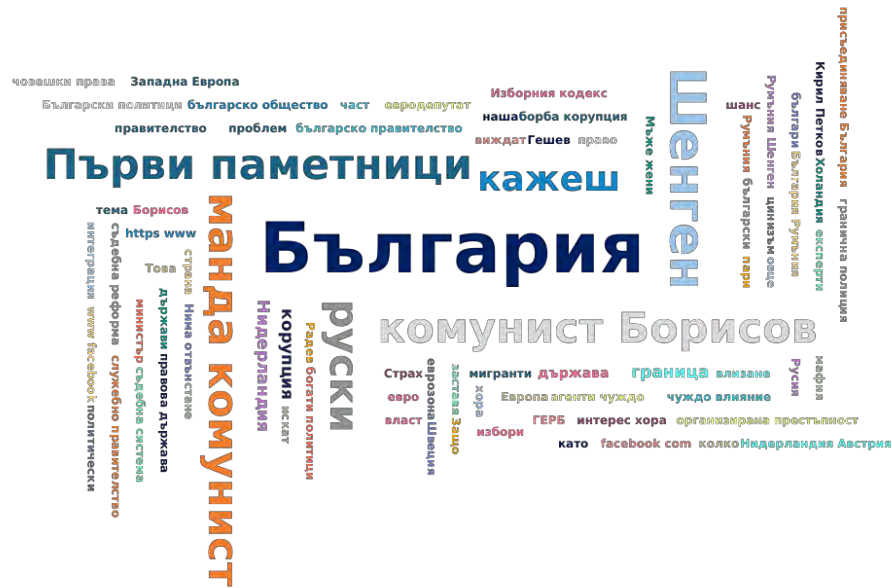
The most commonly used keywords in relation to the story include "Bulgaria" and "Schengen". Additionally, certain phrases, such as "communist Borissov," "communist mandate," "first monuments," and "Russian" appear frequently in comments from various users, indicating a repetitive pattern of publishing the same comments under multiple posts. Furthermore, the name of Boyko Borissov has been repeatedly used in connection with corruption, as he is widely perceived among social media users to be associated with such practices. Furthermore, the term "Russian" has also been frequently used in a negative context in association with Bulgarian President Rumen Radev.

4.1.3.1 Social Coverage: Political Parties (by volume)

Top Mentioned Political Parties

Facebook
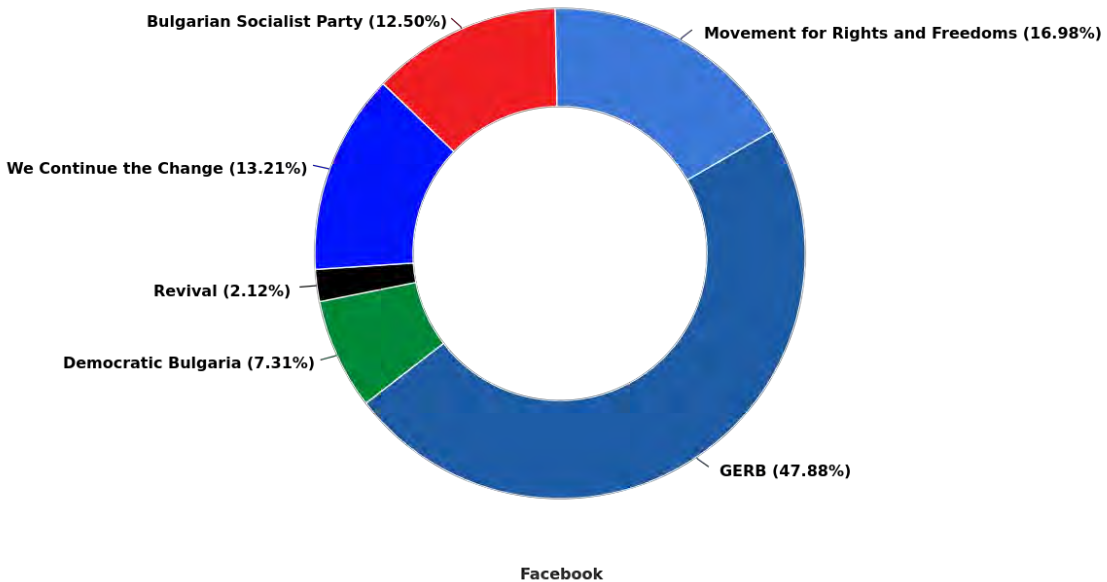
The political party that has been mentioned the most is GERB, accounting for 50% of the references, followed by the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS) with 17% and We Continue the Change (PP) with 13%. GERB has been repeatedly associated with corruption, and social media users have expressed the opinion that the country will not be able to join Schengen until Borissov and his party are no longer in power. DPS has also been linked to corruption, partly due to their association with GERB. PP is mentioned primarily due to their stance on the Schengen bid, as well as in polarized comments from social media users. Overall the interactions were characterized by a wide range of opinions, with users assigning blame to multiple political parties.

4.2. Magnitsky Act Sanctions against Three Bulgarian Individuals

4.2.1. Background

On December 23, 2016, American President Barack Obama signed into law the Global Magnitsky Act, which authorizes the US government to ban foreign government officials all over the world from entering its territory and to freeze their assets. Such restrictions were imposed on Bulgarian offenders for the first time in June 2021. Although the current report draws its metric conclusions from the mentions of the case since its beginning and until the end of the monitored period, the following paragraphs pay special attention to the content peak at the start when the story actually made the headlines and was not merely part of the contextual information.

At the beginning of the month, national media announced that the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) had sanctioned three Bulgarian individuals for their extensive roles in corruption in Bulgaria, as well as their networks encompassing 64 entities. The sanctions targeted Vassil Bozhkov, a prominent Bulgarian businessperson, Delyan Peevski, a former Member of Parliament, and Ilko Zhelyazkov, the former Deputy Chief of the Bulgarian State Agency for Technical Operations [59]. Almost immediately after the announcement, then Prime Minister Stefan Yanev spoke over the phone with the US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland, who informed him that, building upon the Global Magnitsky Act, three Bulgarian individuals and 64 corporate entities had been designated for sanctions and that the measures had been implemented "in the context of the effort to effectively combat corruption in Bulgaria" [60]. The media also widely circulated the position expressed by the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs: "The rule of law underpins the democratic process in any state governed by it. We have unequivocally shared with our partners and allies our conviction that the fight against corruption in all its forms should be our unconditional priority, both in principle and in practice" [61]. Other outlets [62] quoted a POLITICO article, according to which, compared to "the US sweeping anti-graft sanctions, [...] the EU has conspicuously chosen not to stand with Bulgarians fighting corruption" [63].

The Prosecutor's Office ordered an investigation based on the data from the US report. The authority's spokesperson, Siika Mileva, said that an analysis of the inspections against DPS's former deputy Delyan Peevski would be taking place, adding that new charges against Vassil Bozhkov might be raised as well [64]. For its part, the National Revenue Agency published the list of 64 companies connected with Delyan Peevski, Vassil Bozhkov, and Ilko Zhelyazkov, with Asen Vassilev, then Finance Minister and co-chairman of We Continue the Change, confirming that "all of the available information will be made public" [65]. Four days later, 34 more entities, owned, controlled, or managed within the past five years by OFAC's sanctioned individuals, were added to the list [66]. It is worth noting that this was not the final amendment as the month of June saw further corrections in the number of former and current partners of the sanctioned individuals [67].

Vassil Bozhkov was the first of the three to comment on the matter. He did not elaborate on his mention in the report but instead thanked the US authorities "for paying attention to my signal. It was the first official testimony of the racketeering and extortion done on a particularly large scale by Boyko Borissov and Vladislav Goranov [former Minister of Finance]" [68]. Several days later, however, it turned out that Bozhkov's party Bulgarian Summer had filed an appeal in the Supreme Administrative Court against the government's decision to make "blacklists" of the companies related to the sanctioned Bulgarian citizens [69]. Delyan Peevski also commented on the so-called "blacklists," saying: "I have no businesses, no bank accounts, and no real estate in the United States. The Ministry of Finance's claim that Pure Blue Event Management LLC is my property and that it is registered in America is a lie. These are absolute manipulations not based on any real facts" [70]. Following this statement, it was reported that Peevski had taken legal action against OFAC in an attempt to have the Magnitsky Act sanctions lifted [71]. In addition, the third sanctioned individual, Ilko Zhelyazkov, submitted his resignation from the position of a Deputy Chairman of the National Bureau for Control of the Special Surveillance Means [72].

The announced Magnitsky sanctions were accompanied by multiple comments from analysts and political representatives alike. The Chicago-based journalist Simeon Gasparov likened the act to the "domino effect," as the banks associated with Peevski and Bozhkov would have to be sanctioned as well [73]. For her part, BSP's leader Korneliya Ninova remarked that "the US sanctions constitute a serious contribution to the fight against corruption and the

parallel state in our country" [74], while DPS's Chairman, Mustafa Karadaya, explained the following: "Mr. Peevski was never a DPS member. However, he is my friend and one of the people who have been close to DPS since 2008" [75]. Democratic Bulgaria's Hristo Ivanov described the sanctions as "a gesture towards the Bulgarian society's intolerance to political corruption," concluding that the incriminated persons "put the Bulgarian Prosecutor's Office and the Bulgarian political factors that raised these figures in an extremely difficult international situation" [76]. He also called on the State Agency for National Security (DANS) to impose additional sanctions [77]. Kiril Petkov, then Acting Minister of Economy, noted that "it is of utmost importance that our own institutions work properly and that we do not rely on an outsider to tell us these things," specifying that "the money flow in different directions should be under control" [78]. Moreover, Slavi Trifonov, popular TV show host and leader of There is Such a People, was of the opinion that Bulgaria's civil society had been "at the basis of the US position" [79]. In turn, then US Ambassador to Bulgaria, H.E. Herro Mustafa, declared that the Magnitsky Act sanctions "aim to support the efforts of the Bulgarian people to deal with the scourge of corruption," clarifying that "corruption hinders the country's potential" [80]. In a similar vein, President Rumen Radev, speaking for reporters, said that "US sanctions are the diagnosis of a regime that fostered corruption" [81]. He also discussed the matter with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who explained that the sanctions were "the US contribution to the fight against corruption, as well as to the strengthening of democracy in the country and the promotion of its economy's potential" [82].

GERB leader and former Prime Minister Boyko Borissov took part in a special briefing on the subject, during which he stated: "I would just like to remind you why I was elected countless times for different positions. Precisely because of the fight against corruption, for which we [GERB] have done a lot. [...] I declared my relationship with Peevski a long time ago. It is purely political and related to the mixed regions only. We do not share any companies, nor do we own any other joint businesses. We have never received a dime from Bozhkov" [83]. Despite this, many outlets placed the sanctions in the context of the then upcoming elections, scheduled for July 11. According to some reports, because of them, the support for GERB had decreased by 2% [84], while others expected them to be used in support of GERB's elections campaign [85]. The media [86] also quoted a Financial Times article, according to which Boyko Borissov "fights for political life ahead of elections amid public backlash against graft" [87].

Last but not least, some politicians made a connection between the sanctions and European Chief Prosecutor Laura Kövesi's visit to Bulgaria with Viktor Serafimov from Republicans for Bulgaria saying that "the European Prosecutor's prerogatives pertain to the misuse of EU funds and corruption. Within one week, we receive both a "heavy slap" under the Magnitsky law and a visit from Kövesi – a highly unlikely coincidence. Obviously, this is a clear indicator that we must return to normality. Let us complete the judicial reform" [88].

4.2.2. Online Coverage

4.2.2.1 Overall Metrics and Volume Comparison

The online coverage surrounding the story reached around 15,000 articles, making it the second biggest in terms of volume, included in this report. More than half of the content was published by Prominent Sources (around 8,300), followed by Media Aggregators (around 3,000), and Less Prominent Sources (around 2,500). Influence Networks were the least active.

The sources monitored in the context of this story share a similar audience demographic, with people between the ages of 25 and 44 constituting the largest percentage of the readership. In addition, the traffic was generated primarily from Bulgaria. However, the sources differ in terms of how they gained the said traffic. Prominent Sources and Media Aggregators received most of their traffic directly or via search engines, Less Prominent Sources—directly, and Influence Networks mainly through social media and direct clicks.

The results show that the direct use of the word "corruption" is almost four times more common than the use of corruption-associated vocabulary. Due to the national interest in the matter, the story was extensively covered by sources categorized as National Media.

Top Keywords (by volume)
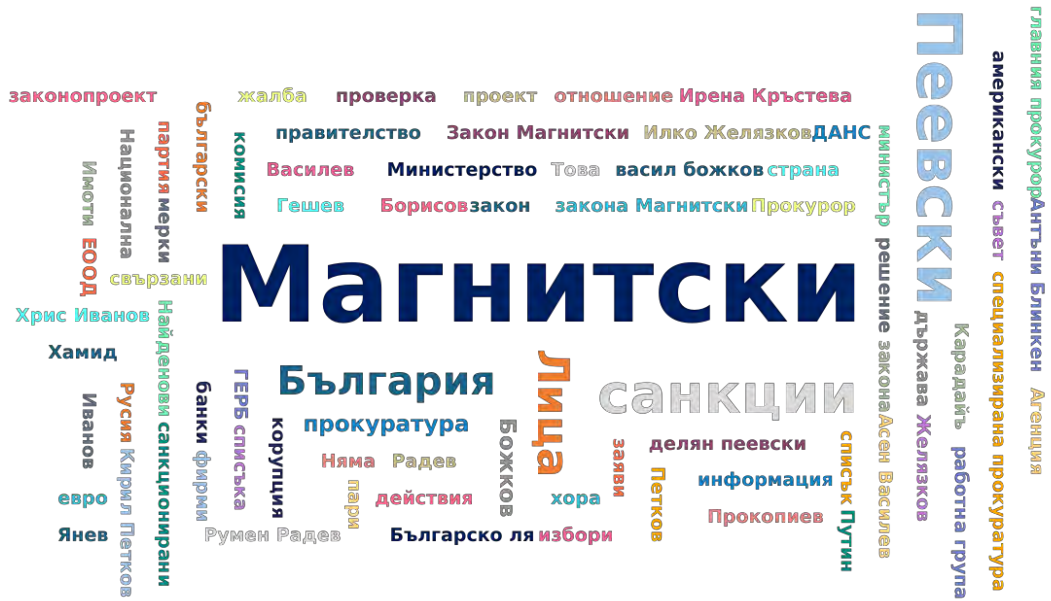
A tag-cloud representation of the most frequently used keywords or phrases within the monitored story. The size of each word in the cloud is a relative indicator of the term's popularity. In this particular case, the most frequently mentioned keywords include "Magnitsky," "sanctions," "individuals," and the family name of one of the sanctioned Bulgarian citizens—Delyan Peevski, a former Member of Parliament. Other frequently mentioned keywords include "Bulgaria," "prosecution," "corruption," and the names of the other two sanctioned Bulgarian citizens—Vassil Bozhkov and Ilko Zhelyazkov.

Volume Comparison – Corruption Keywords vs. Corruption-Associated Keywords
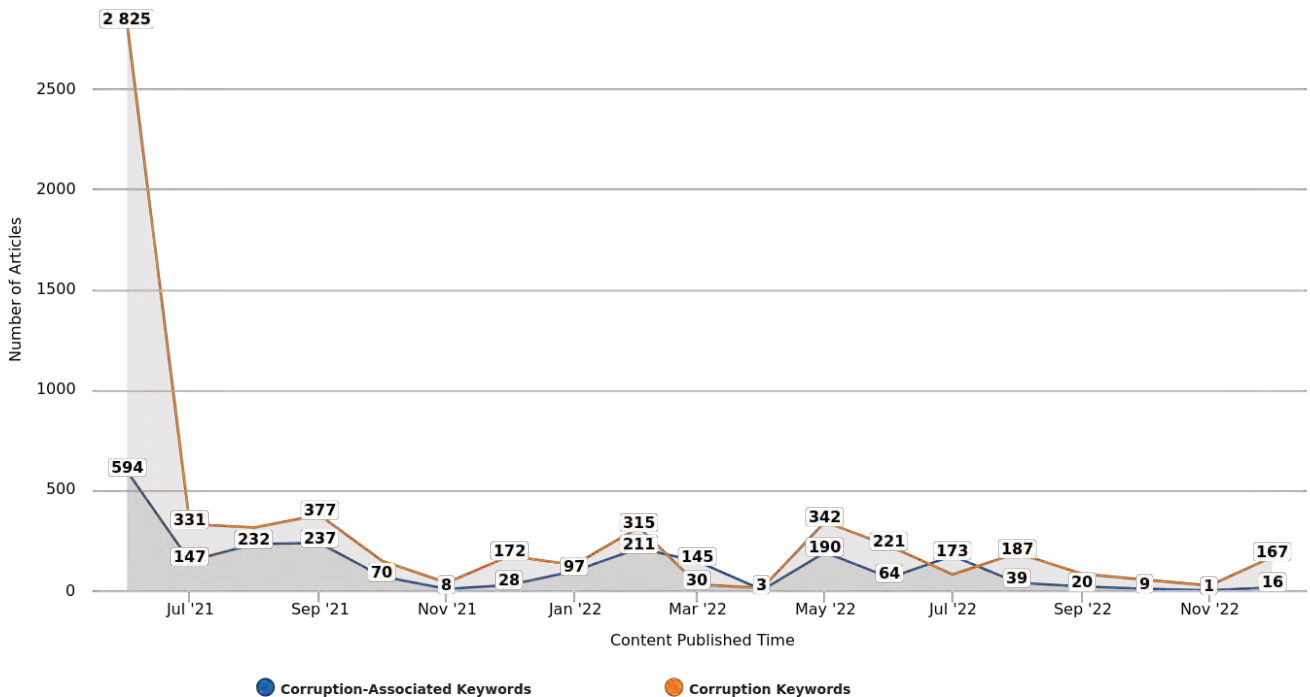
An analysis of the volume distribution of the pieces of content that reference corruption directly or indirectly. The results show that the direct use of the word "corruption" is almost four times more common than the use of corruption-associated vocabulary. A possible reason for that is the fact that, unlike the majority of the other stories, the Magnitsky case is not based on speculations or accusations, but instead on the measures undertaken by a foreign legal entity (the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control), which sanctions individuals "for their extensive roles in corruption."

Potential Reach Comparison – Corruption Keywords vs. Corruption-Associated Keywords
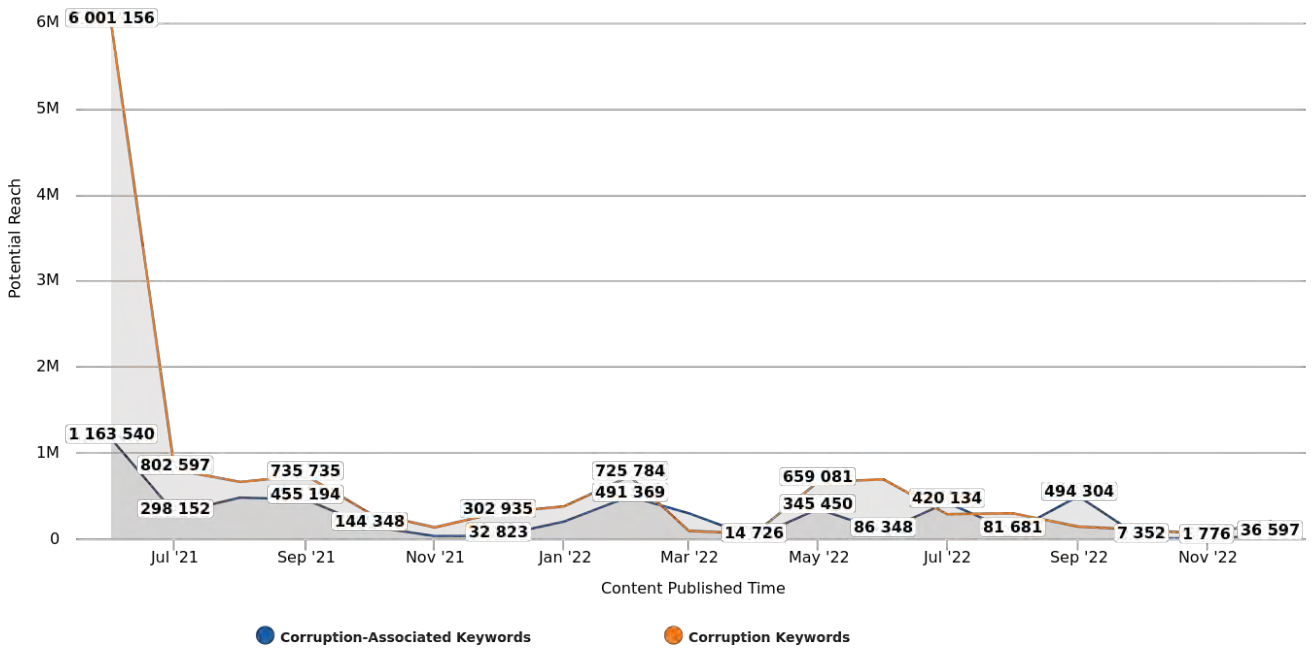
Potential reach distribution of the pieces of content, which reference corruption either directly or indirectly. The potential reach distribution pattern mirrors the volume distribution of the content.

Stacked Volume Comparison (by source type)
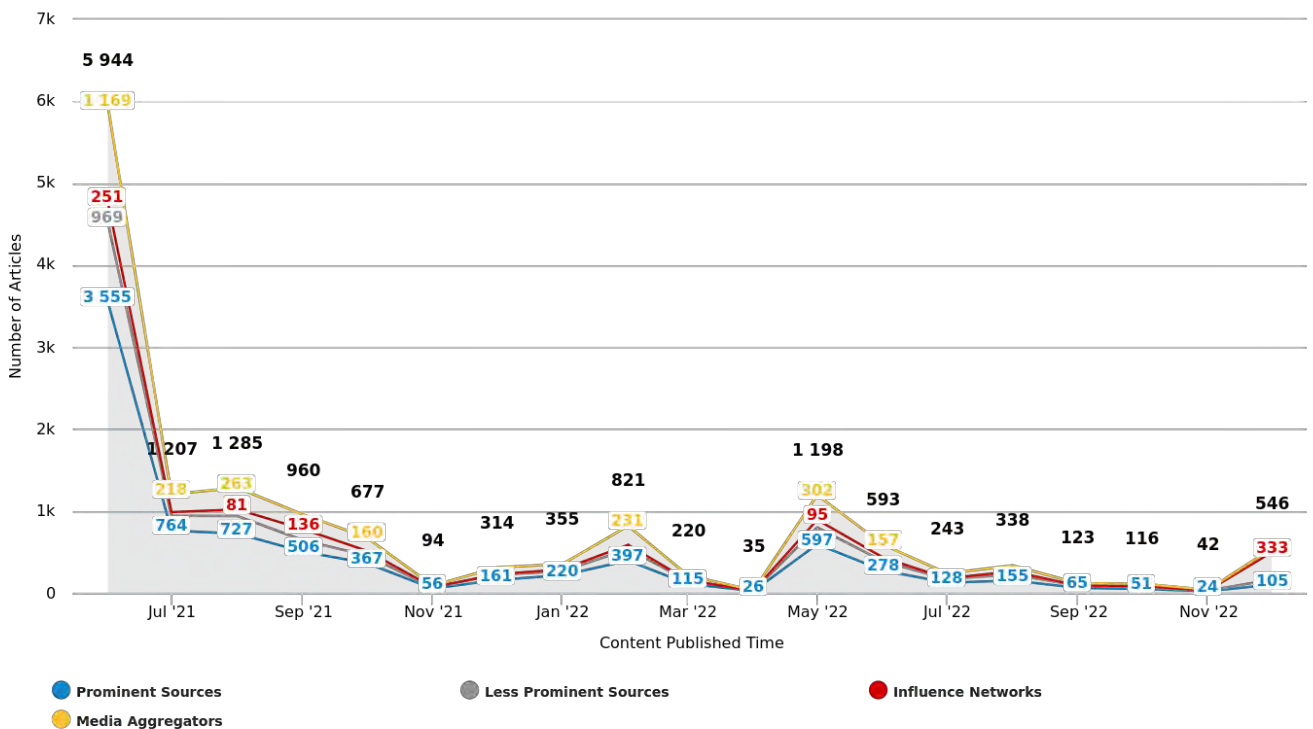
Stacked volume distribution of the story per type of sources. Prominent Sources published the most content, followed by Media Aggregators and Less Prominent Sources. Influence Networks published the least amount of content. The latter produced two minor peaks—one in June 2021, at the very beginning of the story, and one in December 2022, at the end of the monitored period. The first peak was caused by an uncoordinated wave of various articles related to the main storyline. The second peak, however, was caused by only one headline republished multiple times: "Geshev Has Important Revelations about Borissov, "Magnitsky," Operation "White," and the Action at the Border!". The title refers to an interview with Bulgarian Prosecutor-General Ivan Geshev for the Bulgarian National Television [89].

Stacked Potential Reach Comparison (by source type)
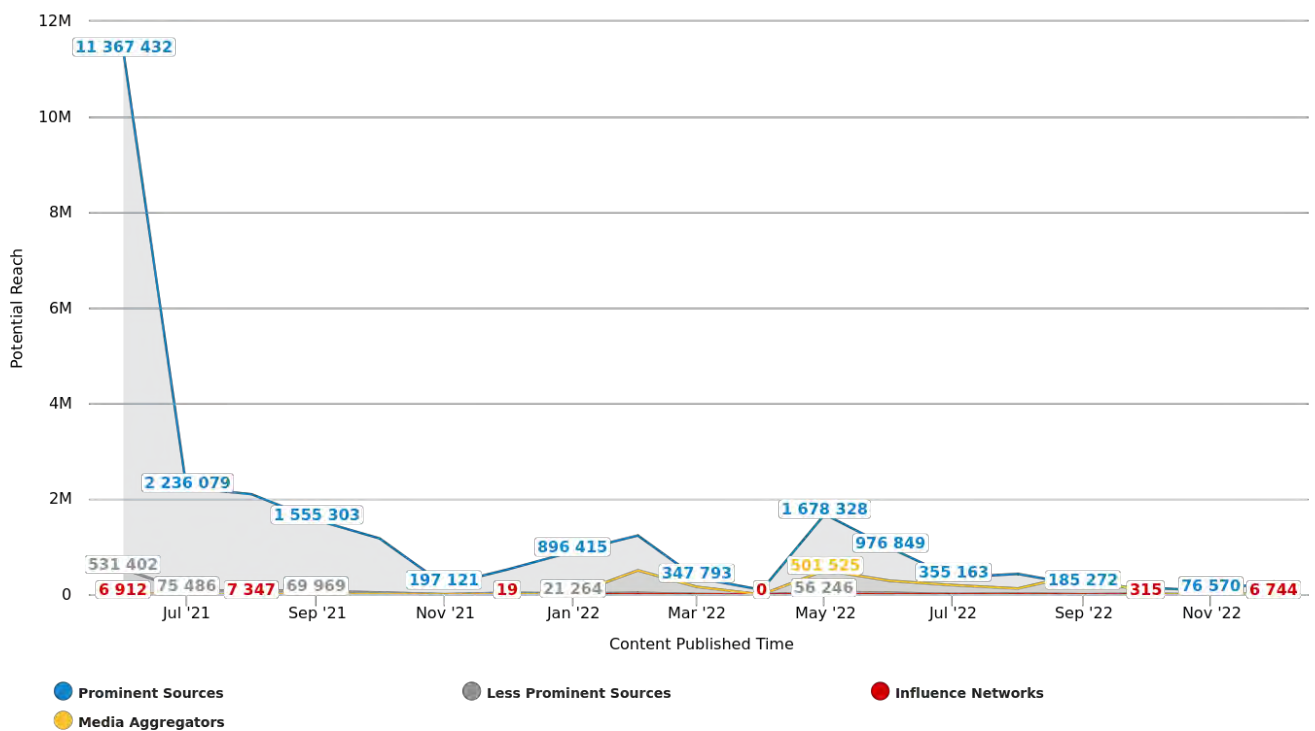
- Prominent Sources
- Less Prominent Sources
- Influence Networks
- Media Aggregators

Stacked potential reach distribution of the story per type of sources. The chart clearly shows the dominant potential reach of Prominent Sources, which overshadows the rest of the source types. One of the reasons for the high potential reach of the Prominent Sources is the fact that the Bulgarian section of the German international broadcaster Deutsche Welle released several related pieces.

Volume Comparison - Regional vs National Sources
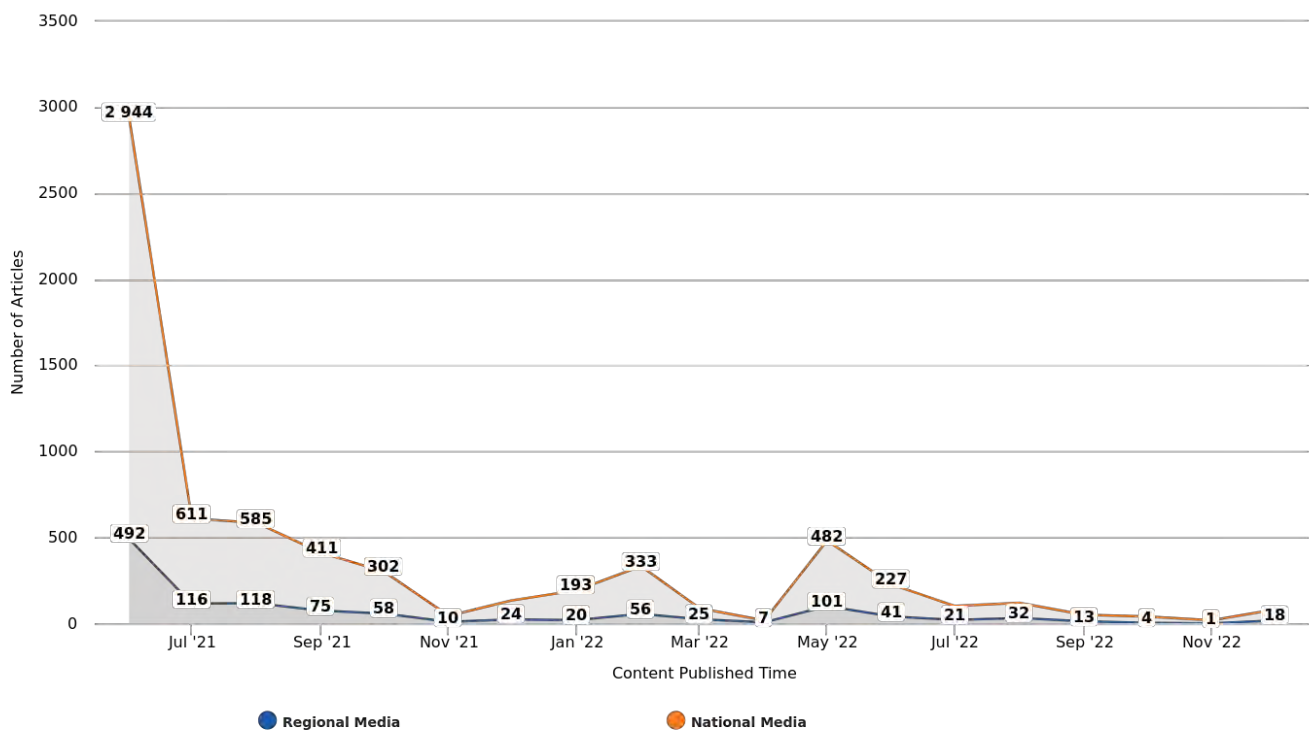
- Regional Media
- National Media

Volume distribution of the story in the National and Regional Media. National Media published nearly six times more content compared to Regional Media.

Potential reach Comparison - Regional vs National Sources
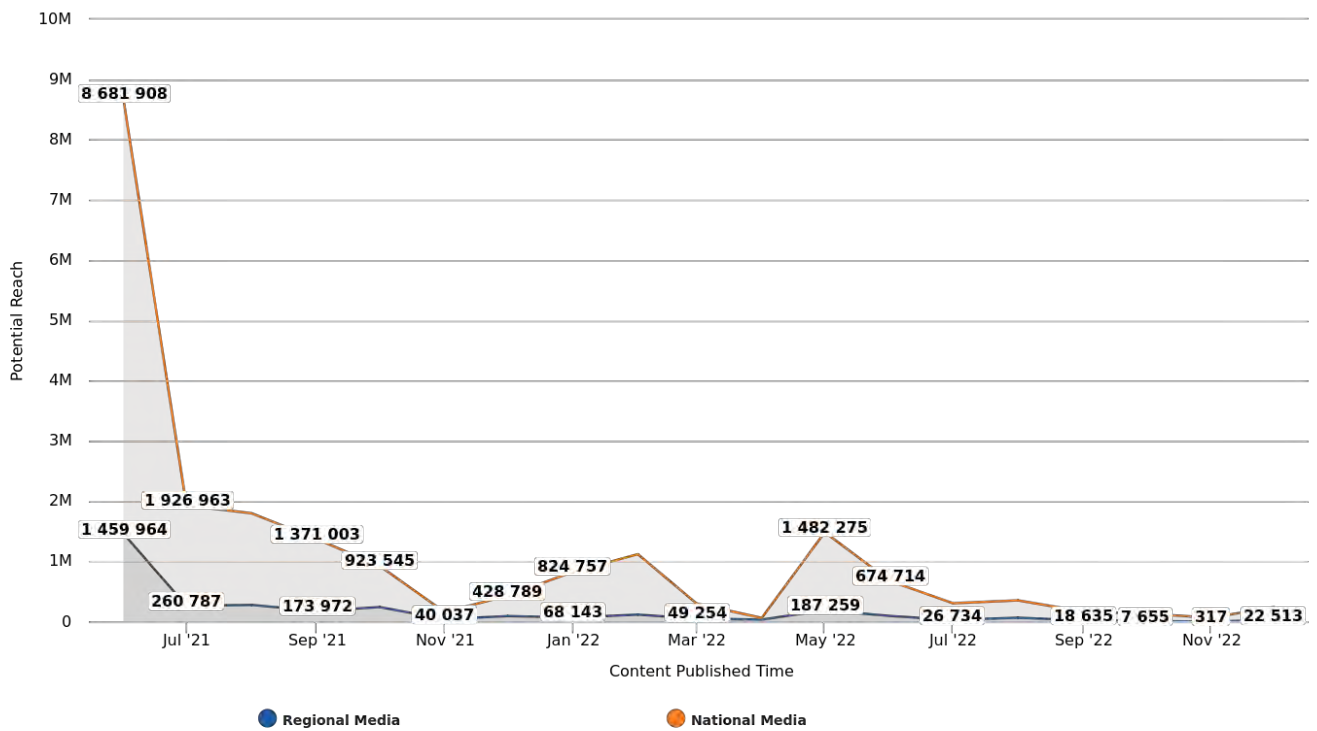
Potential reach distribution of the story in the National and Regional Media. The potential reach of National Media sources far exceeds that of Regional Media, not only due to Regional Media's more limited audience, but also to the lower amount of published content.

4.2.2.2 Online Coverage by Source Type
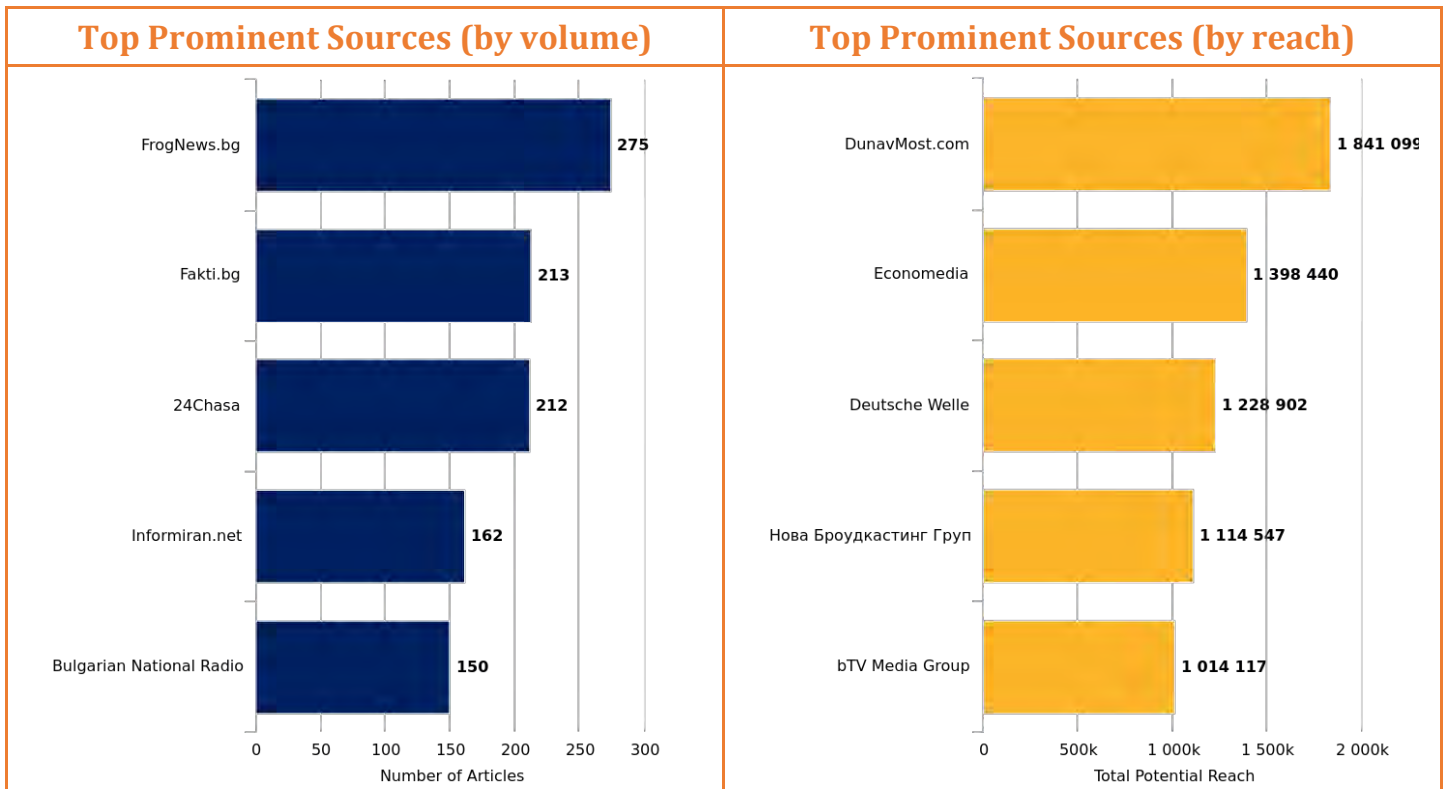
Top Prominent Sources (by volume)

Source	Number of Articles
FrogNews.bg	275
Fakti.bg	213
24Chasa	212
Informiran.net	162
Bulgarian National Radio	150

Top Prominent Sources (by reach)

Source	Total Potential Reach
DunavMost.com	1 841 099
Economedia	1 398 440
Deutsche Welle	1 228 902
Нова Броудкастинг Груп	1 114 547
bTV Media Group	1 014 117

The chart on the left displays the Top Prominent Sources (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Prominent Sources (by potential reach). The numbers point to the conclusion that even though some sources publish less in terms of volume, they manage to reach a considerably wider audience.

Top Less Prominent Sources (by volume)

Source	Number of Articles
Komedia	157
Mignews.info	97
news.bg	97
Cross.bg	62
Novinata.bg	50

Top Less Prominent Sources (by reach)

Source	Total Potential Reach
Burgas Pod Lupa	79 291
news.bg	77 406
Varnautre.bg	73 337
PlovdivNews.bg	59 388
Rodopi24 Blogspot	55 710
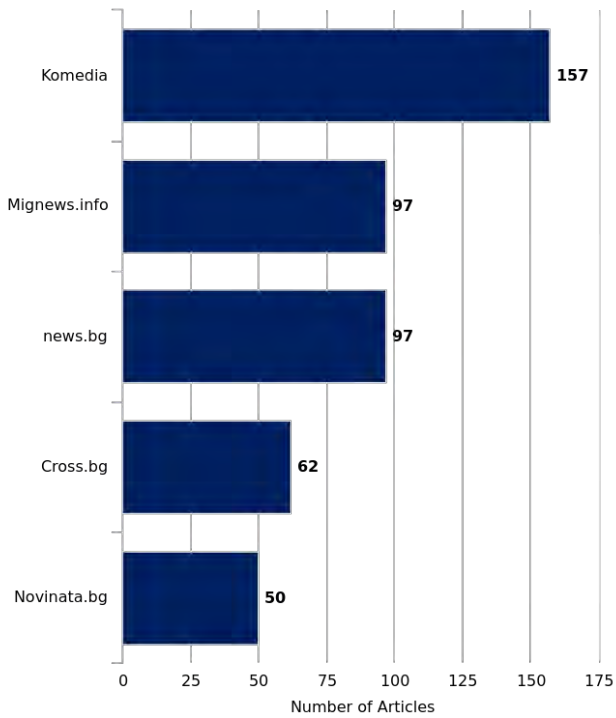
The chart on the left displays the Top Less Prominent Sources (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Less Prominent Sources (by potential reach). "Komedia" published the most content on the story, however, "Burgas Pod Lupa," which is not among the Top 10 Sources in terms of volume, reached the widest audience.

Top Influence Networks (by volume)

Network	Number of Articles
BG7.eu	164
VChas.net	161
BGVEST	144
Zanas.eu	113
Top-novini.eu	36

Top Influence Networks (by reach)

Network	Total Potential Reach
Zanas.eu	6 797
TheMainline.bg	6 314
Sportove.info	4 522
Top-novini.eu	4 329
NEWS7	2 465

The chart on the left displays the Top Influence Networks (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Influence Networks (by potential reach). Although "BG7" published the most content, "Za Nas" had the biggest potential reach.

Top Aggregators (by volume)

	Number of Articles
Novini247	1 905
BulBox	887
BetaRSS.com	158
Bulnews.com	39
ЧАС ПИК	30

Top Aggregators (by reach)

	Total Potential Reach
Novini247	91 440
BG News Online	1 110
BulBox	908
Novinarsko.eu	682
BetaRSS.com	158
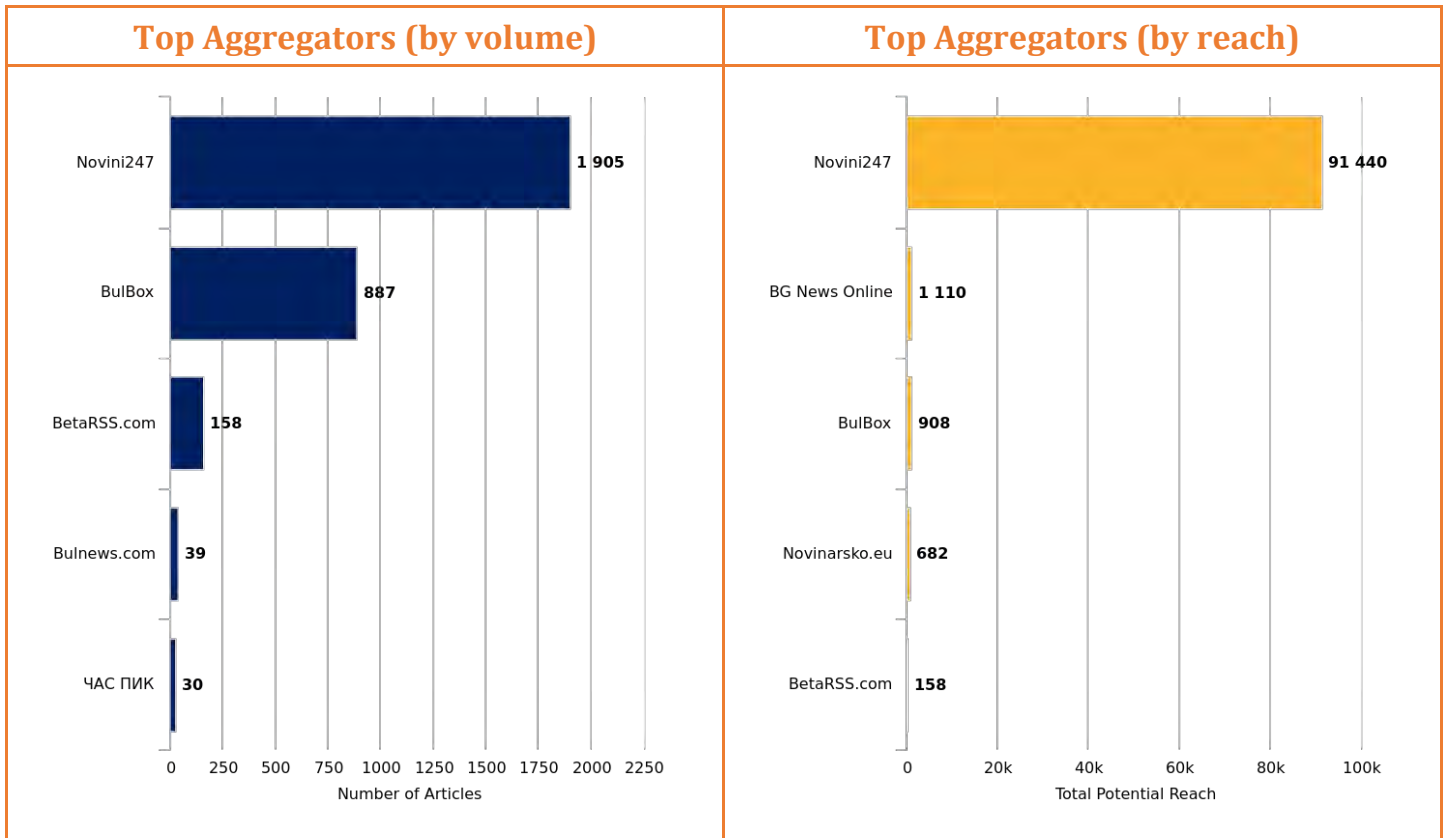
The chart on the left displays the Top Media Aggregators (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Media Aggregators (by potential reach). "Novini247" published the most content and had the biggest potential reach.

4.2.2.3 Online Coverage: Source Audience

Source Audience by Age per Source Type

Age	Tier 1	Tier 2-3	Influence Networks	Aggregators
18-24	14%	13%	16%	12%
25-34	25%	24%	26%	24%
35-44	21%	22%	21%	20%
45-54	16%	16%	16%	17%
55-64	13%	14%	13%	15%
65+	10%	11%	9%	12%

■ Tier 1　■ Tier 2-3　▨ Influence Networks　■ Aggregators

The chart illustrates the different level of engagement with the four types of monitored sources (Prominent Sources, Less Prominent Sources, Media Aggregators, and Influence Networks) among six age groups. The result shows that the people most interested in the story are between the age of 25 and 44. The people above 65 years of age comprise the lowest audience percentage and, in this case, engaged mainly with Media Aggregators.

Source Audience by Top Countries per Source Type

Bulgaria
- 90.7% (Tier 1)
- 90.7% (Tier 2-3)
- 95.9% (Influence Networks)
- 96.9% (Aggregators)

United States
- 3.7% (Tier 1)
- 5.2% (Tier 2-3)
- 2% (Influence Networks)
- 1.2% (Aggregators)

Germany
- 2.1% (Tier 1)
- 2.4% (Tier 2-3)
- 0% (Influence Networks)
- 0.7% (Aggregators)

Others
- 3.5% (Tier 1)
- 1.7% (Tier 2-3)
- 1.9% (Influence Networks)
- 1.1% (Aggregators)

Legend: ■ Tier 1 ■ Tier 2-3 ■ Influence Networks ■ Aggregators

The chart displays the geographical distribution of the websites visitors per source type. The traffic comes mostly from Bulgaria, with the United States taking the second place among all source types.

Source Audience by Traffic per Source Type

Direct
- 44.98% (Tier 1)
- 85.34% (Tier 2-3)
- 23.75% (Influence Networks)
- 8.25% (Aggregators)

Search
- 27.41% (Tier 1)
- 2.36% (Tier 2-3)
- 0% (Influence Networks)
- 87.97% (Aggregators)

Social
- 14.66% (Tier 1)
- 3.61% (Tier 2-3)
- 76.24% (Influence Networks)
- 0.90% (Aggregators)

Referral
- 6.88% (Tier 1)
- 8.11% (Tier 2-3)
- 0.01% (Influence Networks)
- 2.32% (Aggregators)

Email
- 6.01% (Tier 1)
- 0.51% (Tier 2-3)
- 0% (Influence Networks)
- 0.56% (Aggregators)

Others
- 6.6% (Tier 1)
- 0.1% (Tier 2-3)
- 0% (Influence Networks)
- 0% (Aggregators)

Legend: ■ Tier 1 ■ Tier 2-3 ■ Influence Networks ■ Aggregators

The chart compares the source of traffic and its volume generated by the four monitored source types. Prominent Sources and Media Aggregators gained most of their traffic directly or via a search engine. Less Prominent sources gained most of their traffic directly, while Influence Networks gained traffic through social media and, to a lesser degree, via direct clicks.

Source Audience by Social Network per Source Type

Facebook
- 83.6%
- 92.42%
- 99.99%
- 100%

Twitter
- 3.2%
- 2.79%
- 0.01%
- 0%

YouTube
- 9.76%
- 3.99%
- 0%
- 0%

Reddit
- 1.08%
- 0.76%
- 0%
- 0%

Others
- 2.43%
- 0.04%
- 0%
- 0%

■ Tier 1   ■ Tier 2-3   ■ Influence Networks   ■ Aggregators

The chart illustrates the source audience distribution according to the traffic of the website gained via social network per source type. The findings highlight Facebook's dominance in all monitored types of sources.

4.2.2.4 Online Coverage: Political Parties (by volume)
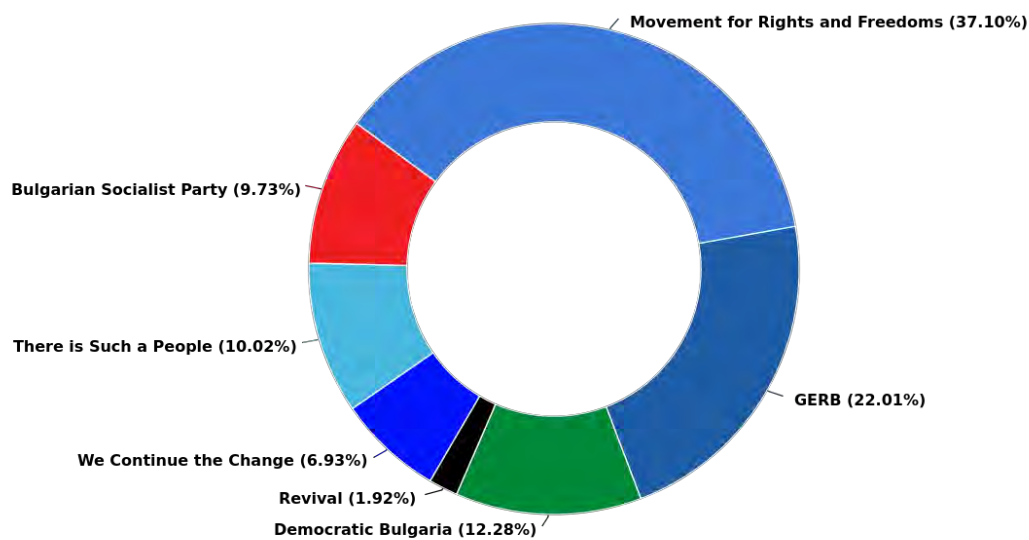
Top Mentioned Political Parties

- Movement for Rights and Freedoms (37.10%)
- Bulgarian Socialist Party (9.73%)
- There is Such a People (10.02%)
- We Continue the Change (6.93%)
- Revival (1.92%)
- Democratic Bulgaria (12.28%)
- GERB (22.01%)

The chart presents the most mentioned political parties in the context of the story. The results highlight the predominant mentions of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS) (37%), as one of the sanctioned individuals, Delyan Peevski, is often referred to as "a former DPS MP." GERB ranked second (22%), due to many outlets reporting on Vassil Bozhkov's corruption allegations against the political entity's senior officials [68]. The remaining political parties were mentioned in relation to the numerous comments made by their leaders or members regarding the sanctioned Bulgarian citizens.

4.2.3. Social Coverage (Facebook)

The Magnitsky sanctions story generated significant interest on Facebook, with relevant discussions taking place over the entire monitored period. The most active social media accounts were the official pages of various media outlets, while the most commonly used keywords were "Magnitsky," "Law," and "Bulgaria." Delyan Peevski and Vassil Bozhkov, two of the sanctioned Bulgarian citizens, were widely criticized by users. The Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS) and GERB were the most discussed political parties. The high level of engagement with the story offers a valuable insight into the ongoing public discourse surrounding corruption in Bulgaria.

Overall Volume (per month)

The main volume peak occurred with the announcement of the sanctions in June 2021. Unlike the online media coverage, which often placed them in the context of the then upcoming parliamentary elections, Facebook users rarely referred to the elections when commenting on the matter. Most of the accounts engaged in blame shifting aimed at the different political entities and their alleged corrupt practices.

Top 10 Social Authors (by volume)

Horizontal bar chart — Y axis: Social Source Name; X axis: Number of Articles

Social Source Name	Number of Articles
Novini.bg	620
bTV Новините	610
Дневник	588
Информационна агенция PIK.bg	400
вестник Сега	305
Faktor.bg	264
Медиапул	258
Frognews.bg	210
Club Z	189
Новини от България и света	178

The official pages of various media outlets, such as Novini, BTV, and Dnevnik stood out. In the meantime, however, the sensationalist page PIK, which published only a few posts, managed to spark several discussions centered on Delyan Peevski, one of the sanctioned individuals.

Top Keywords (by volume)

Word cloud of keywords including: Магнитски, Диета Магнитски, васил божков, руска банка, делян пеевски, американски, https www, правителство, кажеш, комисия, СПИСЪКА МАГНИТСКИ, държава, избори, включени Закона министър Васил, фирми, списъка, Божков, корупция, Това, ГЕРБ, хора, Пандора, десетина, Лица, закона Магнитски, закон, Борисов, България, Пеевски, закона, назован, макар, Magnitski, https само, депутат, Бойко, Василев, Dokument www 24chasa, Румен Радев, за да, Защо, прокуратура, Гешев страна, DO BO руски, партия, Радев, пари, мутри, санкции, всъщност, списък, български, Петков, Европа, Няма, мафия, Борисов Иван, 24chasa bg

The most frequently used keywords in relation to the Magnitsky sanctions story were "Magnitsky," "Law," and "Bulgaria." They were followed by the names of two of the sanctioned Bulgarian citizens, Delyan Peevski and Vassil Bozhkov. Interestingly, the third one, Ilko Zhelyazkov, did not appear among the top keywords.

4.2.3.1 Social Coverage: Political Parties (by volume)

Top Mentioned Political Parties

Movement for Rights and Freedoms (44.26%)

There is Such a People (6.10%)

GERB (31.44%)

Bulgarian Socialist Party (5.95%)

We Continue the Change (4.14%)

Revival (1.77%)

Democratic Bulgaria (6.35%)

Facebook
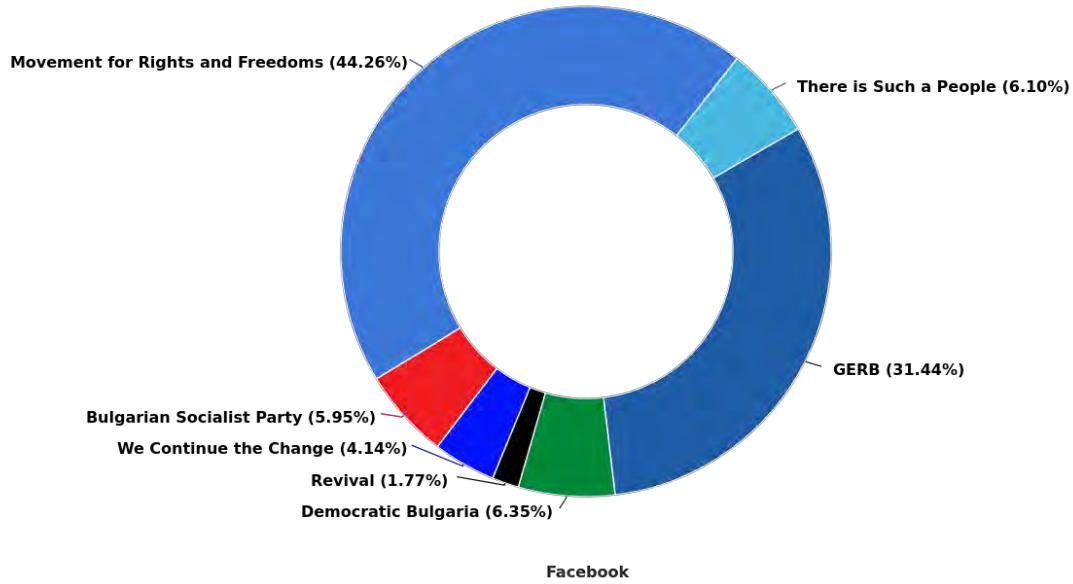
The political party that received the most attention in relation to the Magnitsky sanctions story was the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS) with 47% of the mentions, followed by GERB with 33%. DPS appeared in connection to the sanctions imposed on its former member Delyan Peevski.

4.3. Gemcorp Scandal

4.3.1. Background

On March 23, 2022, the Bulgarian government, headed by then Prime Minister Kiril Petkov, and two foreign private companies announced a plan for collaboration on future projects in the field of clean energy [90]. The country's Energy Minister at the time, Aleksandar Nikolov, signed a memorandum of understanding with the UK-based Gemcorp and the US-based IP3 Corporation, which was expected to unlock "green" investments amounting to USD 1 billion. The event quickly attracted the national media's interest. As a direct response to the news, the website BIRD (The Bureau for Investigative Reporting and Data) published an article titled "Bulgarian Government Brags about USD 1bn Investment by Fund Close to Putin," which also appeared in English the following day [91]. According to the investigation's findings, the Russian oligarch Albert Avdolyan was closely associated with Gemcorp and had been previously monitored for money laundering, along with the Bulgarian citizen Atanas Bostandjiev, Gemcorp's CEO. In turn, Gemcorp denied the accusations and explained that even though one of their investors in 2014 had been Russian, his share was eventually bought off in 2020 [92].

Just a week later, GERB representatives questioned the deal due to Gemcorp's speculated connection to Russia. The party demanded that a temporary commission be formed tasked with investigating the circumstances surrounding the MoUs [93]. The proposal was rejected with parliamentary majority, which GERB's Delyan Dobrev said aroused even more suspicion [94]. Another highlight at that time was the US Embassy's announcement that, contrary to circulating claims, its officials had not attended the signing ceremony [95]. Meanwhile, Bulgarian media began quoting a separate Financial Times investigation titled "The Russia Ties of London's Gemcorp Capital" [96]. The text evoked an even greater nationwide discussion on the matter.

On April 2, 2022, former Prime Minister Petkov said that he had ordered the State Agency for National Security (DANS) to assess the potential risks [97]. He also underlined that should any shady dealings be proved, no Gemcorp investments would be allowed on the country's territory. Petkov further explained that the memorandum of understanding was simply a "letter of intent" and that Bulgaria had no concrete obligations whatsoever, a view confirmed by then Government Spokesperson Lena Borislavova [98].

Shortly after, former Energy Minister Aleksandar Nikolov made what seemed to be a "reassuring statement," according to which the MoUs were merely an expression of investment intentions. He claimed that essential facts were often omitted on purpose, which, in his opinion, had made it easier for the matter to get out of hand [99].

On April 20, BIRD published a second article about Gemcorp. This time the company was presented as an investor in the nanotechnology industrial manufacturer OCSiAl [100]. It was uncovered that one of the entity's main shareholders was a Russian banker linked to oligarch Roman Abramovich, a claim that provoked yet another wave of intense media debate.

On June 1, the Parliament approved the establishing of an ad hoc commission responsible for looking into the case. Not long after, GERB representatives expressed their "utter shock" with a confidential DANS report and demanded that the deal be suspended immediately [101]. Then Prime Minister Kiril Petkov, Deputy Prime Minister Asen Vassilev, and Energy Minister Alexander Nikolov were asked to participate in an open hearing [102]. The content peaked once more in July after GERB accused Kiril Petkov of hiding the DANS report from the public for the period of three months [103]. On July 28, the former Energy Minister officially announced the termination of the memorandum [104].

The media did not pick up the story again until November when GERB said that the memorandum had not been terminated, which sparked a new controversy and lead to the biggest content peak until then, mostly due to the coverage that appeared on influence networks [105]. GERB representatives also declared that they would file a report with DANS and the European Commission, insisting that the memorandum was a threat to the Bulgarian national security [106]. Daniel Mitov (GERB) even claimed that an actual contract had been signed with Gemcorp, a statement republished by a big number of websites [107]. Following the latest incident, Kiril Petkov, Asen Vassilev, and Aleksandar Nikolov were once more asked to speak in a meeting with the temporary parliamentary commission. Nikolov was the only one present and, later, said in an interview that he had confirmed the termination of the MoU, calling the entire matter "much ado about nothing" [108] Moreover, he added that the escalation could harm

Bulgaria's reputation in front of any potential investors.

The last publications on the Gemcorp controversy during the monitored period date back to December 12, 2022, when the newspaper *Trud* detailed the commission's conclusions and the change of internal rules at the Ministry of Energy, which had occurred due to the issues surrounding the memorandum [109].

4.3.2. Online Coverage

4.3.2.1 Overall Metrics and Volume Comparison

The story received a considerable amount of attention, as the total number of articles exceeds 10,000. Prominent Sources that covered the Gemcorp scandal produced more than 2,100 articles, while the Less Prominent Sources around 1,000 (similar to the Media Aggregators' output). The Influence Networks, however, circulated more than 5,600 articles. What is important to note here is that despite the fact that the Influence Networks were the most prolific in terms of volume, their potential reach was the most limited— only 156,199 in online media (Prominent Sources could potentially reach over 6 million readers).

The four types of sources mentioned above were also compared based on variables related to their audience. For instance, all of them turned out to have a similar distribution according to the audience's age, with people between 25 and 44 comprising the biggest percentage of their readership. In addition, all four types have audiences based predominantly in Bulgaria, where Facebook remains the preferred social media platform. The biggest differences were noticed when analyzing source audience by traffic. Here, Prominent Sources stood out with a very evenly distributed readership according to the way readers have accessed the news (directly, via social media, via a search engine, etc.). Less Prominent Sources were mostly accessed directly, Media Aggregators were accessed through a search, and Influence Networks through social media.

The sources publishing on the story were also grouped into National and Regional outlets. Due to the national interest in the scandal surrounding the Gemcorp MoU, the former covered it in a more detailed and consistent manner.

Another finding of note is that Bulgarian media outlets tend to avoid the direct use of the word "corruption" and its derivatives, replacing it instead with vocabulary commonly associated with corrupt practices. Stylistically speaking, the majority of these corruption-associated words were not employed in order to disguise the story's scope and impact. On the contrary—authors would often prefer slang or other informal phrases meant to evoke an emotional reaction and increase the unpleasant effect of the news.

Top Keywords (by volume)

A tag-cloud representation of the most frequently used keywords or phrases within the monitored story. The size of each word in the cloud is a relative indicator of the term's popularity, thereby allowing for the discernment of the most prominent and widely-discussed topics of interest. In this particular case, the most frequently mentioned keywords include different spellings of Gemcorp, along with the political party GERB and the family name of former Prime Minister Kiril Petkov.

Volume Comparison – Corruption Keywords vs. Corruption-Associated Keywords
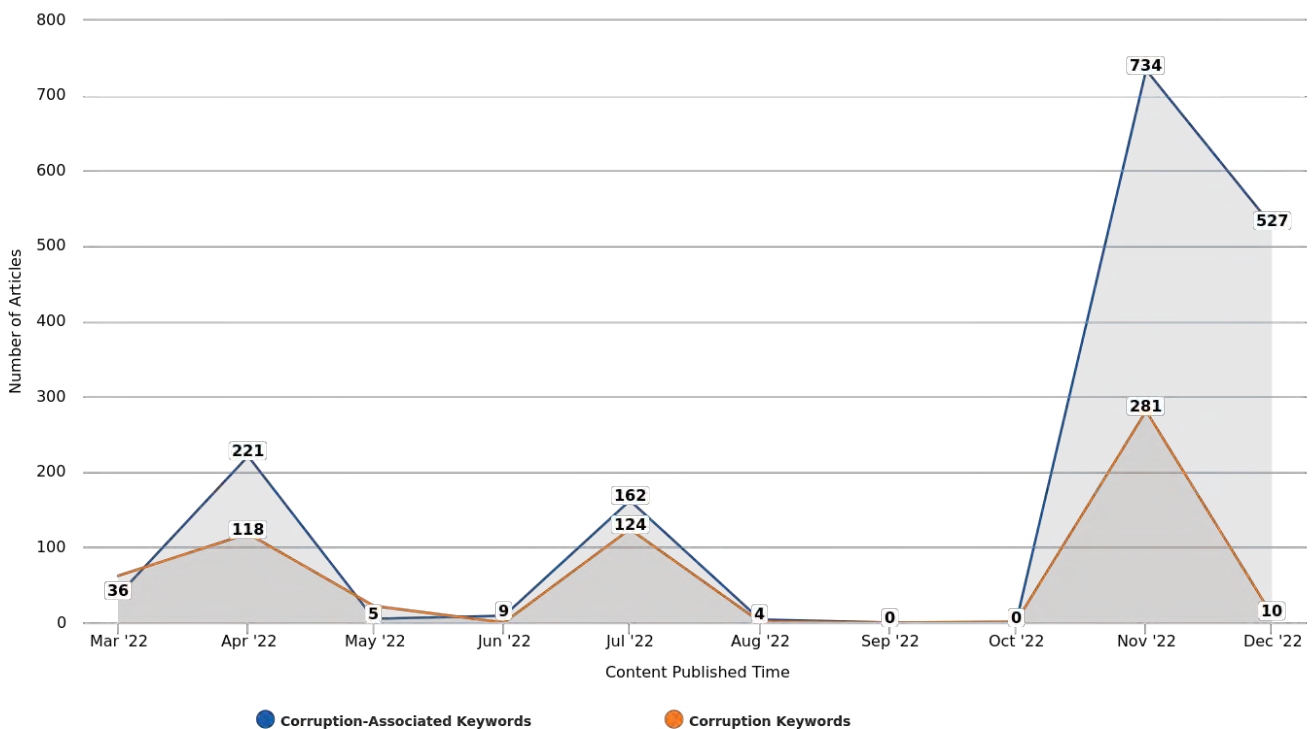
Volume distribution of the pieces of content, which reference corruption either directly or indirectly. The number of articles that explicitly use the word "corruption" within the Gemcorp story is evidently lower.

Potential Reach Comparison – Corruption Keywords vs. Corruption-Associated Keywords
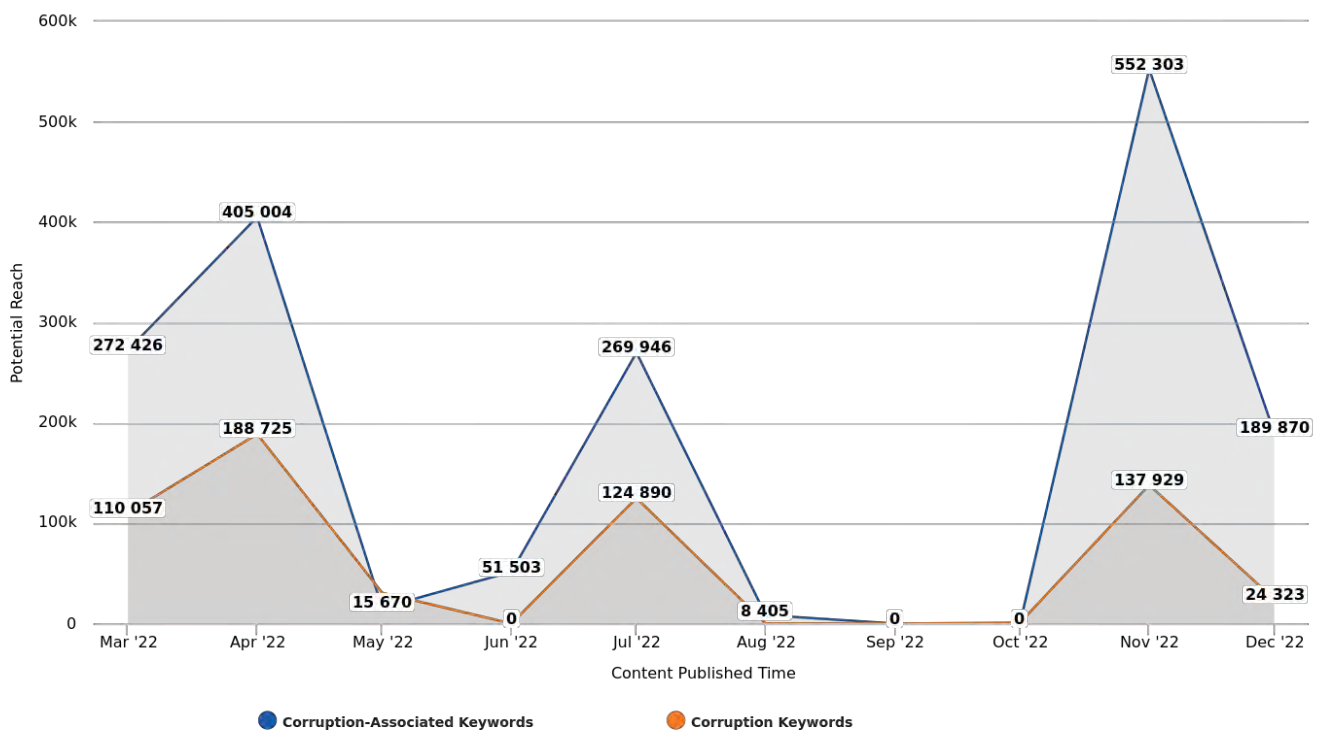
Potential reach distribution of the pieces of content, which reference corruption either directly or indirectly. The potential reach of the articles that explicitly use the word "corruption" within the Gemcorp story is evidently lower.

Stacked Volume Comparison (by source type)
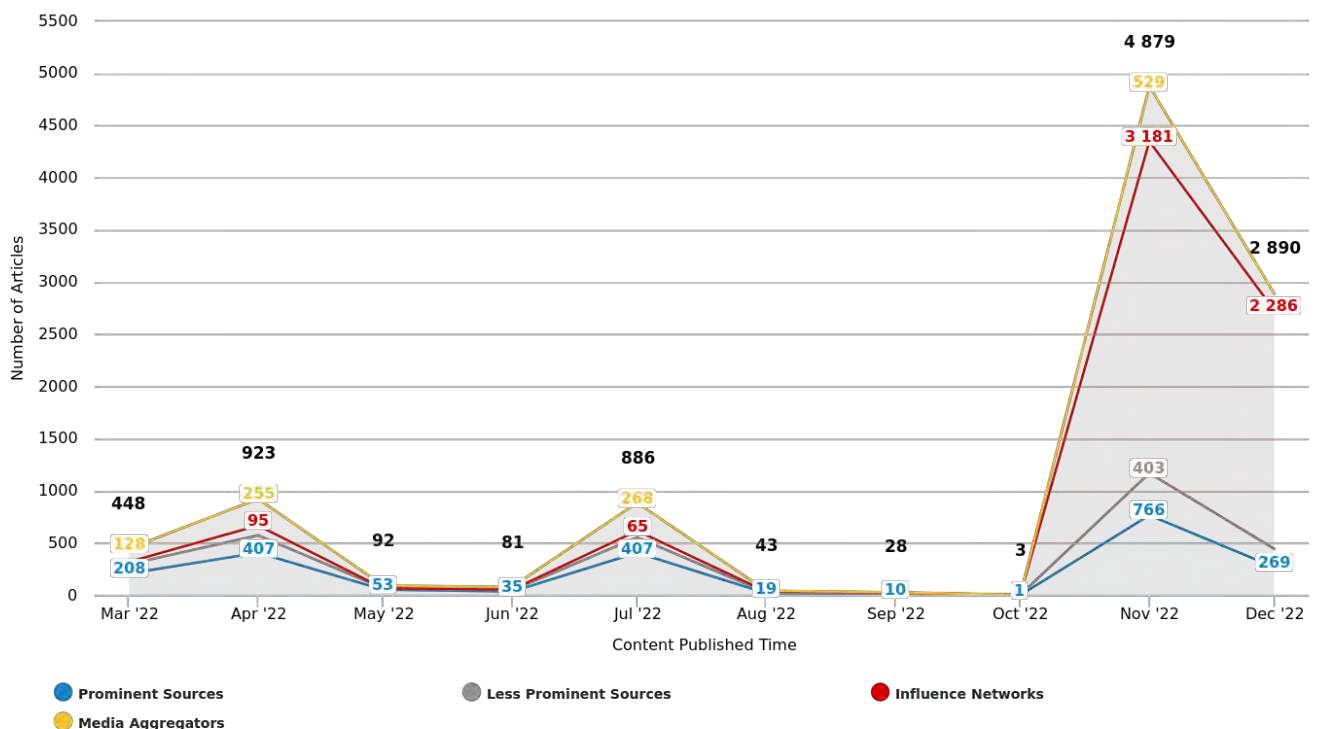
Stacked volume distribution of the story per type of sources. Influence Networks were considerably less active during the peaks in April 2022 and July 2022 compared to the other source types, while in November 2022, their content drastically increased, causing an important peak, a month after the parliamentary elections on October 2, 2022. Various headlines were republished multiple times, forming the abovementioned peak, all of them displaying what can be described as a negative sentiment towards the former Prime Minister Kiril Petkov and his cabinet. Some of the most prominent headlines are: "PP

Stacked Volume Comparison (by source type)

Messed It Up, GERB Has New Scandalous Information about the Fraud With Gemcorp" (PP go Zagaziha, ot GERB Imat Novi Skandalni Danni za Dalaverata s „Gemcorp", 2022); "Borissov Warned About a Civil War Because of What Happened on Friday" (Borissov Predupredi za Grazhdanska Voyna Zaradi Tova, Koeto Stana v Petak , 2022); "GERB: Kiril Petkov Hid the Contract With Gemcorp in His Office for Three Months" [103]; "GERB with a Report to SANS and the Ministry of the Interior Because of Gemcorp! Petkov Lied That..." (GERB sas Signal do DANS i MVR Zaradi Gemcorp! Petkov e Izlagal, che..., 2022); "Kiril and Asen Playing Innocent Regarding the Scandalous Deal With 1 Billion and Gemcorp" (Kiril i Asen Ni Luk Yali, Ni Luk Mirisali za Skandalnata Shema s 1 miliard i Gemcorp, 2022).

Stacked Potential Reach Comparison (by source type)
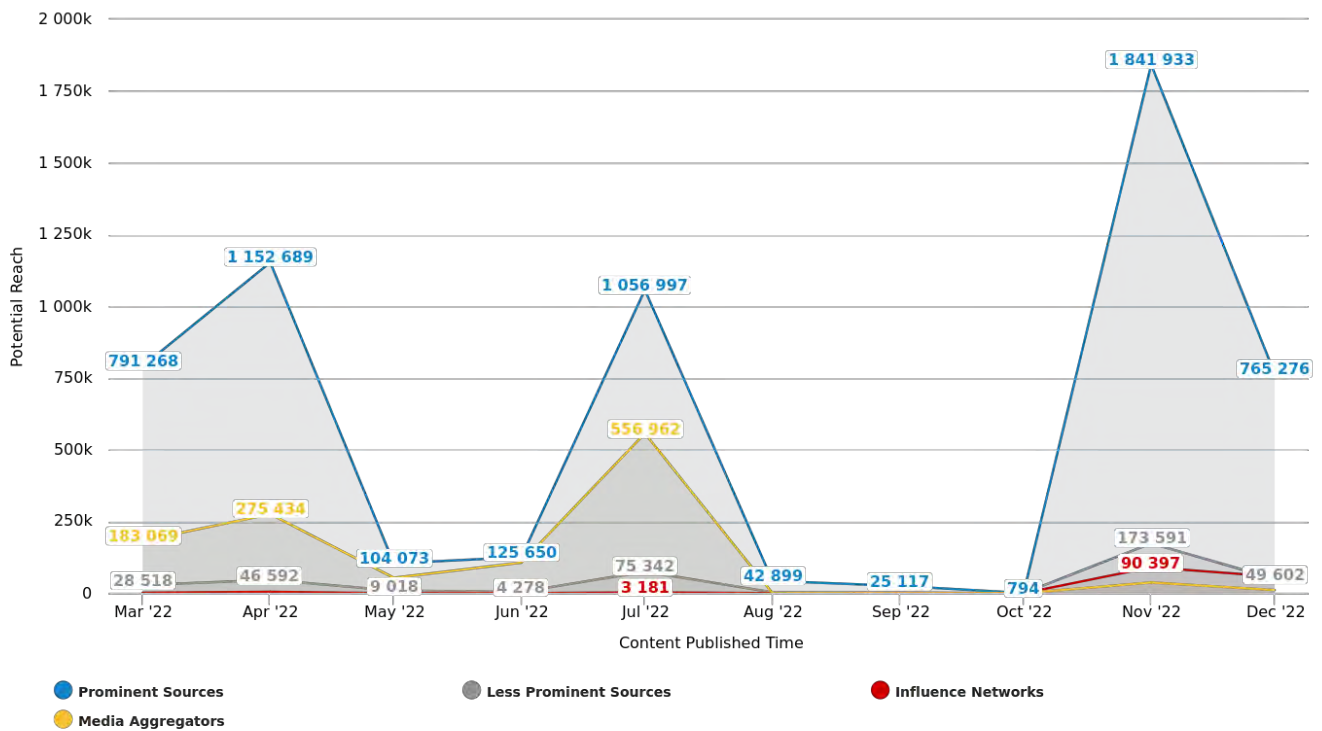
Stacked potential reach distribution of the story per type of sources. Although Prominent Sources have the lowest number of publications, their potential reach is much higher than that of Less Prominent Sources and Media Aggregators.

Volume Comparison - Regional vs National Sources
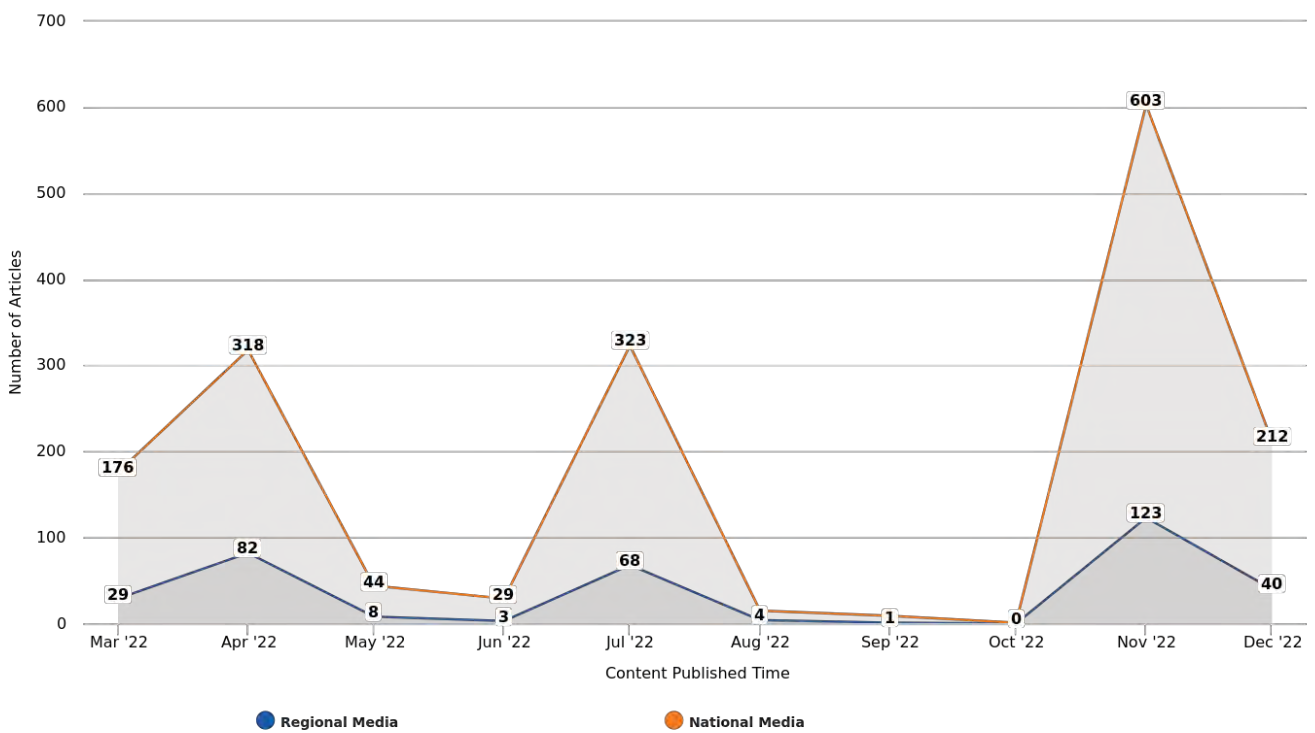
Volume distribution of the Gemcorp story in the National and Regional Media. As displayed above, National Media published more content related to the story compared to locally based outlets.

Potential reach Comparison - Regional vs National Sources
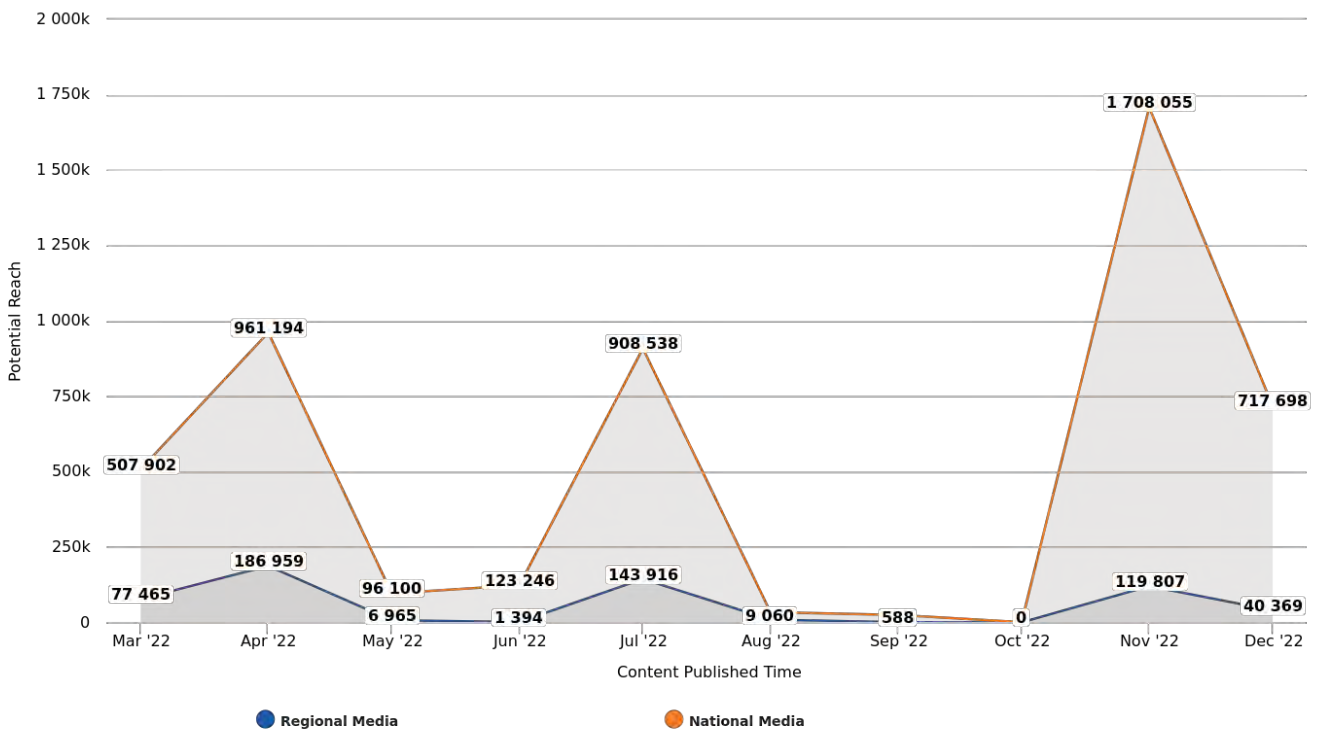
Potential reach distribution of the Gemcorp story in the National and Regional Media. The potential reach of National Media sources is significantly higher than that of regionally published articles dedicated to the story.

4.3.2.2 Online Coverage by Source Type
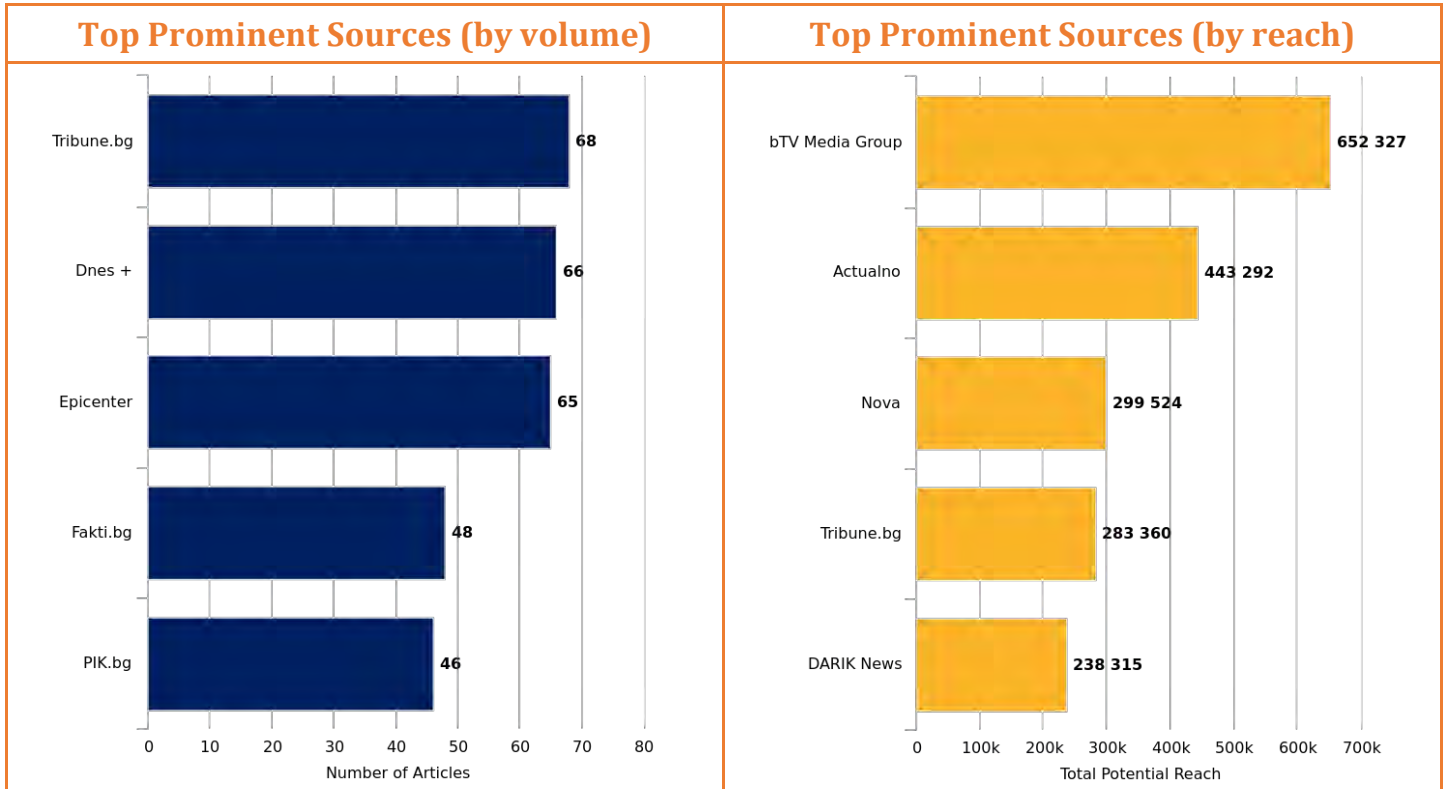
Top Prominent Sources (by volume)

Source	Number of Articles
Tribune.bg	68
Dnes +	66
Epicenter	65
Fakti.bg	48
PIK.bg	46

Top Prominent Sources (by reach)

Source	Total Potential Reach
bTV Media Group	652 327
Actualno	443 292
Nova	299 524
Tribune.bg	283 360
DARIK News	238 315

The chart on the left displays the Top Prominent Sources (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Prominent Sources (by potential reach). The numbers point to the conclusion that even though some sources publish less in terms of volume, they manage to reach a considerably wider audience.

Top Less Prominent Sources (by volume)

Source	Number of Articles
The news today	51
Novinar Online	35
BudilnikBG.com	31
King of Net	31
Novinite-Dnes.eu	31

Top Less Prominent Sources (by reach)

Source	Total Potential Reach
The news today	64 005
Politikata.net	40 290
Blog.bg	32 418
PlovdivNews.bg	22 624
King of Net	20 744
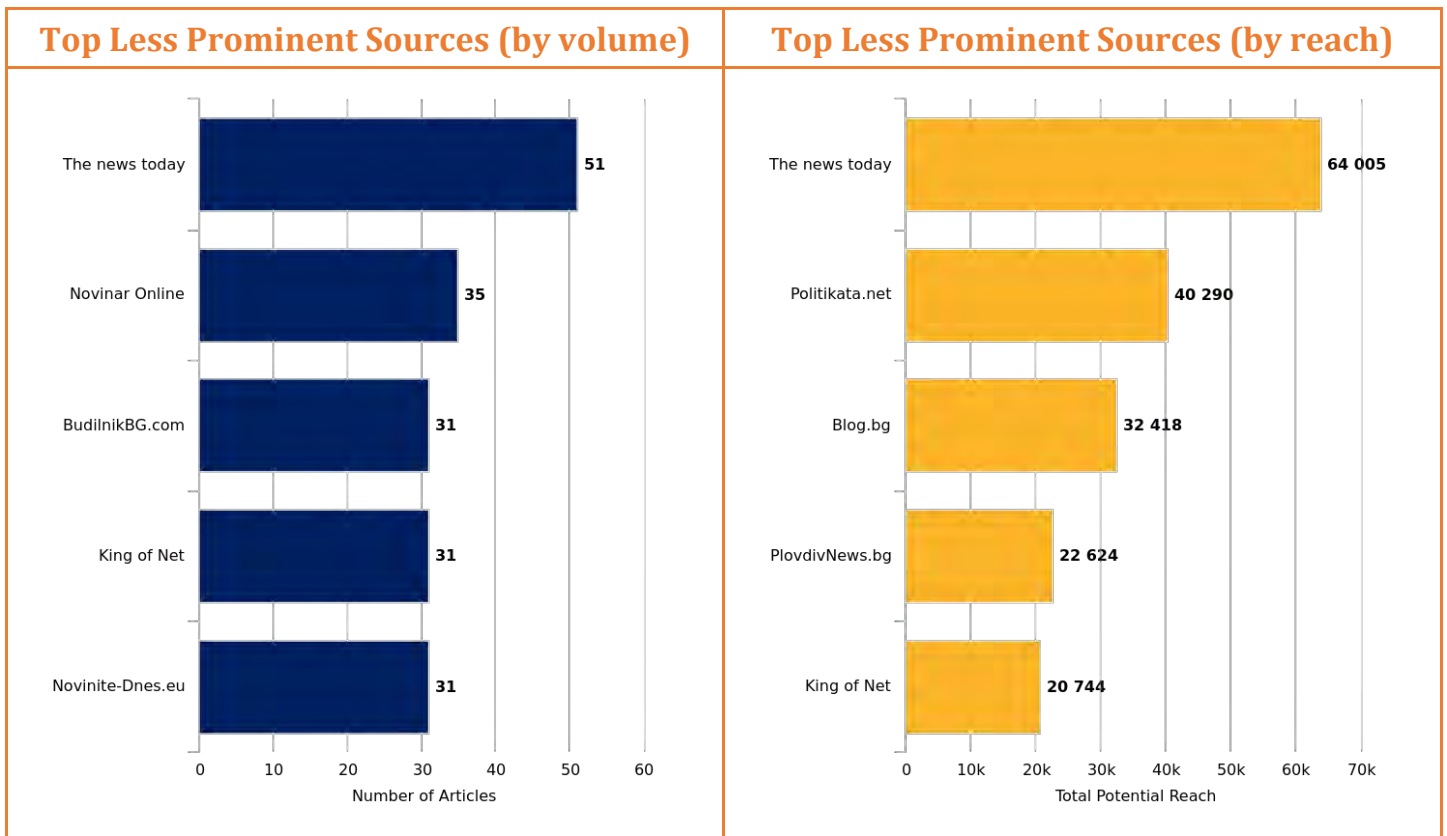
The chart on the left shows the Top Prominent Sources by volume, while the chart on the right shows the Top Prominent Sources by potential reach. "The News Today" occupied first place in both charts. However, other outlets, such as Cross.bg, were among the Top 10 sources by volume, but not among the Top 10 sources by potential reach.
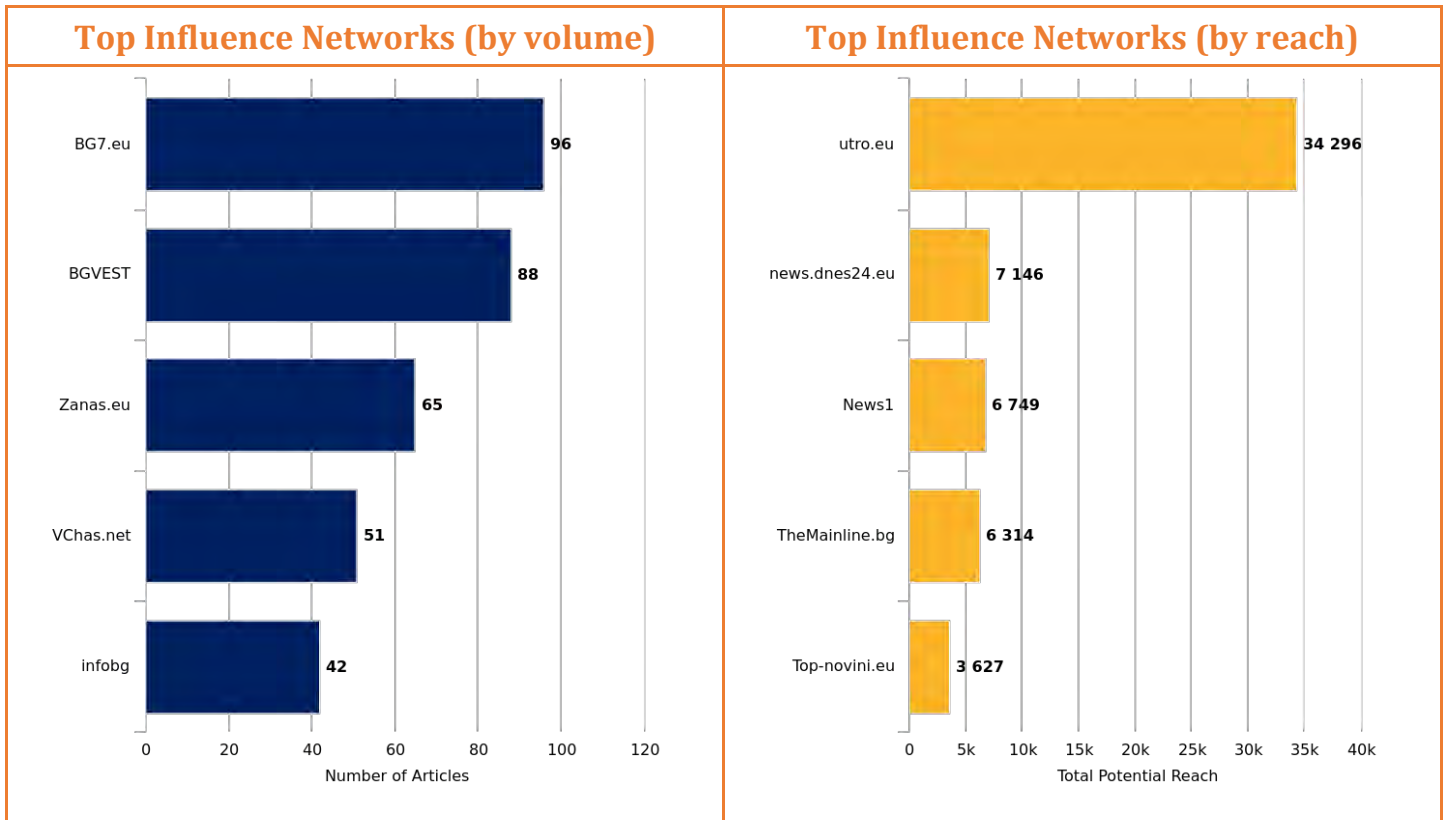
Top Influence Networks (by volume)

	Number of Articles
BG7.eu	96
BGVEST	88
Zanas.eu	65
VChas.net	51
infobg	42

Top Influence Networks (by reach)

	Total Potential Reach
utro.eu	34 296
news.dnes24.eu	7 146
News1	6 749
TheMainline.bg	6 314
Top-novini.eu	3 627

The chart on the left displays the Top Influence Networks (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Influence Networks (by potential reach). "Utro", which is not even among the Top 10 sources by volume, occupied the first place in terms of potential reach.

Top Aggregators (by volume)

	Number of Articles
Novini247	825
BulBox	203
BG News Online	155
BetaRSS.com	72
ЧАС ПИК	25

Top Aggregators (by reach)

	Total Potential Reach
Novini247	39 600
BG News Online	28 675
Easy Branches	7 872
BulBox	288
ЧАС ПИК	75

The chart on the left displays the Top Media Aggregators (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Media Aggregators (by potential reach). The popular aggregator Shafaqna, or "Shia News Agency," which has a Bulgarian domain among many others, is the number one Media Aggregator by potential reach, despite the fact that it published less than 100 articles on the story.
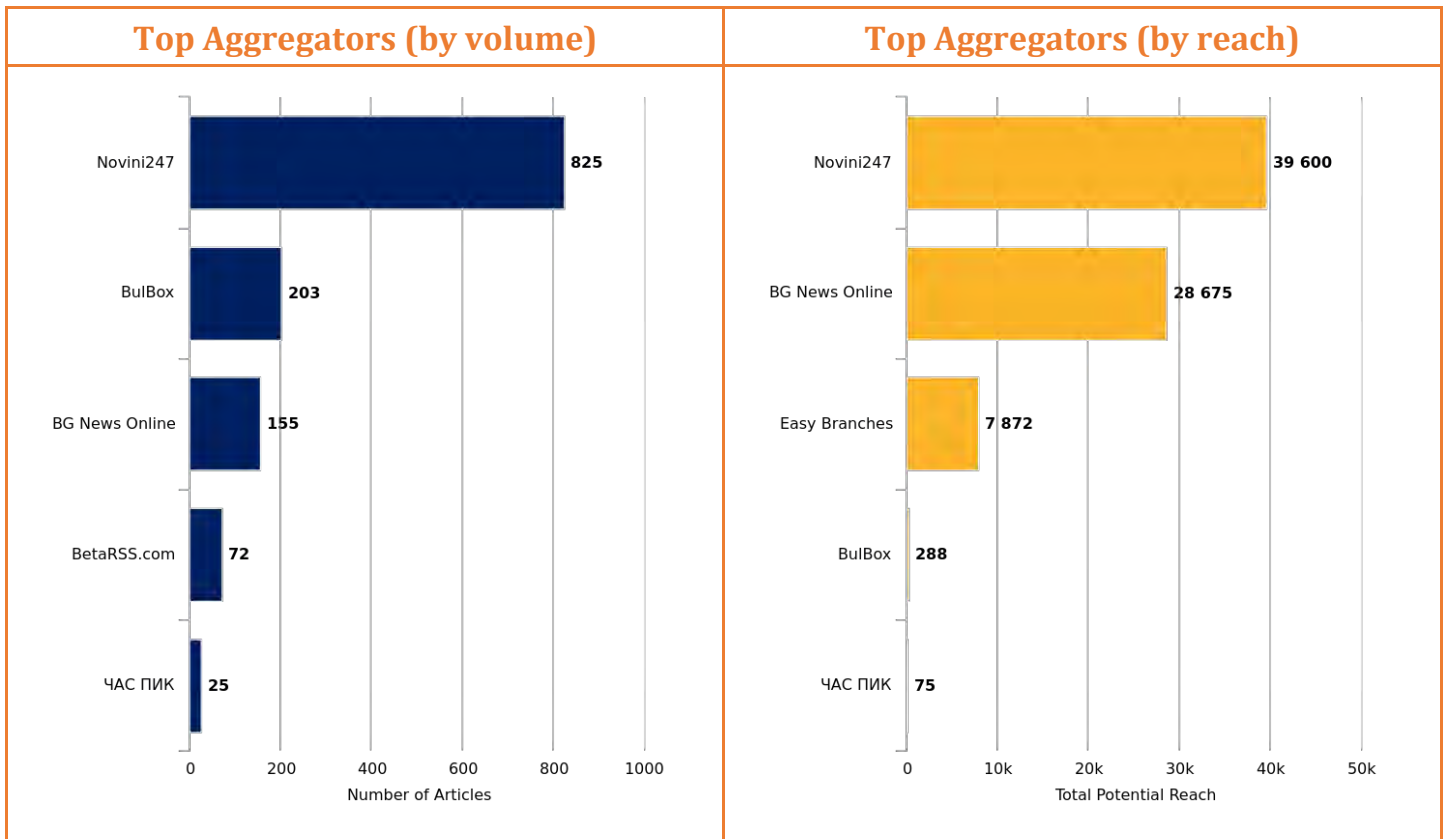
4.3.2.3 Online Coverage: Source Audience
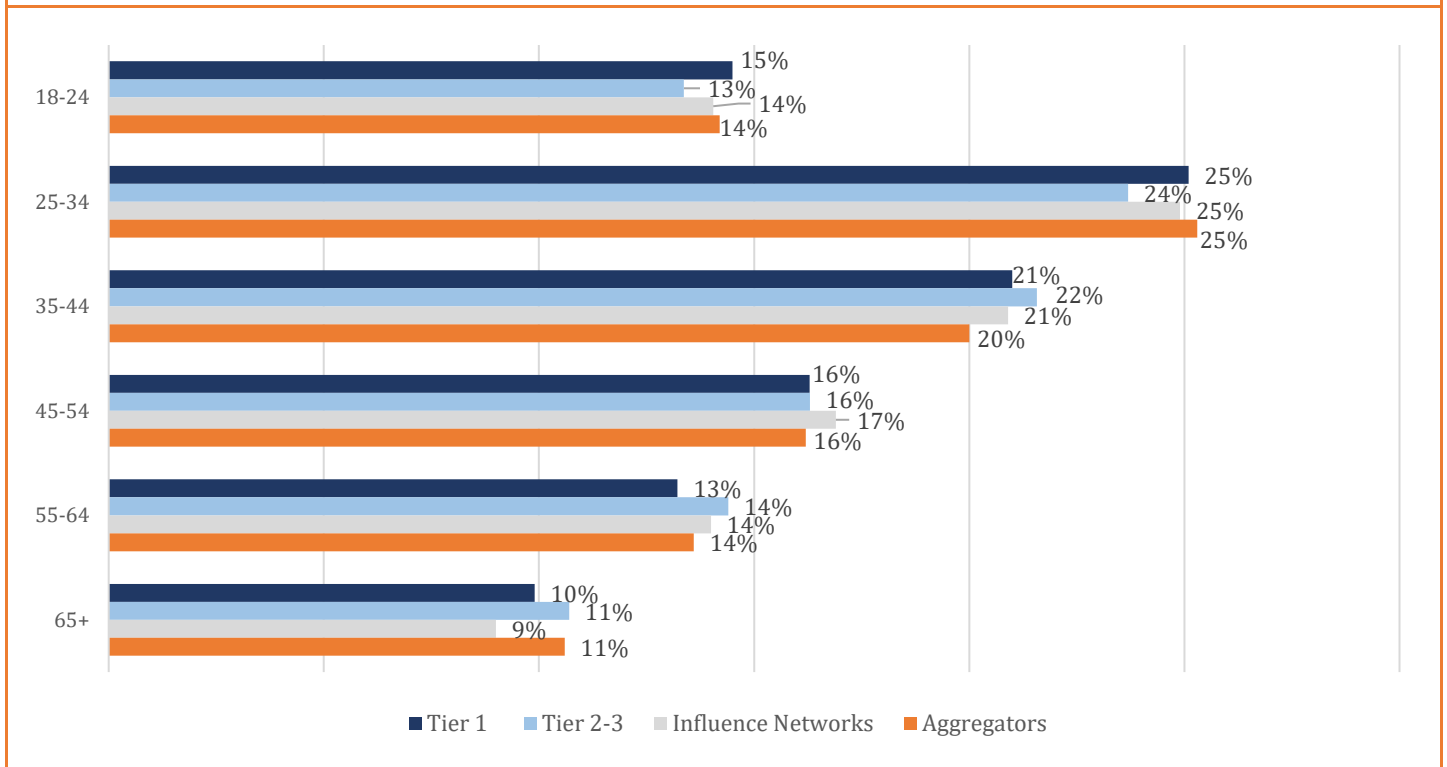
Source Audience by Age per Source Type

The chart illustrates the different level of engagement with the four types of monitored sources (Most Prominent Sources, Less Prominent Sources, Aggregators, and Influence Networks) among six age groups. The results show that the biggest number of visitors interested in the Gemcorp scandal are of ages ranging between 25 and 44. On the other hand, those above 65 are least interested, which, according to Bulgaria's National Statistical Institute [110], can be explained by the low percentage of people at that age who have access to the Internet.

Source Audience by Top Countries per Source Type
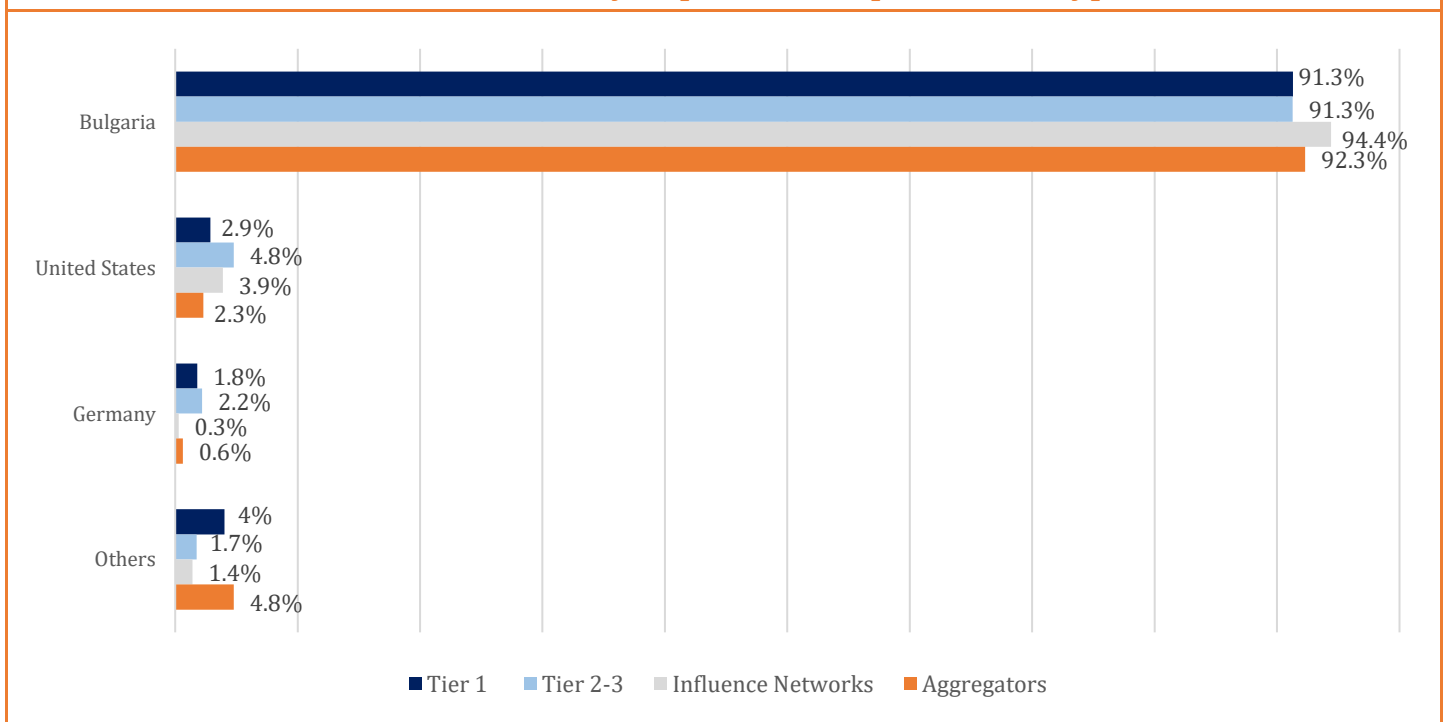
The chart displays the geographical distribution of the websites visitors per source type. Overall, most of the traffic comes from Bulgaria.

Source Audience by Traffic per Source Type

Direct
- 40.20% (Tier 1)
- 82.40% (Tier 2-3)
- 38.50% (Influence Networks)
- 10.40% (Aggregators)

Search
- 27.40% (Tier 1)
- 4.40% (Tier 2-3)
- 0.02% (Influence Networks)
- 86.80% (Aggregators)

Social
- 18.80% (Tier 1)
- 5.20% (Tier 2-3)
- 61.40% (Influence Networks)
- 0.25% (Aggregators)

Referral
- 6.50% (Tier 1)
- 7.50% (Tier 2-3)
- 0.02% (Influence Networks)
- 2.09% (Aggregators)

Email
- 7.01% (Tier 1)
- 0.50% (Tier 2-3)
- 0% (Influence Networks)
- 0.50% (Aggregators)

Others
- 0.1% (Tier 1)
- 0.0% (Tier 2-3)
- 0.1% (Influence Networks)
- 0% (Aggregators)

■ Tier 1 ■ Tier 2-3 ■ Influence Networks ■ Aggregators

The chart compares the types and volume of traffic generated by the four monitored sources. Around 37% of the Prominent Sources and 82% of the Less Prominent Sources have received direct traffic. On the other hand, search engines generated 86.81% of the Media Aggregators' traffic. Finally, links shared on social media and redirecting to outside sources were the main drivers behind Mushroom Websites traffic (61.9%).

Source Audience by Social Network per Source Type

Facebook
- 86.35% (Tier 1)
- 92.94% (Tier 2-3)
- 99.97% (Influence Networks)
- 86.16% (Aggregators)

Twitter
- 2.48% (Tier 1)
- 2.59% (Tier 2-3)
- 0.03% (Influence Networks)
- 0% (Aggregators)

YouTube
- 8.14% (Tier 1)
- 3.72% (Tier 2-3)
- 0% (Influence Networks)
- 0.81% (Aggregators)

Reddit
- 0.95% (Tier 1)
- 0.69% (Tier 2-3)
- 0% (Influence Networks)
- 0% (Aggregators)

Others
- 2.08% (Tier 1)
- 0.06% (Tier 2-3)
- 0% (Influence Networks)
- 13.03% (Aggregators)

■ Tier 1 ■ Tier 2-3 ■ Influence Networks ■ Aggregators
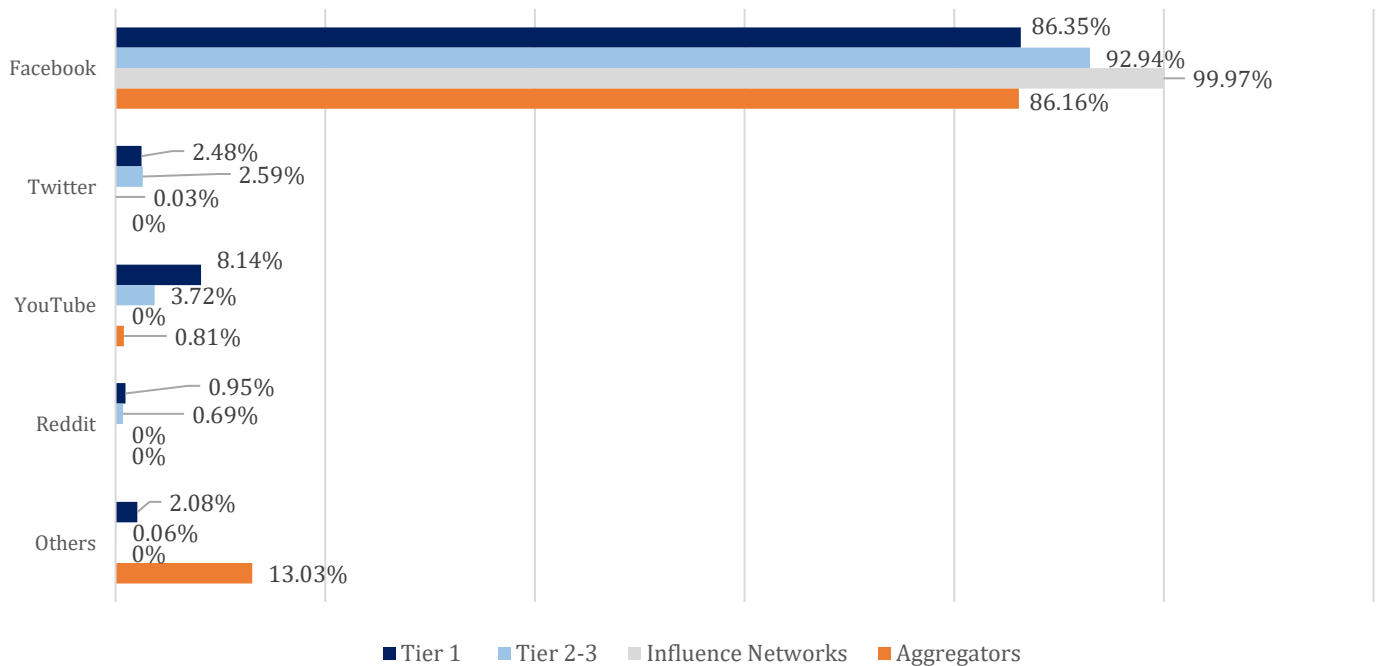
The chart illustrates the social audience distribution according to the preferred social network as per source type. The findings highlight Facebook's dominance in all of the monitored source types, which can be explained by the fact that it is the most popular social network in Bulgaria [111].

4.3.2.4 Online Coverage: Political Parties (by volume)
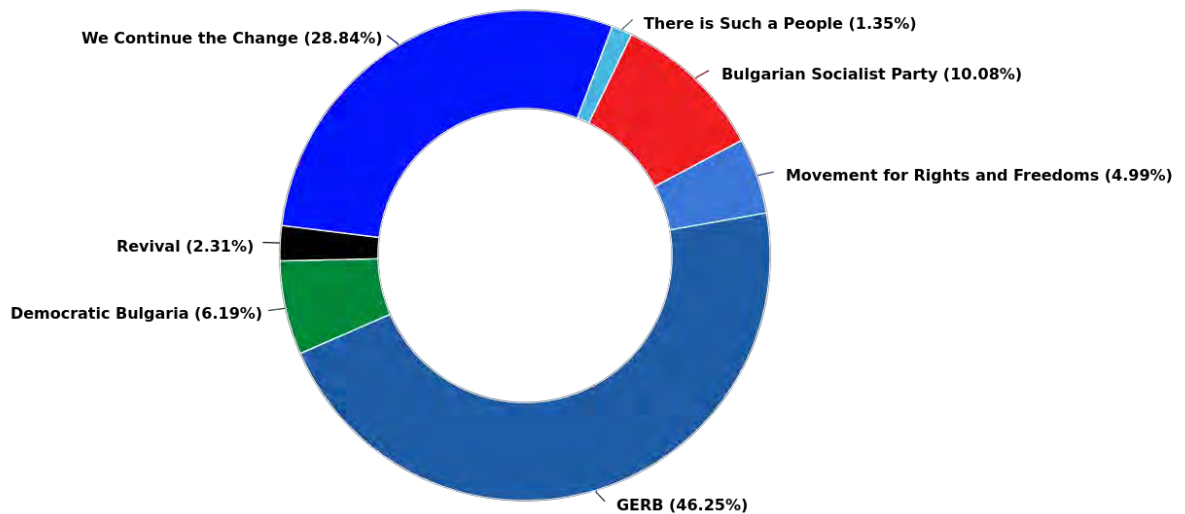
<table>
<tr><td>

Top Mentioned Political Parties

The chart displays the number of political party mentions in relation to the Gemcorp scandal in online media. GERB and We Continue the Change were mentioned in 45.5% and 29.2% of the content, respectively. This was mainly due to the fact that both parties held opposing views on the Gemcorp MoU. No other political entity was mentioned in more than 10% of the content, as not many third-party representatives voiced notable positions on the case.

</td></tr>
</table>

4.3.3.   Social Coverage (Facebook)

The research findings indicate that the Gemcorp scandal generated significant activity on social media, with three notable peaks in April, July, and November 2022. The top social authors on Facebook were "Novini.bg," "PIK," and "Tribune," which generated the highest volume of content engagement. They posted pieces of content accusing Kiril Petkov of corruption and of supporting Russian interests, while users in their comment sections often defended the memorandum. The most widely circulated keywords were related to Gemcorp and Kiril Petkov. Initially, comments focused on Bulgaria's energy dependencies, but after the MoU termination, comments were negative, with many suggesting that Gemcorp would have engaged in money laundering. GERB was referenced in over 50% of relevant posts or comments, while other parties were briefly mentioned in connection with their representatives' views on the scandal.

Overall Volume (per month)
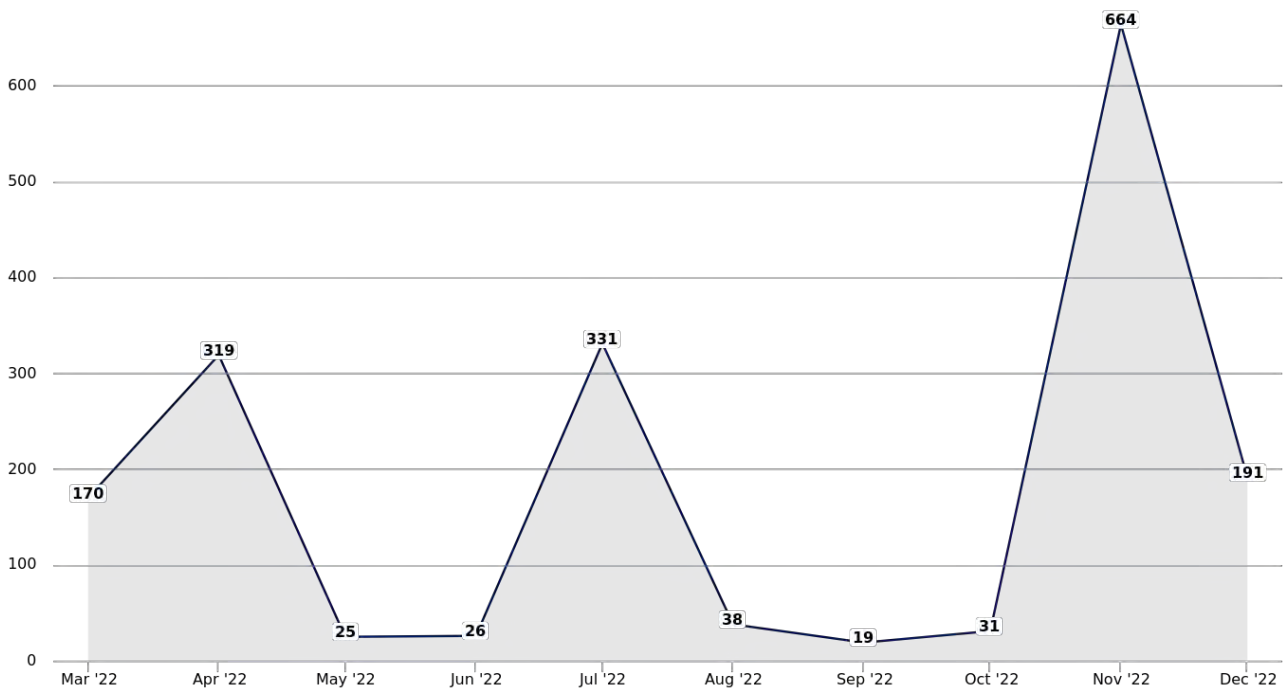
The social content volume distribution mimicked that of online media with three main peaks throughout the monitored period: announcement of the MoU in March and April, allegations that Gemcorp had links to Russia in July, and claims that the deal termination was a lie in November.

Top 10 Social Authors (by volume)
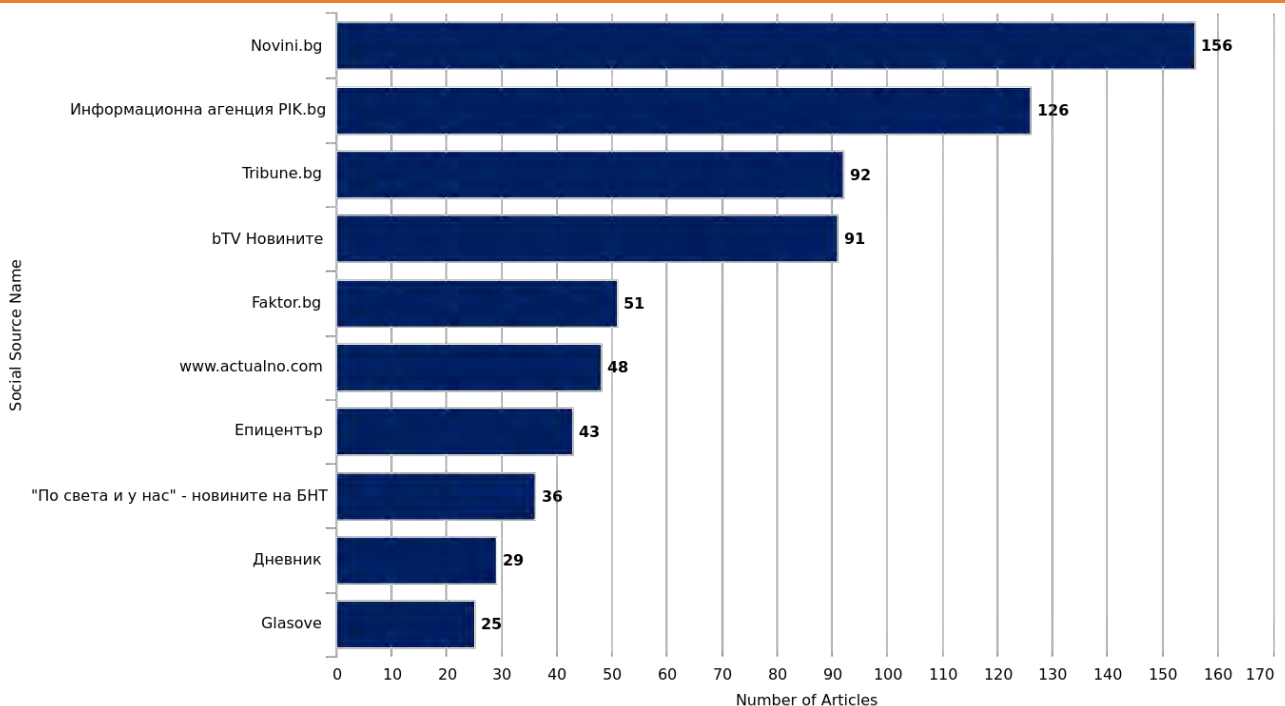
The chart presents the most prominent Social Authors on Facebook, ranked based on their combined number of posts and comments during the monitored period. "Novini.bg," "PIK," and "Tribune" stand out as the most active accounts, having generated the highest volume of engagement. In addition, accounts, such as "Tribune" [112] and "PIK" [113]accused Petkov of corruption, insisting that he supports Russian interests, while others, such as "Dnevnik" [114] and "Mediapool" [115] defended the memorandum and maintained the position of the government that the company had cut its ties with Russia a years ago.

Top Keywords (by volume)

The most widely circulated keywords and phrases included various spellings of "Gemcorp," "Kiril Petkov," and related keywords such as "minister." Initially, many Facebook users commented on Bulgaria's energy dependencies and the ways in which they affect the country's ability to cooperate with foreign businesses.

After the MoU termination, however, a new narrative was observed in the comments. Various profiles praised GERB for acting against the deal and noted that this political party had been the only one to question the company's origins from the start. In general, the predominant sentiment towards the discontinued agreement was negative as the majority of the comments deemed it a lie. What is more, some suspected that Gemcorp would have taken advantage of the MoU and engaged in money laundering at the expense of the Bulgarian energy sector. The number of users who voiced the opposite opinion was significantly lower. It is worth noting that identical comments from the same social media user or even different users can be found across multiple Facebook posts, regardless of the differences in the content of each post.

4.3.3.1 Social Coverage: Political Parties (by volume)

Top Mentioned Political Parties

We Continue the Change (22.81%)
Bulgarian Socialist Party (6.29%)
Movement for Rights and Freedoms (4.68%)
There is Such a People (1.90%)
Democratic Bulgaria (5.70%)
GERB (58.63%)
Facebook
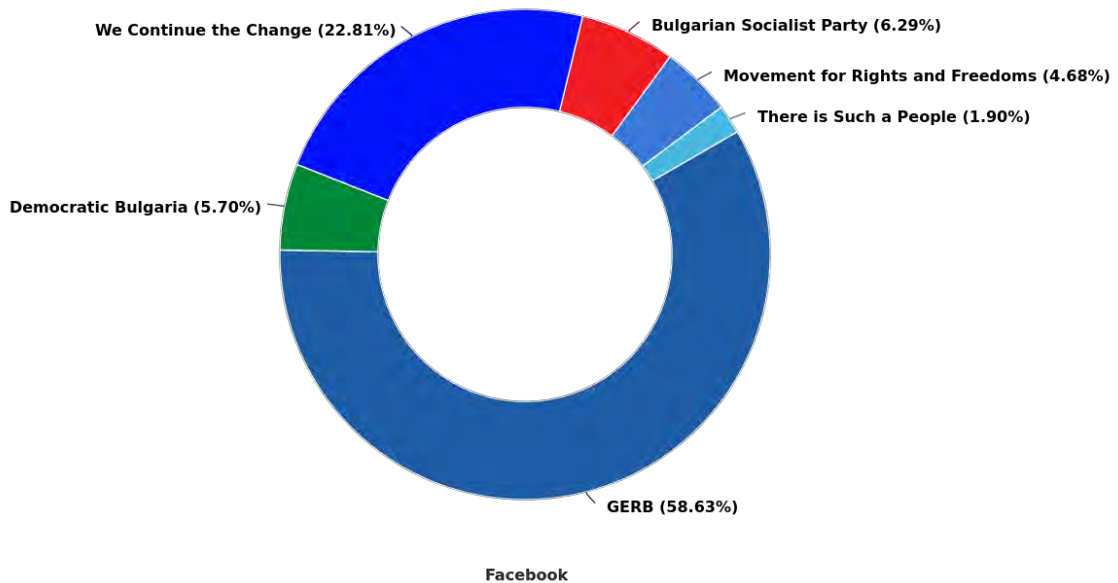
The chart depicts the frequency of political party mentions in Facebook posts related to the Gemcorp scandal. According to Facebook data, GERB was referenced in over 50% of relevant posts or comments regarding the party's concerns about the government's memorandum with Gemcorp. We Continue the Change appeared in roughly 24.4% of the posts. Other parties were briefly mentioned, usually in connection with their representatives' opinions on the scandal.

4.4. Bulgargas-Gazprom Supply Issues Controversy

4.4.1. Background

On April 27, 2022, GERB's MP Delyan Dobrev stated that "out of 22 countries, we are the only ones who have had their gas cut off (…) As of 9 a.m. today, the gas entering Bulgaria is only transiting through the country," adding that, as a result, the gas price will "double" [116]. A few days later, on May 1, he even said that "the government buys Russian gas in order to receive EUR 30 more by purchasing through its intermediary company; this amounts to an additional EUR 100 million per month or EUR 1.2 billion per year" [117]. Furthermore, regional outlets paid special attention to Dobrev's expectations that the residential heating bills in Sofia will reach BGN 1000 per household per month in the fall [118]. Other websites quoted his statements by presenting the news under their "shocking" or "scandalous" section and by rephrasing Dobrev's prognosis and adding words such as "terrifying" [119]. On the following day, former PM Boyko Borissov criticized the authorities, claiming their gas-related policies were part of "corrupt schemes and scams that are serving Putin" [120]. Consequently, in the middle of May, Delyan Dobrev officially announced that GERB would "report to the Ministry of Interior, the General Directorate for Combating Organized Crime, and the State Agency for National Security that the government's gas purchases have been marred by fraud" [121]. Various outlets also highlighted, under sensationalist titles, Dobrev's participation in the TV show Panorama, during which he debated the energy issue with then deputy PM and co-leader of We Continue the Change (PP) Asen Vassilev [122].

There was a noticeable output drop in June, as the local media did not report on any significant story developments. However, the next month witnessed a steep rise in content. On July 7, different websites reported that the National Assembly would hold an extraordinary hearing of then PM Kiril Petkov and former Energy Minister Alexander Nikolov on the natural gas issue [123]. Soon after, Delyan Dobrev shared, during a parliamentary session that the gas price was expected to "jump by 20% to 30%" [124]. Many of the outlets that republished the statement used the word "crisis" when describing the general state of affairs [125]. On July 20, Dobrev took part in Nova's morning show "Your Day" (Tvoyat Den), during which he commented on the matter, saying: "Yesterday, I found out that Bulgargas had bought supplies from Gazprom's intermediary Wintershall" [126]. A couple of days later, both Temenuzhka
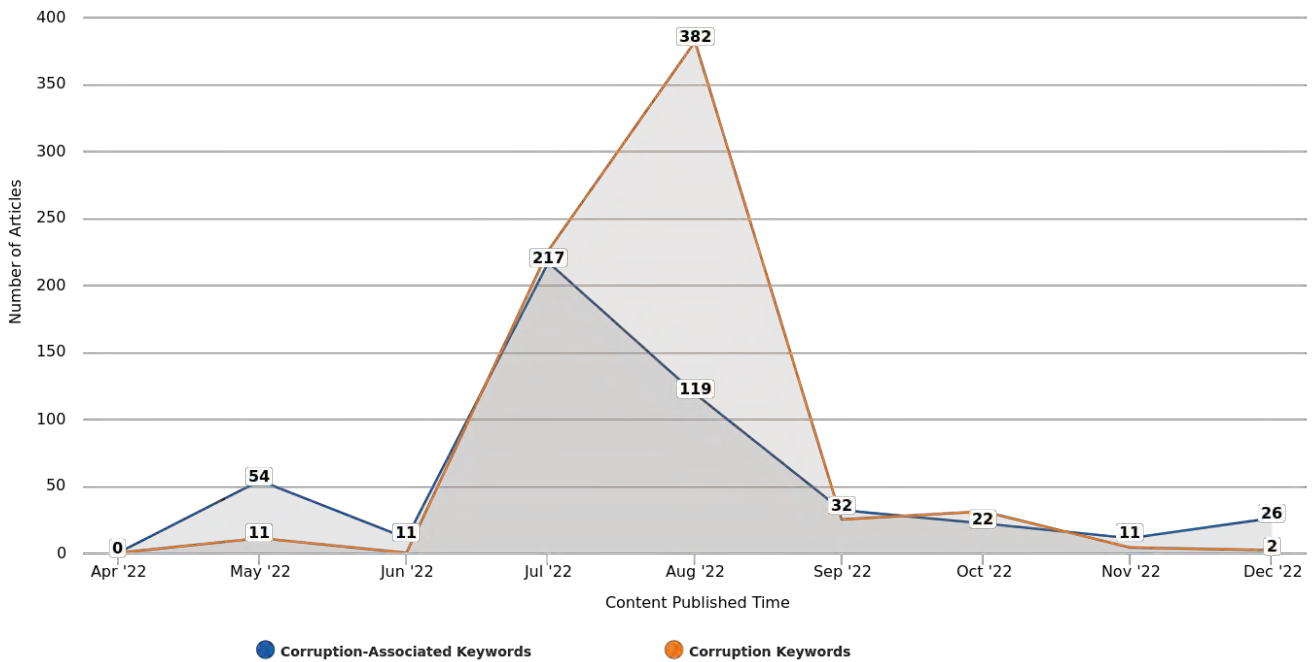
Petkova, a GERB representative and former Energy Minister [127], and DPS's Ramadan Atalay, then member of the Ad Hoc Committee on the Energy Crisis [128], announced that a special report would highlight the "unlawful practices" related to the Bulgargaz-Gazprom purchases. And, indeed, according to the widely republished report findings, "numerous violations were found in the ranking and selection of potential suppliers" [129] and "Bulgargaz has manipulated the disclosure of information about its correspondence with Gazprom Export regarding the latter's request for a new payment mechanism" [130]. Almost immediately after, the Parliament members rejected the findings [131].

Later on, Dobrev claimed that "due to huge scams Bulgargaz is in fact bankrupt" [132], and that former PM Kiril Petkov "serves the interests of Gazprom and Lukoil" [133]. In the beginning of August, Dobrev reiterated his previous statement that "the gas is still Russian, only now it comes through intermediaries and fills party coffers" [134]. A number of outlets even republished his provocative statements that "Kiril Petkov and Asen Vassilev should be on the lookout for good lawyers" [135]. As a reaction to GERB's comments, on August 10, hundreds of citizens gathered in front of the Presidency Headquarters in Sofia and launched a protest under the slogan #GazWithMe. The crowd strongly disagreed with the caretaker government's announced intentions to seek a Gazprom supplies renewal and considered them to be a clear sign of corruption [136]. For its part, the newspaper Capital noted that Democratic Bulgaria and We Continue the Change were the only political entities to openly oppose Gazprom's return to the country [137]. Meanwhile, other websites circulated the news that Delyan Dobrev was being investigated by the US sanction authorities "because of his close ties to Bulgargaz's former head Nikolay Pavlov, who cut cheap Azeri gas by 2/3 in September 2021 and provided Gazprom with the option to wring hands" [138]. In a similar context, both Petkov [139] and Vassilev [140] threatened to sue Dobrev for defamation. Moreover, then Parliament Spokesperson Nikola Minchev from We Continue the Change announced that the government was not interested in negotiating with Gazprom [141].

Finally, in October, PP called for an investigation into the way in which Dobrev had obtained receipts related to the Gazprom purchases. The party's

representative Venko Sabrutev even said: "The State Agency for National Security and the Prosecutor's Office must conduct an investigation! How could the Secret Services have disclosed information of this kind? This is an example of rampant lawlessness—a single politician has thrown the entire energy sector under a train" [142].

4.4.2. Online Coverage

4.4.2.1 Overall Metrics and Volume Comparison

The online coverage of the story comprised around 4,100 articles, with the majority of them circulating between the second half of July 2022 and the end of August 2022. The narrative remained active in the public domain through a heated exchange of arguments between GERB representatives and politicians from We Continue the Change, as well as other public figures. Most of the content originated from Prominent Sources, while Mushroom Websites remained relatively inactive during this period.

Prominent Sources mainly received their traffic through direct clicks (35%), searches (31%), and social media platforms (21%). Less Prominent Sources attracted a significantly higher percentage of visits from direct clicks (76%), while Mushroom Websites primarily drew visits through social media platforms (74%), especially Facebook. Media Aggregators gained their traffic mainly through searches (64%).

Throughout the story's development, the word "corruption" and its derivatives were mentioned twice as often as keywords associated with corruption. This clearly demonstrates that the media portrayed the story as related to corruption, and it is important to note that this narrative was initially established by GERB MP Delyan Dobrev, who used the word in a statement against a rival party, We Continue the Change.

Top Keywords (by volume)

A tag-cloud representation of the most frequently used keywords or phrases within the monitored story. The size of each word in the cloud is a relative indicator of the term's popularity, thereby allowing for the discernment of the most prominent and widely-discussed topics of interest. In addition to "Gazprom," another frequently mentioned keyword was the name of former Energy Minister and GERB MP Delyan Dobrev, who escalated the issue in the public domain by directing blame toward We Continue the Change [143].

More examples of frequently mentioned keywords are the names of former Finance Minister and We Continue the Change MP Asen Vassilev, who actively addressed the issue in the public domain, responding to allegations against his party for purchasing Russian gas through intermediaries.

Volume Comparison – Corruption Keywords vs. Corruption-Associated Keywords
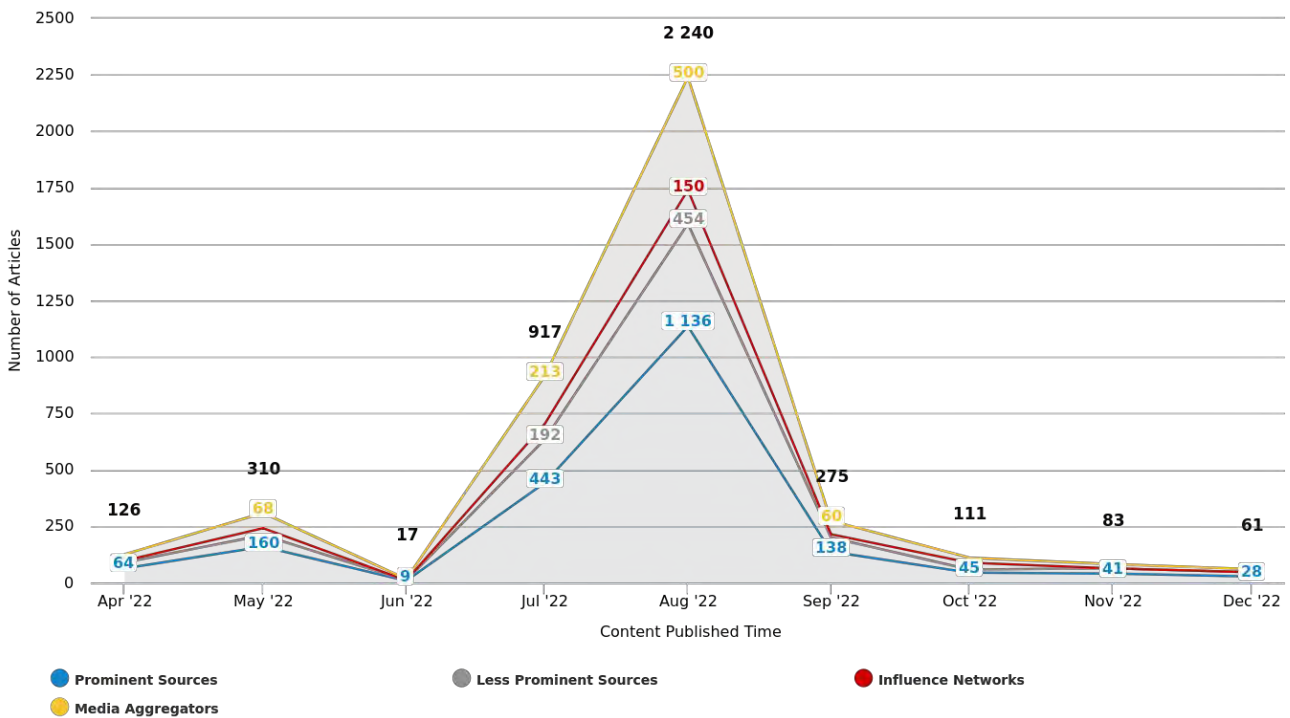

An analysis of the volume distribution of the pieces of content that make reference to corruption directly or indirectly. Overall, the mentions of the word "corruption" and its derivatives are twice as frequent as the mentions of keywords associated with corruption, primarily because the story fundamentally revolves around one political party accusing another of corrupt practices. The content peaked in August when Delyan Dobrev publicly disclosed invoices revealing gas deals conducted by Petkov's government involving four intermediary companies, tracing the gas back to Russian suppliers. Dobrev claimed these transactions resulted in a EUR 200 million loss for the state. He further called for legal actions against Kiril Petkov and Asen Vassilev, whom he held responsible. [144]

Potential Reach Comparison – Corruption Keywords vs. Corruption-Associated Keywords
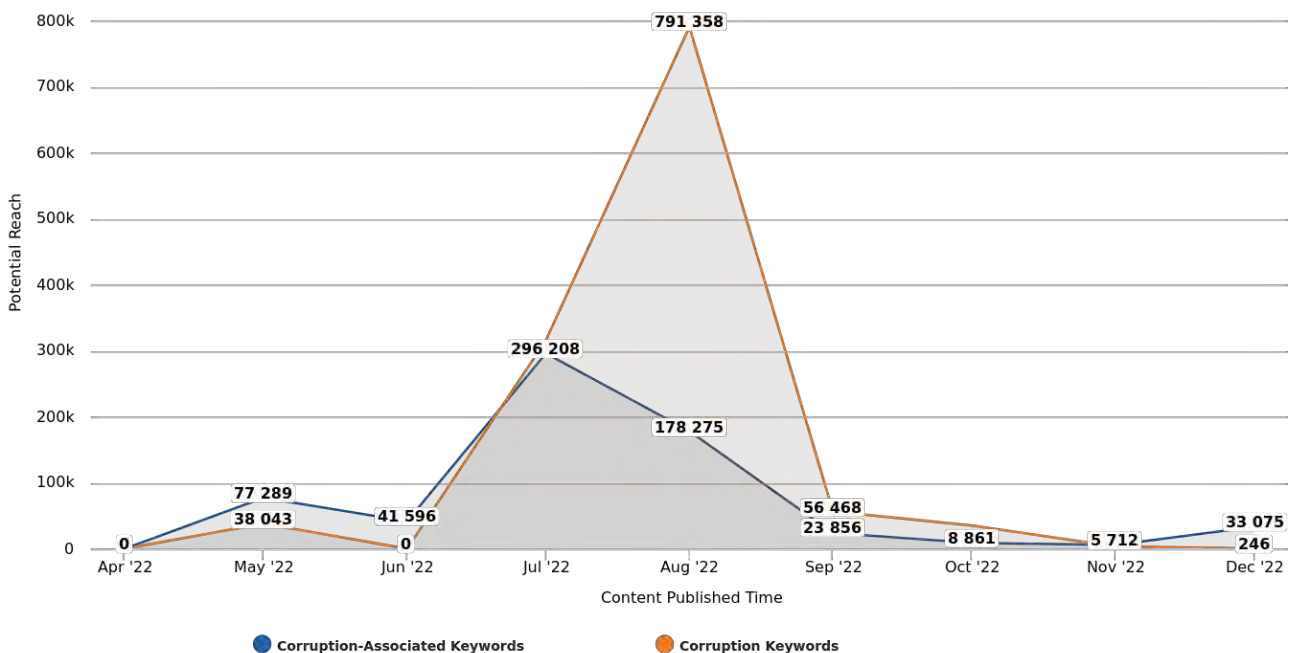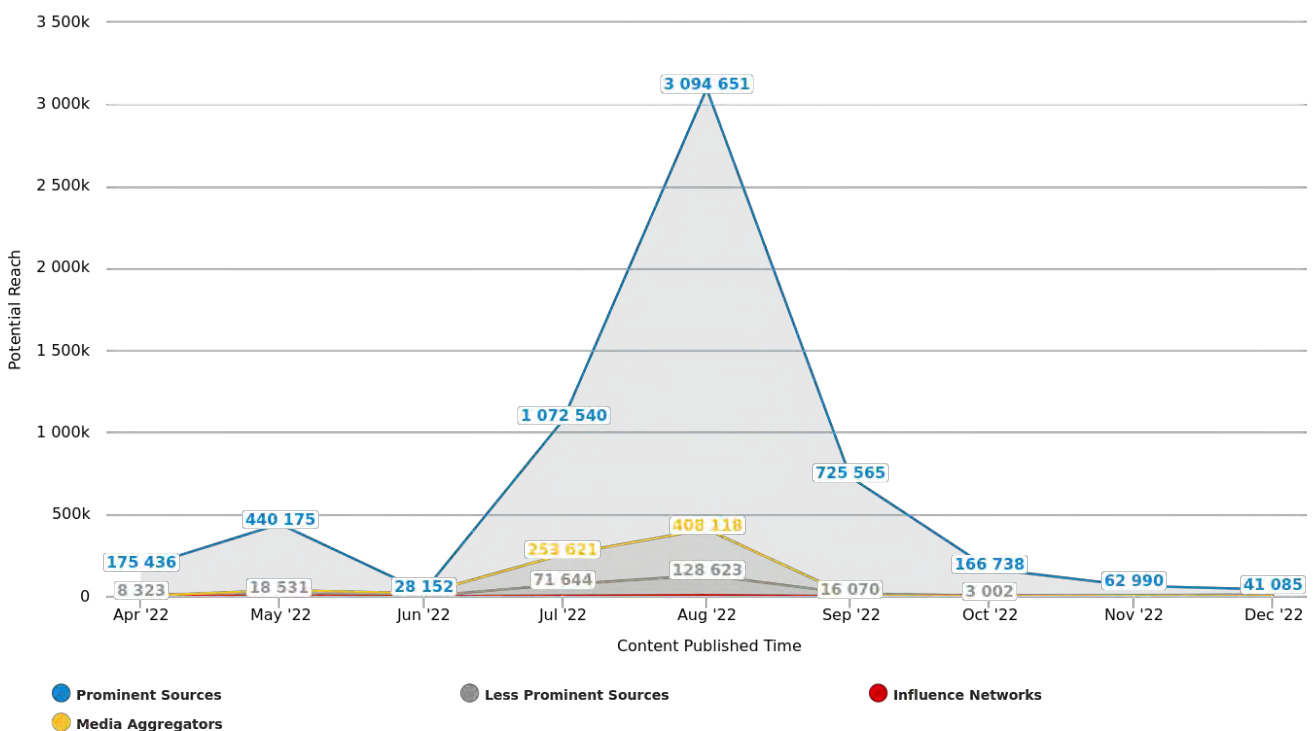

Potential reach distribution of the pieces of content, which reference corruption either directly or indirectly. The pattern of potential reach distribution closely mirrors the content volume distribution. A significant peak in the potential reach is observed at the beginning of August when Asen Vassilev responded to the accusations against him and his party, and when Deutsche Welle conducted an interview with him featuring the following headline – "How to Become a Normal Country: 28 Questions for Asen Vassilev" [145].
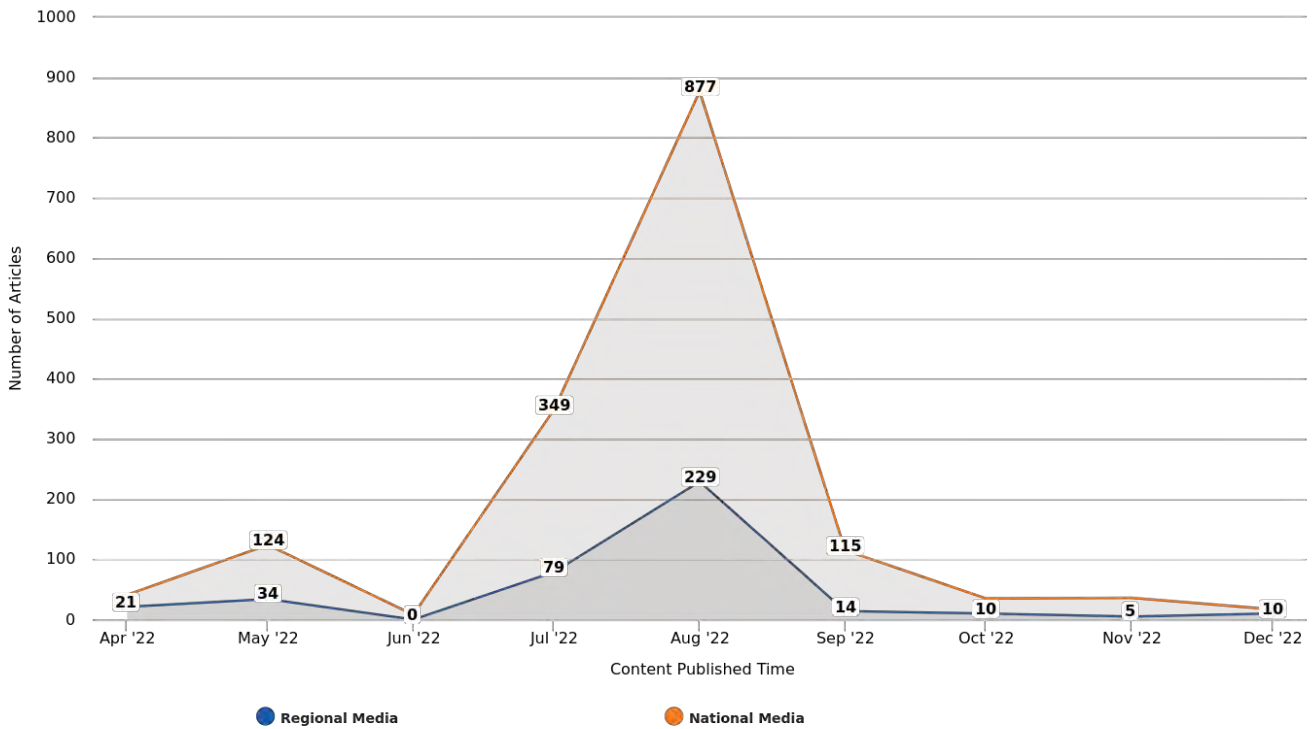
Stacked Volume Comparison (by source type)

Stacked volume distribution of the story per type of sources. Prominent Sources produced the most articles on the story, encompassing all aspects of the scandal and addressing its geopolitical dimensions in connection to Bulgarian-Russian relations. [146]. Media Aggregators ranked second in terms of volume, demonstrating considerable interest in all narratives surrounding the Gazprom scandal, particularly those related to the uncertainty of Bulgaria's gas supply and the dispute between the two parties – GERB and We Continue the Change.

Stacked Potential Reach Comparison (by source type)
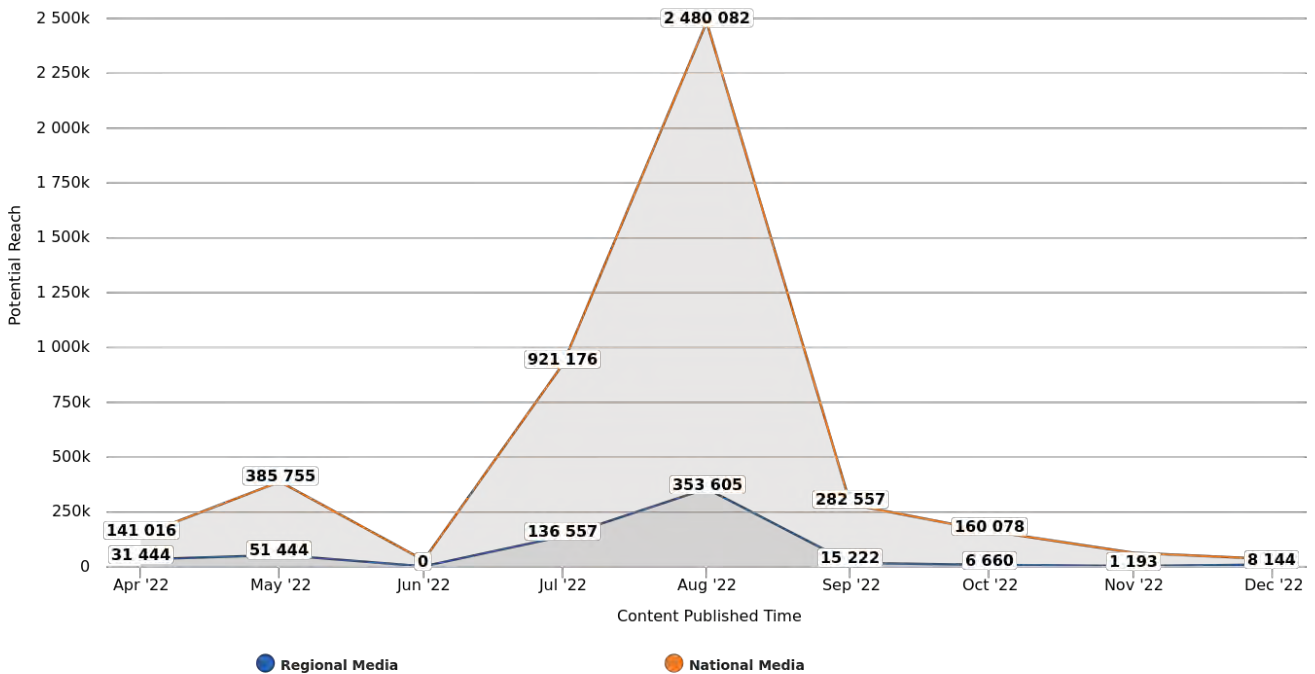

Stacked potential reach distribution of the story per type of sources. The chart clearly shows the dominant potential reach of Prominent Sources, which overshadows the rest of the source types. One of the reasons for the high potential reach of the Prominent Sources is the fact that the Bulgarian section of German international broadcaster Deutsche Welle released several pieces on the story.

Volume Comparison - Regional vs National Sources

Volume distribution of the story in the National and Regional Media. National Media published nearly four times more content than Regional Media.

## Potential reach Comparison - Regional vs National Sources

Potential reach distribution of the story in the National and Regional Media. The potential reach of National Media sources far exceeds that of Regional Media, due not only to the more limited audience of Regional Media, but also the lower amount of published content.

4.4.2.2 Online Coverage by Source Type
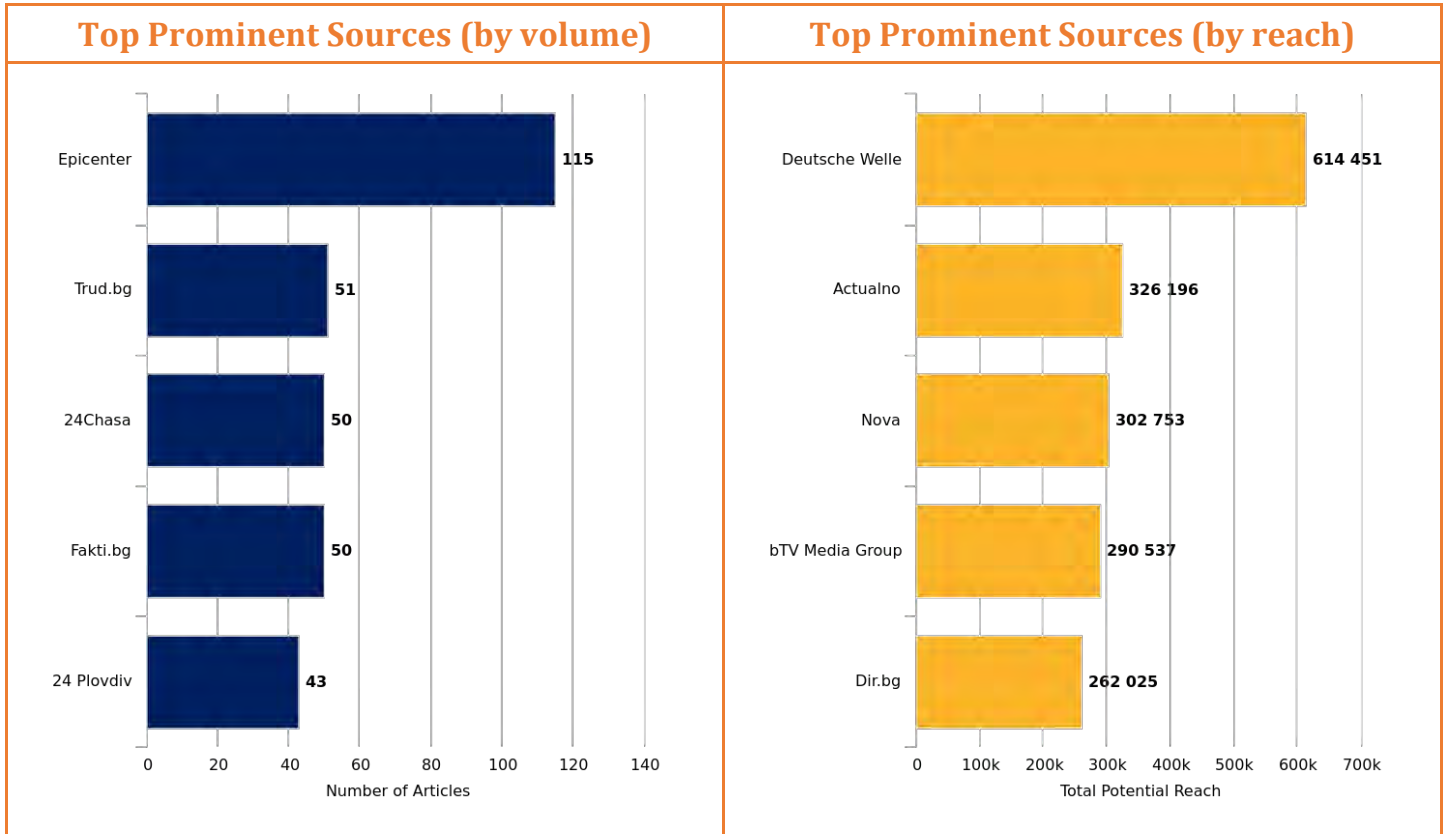
Top Prominent Sources (by volume)	Top Prominent Sources (by reach)

The chart on the left displays the Top Prominent Sources (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Prominent Sources (by potential reach). The numbers point to the conclusion that even though some sources publish less in terms of volume, they manage to reach a considerably wider audience. "Epicenter" emerged as the most active source in terms of volume, presenting various perspectives on the story in a fairly balanced manner.
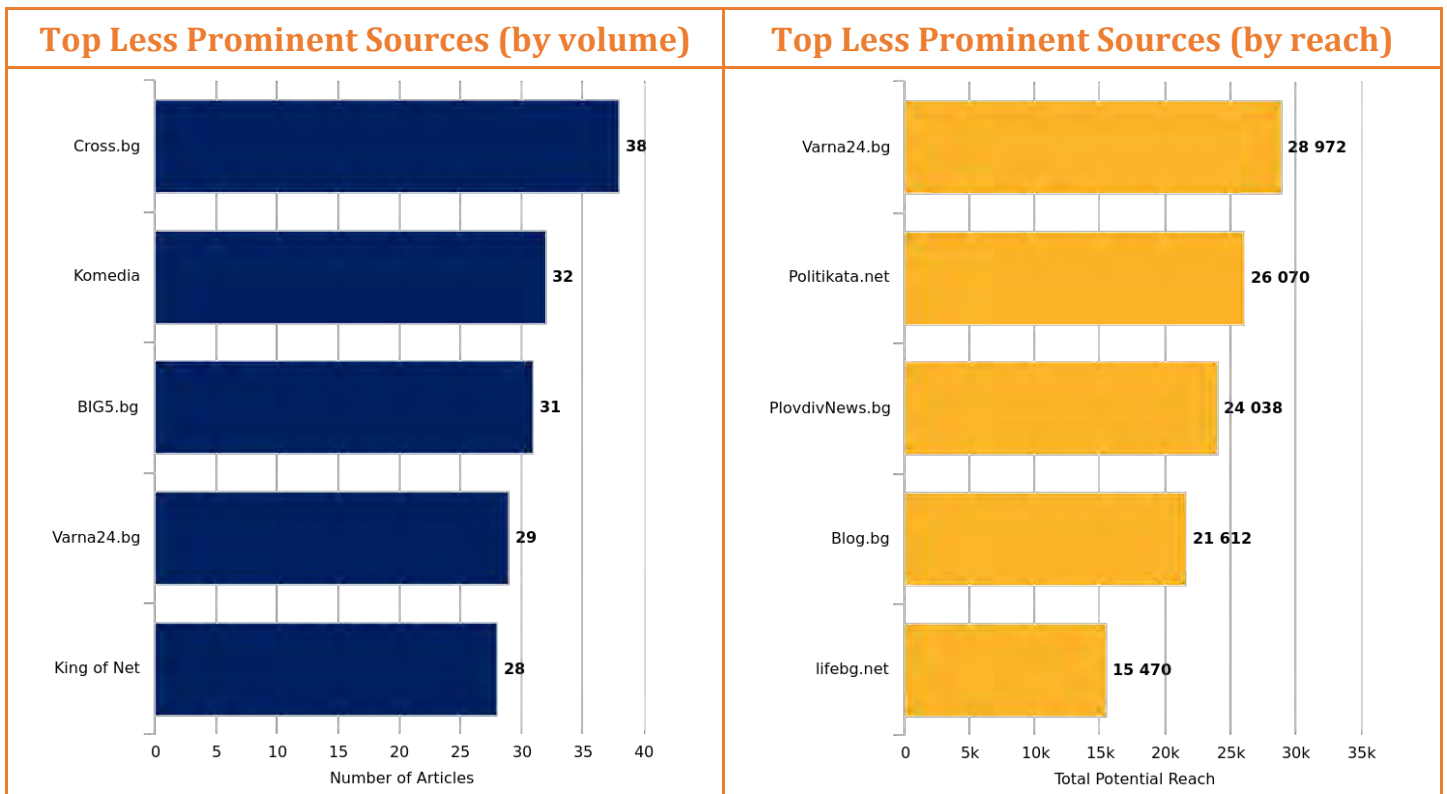
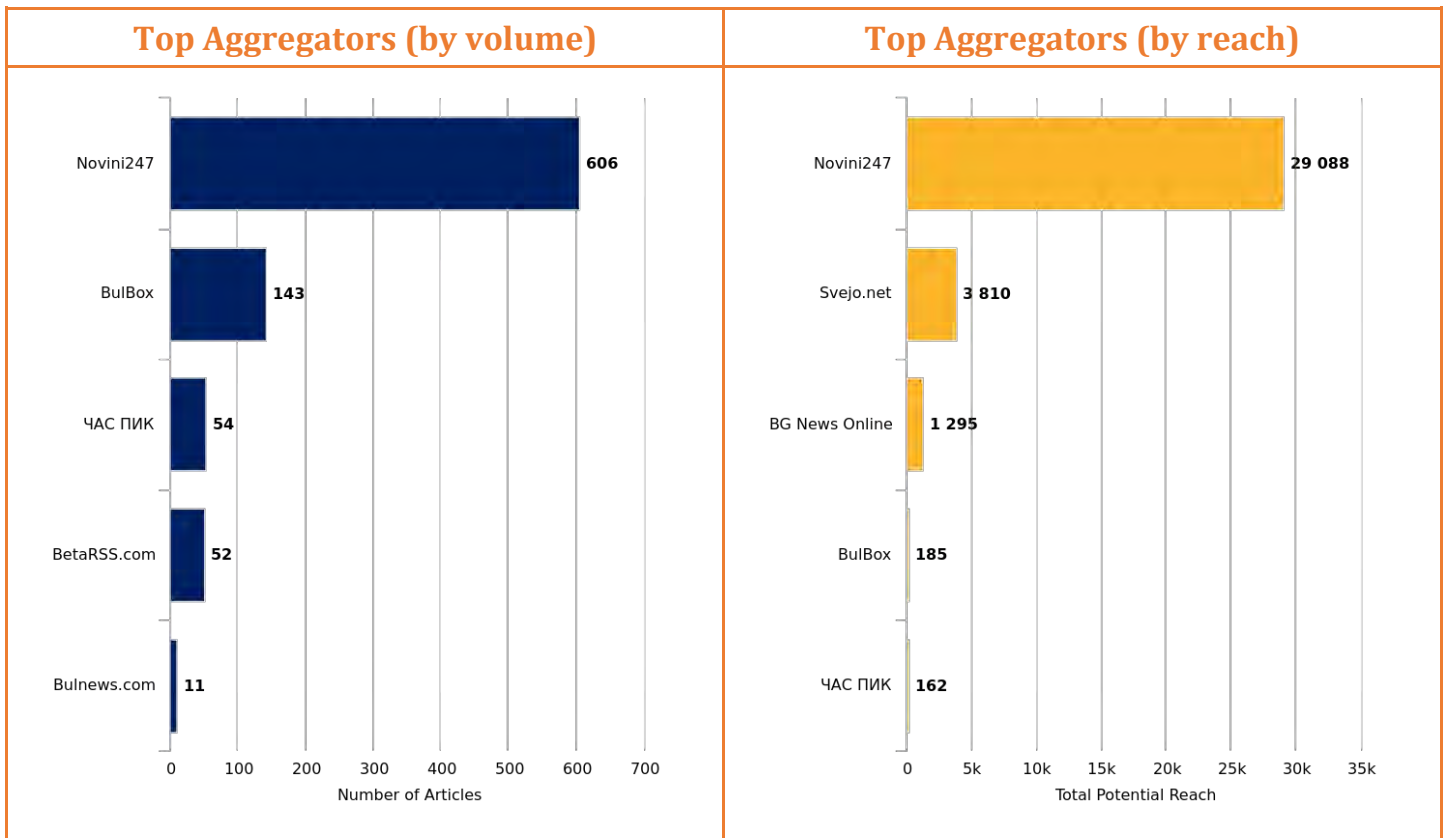| Top Less Prominent Sources (by volume)	Top Less Prominent Sources (by reach)

The chart on the left displays the Top Less Prominent Sources (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Less Prominent Sources (by potential reach). "Cross.bg" had the highest content volume, while "Varna 24" reached the widest audience.
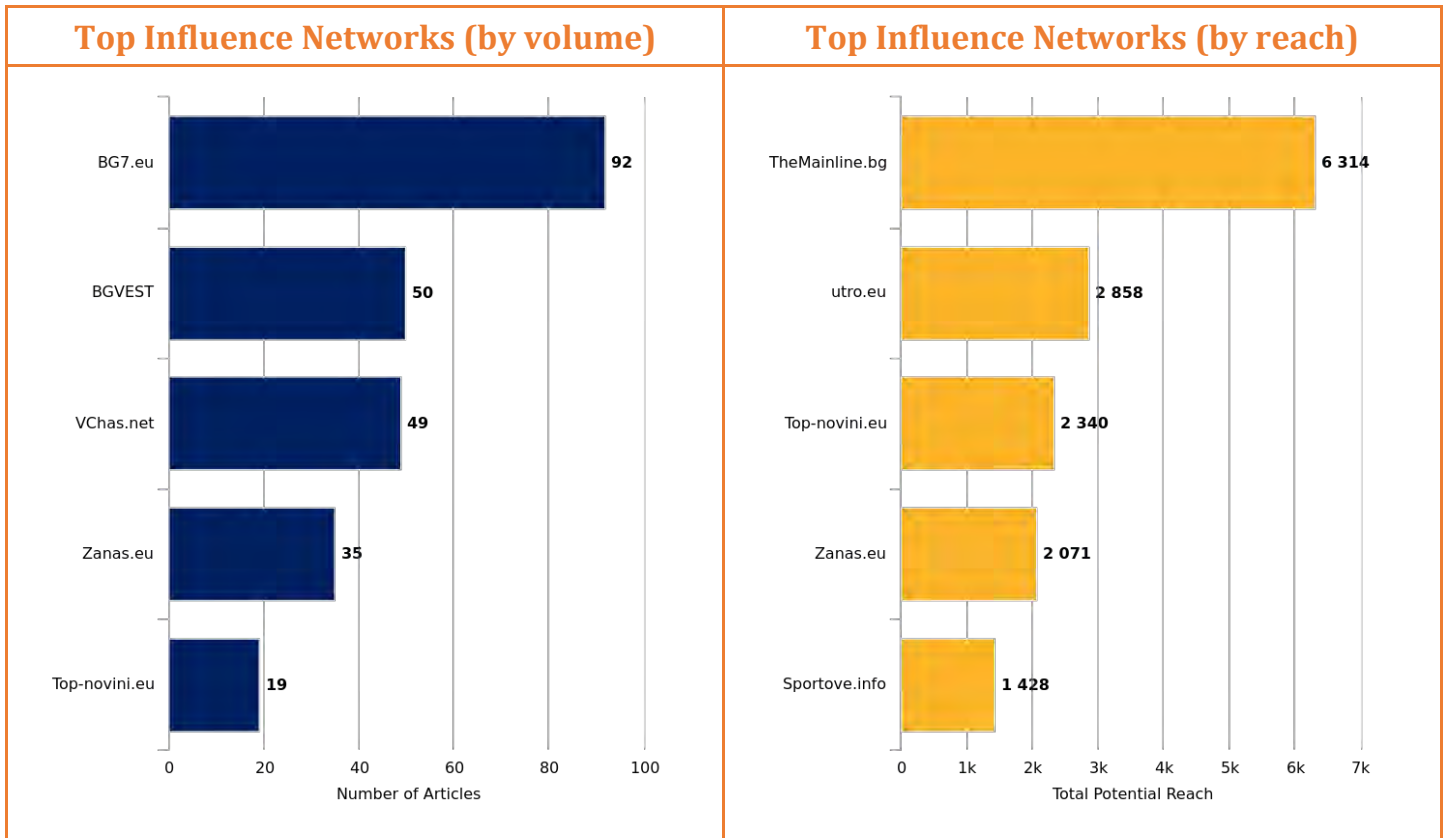
Top Influence Networks (by volume)

Number of Articles

- BG7.eu — 92
- BGVEST — 50
- VChas.net — 49
- Zanas.eu — 35
- Top-novini.eu — 19

Top Influence Networks (by reach)

Total Potential Reach

- TheMainline.bg — 6 314
- utro.eu — 2 858
- Top-novini.eu — 2 340
- Zanas.eu — 2 071
- Sportove.info — 1 428

The chart on the left displays the Top Influence Networks (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Influence Networks (by potential reach). In general, the Mushroom Websites were not very active on this story. "BG7.eu" published the highest number of articles, while "The Mainline" achieved the highest potential reach. It is worth noting that the content published by "The Mainline" displayed negative sentiment toward We Continue the Change [147].

Top Aggregators (by volume)

Number of Articles

- Novini247 — 606
- BulBox — 143
- ЧАС ПИК — 54
- BetaRSS.com — 52
- Bulnews.com — 11

Top Aggregators (by reach)

Total Potential Reach

- Novini247 — 29 088
- Svejo.net — 3 810
- BG News Online — 1 295
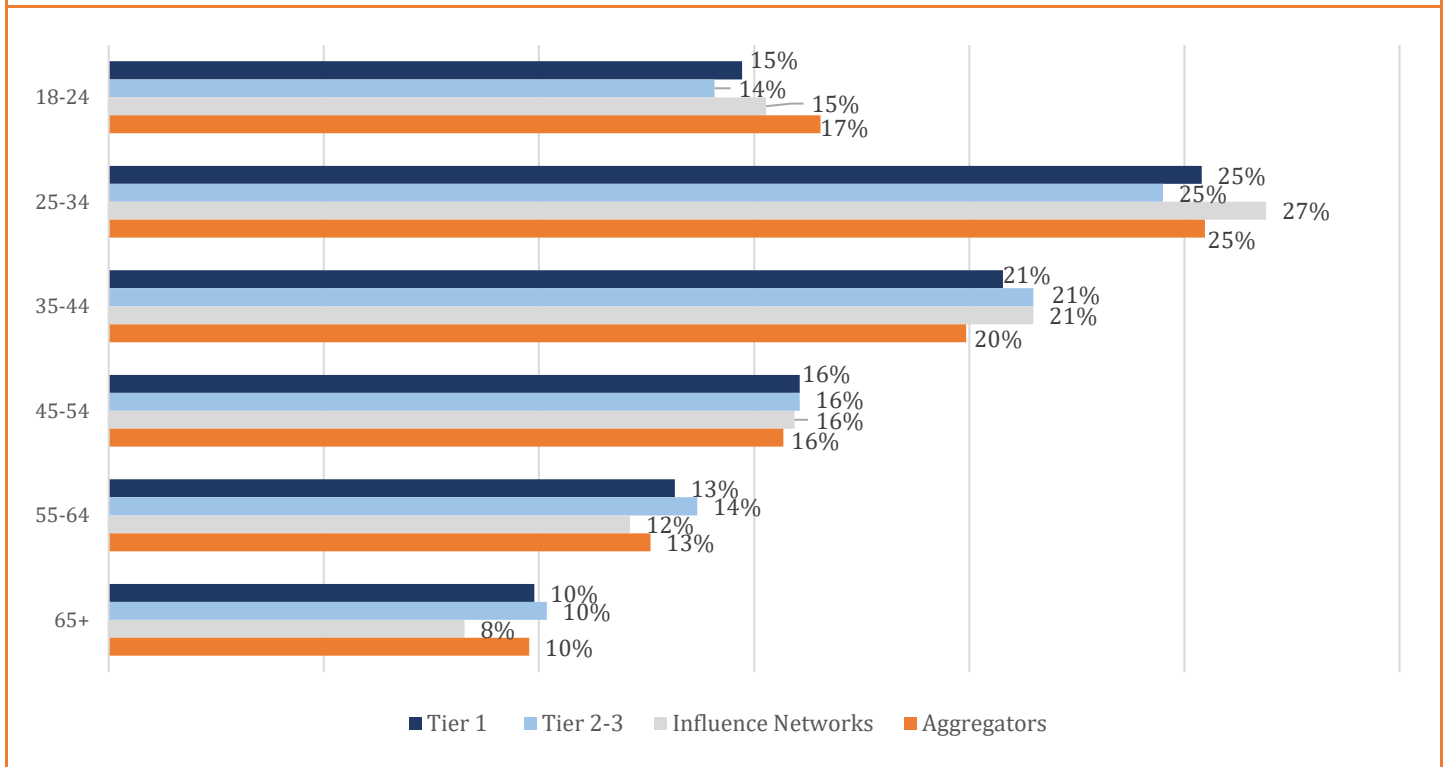- BulBox — 185
- ЧАС ПИК — 162

The chart on the left displays the Top Media Aggregators (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Media Aggregators (by potential reach). "Novini247" published most of the content, surpassing by far all other Media Aggregators.
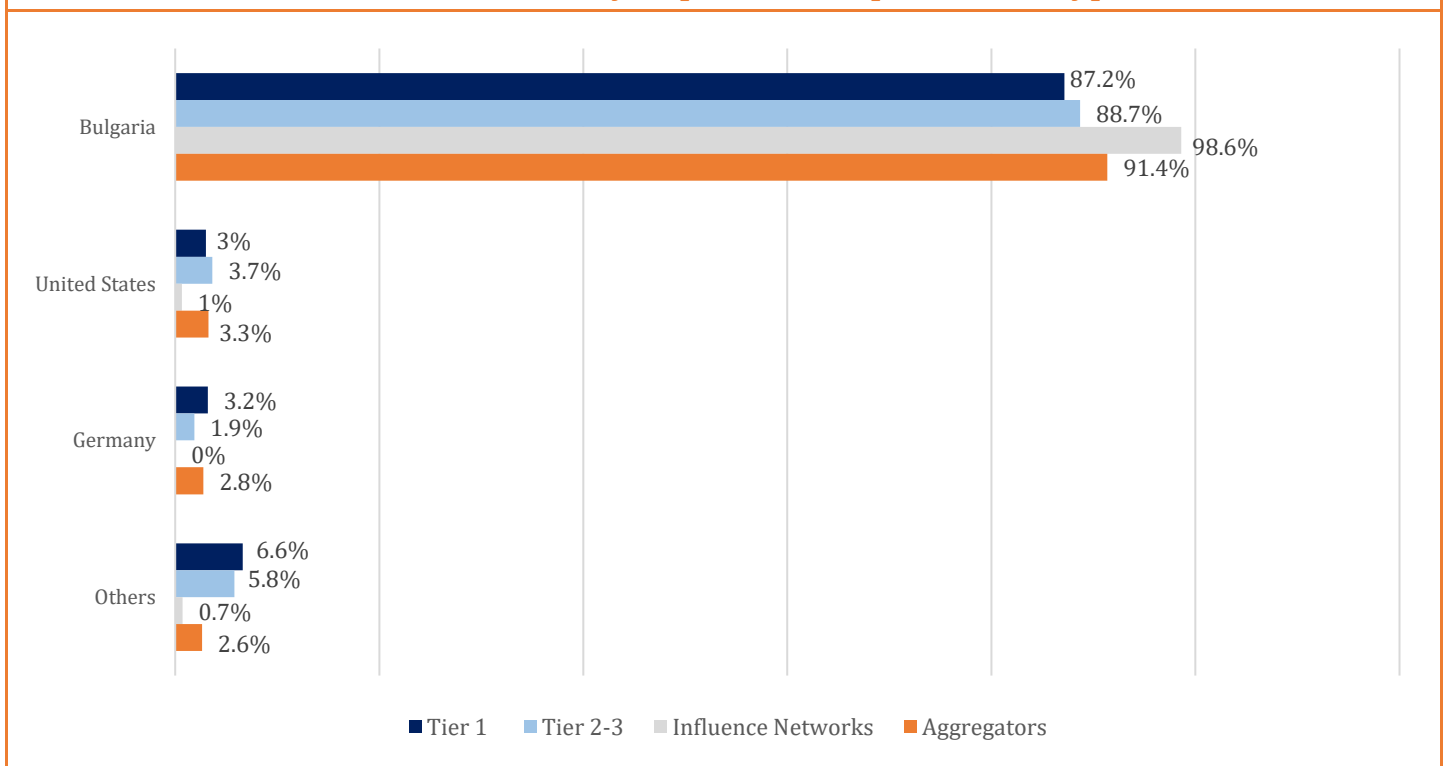
4.4.2.3 Online Coverage: Source Audience

Source Audience by Age per Source Type

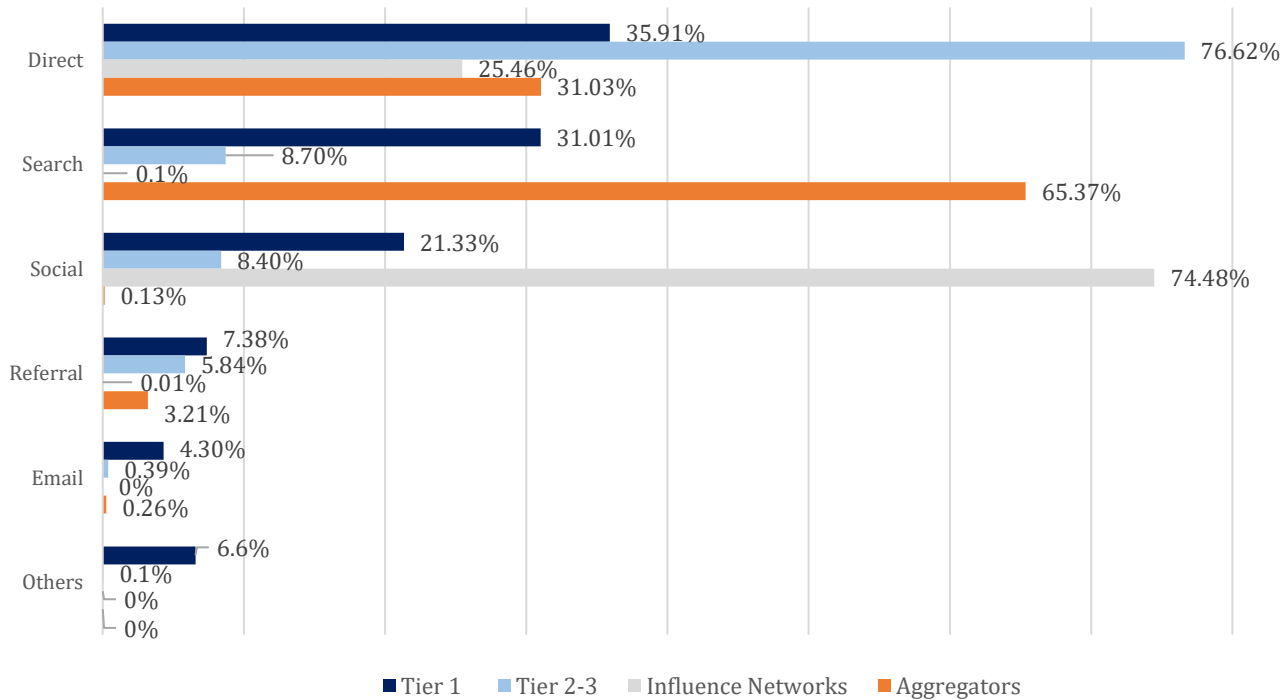| Age	Tier 1	Tier 2-3	Influence Networks	Aggregators
18-24	15%	14%	15%	17%
25-34	25%	25%	27%	25%
35-44	21%	21%	21%	20%
45-54	16%	16%	16%	16%
55-64	13%	14%	12%	13%
65+	10%	10%	8%	10%

The chart illustrates the different level of engagement with the four types of monitored sources (Prominent Sources, Less Prominent Sources, Media Aggregators, and Influence Networks) among six age groups. The result shows that the people most interested in the story are between the age of 25 and 44. The people above 65 years of age comprise the lowest audience percentage and, in this case, engaged mainly with Media Aggregators.

Source Audience by Top Countries per Source Type

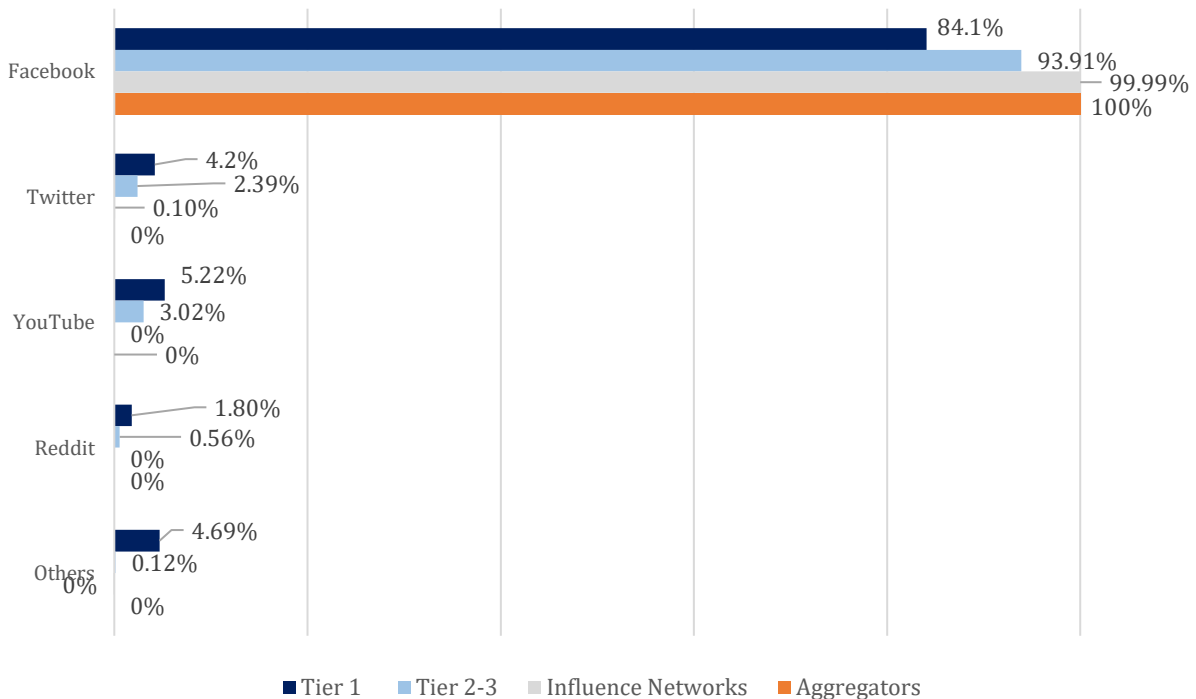| Country	Tier 1	Tier 2-3	Influence Networks	Aggregators
Bulgaria	87.2%	88.7%	98.6%	91.4%
United States	3%	3.7%	1%	3.3%
Germany	3.2%	1.9%	0%	2.8%
Others	6.6%	5.8%	0.7%	2.6%

The chart displays the geographical distribution of the websites visitors per source type. The traffic comes mostly from Bulgaria, with the United States taking the second place among all source types.

Source Audience by Traffic per Source Type

Direct
- Tier 1: 35.91%
- Tier 2-3: 76.62%
- Influence Networks: 25.46%
- Aggregators: 31.03%

Search
- Tier 1: 31.01%
- Tier 2-3: 8.70%
- Influence Networks: 0.1%
- Aggregators: 65.37%

Social
- Tier 1: 21.33%
- Tier 2-3: 8.40%
- Influence Networks: 74.48%
- Aggregators: 0.13%

Referral
- Tier 1: 7.38%
- Tier 2-3: 5.84%
- Influence Networks: 0.01%
- Aggregators: 3.21%

Email
- Tier 1: 4.30%
- Tier 2-3: 0.39%
- Influence Networks: 0%
- Aggregators: 0.26%

Others
- Tier 1: 6.6%
- Tier 2-3: 0.1%
- Influence Networks: 0%
- Aggregators: 0%

Legend: ■ Tier 1 ■ Tier 2-3 ■ Influence Networks ■ Aggregators

The chart compares the source of traffic and its volume generated by the four monitored source types. Prominent Sources and Media Aggregators gained most of their traffic directly or via a search engine. Less Prominent sources gained most of their traffic directly, while Influence Networks gained traffic through social media and, to a lesser degree, via direct clicks.
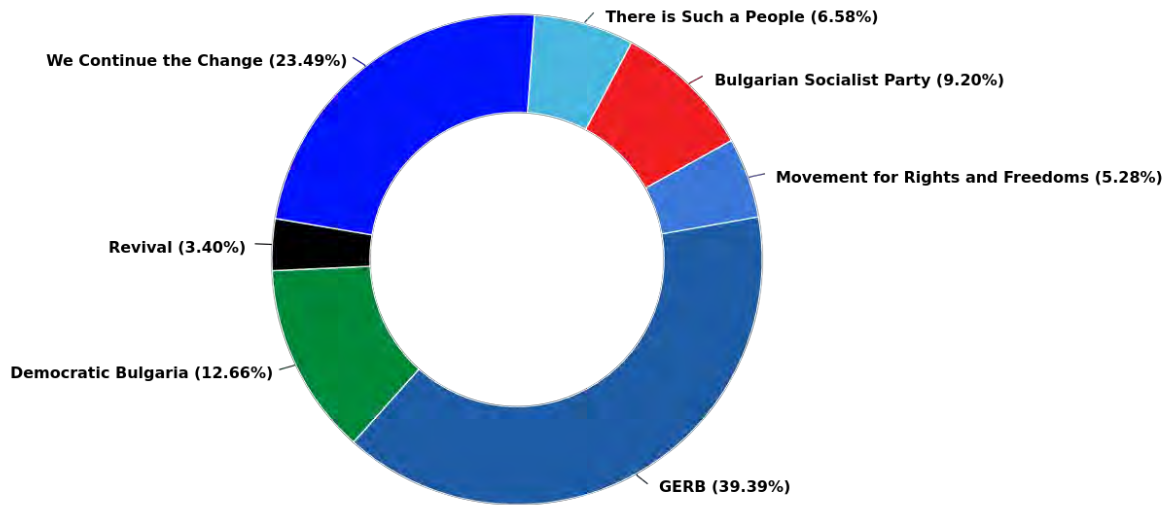
Source Audience by Social Network per Source Type

Facebook
- Tier 1: 84.1%
- Tier 2-3: 93.91%
- Influence Networks: 99.99%
- Aggregators: 100%

Twitter
- Tier 1: 4.2%
- Tier 2-3: 2.39%
- Influence Networks: 0.10%
- Aggregators: 0%

YouTube
- Tier 1: 5.22%
- Tier 2-3: 3.02%
- Influence Networks: 0%
- Aggregators: 0%

Reddit
- Tier 1: 1.80%
- Tier 2-3: 0.56%
- Influence Networks: 0%
- Aggregators: 0%

Others
- Tier 1: 4.69%
- Tier 2-3: 0.12%
- Influence Networks: 0%
- Aggregators: 0%

Legend: ■ Tier 1 ■ Tier 2-3 ■ Influence Networks ■ Aggregators

The chart illustrates the source audience distribution according to the traffic of the website gained via social network per source type. The findings highlight Facebook's dominance in all monitored types of sources.

4.4.2.4 Online Coverage: Political Parties (by volume)

Top Mentioned Political Parties

- There is Such a People (6.58%)
- Bulgarian Socialist Party (9.20%)
- Movement for Rights and Freedoms (5.28%)
- GERB (39.39%)
- Democratic Bulgaria (12.66%)
- Revival (3.40%)
- We Continue the Change (23.49%)

The chart presents the most mentioned political parties in the context of the story. Given the fact that the story primarily revolves around GERB and We Continue the Change as the central figures, it is unsurprising that GERB was mentioned the most, with Delyan Dobrev as its key representative in this context. We Continue the Change followed in terms of mentions. The third most mentioned party was Democratic Bulgaria, with several main narratives related to accusations leveled against it by GERB's representatives.

4.4.3. Social Coverage (Facebook)

The findings from the charts indicate that the Bulgargaz-Gazprom supply issues controversy did not generate significant interest among Facebook users, despite posts from official pages of media outlets. However, repetitive comments aimed at Kiril Petkov's government were observed, indicating a deliberate effort to emphasize accusations of corruption and inaction. The top social authors were primarily media outlets.

In general, the top keywords accurately capture the story's key elements, but some of them stand out, highlighting potentially problematic or controversial political behaviors. Notably, the political parties that garnered the most attention were GERB and We Continue the Change (PP), both of which were directly involved in the Gazprom scandal.

Overall Volume (per month)
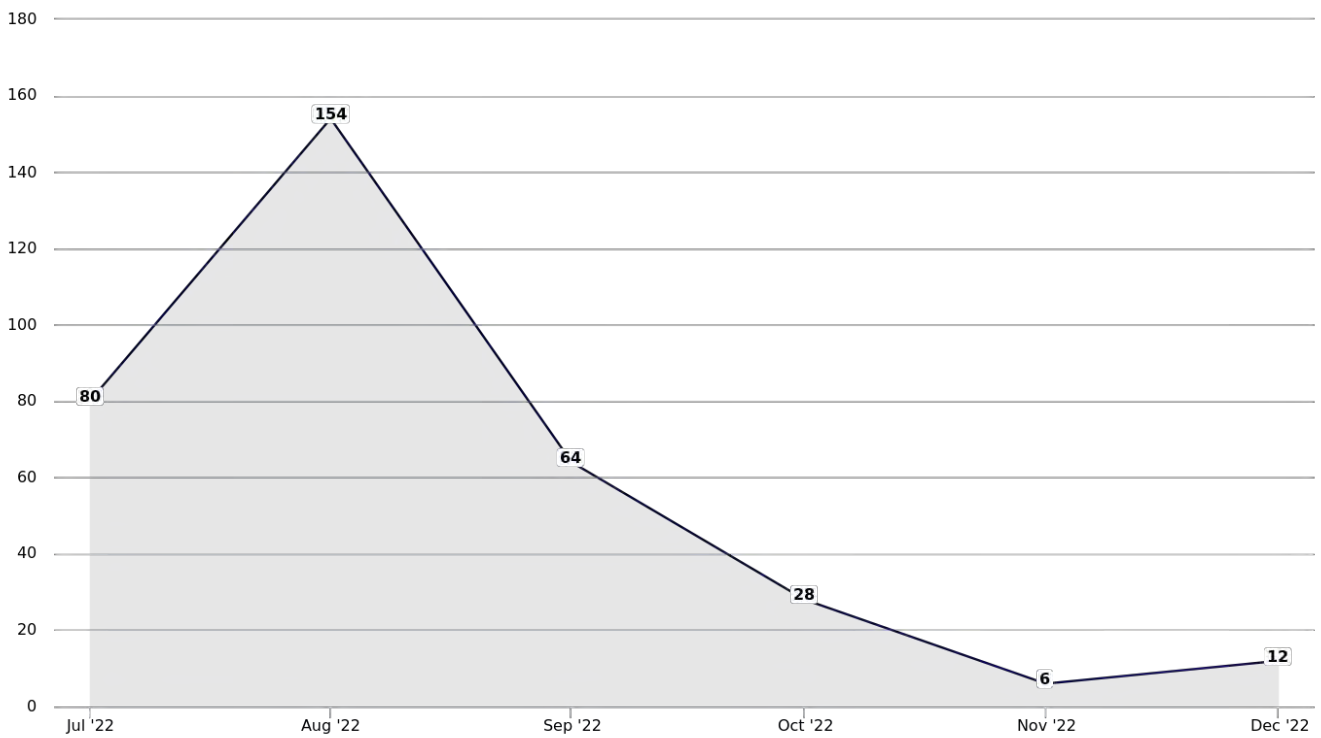
The story surrounding the Bulgargaz-Gazprom supply issues controversy received limited attention on Facebook, with only one peak that occurred in July and continued until August. It is worth noting that the majority of the content causing this peak was a result of repetitive and identical comments under posts by various official media pages. These comments were aimed at the government of Kiril Petkov, accusing it of corruption and inaction.

Top 10 Social Authors (by volume)
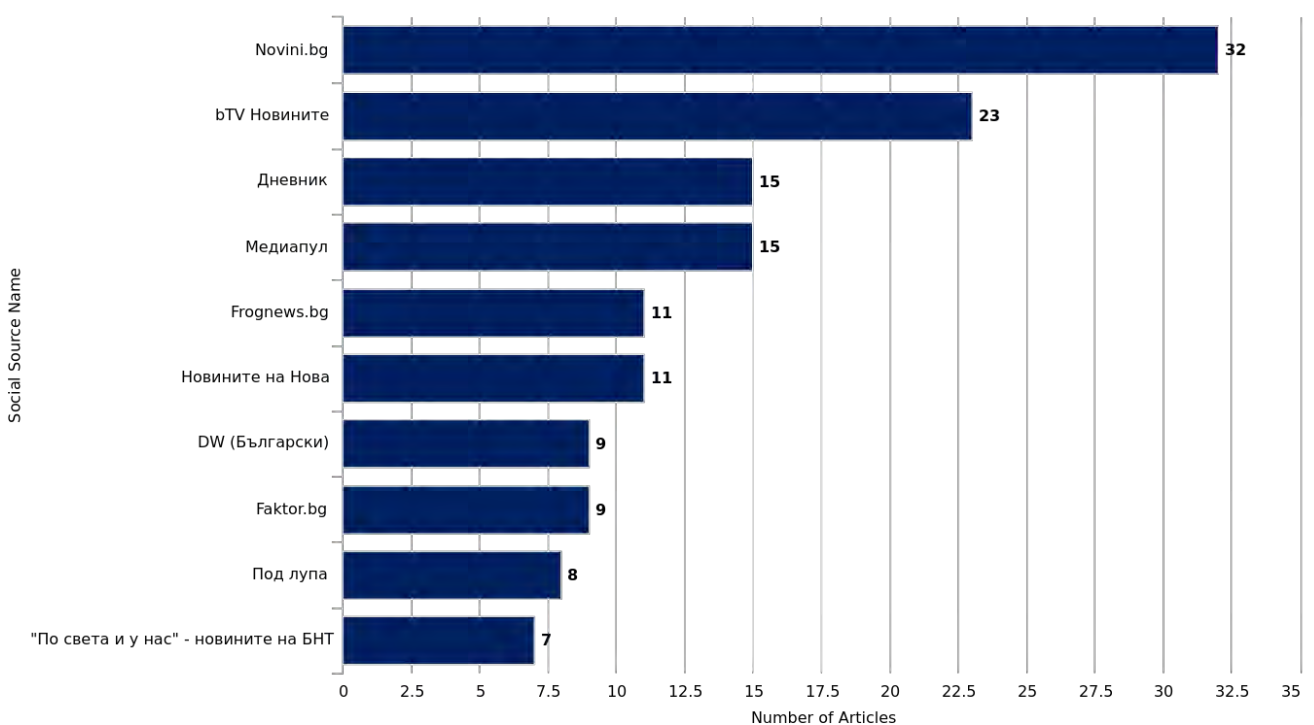
The Facebook pages "Novini.bg," "BTV," and "Dnevnik" were the most active accounts during the observed timeframe, based on their combined number of posts. In general, Facebook users showed little interest in the subject, as they shared only a limited number of posts that received very little engagement.

Top Keywords (by volume)
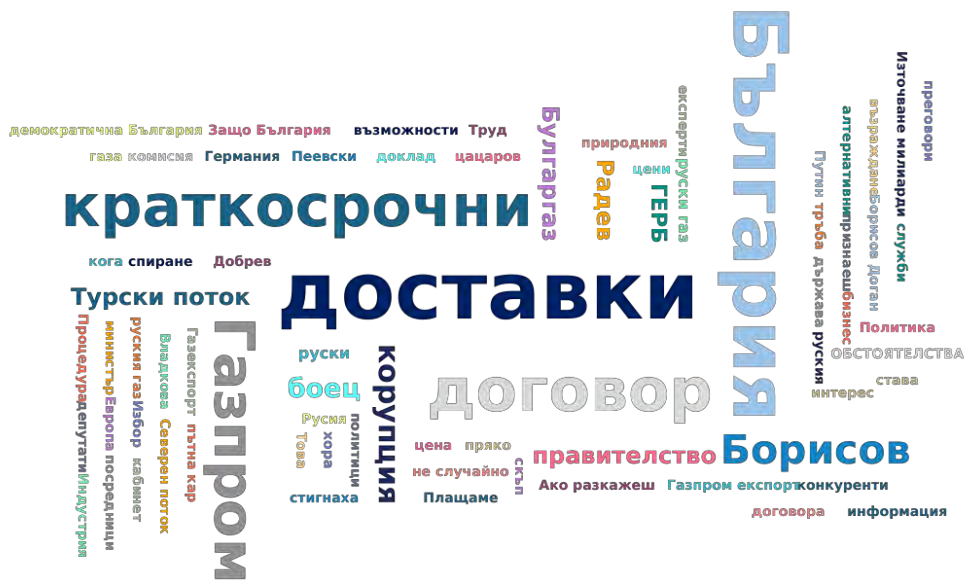
The chart above highlights several keywords, including "Bulgaria," "supply", "contract," "natural gas," and "short-term," which accurately capture the essence of the story. Notably, the name of Bulgarian President Rumen Radev also appears among the top keywords. Social media users accused Radev and his caretaker cabinet of continuing to prioritize Russian interests over those of Bulgaria.

4.4.3.1 Social Coverage: Political Parties (by volume)

Top Mentioned Political Parties

Facebook
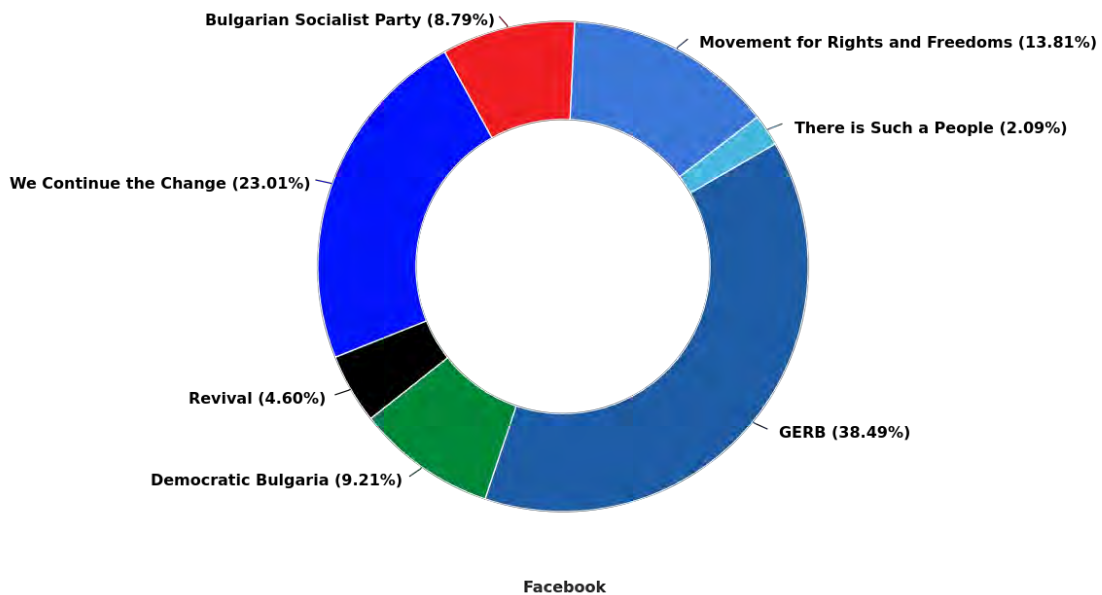
Similar to the online content, the political parties that received the most mentions are GERB with 40% and We Continue the Change (PP) with 24%. This is a result of both parties involvement in the Gazprom scandal. It is worth noting that GERB is repeatedly associated with corruption in the comment sections. The Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS) is also mentioned in nearly 14% of the content, specifically in connection with the statement made by DPS deputy Ramadan Atalay regarding the parliamentary committee report on the termination of the Gazprom contract. The remaining parties were only briefly mentioned in the social media content and did not receive significant attention.

4.5. Irregularities in the National Children's Hospital Construction

4.5.1. Background

Bulgaria is the only country in the European Union that does not have a National Children's Hospital. The construction of such has been underway since 2018 with an expected completion date in 2023. However, the project has been plagued with allegations of irregularities and corruption, which have raised concerns about the quality and safety of the final facility. The National Children's Hospital project is funded by the Bulgarian government and the European Union. The initial budget for the project was set at EUR 100 million, but this figure has since increased to EUR 216 million due to delays and cost overruns. The construction is being carried out by a consortium of companies, including the Health Investment Company for Children's Hospital, led by the Bulgarian construction firm Glavbolgarstroy. Throughout the years, several irregularities have been reported in the construction of the hospital, among them concerns about the quality of the materials, cost overruns, delayed construction, and favoritism in the awarding of contracts. All these allegations have led to partial investigations by the Bulgarian authorities and the European Antifraud Office (OLAF).

The story's peak could be traced back to June 2021 when several media outlets reported that the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works had announced the issuing of a special permit for a brand new Children's Hospital on the foundations of an abandoned construction site in the courtyard of the Medical Academy in Sofia [148]. Soon after, 90,000 Bulgarian citizens signed a petition against the construction of the hospital at a site near the Medical Academy [149]. In July, it was reported that Bulgaria's Ministry of Health was in the process of cancelling the construction contract due to a directive from the Ministry of Regional Development, according to which it was not possible to build a modern and spacious medical institution on top of old foundations [150]. In August, during a hearing in the National Assembly, then acting Minister of Health Dr. Stoycho Katsarov revealed that his office had identified multiple legal violations made during the construction of the National Children's Hospital. Katsarov handed over materials related to these violations to the Special Prosecutor's Office. According to him, former Prime Minister Boyko Borissov and some former Health Ministers were aware of these violations. Katsarov did not provide specifics on what the violations entailed or which companies were involved [151].

In December 2021, Minister Katsarov announced that the new National Children's Hospital would be constructed on the site of the former Lozenets Hospital, sparking a flurry of news coverage and public interest [152]. According to the Health Minister, the new hospital had to maintain its multi-profile character and accommodate children currently treated at the specialized one. The project could take up to five years to complete. Many saw the decision as a positive step forward. A couple of days later, however, medical staff and students demanded Katsarov's resignation, raising concerns about job losses and the insufficient capacity of the Lozenets Hospital. On December 14, following the formation of the new government led by Kiril Petkov, the new Health Minister, Professor Asena Serbezova, announced the suspension of the merger between Lozenets Hospital and the Children's Hospital [153]. The Minister stated that she would review the case thoroughly before giving her final opinion. She also emphasized that now former Minister of Health Dr. Stoycho Katsarov had signed the decision for the merger just days before the end of his term, which raised doubts about the motives behind it.

During a parliamentary control session in February 2022, Minister Serbezova announced the creation of a working group composed of experts expected to analyze all issues related to the National Children's Hospital project. The group was to conduct legal, financial, and medical checks. [154]. During the same month, media outlets reported that the Specialized Prosecutor's Office had opened a pre-trial proceeding against a Ministry of Health official for violating their duties regarding the construction of the facility. The investigation was prompted by a report from former Health Minister Stoycho Katsarov, who claimed that the BGN 10 million intended for the hospital had been transferred without proper legal authorization [155]. Moreover, according to documents sent by the Ministry of Interior [156], there was enough evidence of official wrongdoings to prompt an investigation by the Prosecutor's Office into the last two health ministers from GERB, Kiril Ananiev and Kostadin Angelov. A financial inspector even discovered that the unfinished construction had been unacceptable from a zoning standpoint due to conflicts with existing plans.

Later on in June, the audit of the entity Health Investment Company for Children's Hospital revealed

several significant failures in its operations. According to the investigation, the company had incurred losses amounting to around BGN 415,000, which, deducted from the recorded capital of BGN 100 million, eventually resulted in a total equity of BGN 99,588,000. The audit also found that the company had made unauthorized payments without prior legal control and had no procedures for ongoing control of financial commitments and contracts [157]. After further discussions regarding the construction of the Children's Hospital in October, the Health Ministry announced that a meeting with the Minister of Regional Development had been scheduled to expedite the approval of a suitable construction site. Despite this, the meeting was postponed due to deficiencies in the documents submitted by the investor [158].

The content reached another peak when the government notified the public that it had chosen a new plot of land for the construction of the National Children's Hospital in the Gorna Banya district [159]. The announcement received the approval of numerous officials. In this relation, the media outlet Dnevnik [160] published an article featuring the position of the "For a Real Children's Hospital" initiative group in regard to the parliamentary debate led by two MPs, Kremena Kuneva and Alexander Simidchiev, which aimed to analyze the future hospital's goals. The initiative group expressed its contentment with the unanimous agreement for a detailed analysis of the issues in pediatric healthcare and for the development of a sustainable vision for resolving them, with the National Children's Hospital playing an important role.

4.5.2. Online Coverage

4.5.2.1 Overall Metrics and Volume Comparison

The online coverage surrounding the story amounted to around 2,600 articles, with more than half of the content published by Prominent Sources (around 1,400), followed by Media Aggregators (around 700), and Less Prominent Sources (around 460). Influence Networks were the least active.

The sources monitored in the context of this story share a similar audience demographic, with people between the ages of 25 and 44 constituting the largest percentage of the readership. In addition, the traffic was generated primarily from Bulgaria. However, the
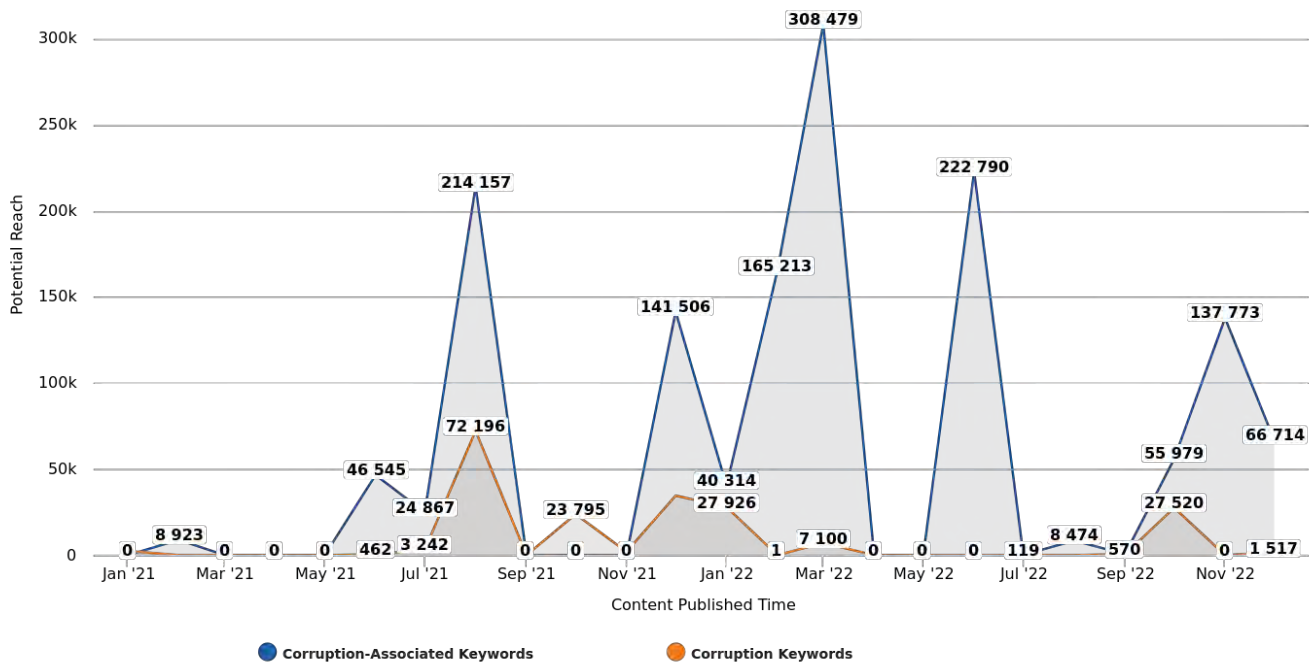
sources differ in terms of how they gained the said traffic. Prominent Sources received most of it directly or via search engines, Less Prominent Sources—directly, and Media Aggregators through a search engine. Influence Networks gained traffic mainly from social media and direct clicks.

The results also show that the use of vocabulary associated with corruption was almost four times more common than the direct reference to corruption. Due to the national interest in the matter, the story was extensively covered by sources categorized as National Media.
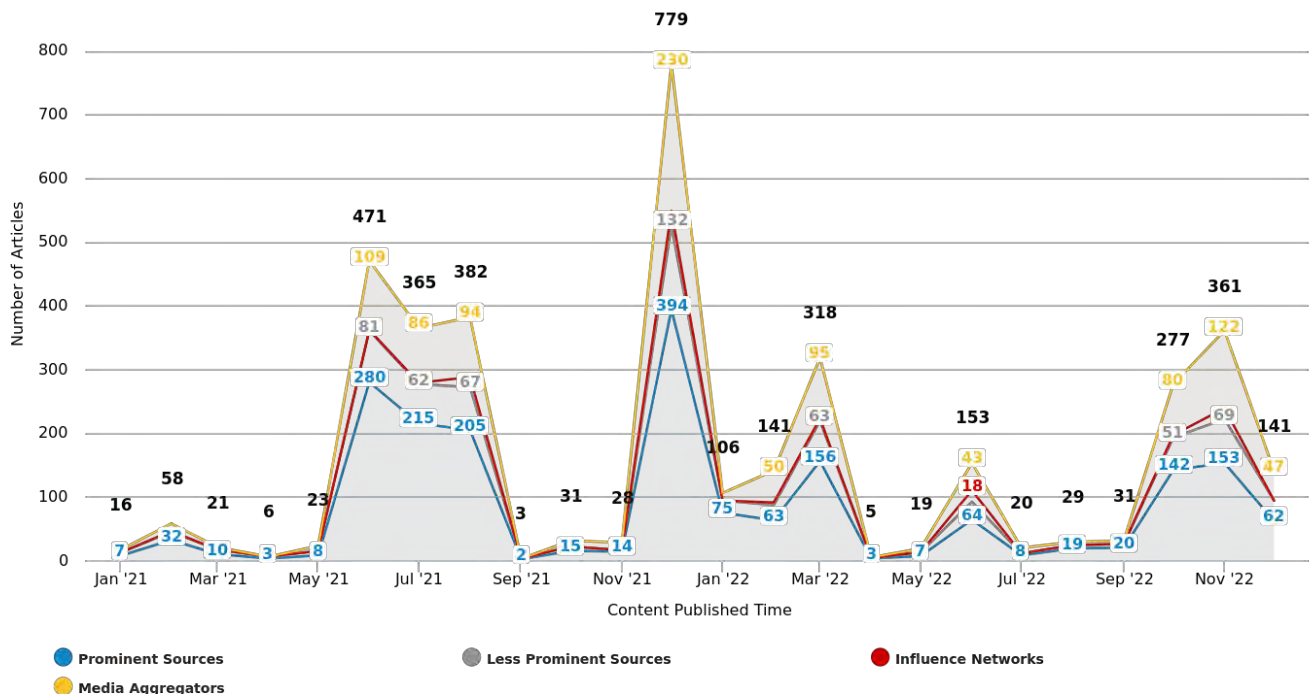
Top Keywords (by volume)

A tag-cloud representation of the most frequently used keywords or phrases within the monitored story. The chart depicts each word's size relative to its popularity, providing an insight into the most prominent and widely discussed points of interest. In this particular case, the most frequently mentioned keywords include "children's hospital," "government company," "Ministry of Health," and the names of the two consecutive Health Ministers, Stoycho Katsarov and Asena Serbezova. Among the other frequently mentioned terms are "pre-trial proceedings," "specialized prosecution," and "healthcare."

Volume Comparison – Corruption Keywords vs. Corruption-Associated Keywords

An analysis of the volume distribution of the pieces of content that reference corruption either directly or indirectly. The results show that the use of words associated with corruption is almost four times more common than the direct reference to corruption.

## Potential Reach Comparison – Corruption Keywords vs. Corruption-Associated Keywords

Potential reach distribution of the pieces of content, which reference corruption either directly or indirectly. The potential reach distribution pattern mirrors the volume distribution of the content.

Stacked Volume Comparison (by source type)

Stacked volume distribution of the story per type of sources. Prominent Sources published more than half of the content, followed by Media Aggregators and Less Prominent Sources. Influence Networks published the least amount of content that could be traced back to two small peaks (less than 30 articles). The first peak occurred in August 2021 and was a result of several different headlines, the most representative of which was "Emotions in the National Assembly Escalated! Deputy Bursts into Tears on the Parliamentary Podium" [161]. The second peak was in December 2021 and was caused by uncoordinated republishing of various articles, with no particular headline standing out.

## Stacked Potential Reach Comparison (by source type)
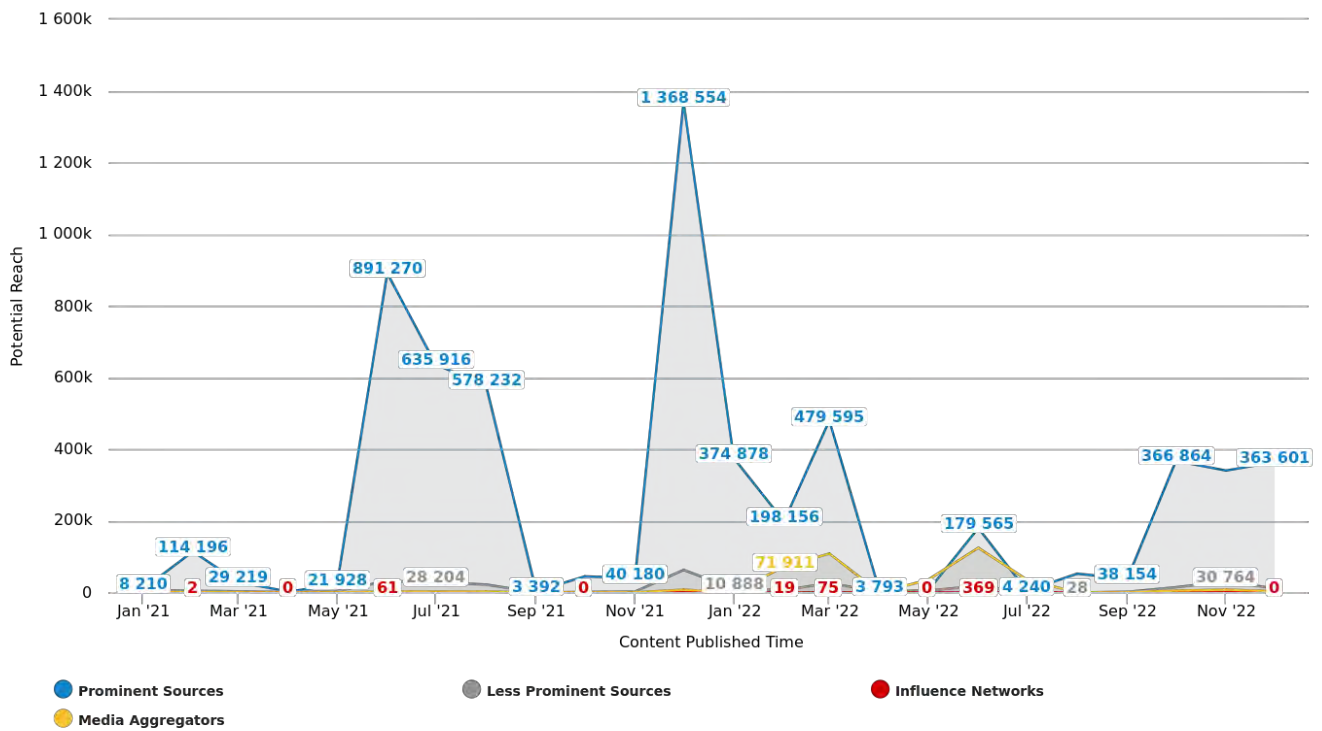
Stacked potential reach distribution of the story per type of sources. The chart clearly shows the dominant potential reach of Prominent Sources, which overshadows the rest of the source types.

Volume Comparison - Regional vs National Sources
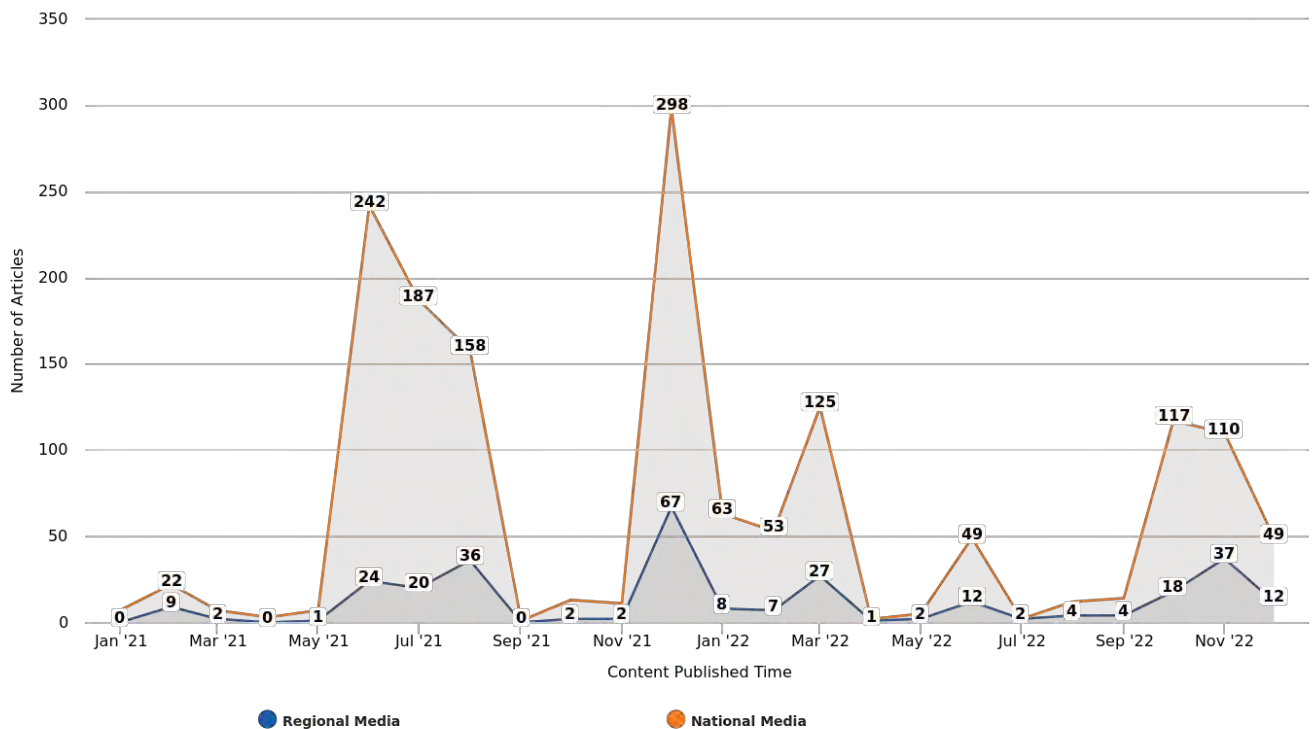
Volume distribution of the story in the National and Regional Media. National Media published nearly ten times more content related to the story compared to Regional Media.
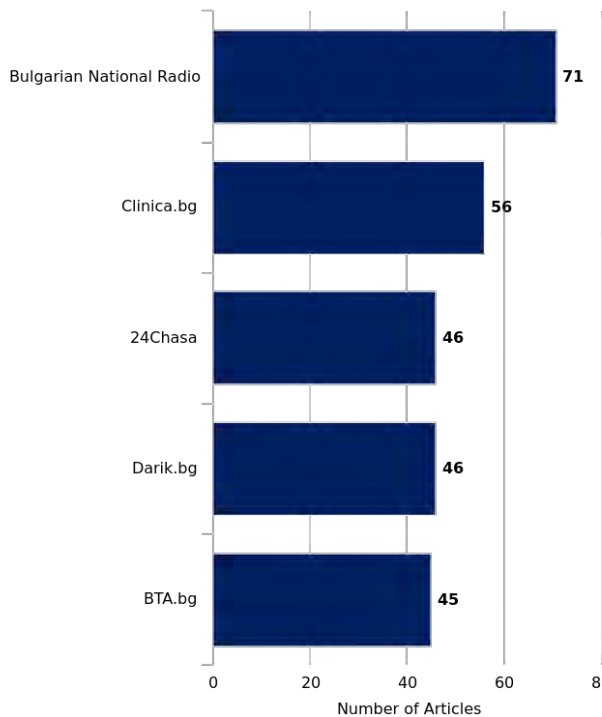
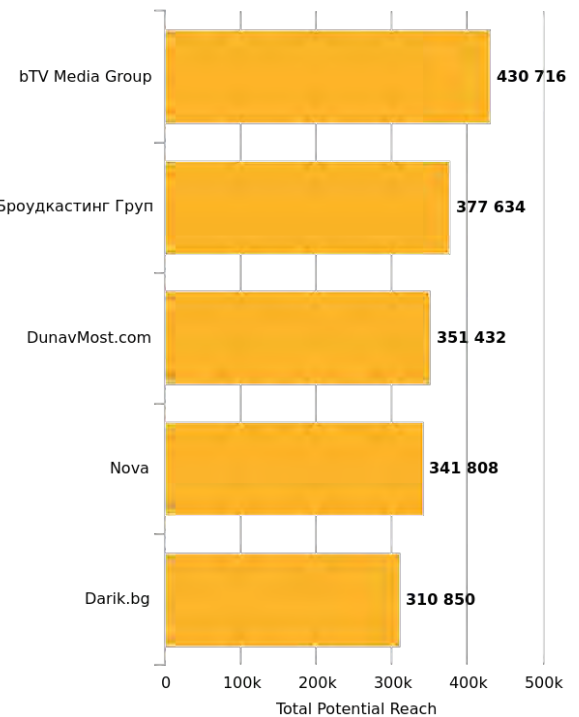## Potential reach Comparison - Regional vs National Sources
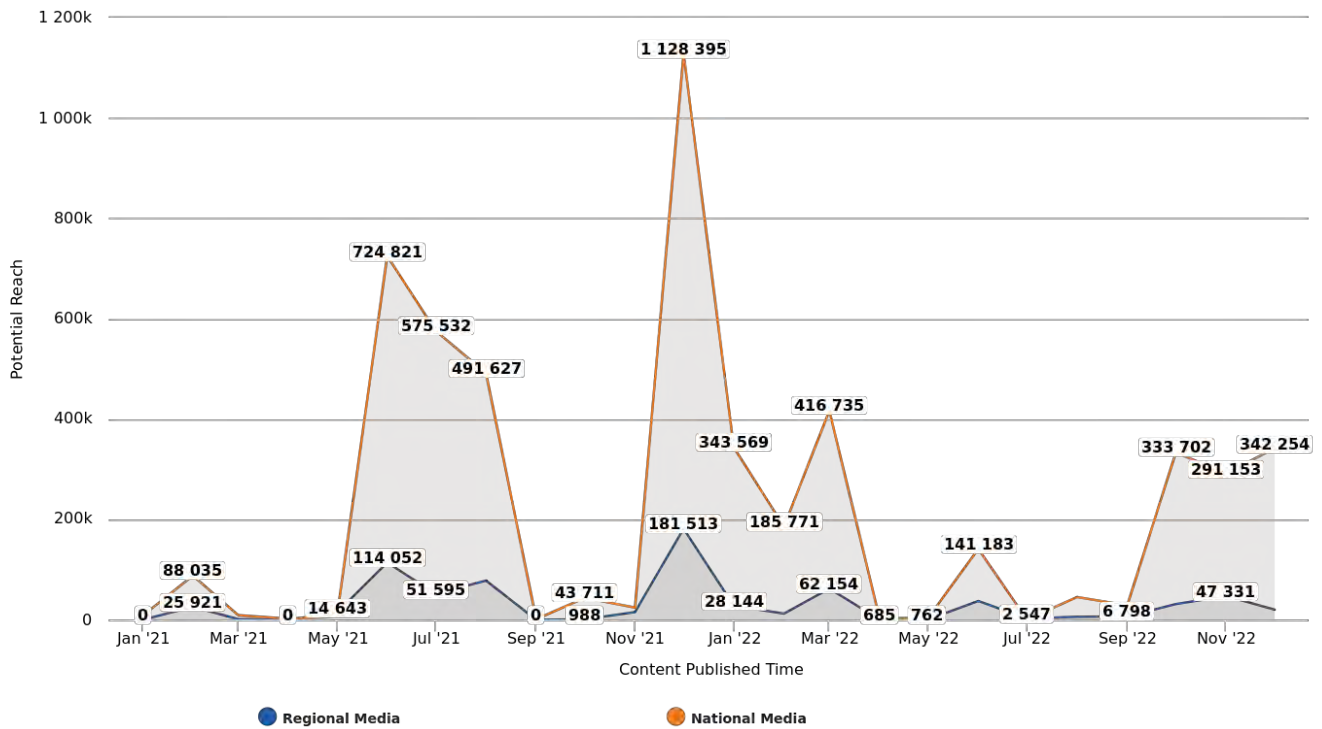
Potential reach distribution of the story in the National and Regional Media. The potential reach of National Media Sources far exceeds that of Regional Media, due not only to Regional Media's more limited audience, but also to the lower amount of published content.

4.5.2.2 Online Coverage by Source Type
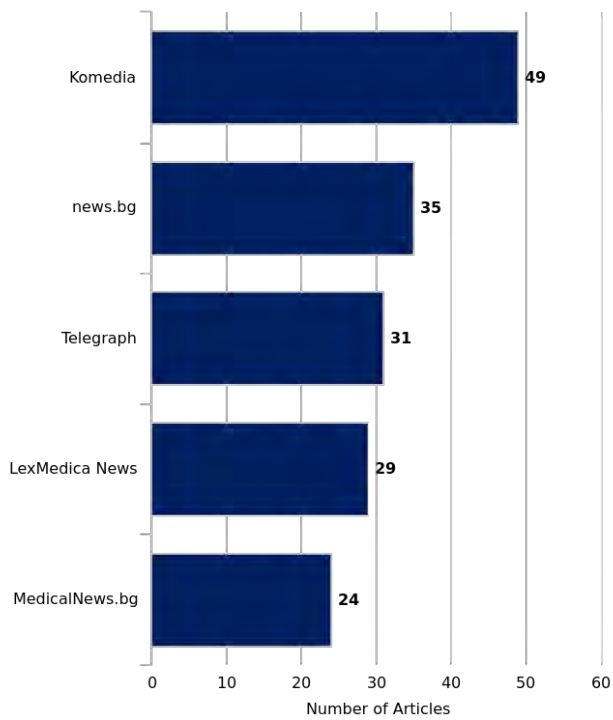
Top Prominent Sources (by volume)

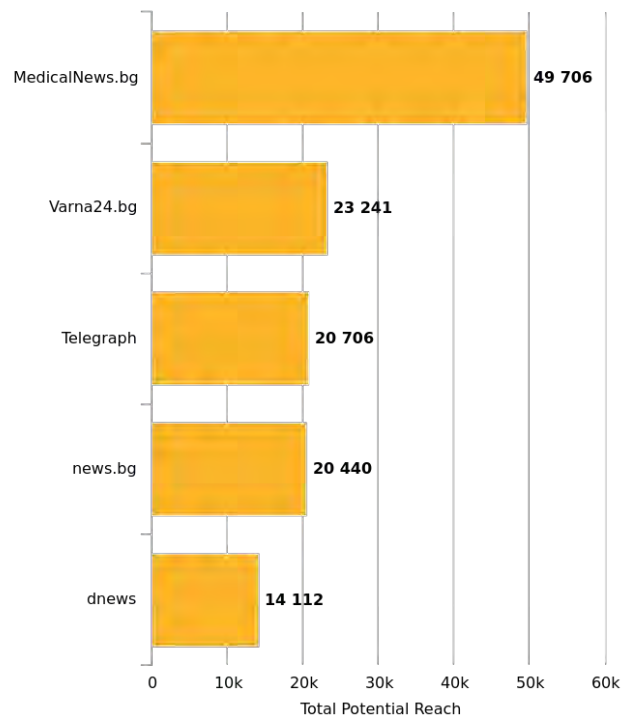## Top Prominent Sources (by reach)

The chart on the left displays the Top Prominent Sources (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Prominent Sources (by potential reach). The numbers point to the conclusion that even though some sources publish less in terms of volume, they manage to reach a considerably wider audience.
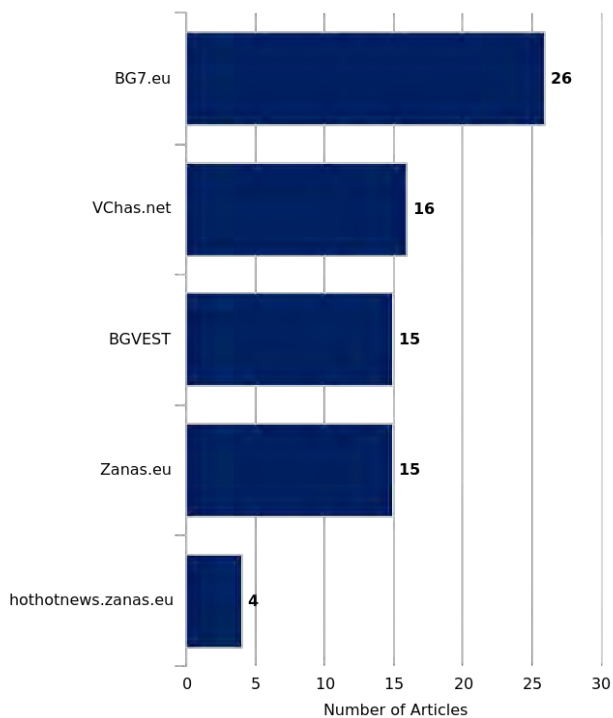
Top Less Prominent Sources (by volume)

Source	Number of Articles
Komedia	49
news.bg	35
Telegraph	31
LexMedica News	29
MedicalNews.bg	24

Top Less Prominent Sources (by reach)

Source	Total Potential Reach
MedicalNews.bg	49 706
Varna24.bg	23 241
Telegraph	20 706
news.bg	20 440
dnews	14 112

The chart on the left displays the Top Less Prominent Sources (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Less Prominent Sources (by potential reach). "Telegraph" published the most content on the story, however, "Medical News," which is not among the Top 10 Sources in terms of volume, reached the widest audience.

Top Influence Networks (by volume)

Network	Number of Articles
BG7.eu	26
VChas.net	16
BGVEST	15
Zanas.eu	15
hothotnews.zanas.eu	4

Top Influence Networks (by reach)

Network	Total Potential Reach
Zanas.eu	787
Sportove.info	476
Top-novini.eu	351
zanas.top	213
BG7.eu	156
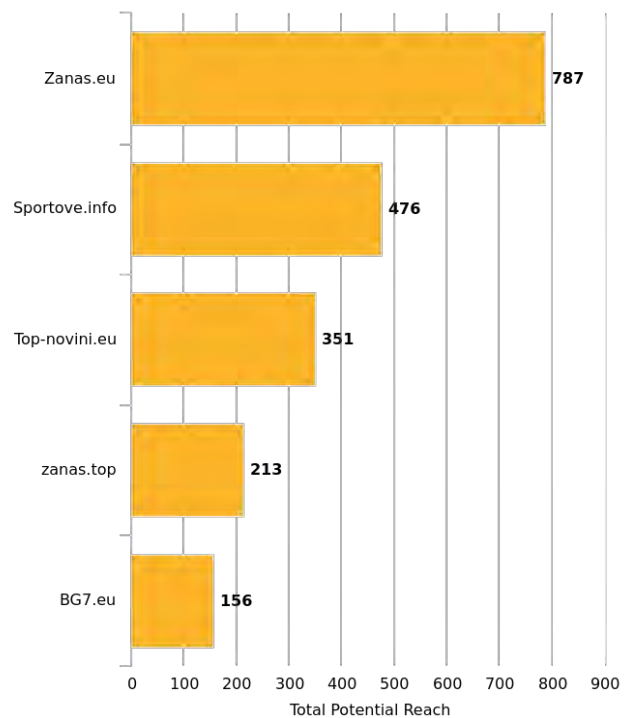
The chart on the left displays the Top Influence Networks (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Influence Networks (by potential reach). Although "BG7" published the most content, "Sportove" had the biggest potential reach.
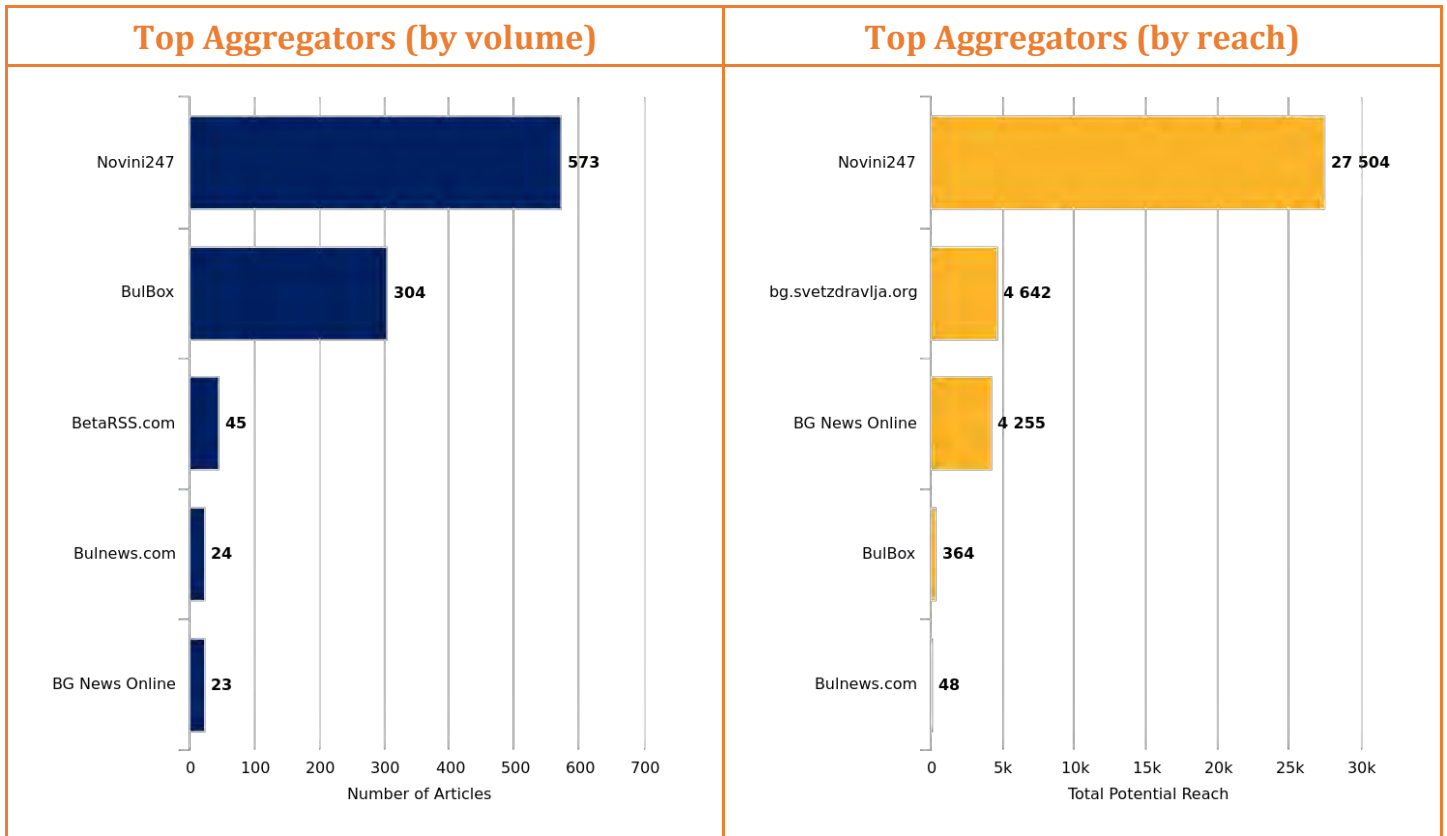
Top Aggregators (by volume)

Source	Number of Articles
Novini247	573
BulBox	304
BetaRSS.com	45
Bulnews.com	24
BG News Online	23

Top Aggregators (by reach)

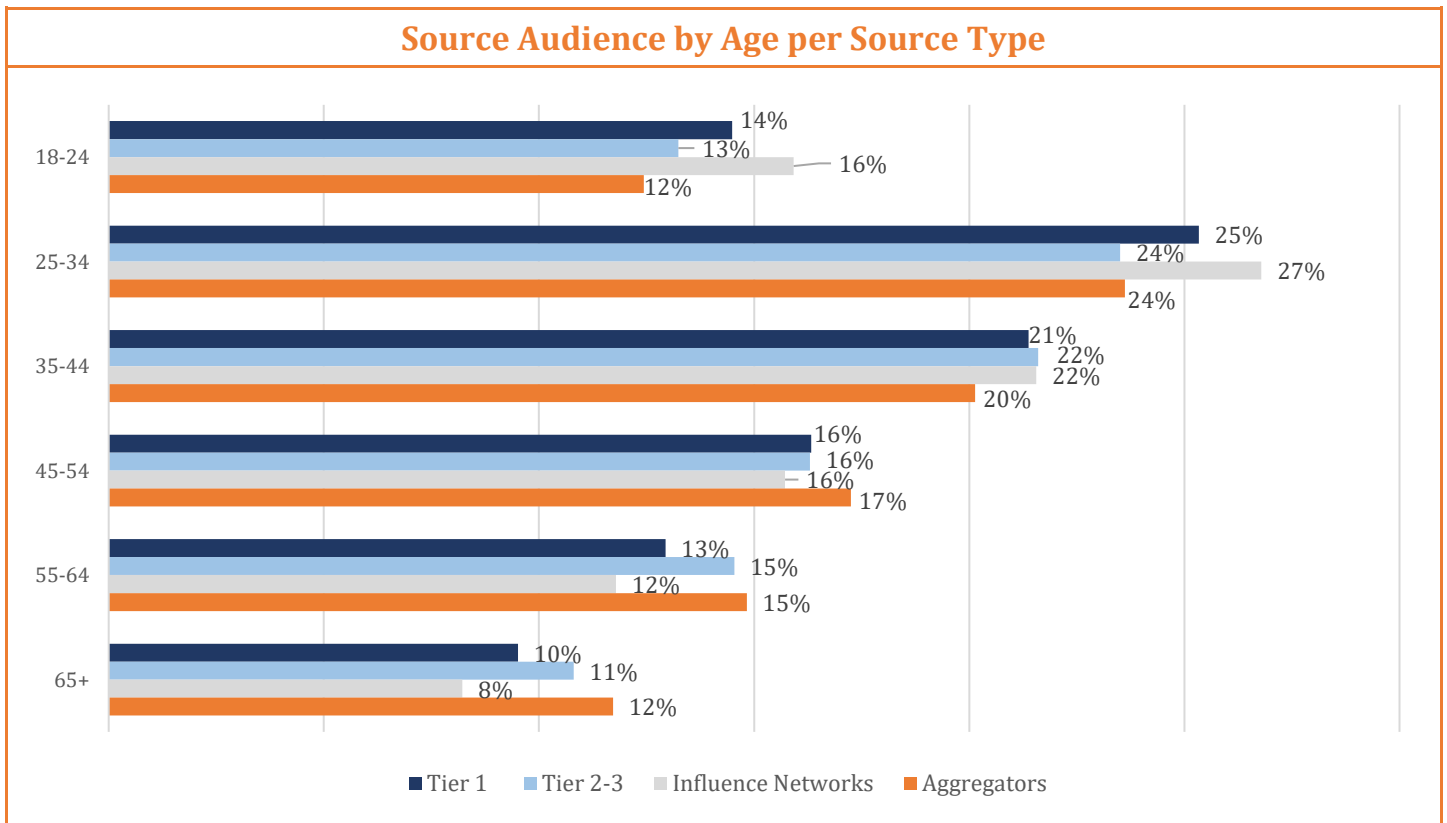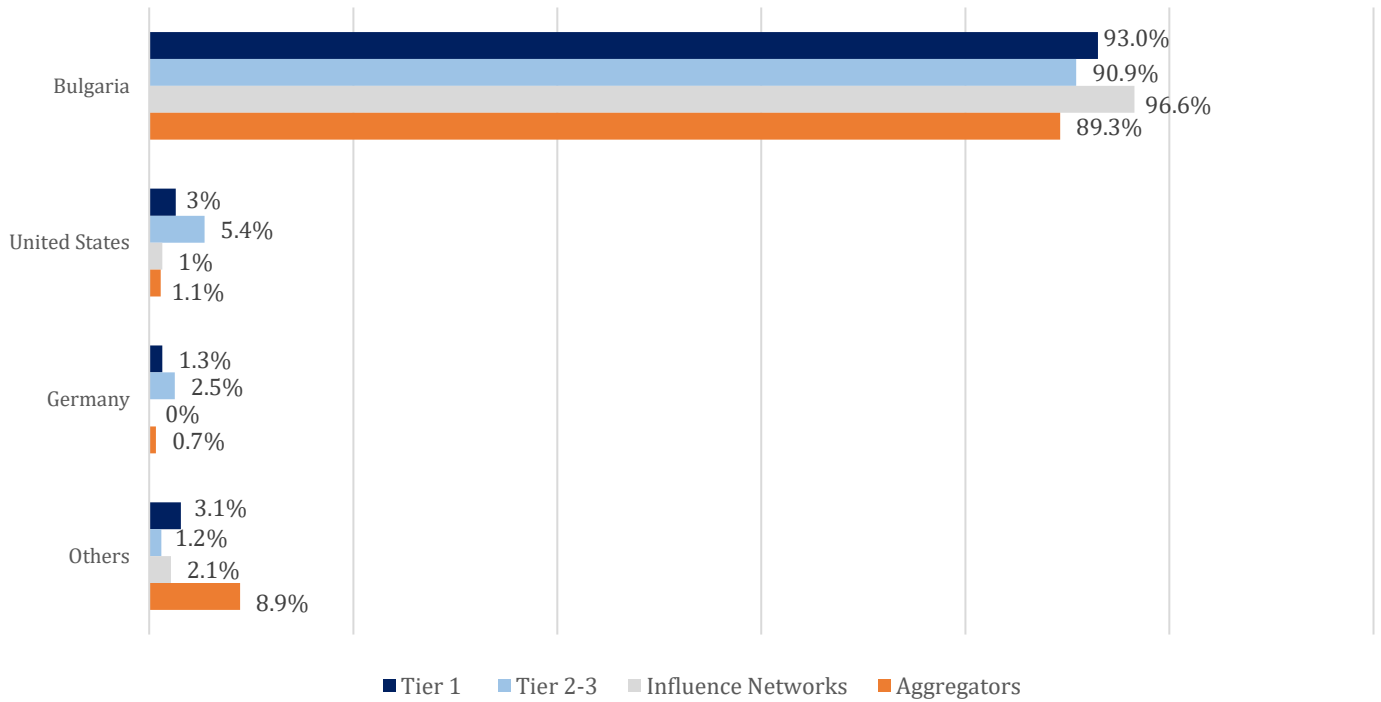| Source	Total Potential Reach
Novini247	27 504
bg.svetzdravlja.org	4 642
BG News Online	4 255
BulBox	364
Bulnews.com	48

The chart on the left displays the Top Media Aggregators (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Media Aggregators (by potential reach). "Novini247" published the most content and had the biggest potential reach.

4.5.2.3 Online Coverage: Source Audience

Source Audience by Age per Source Type

Age	Tier 1	Tier 2-3	Influence Networks	Aggregators
18-24	14%	13%	16%	12%
25-34	25%	24%	27%	24%
35-44	21%	22%	22%	20%
45-54	16%	16%	16%	17%
55-64	13%	15%	12%	15%
65+	10%	11%	8%	12%

■ Tier 1   ■ Tier 2-3   ■ Influence Networks   ■ Aggregators

The chart illustrates the different level of engagement with the four types of monitored sources (Prominent Sources, Less Prominent Sources, Media Aggregators, and Influence Networks) among six age groups. The result shows that the people most interested in the story are between the ages of 25 and 44. The people above 65 years of age comprise the lowest audience percentage and, in this case, engaged mainly with Less Prominent Sources and Media Aggregators.

Source Audience by Top Countries per Source Type

Bulgaria
- Tier 1: 93.0%
- Tier 2-3: 90.9%
- Influence Networks: 96.6%
- Aggregators: 89.3%

United States
- Tier 1: 3%
- Tier 2-3: 5.4%
- Influence Networks: 1%
- Aggregators: 1.1%

Germany
- Tier 1: 1.3%
- Tier 2-3: 2.5%
- Influence Networks: 0%
- Aggregators: 0.7%

Others
- Tier 1: 3.1%
- Tier 2-3: 1.2%
- Influence Networks: 2.1%
- Aggregators: 8.9%

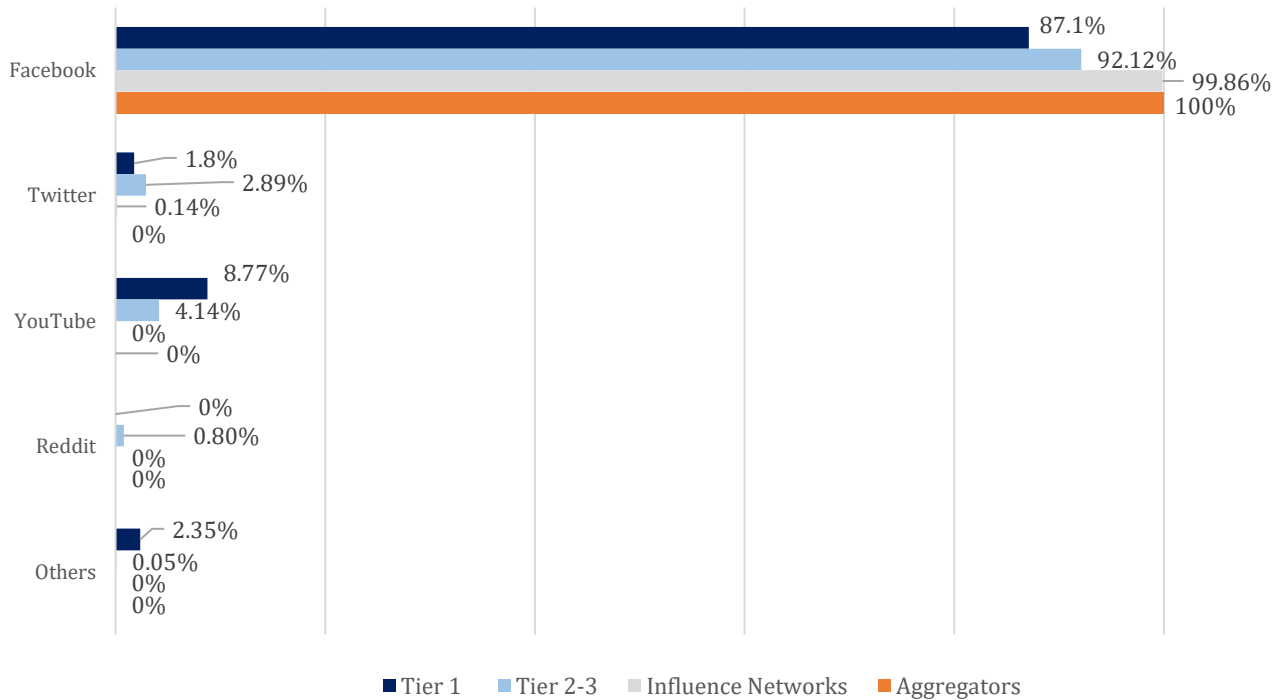■ Tier 1   ■ Tier 2-3   ■ Influence Networks   ■ Aggregators

The chart displays the geographical distribution of the websites visitors per source type. The traffic comes mostly from Bulgaria, with the United States taking the second place among all source types.

Source Audience by Traffic per Source Type

Direct
- Tier 1: 38.61%
- Tier 2-3: 87.17%
- Influence Networks: 16.12%
- Aggregators: 8.21%

Search
- Tier 1: 26.78%
- Tier 2-3: 0.65%
- Influence Networks: 0.0%
- Aggregators: 88.62%

Social
- Tier 1: 14.38%
- Tier 2-3: 2.97%
- Influence Networks: 83.77%
- Aggregators: 0.27%

Referral
- Tier 1: 8.03%
- Tier 2-3: 8.60%
- Influence Networks: 0.11%
- Aggregators: 2.33%

Email
- Tier 1: 12.13%
- Tier 2-3: 0.53%
- Influence Networks: 0%
- Aggregators: 0.57%

Others
- Tier 1: 0.1%
- Tier 2-3: 0.1%
- Influence Networks: 0%
- Aggregators: 0%

■ Tier 1   ■ Tier 2-3   ■ Influence Networks   ■ Aggregators

The chart compares the source of traffic and its volume generated by the four monitored source types. Prominent Sources gained most of their traffic directly or via a search engine. Media Aggregators received it through a search engine, while Less Prominent Sources were predominantly accessed via direct clicks. Influence Networks gained traffic through social media and, to a lesser degree, via direct clicks.
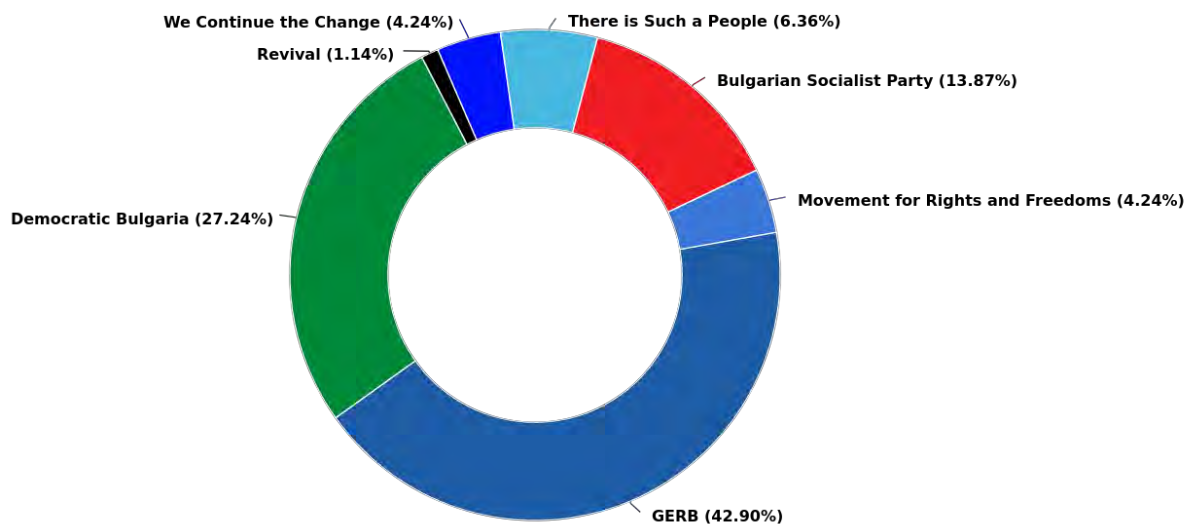
Source Audience by Social Network per Source Type

Facebook
- 87.1%
- 92.12%
- 99.86%
- 100%

Twitter
- 1.8%
- 2.89%
- 0.14%
- 0%

YouTube
- 8.77%
- 4.14%
- 0%
- 0%

Reddit
- 0%
- 0.80%
- 0%
- 0%

Others
- 2.35%
- 0.05%
- 0%
- 0%

■ Tier 1　■ Tier 2-3　■ Influence Networks　■ Aggregators

The chart illustrates the source audience distribution according to the traffic of the website gained via social network per source type. The findings highlight Facebook's dominance in all monitored types of sources.

4.5.2.4 Online Coverage: Political Parties (by volume)

Top Mentioned Political Parties

- We Continue the Change (4.24%)
- Revival (1.14%)
- There is Such a People (6.36%)
- Bulgarian Socialist Party (13.87%)
- Democratic Bulgaria (27.24%)
- Movement for Rights and Freedoms (4.24%)
- GERB (42.90%)

The chart presents the most mentioned political parties in the context of the story. The results show that GERB accounted for almost 50% of all mentions. Media coverage focused on the party's plans to build a National Children's Hospital on an abandoned construction site, as well as on the legal violations during the construction identified by then Minister of Health Stoycho Katsarov. Democratic Bulgaria ranked second with nearly 25%, as different websites reported that it had organized an expert discussion on the issue in the National Assembly. Other political entities were mentioned in relation to their members' statements on the hospital's construction.

4.5.3. Social Coverage (Facebook)

The story about the construction of the National Children's Hospital provoked serious discussion on Facebook. The story's peaks were consistent with the online media patterns observed during the years 2021 and 2022. Social media users expressed their frustration and dissatisfaction with the Government's perceived inability to establish a health facility of this kind. The story also placed GERB in the spotlight. Additionally, a word cloud representation of t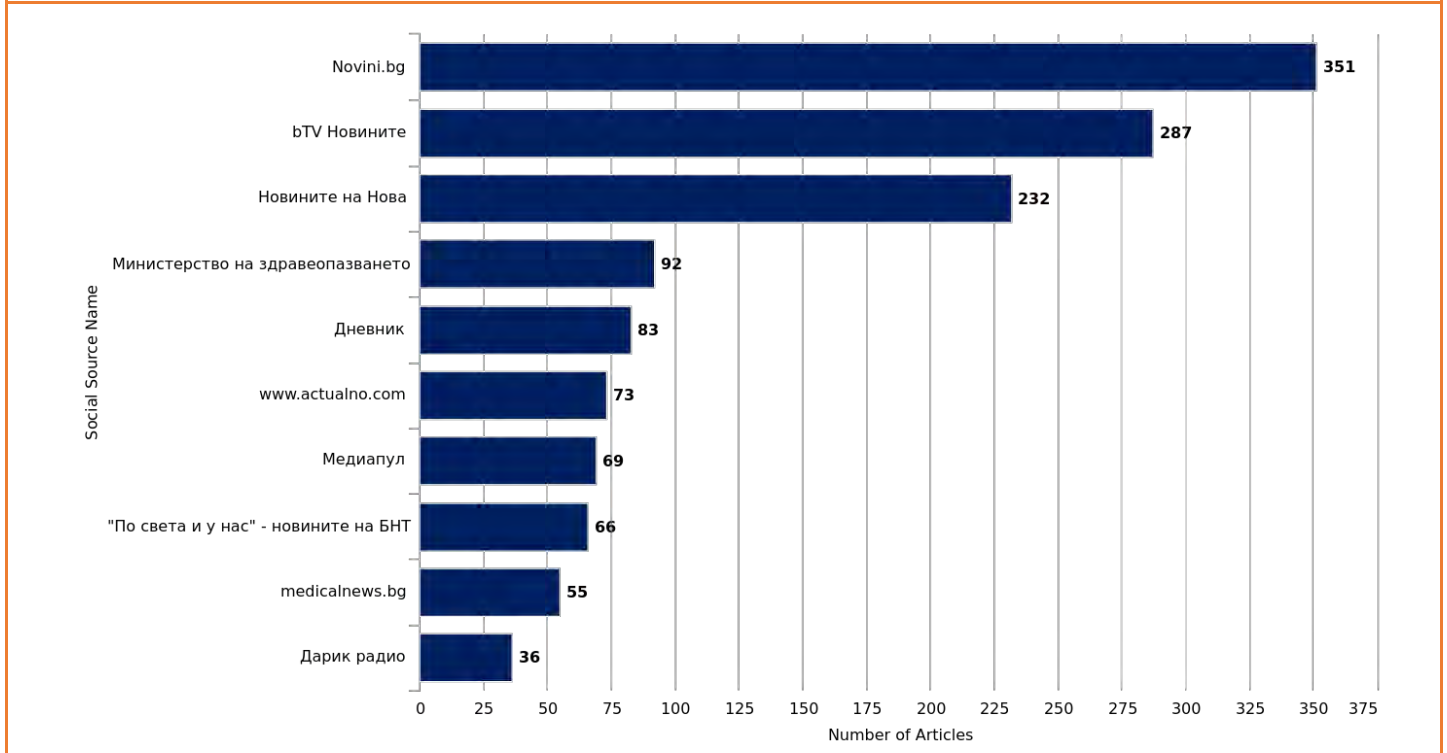he most frequently used keywords highlighted "hospital," "children," and "children's hospital" as the most prominent terms. In this regard, it should be noted that offensive language, direct accusations, and generalizations based on personal views were common among Facebook users interacting with the story. Overall, the case underscored the power of social media in influencing public opinion and the need for the Government to address citizens' concerns by taking appropriate action.

Overall Volume (per month)
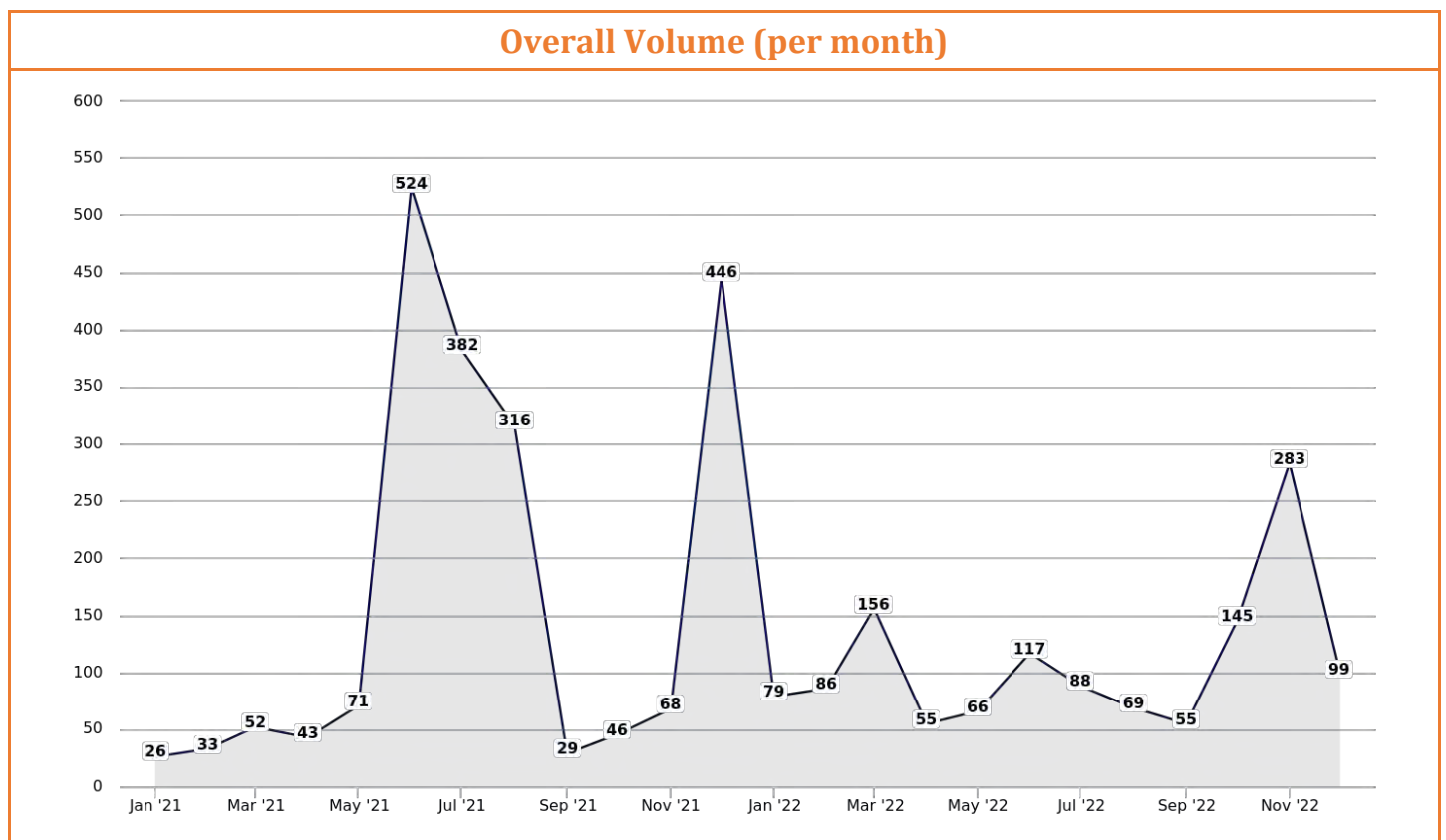
The story's peaks remained in line with the patterns observed in online media during the years 2021 and 2022. The most noteworthy spike in content activity took place between June and August of 2021, during which time Facebook users voiced their discontentment after the numerous unsuccessful efforts towards achieving a resolution. Additionally, a nationwide petition for a contemporary National Children's Hospital was initiated on Facebook during this period, contributing to the heightened engagement levels. In December 2021, right after the parliamentary elections, a new wave of frustration was registered, as accounts actively criticized the country's perceived inability to establish a children's hospital. A significant proportion of the comments appeared under posts concerning the construction of other buildings (such as a prison) or posts related to other expenditures. The second content surge was in December 2022, after the announcement by then Minister of Health Dr. Stoycho Katsarov about the plans for the National Children's Hospital to be built on the site of the former Lozenets Hospital. The proposed project led to widespread dissatisfaction among users.

Top 10 Social Authors (by volume)

Social Source Name	Number of Articles
Novini.bg	351
bTV Новините	287
Новините на Нова	232
Министерство на здравеопазването	92
Дневник	83
www.actualno.com	73
Медиапул	69
"По света и у нас" - новините на БНТ	66
medicalnews.bg	55
Дарик радио	36

The chart presents the top 10 Social Authors on Facebook, ranked based on their combined number of posts and comments during the monitored period. Novini.bg, BTV, and Nova stand out as the most active accounts, having generated the highest volume of content engagement. In addition to general reports on the matter, Novini.bg also shared posts expressing dissatisfaction with the actions taken. This resulted in significant engagement from various users, who brought up the corruption aspect. The Ministry of Health's official page received a significant number of negative comments, even if they were not directly related to the story.
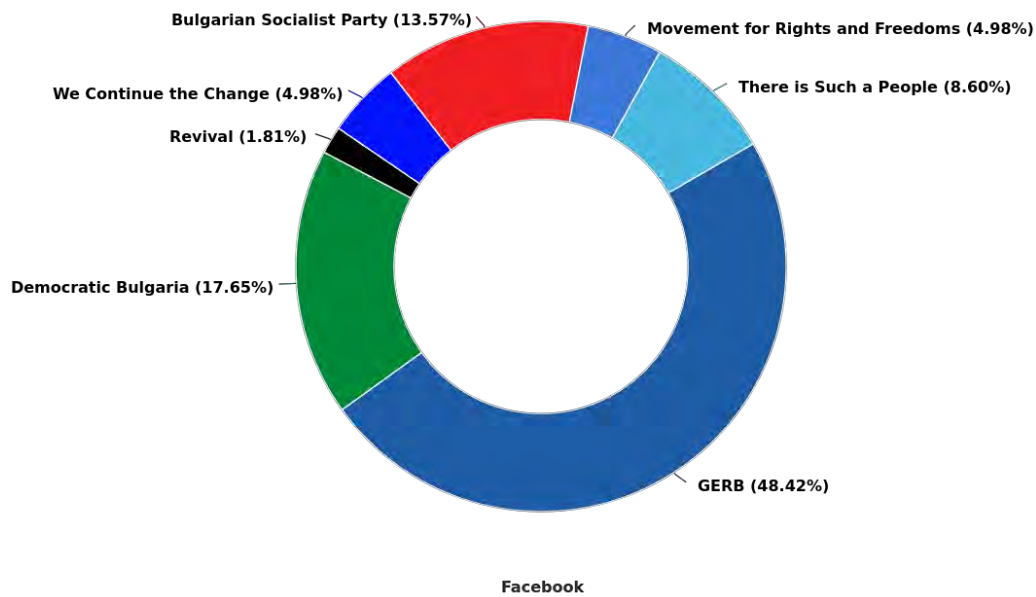
Top Keywords (by volume)
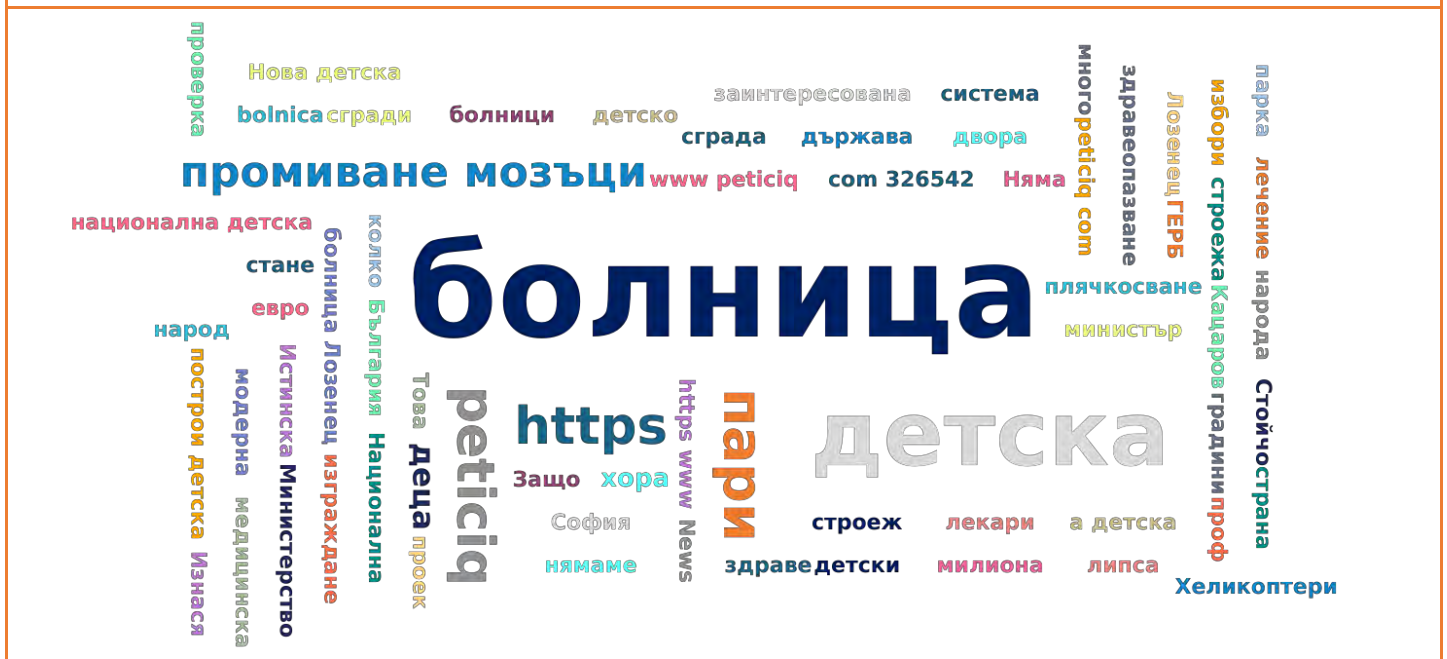
A word cloud that illustrates the most frequently used keywords or phrases in the context of the monitored story, with the word's size indicating its relative popularity. The most prominent terms include "hospital," "children," and "children's hospital." Other words such as "brainwashing" appear due to certain social media users repeatedly posting the same comments across multiple posts, drawing attention to the story. Notably, a majority of the users, who commented on the case, used offensive language and made direct accusations and generalizations based on their personal views.

4.5.3.1 Social Coverage: Political Parties (by volume)

Top Mentioned Political Parties

Bulgarian Socialist Party (13.57%)

Movement for Rights and Freedoms (4.98%)

We Continue the Change (4.98%)

There is Such a People (8.60%)

Revival (1.81%)

Democratic Bulgaria (17.65%)

GERB (48.42%)

Facebook

The chart presents the number of political party mentions in relation to the Children's Hospital case. The most mentioned political party is GERB (50%), due to social users' negative perception of this political entity in the given context and their accusations that GERB did not take any action towards the construction of the health facility. Appearing in 18% of the content, Democratic Bulgaria (DB) was the second most frequently mentioned political party. Its own official pages were among the reasons for its high visibility, as they shared content with proposals on how to cope with the problems surrounding children's healthcare. Furthermore, Dr. Tanya Andreeva's prominent position in the party also played a significant part in DB's high number of mentions, given her longstanding advocating for a children's hospital. The Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) ranked third, primarily due to the widespread coverage of BSP's representative and Deputy Professor Georgi Mihailov's emotional speech on the inadequate progress towards establishing a specialized children's hospital. On the other hand, some users criticized BSP for alleged misconduct and lack of action. The other political parties received limited mentions and were subject to disapproving remarks from Facebook accounts.

4.6.   TurkStream: Corruption and Russian Influence

4.6.1.   Background

On February 25, 2022, Bulgaria's Anticorruption Fund published an open letter to then Prime Minister Kiril Petkov, demanding full transparency concerning the country's role in the development of Russian energy projects, specifically TurkStream's extension Balkan Stream. The NGO highlighted the suspicions that the pipelines were "a possible source of strategic corruptive influence" [162]. A couple of days later, Tsvetan Tsvetanov, former GERB Chairman, claimed that "during Borissov's third mandate [current GERB leader Boyko Borissov], Bulgaria's dependence on Russia increased thanks to the construction of TurkStream. A project built with the money of the Bulgarian taxpayer but serving foreign interests and not our national security goals" [163].

A month later, and against the backdrop of Borissov's arrest on March 17, national media reported that the company in charge of building the TurkStream gas pipeline on Bulgarian territory, Arkad Engineering, had distributed a number of jeeps to state departments and private entities, among them its contractor Bulgartransgaz and the Ministry of Environment and Water [164]. Petkov pointed at this case and connected it to other corrupt practices in the country, clarifying that an investigation into the matter was underway [165]. In addition, he said that, during his meeting with US President Joe Biden in Brussels on March 25, he had discussed the ways in which Putin uses corruption as a tool in the Balkans. He had also given as an example TurkStream "for which we spent BGN 3 billion on a pipe we cannot even use" [166]. As a response to the statement, GERB's representative Daniel Mitov posed the following question: "Does the Prime Minister know what he is talking about, is he aware of the facts? Balkan Stream is Bulgarian property. The project was built with Bulgarian funds and our country can close the pipe whenever it wants and let gas from whomever it wants" [167]. Moreover, GERB's Dimitar Glavchev said: "In Bulgaria, TurkStream is called Balkan Stream. If anyone claims that there is corruption, then the European Commission is also involved" [168]. For its part, the Russian Embassy in Bulgaria made an official statement, according to which the former PM's comment had been "undiplomatic, sharp, and rude" [169].

In April, Boyko Borissov himself declared that "Bulgaria's net profit from TurkStream would be over BGN 50,000" [170]. These alleged numbers, however, did not affect Petkov's subsequent announcement that the "South Stream gas pipeline project will be fully scrutinized as a corrupt tool of Russia's external influence" [171]. Many outlets commented on his use of "South Stream" instead of "TurkStream" or "Balkan Stream" with the Council of Ministers even issuing a clarifying text that read: "On the occasion of Prime Minister Kiril Petkov's statement, before the regular government meeting, regarding his order for all aspects of South Stream to be reviewed, please note that the check-ups in question relate to the Turk/Balkan Stream project, which was built after the termination of South Stream" [172]. Asen Vassilev, We Continue the Change's co-chairman, also commented on the upcoming investigation, revealing that "according to unconfirmed reports, several deaths have occurred during the construction [of the pipeline] and a number of procedures have not been followed" [173]. Russia's Ambassador to Bulgaria, H.E. Eleonora Mitrofanova, countered Petkov's "corruption allegations" and called them "an affront to the Russian Federation" [174].

In the beginning of June, the Parliament discussed the creation of a temporary commission tasked with establishing the facts and circumstances surrounding the gas pipelines South Stream and Turk/Balkan Stream, as well as the reasons for the delay of the IGB project (Intersystem Gas Connection Greece–Bulgaria). The Movement for Rights and Freedoms, headed by Mustafa Karadaya, proposed the commission's creation. The MPs explained that such a body was necessary "at the current geopolitical moment in which gas is being used as a tool of the Russian Federation's foreign policy and the interruption of supplies is a threat to the country's national energy security" [175]. Almost a month later, Tsvetan Tsvetanov said in an interview that "two ministers from the government of Boyko Borissov, Temenuzhka Petkova and Tomislav Donchev, as well as Borissov himself, held meetings with people sanctioned by the European Commission. These were the Russians who pushed the road map for TurkStream." Tsvetanov also recalled that the road map in question, signed by Temenuzhka Petkova in Saint Petersburg, had been declared "lost" [176]. In response to the accusations, Petkova said that "Mr. Tsvetanov is talking nonsense," and emphasized that "Balkan Stream was implemented by a decision of the

National Assembly and in accordance with European legislation. The European Commission would not have remained indifferent had there been any violations" [177].

On August 2, various websites reported that "serious violations were found during the inspection of Balkan Stream, which Kiril Petkov ordered two months ago. Among the most egregious irregularities are violations of labor legislation, violations in the execution and awarding of public contracts, non-compliance with the environmental legislation, and a missing road map" [178]. Immediately after, GERB replied that "Petkov's government has demonstrated incompetence" with Temenuzhka Petkova stating the following: "When it comes to the Balkan Stream road map, we are witnessing yet another lie. They [the government] are mad because they could not get anything out of it. We have never signed contracts and documents that would be disadvantageous for Bulgaria, I will only say Gemcorp[5] , which, I believe, exhausts the subject" [179]. For his part, Nikolay Staykov from the Anticorruption Fund said that "the Balkan Stream gas pipeline project was completed within two years, which is an extremely short period of time for a project of such a scale. Administratively, this is only possible if a huge number of laws have been disregarded. I hope the truth comes out in the end and we discover why the involved parties were in a rush." He also considered the expulsion of Russian diplomats from Bulgaria to be "the biggest anticorruption measure" [180].

During a press conference at the end of August, Boyko Borissov declared that "for Russia, the most beneficial government was that of Kiril [Petkov] and Asen [Vassilev]." Some authors, though, presented the situation in a slightly different manner: "Boyko Borissov's party, whose third government extended the TurkStream pipeline through Bulgarian territory, for the benefit of Russian President Vladimir Putin and Gazprom, then financed its construction entirely with Bulgarian money, allowing Putin to deliver natural gas to Serbia and Hungary, bypassing Ukraine, which later gave the Russian president the opportunity to attack Ukraine" [181]. A few days later, Democratic Bulgaria's representative Atanas Atanasov commented on the case, saying that "Borissov's arrest was a rash step aimed at affecting the public. He should be tried for serious corruption deals." He also mentioned among the latter "the so-called Russian/TurkStream" [182].

On September 19, Bulgarian media [183] republished Tsvetanov's interview for Euractiv, during which he said that "Brussels does not know the truth about TurkStream" and that "the TurkStream gas pipeline is a conduit for Russian interests in Southeast Europe and should be subject to sanctions" [184]. Soon after, BIRD (the Bureau for Investigative Reporting and Data) disclosed that "in 2017, President Rumen Radev, Prime Minister Boyko Borissov, and the Speakers of the National Assembly got acquainted with DANS [the State Agency for National Security] reports on the Balkan Stream project. The reports claimed that Russia's ultimate goal was to isolate Ukraine from gas supplies by 2020 and to stop the gas inflow to Bulgaria through this pipe. Subsequently, Prime Minister Boyko Borissov did everything in his power to make the project happen by the end of 2020, including through drastic violations of the legislation and by sending the army to execute construction work at the problematic areas" [185]. In this context, Atanas Atanasov stated that he would propose "a new parliamentary commission expected to clarify the damage caused to the Bulgarian national security by the actions of Prime Minister Boyko Borissov, with which he placed the country in a state of energy dependence on Russia and which served Putin's plans to wage a war against Ukraine and the civilized world" [186].

Some outlets covered the scandal by paying closer attention to the relations between Borissov and the Chief Prosecutor Ivan Geshev: "Ivan Geshev must investigate whether Borissov's reputation had really been tarnished and by whom/why. If Geshev obeys the law, then he should do exactly that, while Borissov should withdraw from the elections. However, he will not, because the two are in cahoots with each other […] Geshev will not lift a finger to investigate why Borissov had invested BGN 2.8 billion secured through a parliamentary vote into Russian/TurkStream" [187].

Towards the middle of October, the Prosecutor's Office released a formal note, according to which "Mr. Hristo Ivanov's [founder of the Yes, Bulgaria! political party, which later joined the DB coalition] statement about the lack of interest on the part of the Prosecutor's Office in the DANS report regarding the construction of TurkStream is another example of political speculation and an effort to discredit the Prosecutor's Office. Such a report by DANS was never submitted and, consequently, there has been no

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[5] The Gemcorp Scandal has also been covered by the current report. For more information see point 4.3.

objective way for the Prosecutor's Office to show or not show interest in it" [188].

Finally, on December 2, in a reply to Atanasov, Acting Minister of Interior Ivan Demerdzhiev confirmed that the Ministry of Internal Affairs had received a report regarding the Balkan Stream gas pipeline, which had been forwarded for investigation to DANS and the Prosecutor's Office [189].

4.6.2. Online Coverage

4.6.2.1 Overall Metrics and Volume Comparison

The online coverage surrounding the story amounted to around 2,100 articles. Nearly half of the content was published by Prominent Sources (around 1000), followed by Media Aggregators (around 560) and Less Prominent Sources (around 400). Influence Networks were the least active.
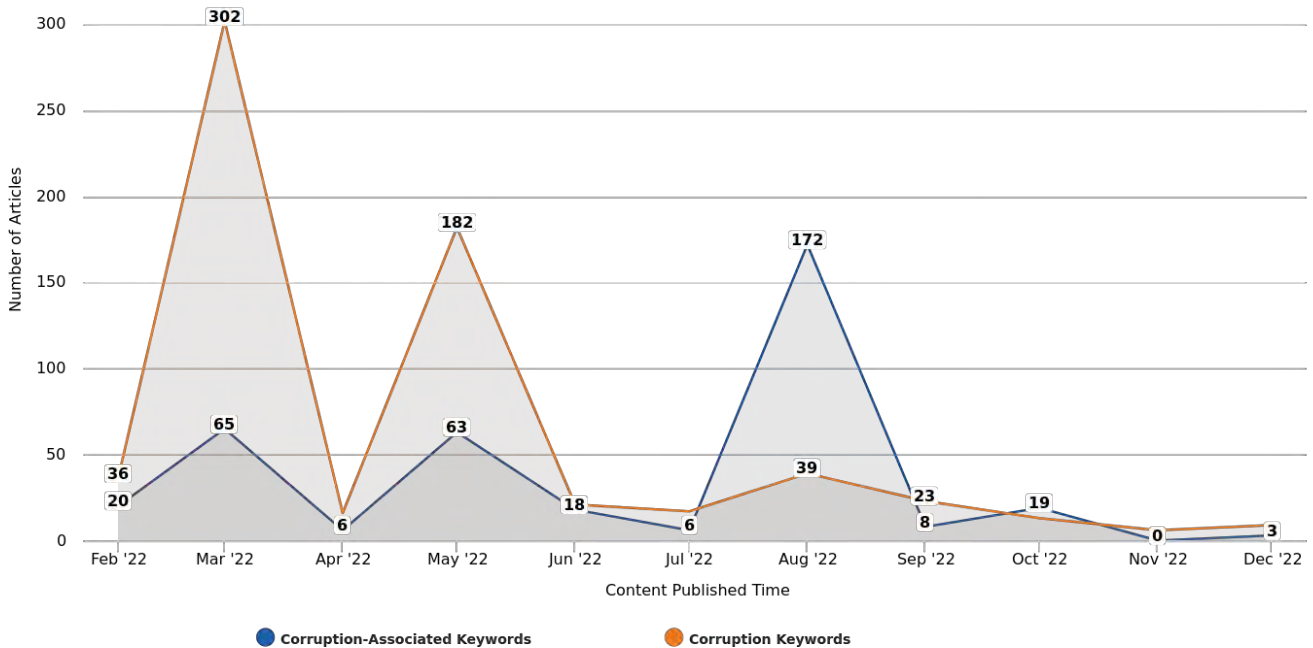
The sources monitored in the context of this story share a similar audience demographic, with people between the ages of 25 and 44 constituting the largest percentage of the readership. In addition, the traffic was generated primarily from Bulgaria. However, the sources differ in terms of how they gained the said traffic. For example, Prominent Sources received it either directly or via search engines, Less Prominent Sources—directly, and Media Aggregators via a search engine. Influence Networks gained their traffic mainly through social media and direct clicks.

The results show that the content covering the first part of the story uses predominantly the word "corruption" and its derivatives, while for the second part, the outlets heavily rely on vocabulary commonly associated with corruption. Due to the broad public interest in the matter, the story was covered extensively by National Media.


Top Keywords (by volume)

A tag-cloud representation of the most frequently used keywords or phrases within the monitored story. The size of each word in the cloud is a relative indicator of the term's popularity, thereby allowing for the discernment of the most prominent and widely discussed points of interest. In this particular case, the most frequently mentioned keywords include the names of Kiril Petkov, then Prime Minister of Bulgaria, and Boyko Borissov, former Prime Minister of the country. Both of them are leaders of opposing political parties (We Continue the Change and GERB, respectively) and heavily involved in the TurkStream investigation. Among the other most frequently mentioned keywords are "TurkStream," "Balkan Stream," and "Putin."

## Volume Comparison – Corruption Keywords vs. Corruption-Associated Keywords

An analysis of the volume distribution of the pieces of content that reference corruption directly or indirectly. The results show that the articles covering the first part of the story use predominantly the word "corruption" and its derivatives, while for the second part, the outlets heavily rely on words associated with corruption. The peak that occurred in March coincides with the investigation of the company in charge of building the TurkStream gas pipeline on Bulgarian territory, Arkad Engineering, and the conclusion that it had distributed a number of jeeps to state departments and private entities. The peak in May is caused by the statement of Russia's Ambassador to Bulgaria, H.E. Eleonora Mitrofanova, regarding Prime Minister Petkov's "corruption allegations," which she considered "an affront to the Russian Federation." In both cases, media outlets used the word "corruption" directly. The peak in August, when the media reported on the results of the investigation launched by Petkov, displays a saturation of the words associated with corruption, among which is "violations."

## Potential Reach Comparison – Corruption Keywords vs. Corruption-Associated Keywords
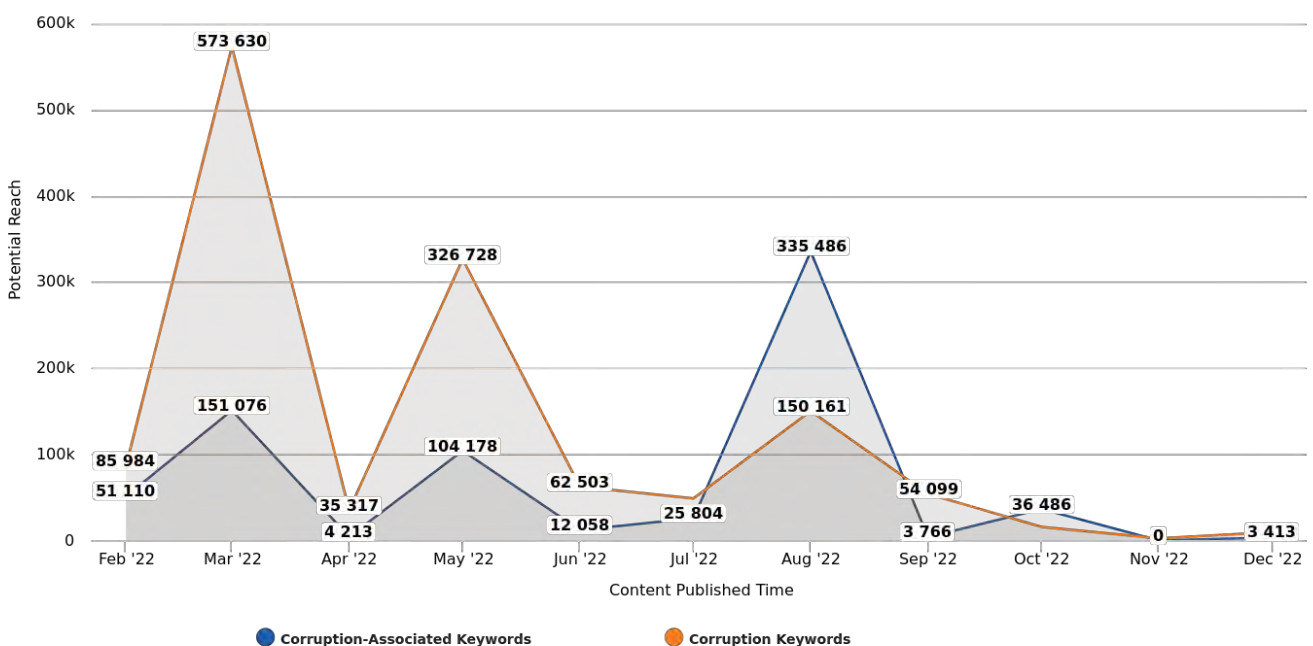
Potential reach distribution of the pieces of content, which reference corruption either directly or indirectly. The potential reach distribution pattern mirrors the volume distribution of the content.

Stacked Volume Comparison (by source type)
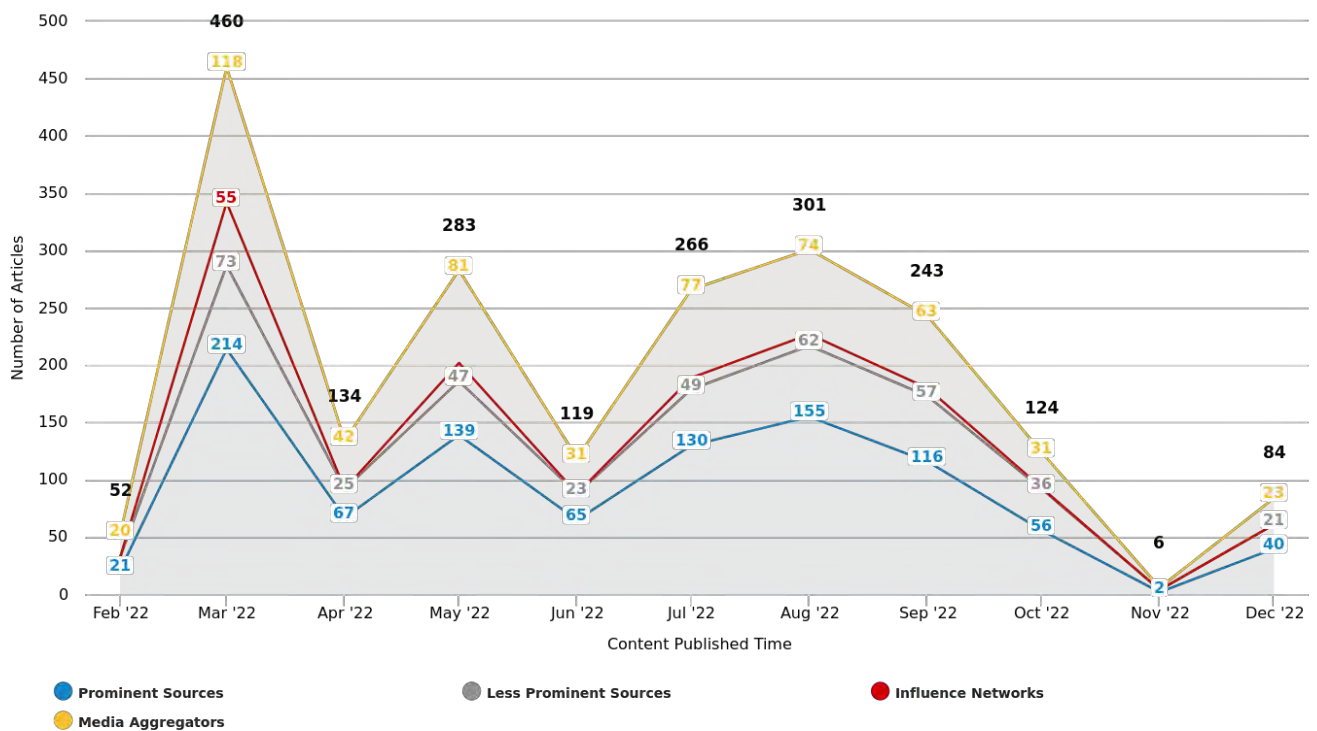
Stacked volume distribution of the story per type of sources. Prominent Sources were the most active, followed by Media Aggregators and Less Prominent Sources. The Influence Networks published the least amount of content on the subject, forming a small peak in March due to republishing headlines originally distributed by Prominent Sources. The majority of them concerned the Russian Ambassador's critics towards Prime Minister Petkov's comments on Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Stacked Potential Reach Comparison (by source type)
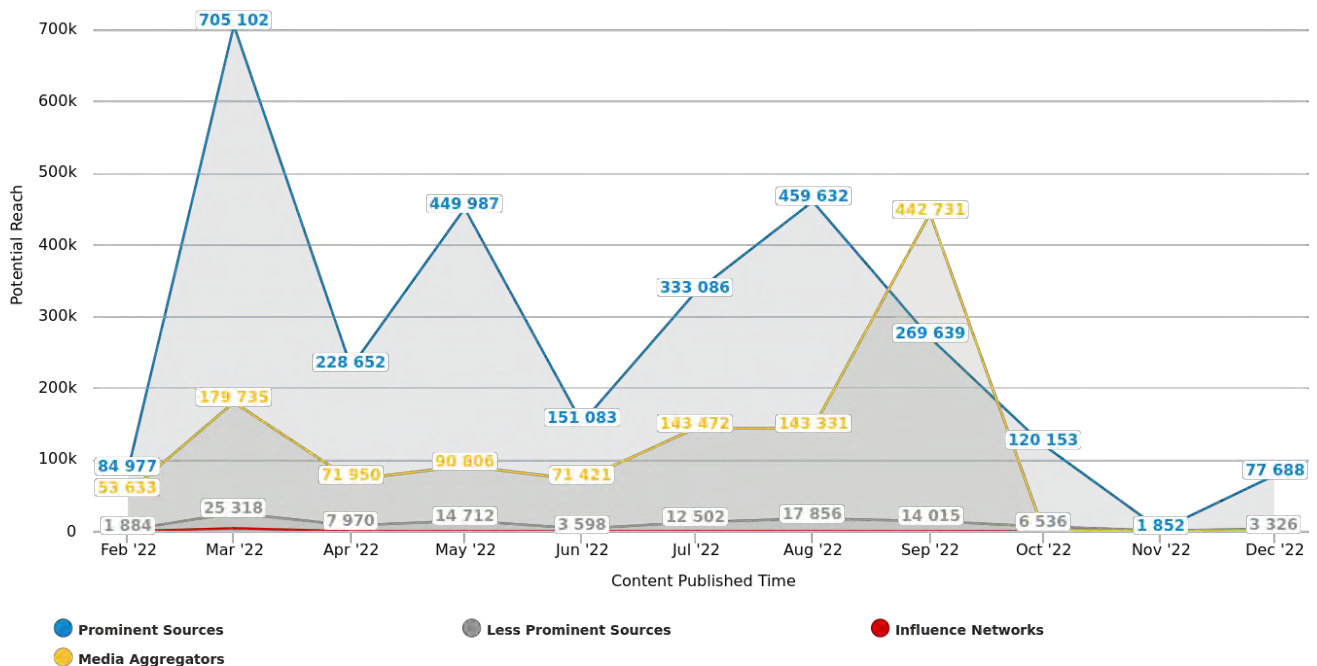
Stacked potential reach distribution of the story per type of sources. The chart clearly shows the dominant potential reach of Prominent Sources and Media Aggregators. Less Prominent Sources and Influence Networks did not reach a wide audience in the context of this story.

Volume Comparison - Regional vs National Sources
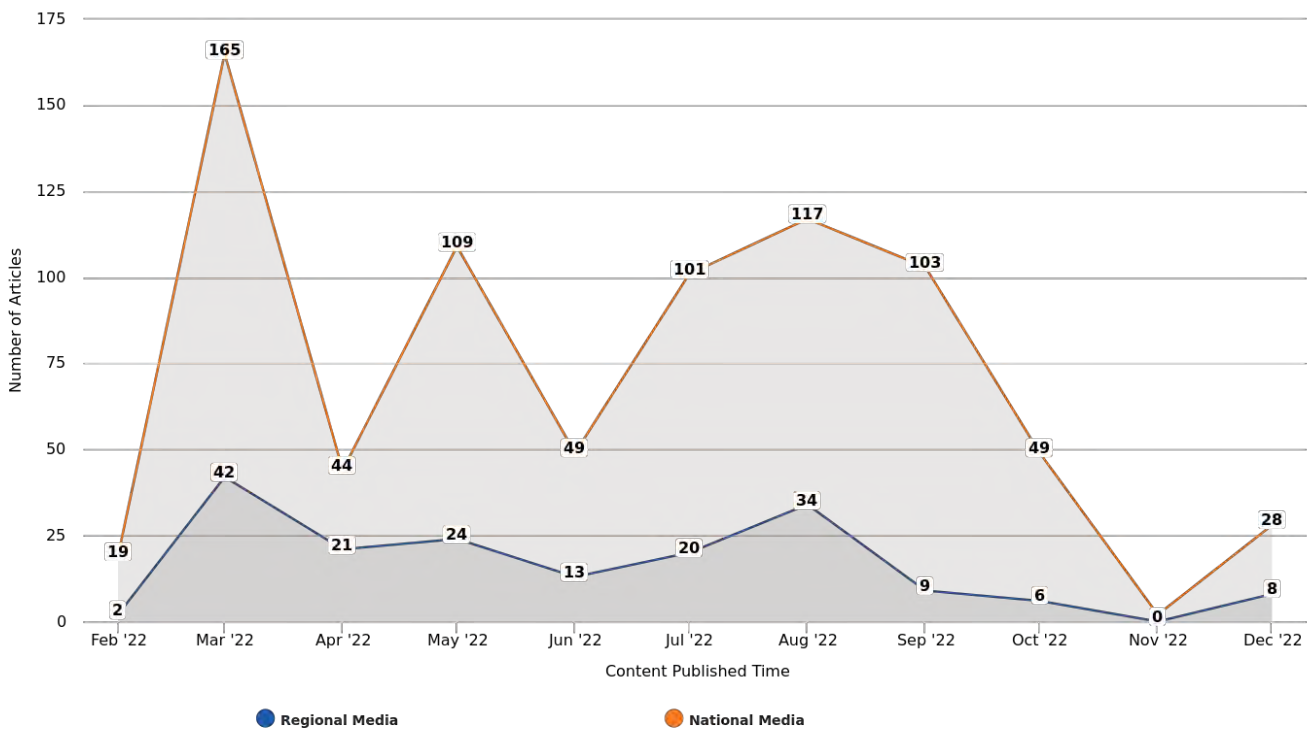
● Regional Media   ● National Media

Volume distribution of the story in the National and Regional Media. National Media published more content related to the story compared to Regional Media.
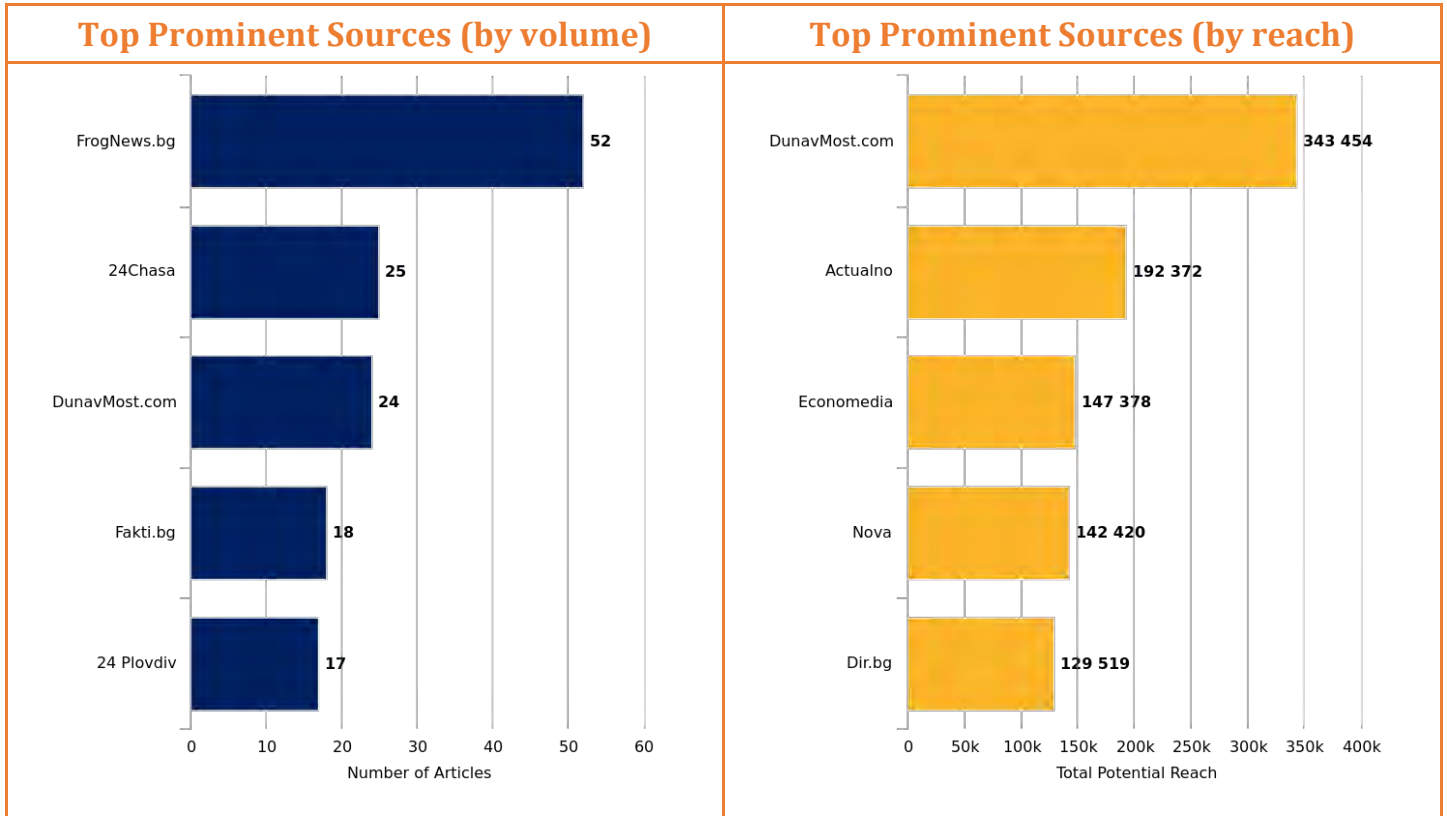
Potential reach Comparison - Regional vs National Sources

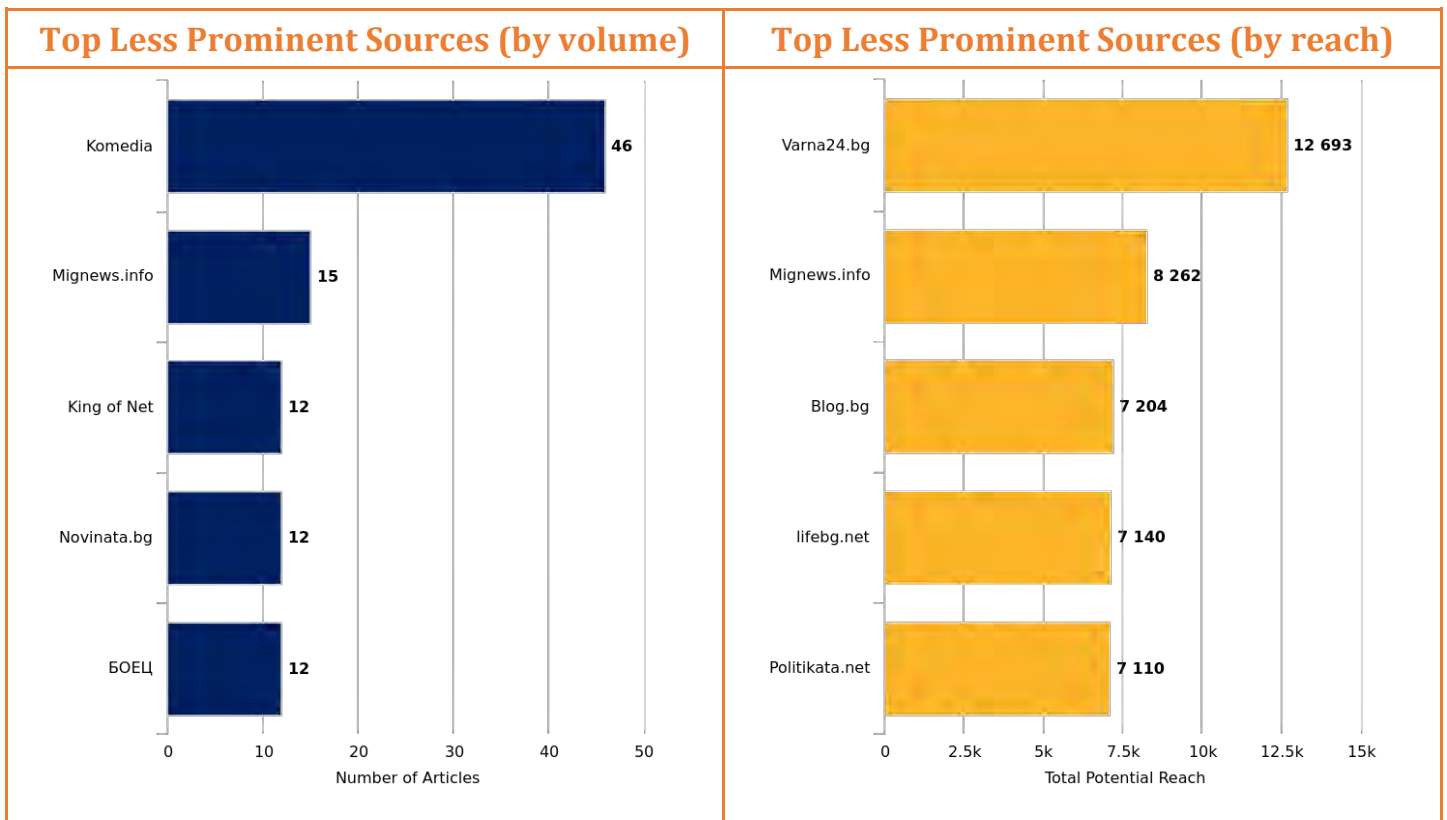● Regional Media   ● National Media
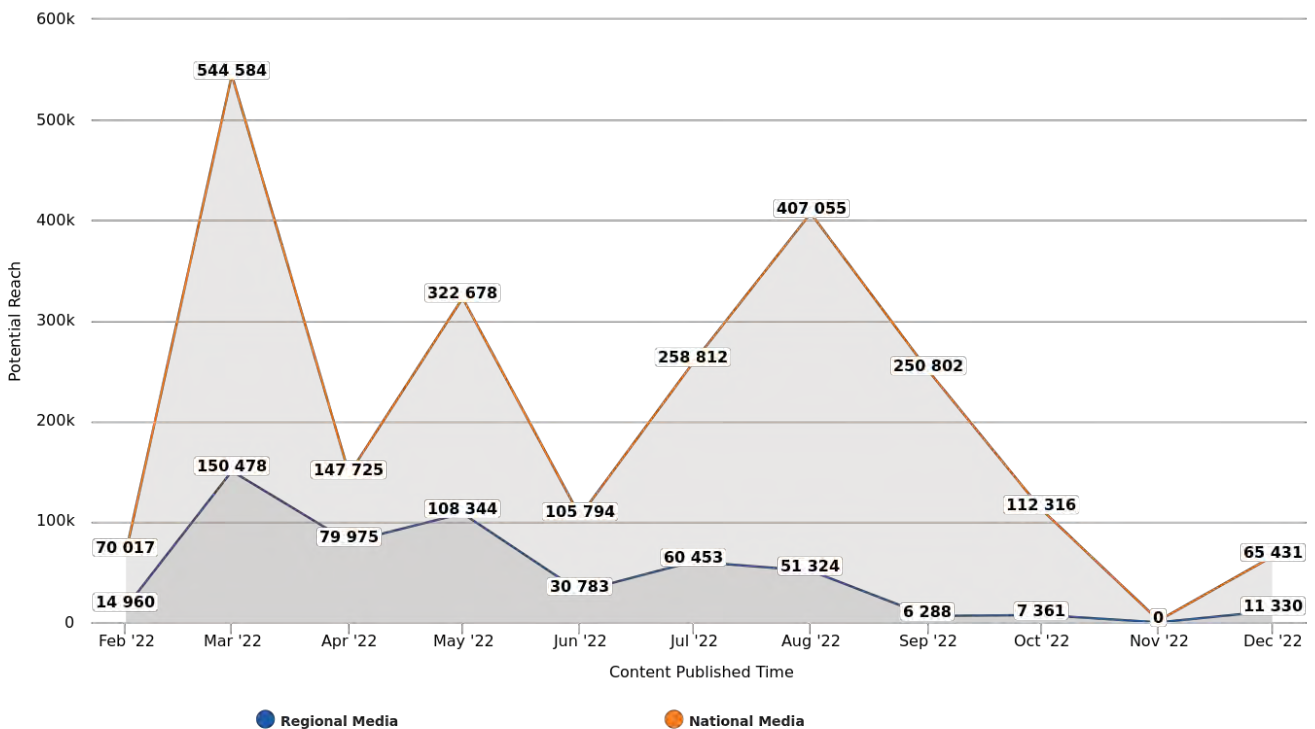
Potential reach distribution of the story in the National and Regional Media. The potential reach of National Media sources far exceeds that of Regional Media, due not only to Regional Media's more limited audience, but also to the lower amount of published content.
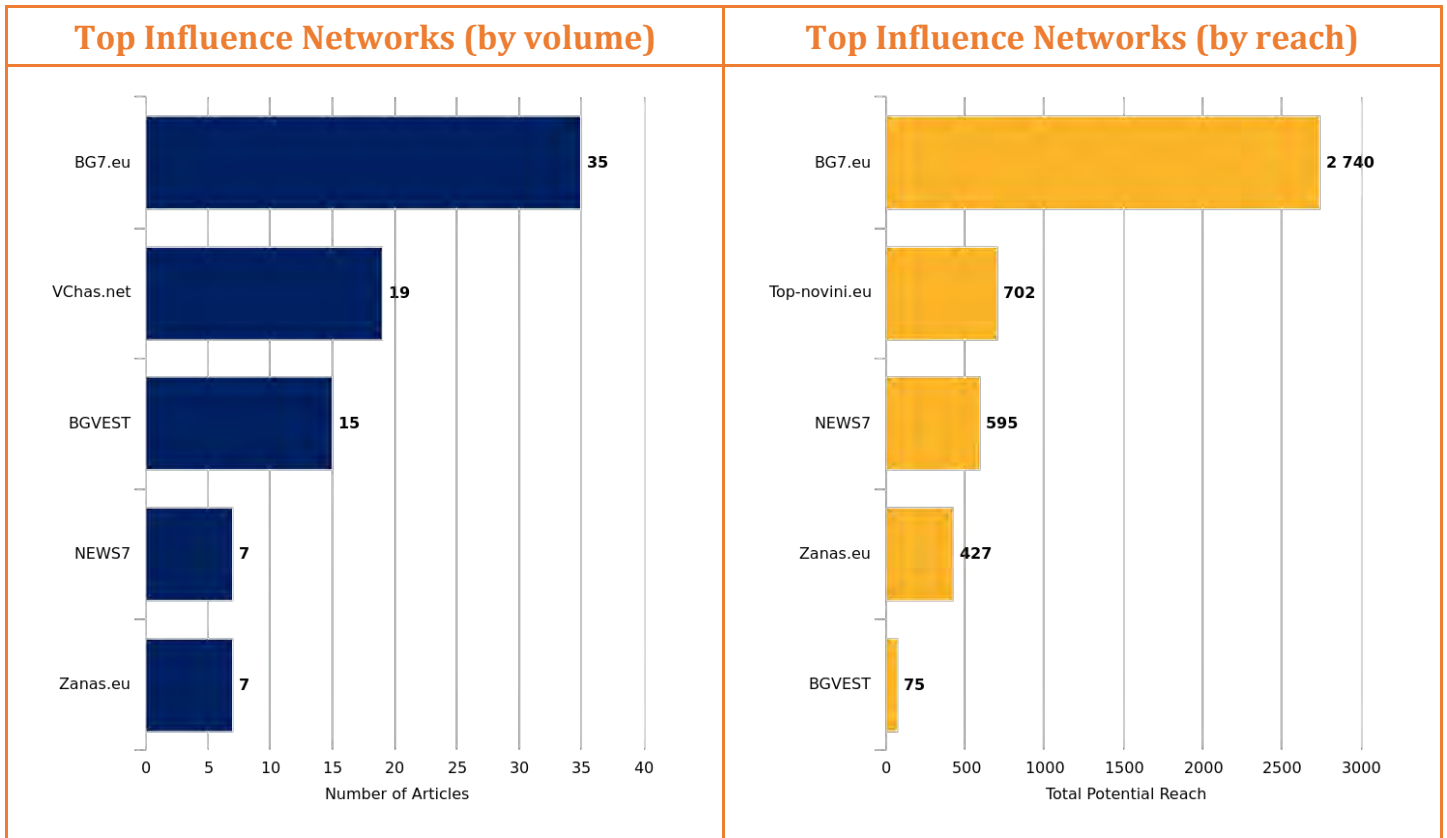
4.6.2.2 Online Coverage by Source Type

Top Prominent Sources (by volume)

Source	Number of Articles
FrogNews.bg	52
24Chasa	25
DunavMost.com	24
Fakti.bg	18
24 Plovdiv	17

Top Prominent Sources (by reach)

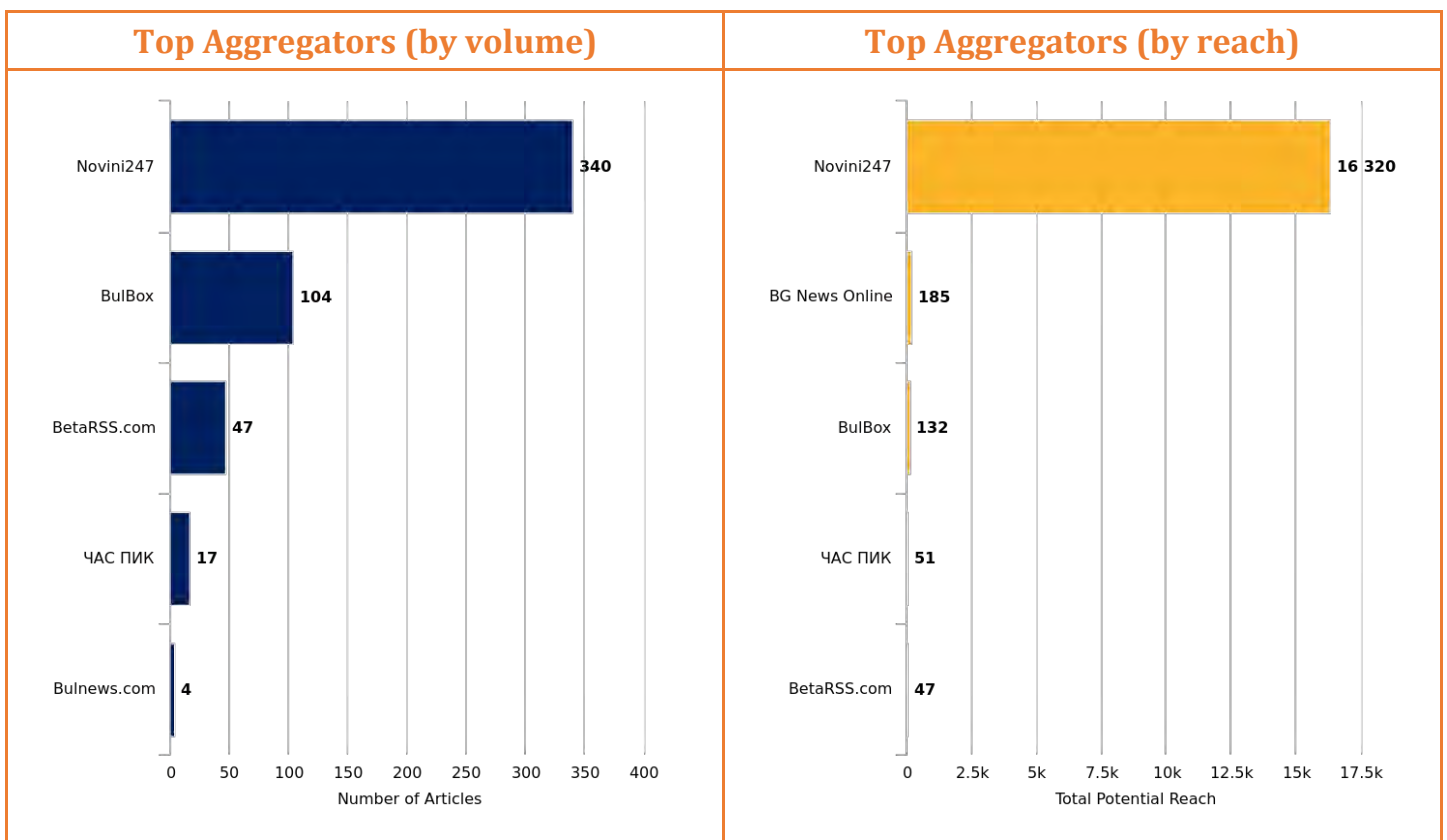| Source	Total Potential Reach
DunavMost.com	343 454
Actualno	192 372
Economedia	147 378
Nova	142 420
Dir.bg	129 519

The chart on the left displays the Top Prominent Sources (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Prominent Sources (by potential reach). The numbers point to the conclusion that even though some sources publish less in terms of volume, they manage to reach a considerably wider audience.

Top Less Prominent Sources (by volume)

Source	Number of Articles
Komedia	46
Mignews.info	15
King of Net	12
Novinata.bg	12
БОЕЦ	12

Top Less Prominent Sources (by reach)

Source	Total Potential Reach
Varna24.bg	12 693
Mignews.info	8 262
Blog.bg	7 204
lifebg.net	7 140
Politikata.net	7 110

The chart on the left displays the Top Less Prominent Sources (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Less Prominent Sources (by potential reach). "Komedia" published the most content on the story, however, "Varna 24," which is not among the Top 10 Sources in terms of volume, reached the widest audience.

Top Influence Networks (by volume)

Network	Number of Articles
BG7.eu	35
VChas.net	19
BGVEST	15
NEWS7	7
Zanas.eu	7

Top Influence Networks (by reach)

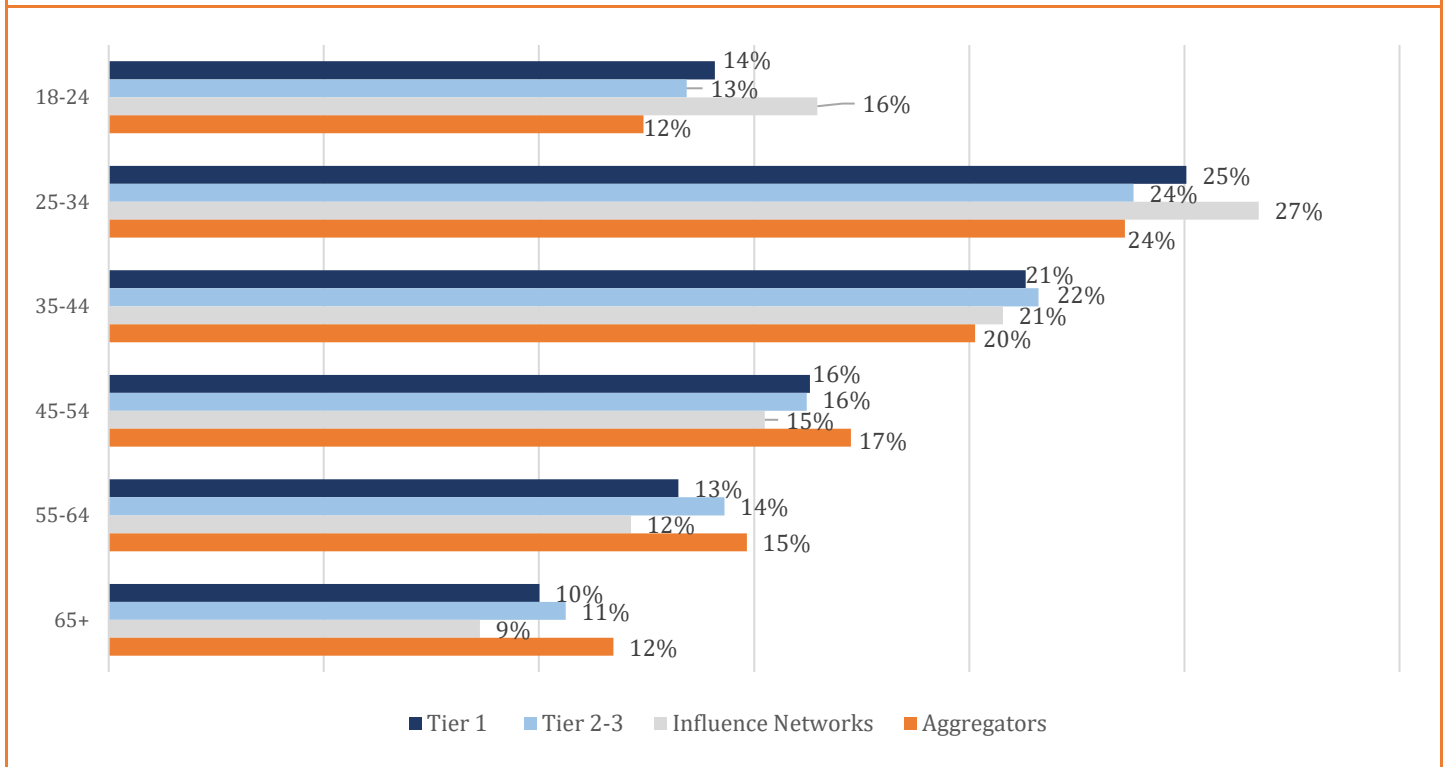| Network	Total Potential Reach
BG7.eu	2 740
Top-novini.eu	702
NEWS7	595
Zanas.eu	427
BGVEST	75

The chart on the left displays the Top Influence Networks (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Influence Networks (by potential reach). "BG7" published the most content and had the biggest potential reach.

Top Aggregators (by volume)

Aggregator	Number of Articles
Novini247	340
BulBox	104
BetaRSS.com	47
ЧАС ПИК	17
Bulnews.com	4

Top Aggregators (by reach)

Aggregator	Total Potential Reach
Novini247	16 320
BG News Online	185
BulBox	132
ЧАС ПИК	51
BetaRSS.com	47

The chart on the left displays the Top Media Aggregators (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Media Aggregators (by potential reach). "Novini247" published the most content and had the biggest potential reach.
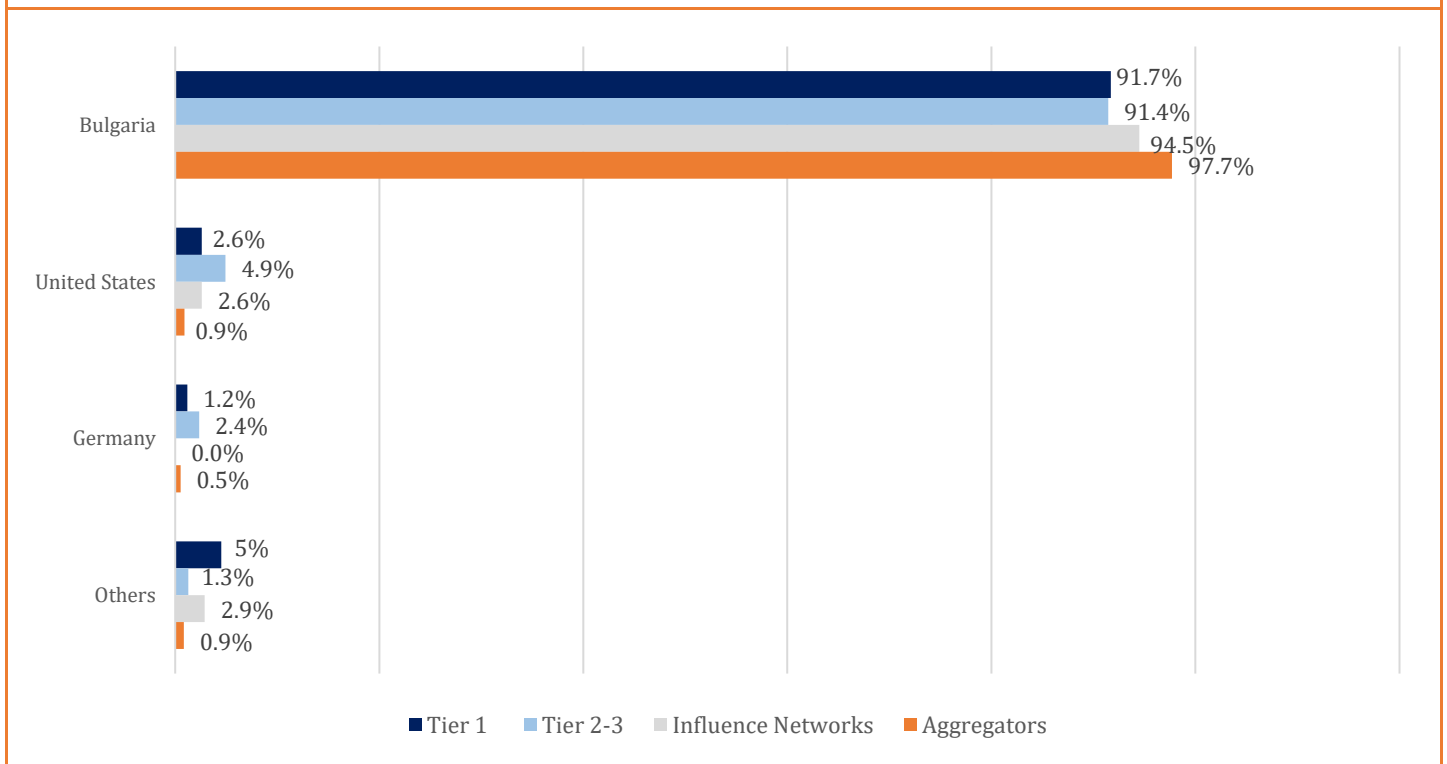
4.6.2.3 Online Coverage: Source Audience
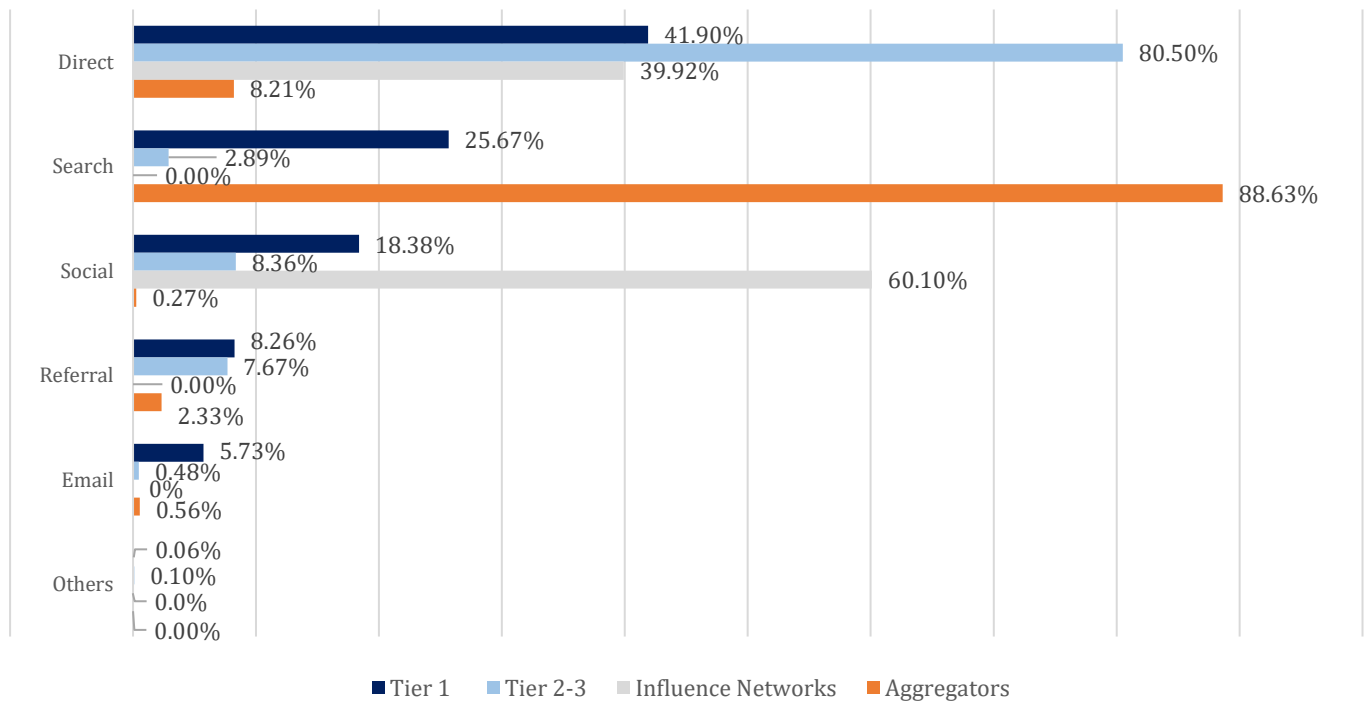
Source Audience by Age per Source Type

18-24
- Tier 1: 14%
- Tier 2-3: 13%
- Influence Networks: 16%
- Aggregators: 12%

25-34
- Tier 1: 25%
- Tier 2-3: 24%
- Influence Networks: 27%
- Aggregators: 24%

35-44
- Tier 1: 21%
- Tier 2-3: 22%
- Influence Networks: 21%
- Aggregators: 20%

45-54
- Tier 1: 16%
- Tier 2-3: 16%
- Influence Networks: 15%
- Aggregators: 17%

55-64
- Tier 1: 13%
- Tier 2-3: 14%
- Influence Networks: 12%
- Aggregators: 15%

65+
- Tier 1: 10%
- Tier 2-3: 11%
- Influence Networks: 9%
- Aggregators: 12%

■ Tier 1　■ Tier 2-3　■ Influence Networks　■ Aggregators

The chart illustrates the different level of engagement with the four types of monitored sources (Prominent Sources, Less Prominent Sources, Media Aggregators, and Influence Networks) among six age groups. The result shows that the people most interested in the story are between the age of 25 and 44. The people above 65 years of age comprise the lowest audience percentage.

Source Audience by Top Countries per Source Type

Bulgaria
- Tier 1: 91.7%
- Tier 2-3: 91.4%
- Influence Networks: 94.5%
- Aggregators: 97.7%

United States
- Tier 1: 2.6%
- Tier 2-3: 4.9%
- Influence Networks: 2.6%
- Aggregators: 0.9%

Germany
- Tier 1: 1.2%
- Tier 2-3: 2.4%
- Influence Networks: 0.0%
- Aggregators: 0.5%

Others
- Tier 1: 5%
- Tier 2-3: 1.3%
- Influence Networks: 2.9%
- Aggregators: 0.9%

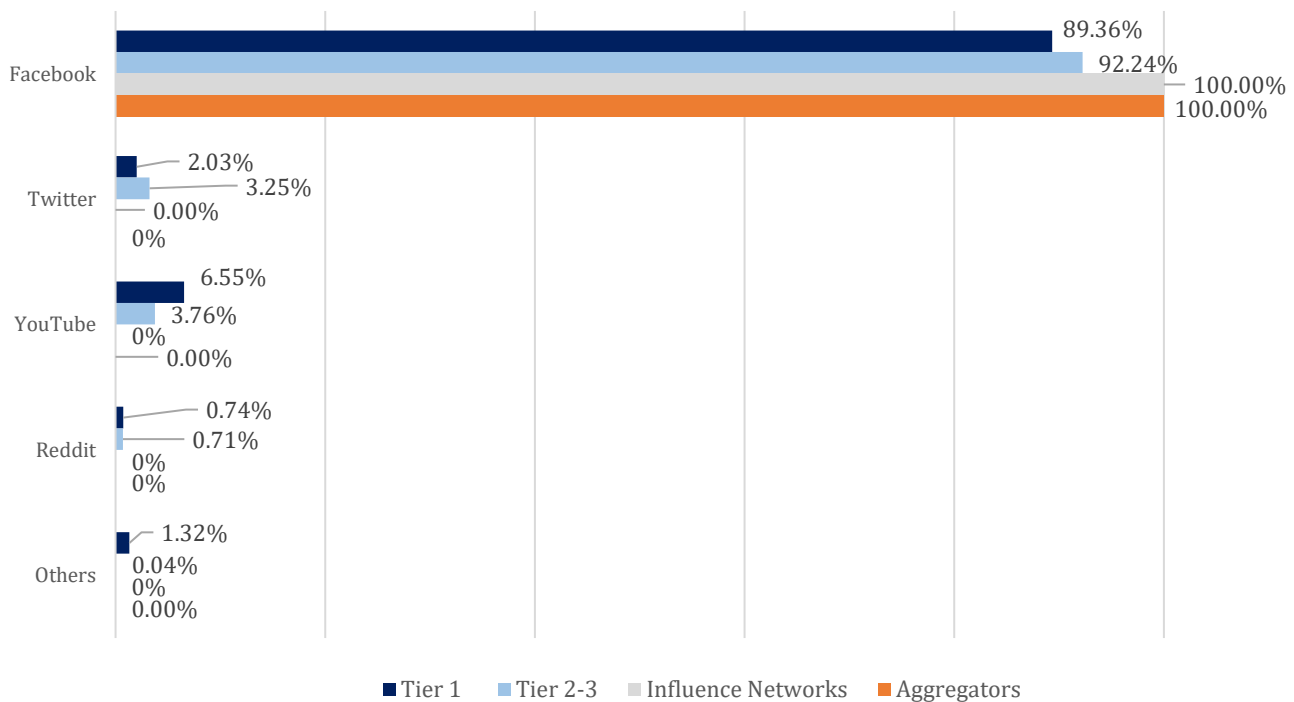■ Tier 1　■ Tier 2-3　■ Influence Networks　■ Aggregators

The chart displays the geographical distribution of the websites visitors per source type. The traffic comes mostly from Bulgaria, with the United States taking the second place among all source types.

Source Audience by Traffic per Source Type

Direct
- 41.90%
- 80.50%
- 39.92%
- 8.21%

Search
- 25.67%
- 2.89%
- 0.00%
- 88.63%

Social
- 18.38%
- 8.36%
- 60.10%
- 0.27%

Referral
- 8.26%
- 7.67%
- 0.00%
- 2.33%

Email
- 5.73%
- 0.48%
- 0%
- 0.56%

Others
- 0.06%
- 0.10%
- 0.0%
- 0.00%

■ Tier 1　■ Tier 2-3　■ Influence Networks　■ Aggregators

The chart compares the source of traffic and its volume generated by the four monitored source types. Prominent Sources gained most of their traffic directly or via a search engine. Less Prominent Sources gained most of their traffic directly, while Media Aggregators did so via direct clicks. Influence Networks gained traffic through social media and, to a lesser degree, via direct clicks.

Source Audience by Social Network per Source Type

Facebook
- 89.36%
- 92.24%
- 100.00%
- 100.00%

Twitter
- 2.03%
- 3.25%
- 0.00%
- 0%

YouTube
- 6.55%
- 3.76%
- 0%
- 0.00%

Reddit
- 0.74%
- 0.71%
- 0%
- 0%

Others
- 1.32%
- 0.04%
- 0%
- 0.00%

■ Tier 1　■ Tier 2-3　■ Influence Networks　■ Aggregators

The chart illustrates the source audience distribution according to the traffic of the website gained via social network per source type. The findings highlight Facebook's dominance in all monitored types of sources.

4.6.2.4 Online Coverage: Political Parties (by volume)
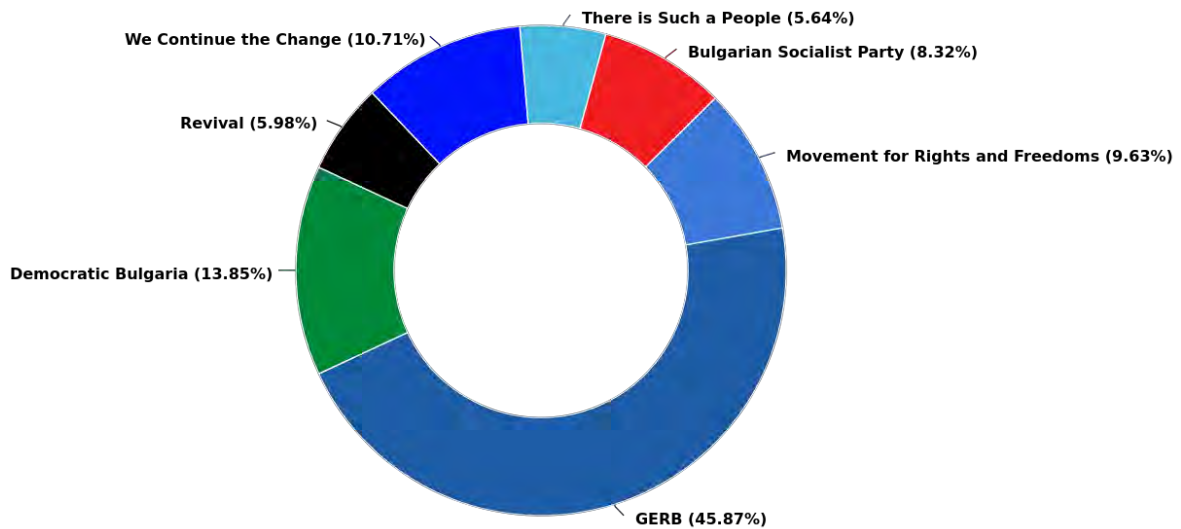
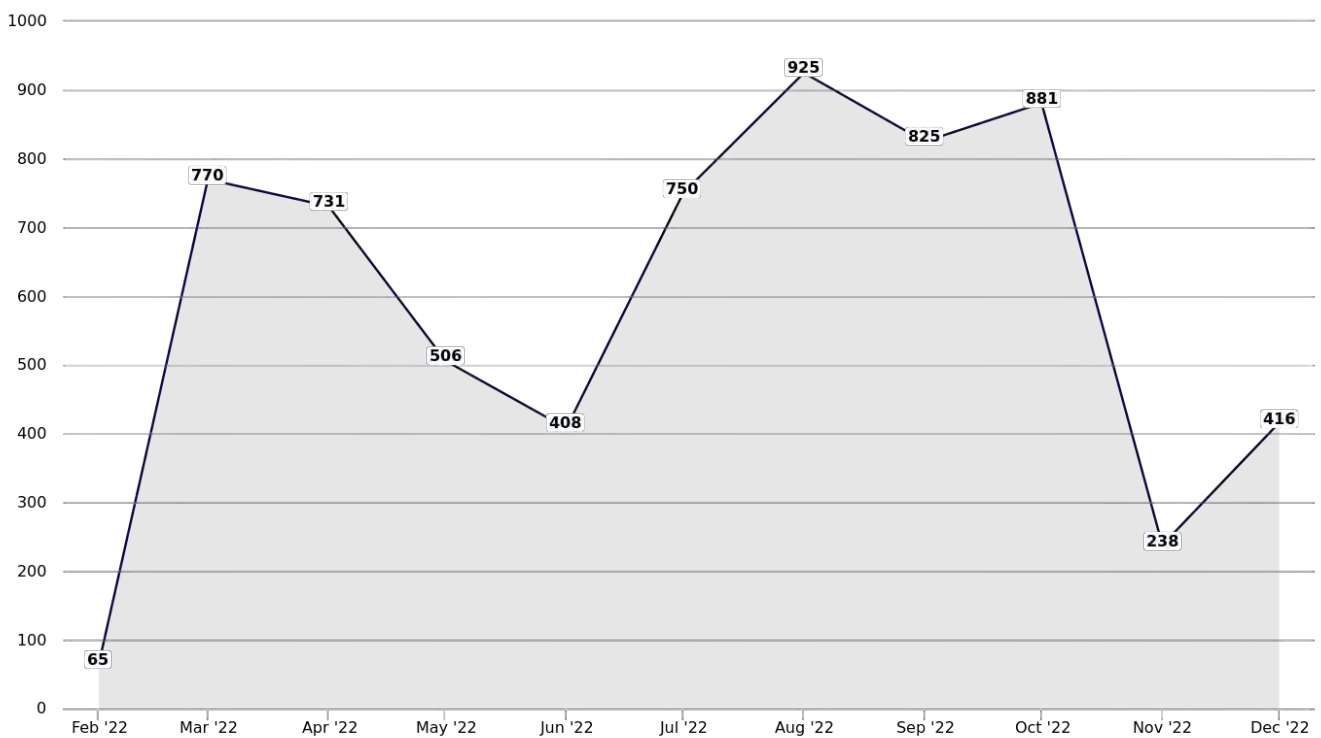**Top Mentioned Political Parties**

The chart presents the most mentioned political parties in the context of the story. The findings show that GERB was the most frequently mentioned in the context of the investigation, as the construction of the project happened during Boyko Borissov's third cabinet. In addition, the launch of the investigation itself coincided with his arrest. Democratic Bulgaria was second in terms of mentions, due to media outlets quoting Atanas Atanasov, leader of Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria, co-chairman of Democratic Bulgaria, and then Deputy Chairman of the National Assembly. At the beginning of March 2022, in an interview for the Bulgarian National Television, Mr. Atanasov stated that Borissov's cabinet served Russian President Vladimir Putin's plans to launch a war on Ukraine [190]. In another instance, in December 2022, the co-chairman of Democratic Bulgaria asked, during a parliamentary session, whether the Ministry of Interior was investigating the information revealed by a report from the State Agency for National Security (DANS), published by various outlets prior to the construction of the gas pipeline [189]. The report warned the Prime Minister that the construction of the Balkan Stream pipeline was "part of Putin's strategic plan to bypass Ukraine." The party was also mentioned in an interview with GERB's Deputy Chairman Daniel Mitov, who stated that, as a right-wing political force, Democratic Bulgaria needs to reconsider its participation in the current government [191]. The interview was widely republished.

4.6.3. Social Coverage (Facebook)

The story of the TurkStream project received a high level of Facebook engagement throughout 2022, with multiple peaks in August and October. It was of particular interest to the audience, which led to strong engagement and interaction with the content. Users expressed their opinions on various matters, such as the role of the Balkan Stream gas pipeline and the violations made in connection to it, as well as the price increase of natural gas. The official pages of different media outlets were the top social authors, with many of them criticizing Boyko Borissov's government. PIK, in particular, is among those that stood out. GERB and the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS) were the most frequently mentioned political parties, usually in the context of alleged theft and dishonesty. A number of accounts discussed the Balkan Stream project and its potential economic benefits for Bulgaria, while their opponents raised concerns about the country's dependence on Russian gas. Overall, the story highlights the importance of the energy security and diversification in the region and the ongoing debate surrounding Russia's role in Europe's energy supply.

Overall Volume (per month)

Chart data (Overall Volume per month):
- Feb '22: 65
- Mar '22: 770
- Apr '22: 731
- May '22: 506
- Jun '22: 408
- Jul '22: 750
- Aug '22: 925
- Sep '22: 825
- Oct '22: 881
- Nov '22: 238
- Dec '22: 416

The Facebook content closely mirrored that of the online media, exhibiting multiple peaks throughout 2022, with the highest ones occurring in August and October. During the month of March, numerous accounts shared a statement made by former Energy Minister Temenuzhka Petkova. According to her, the Balkan Stream gas pipeline project had played a crucial role in preserving the gas transit for Bulgaria, resulting in the country receiving hundreds of millions of dollars annually for years to come. The news sparked a great deal of debate among users, with many expressing strong opinions both for and against Russia. In April, social media saw another surge of content as news spread that the price of natural gas was expected to increase by 20% to 30%. The announcement of serious violations found during the inspection of Balkan Stream caused another content peak that continued to spread until October, indicating the issue's sensitivity.

Top 10 Social Authors (by volume)
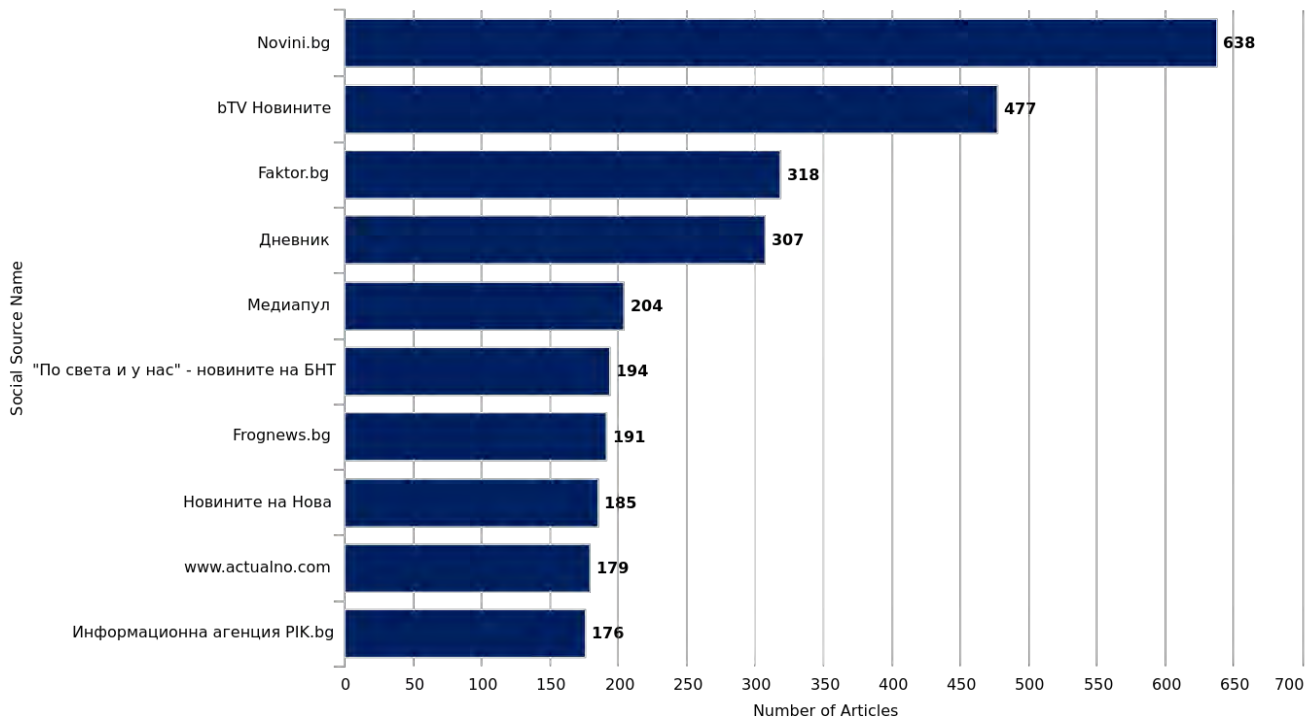
The Top Social Authors in terms of engagement were official media outlets pages, most of which criticized Boyko Borissov's government. Although PIK published only two posts on the matter, it stood out due to receiving 200% more engagements. However, it is worth noting that the majority of the interactions with PIK's page are repetitive and offensive, specifically targeting Bulgarian President Rumen Radev. Additionally, some of the interactions mention Boyko Borissov and his political party GERB in the context of corruption and theft accusations.

Top Keywords (by volume)
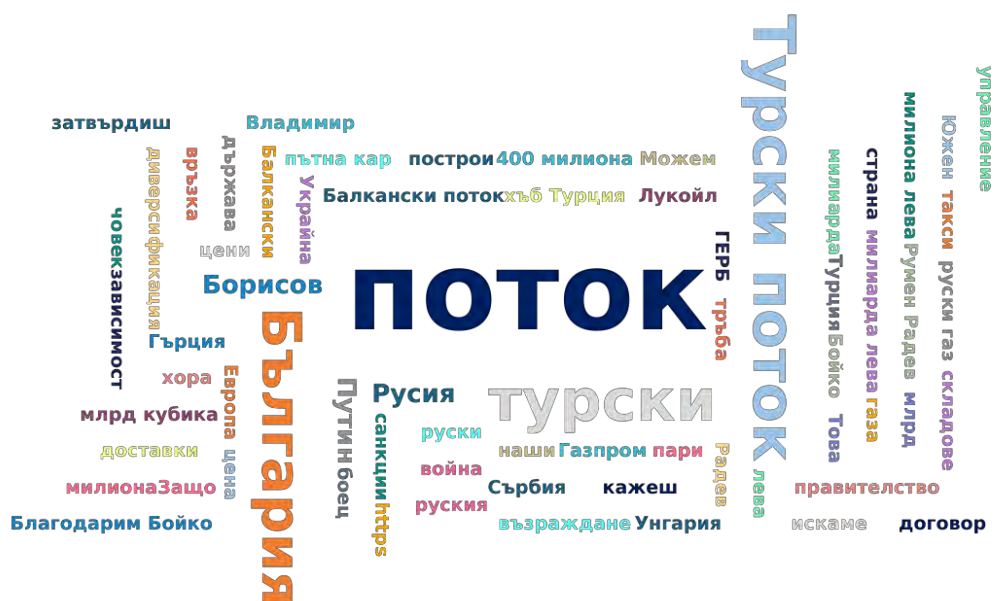
According to the visualization above, the most frequently used words on Facebook during the monitored period were "TurkStream," "Bulgaria," "Russia," "Putin," "Borissov," and "GERB," as well as words such as "money," "billions," and "sanctions," all of which accurately capture the essence of the story. However, it is worth noting that "Gazprom" and "Lukoil" also appear since the latter had an unpaid excise duty for loading a ship belonging to "Gazprom," which was used for the TurkStream project.

4.6.3.1 Social Coverage: Political Parties (by volume)

Top Mentioned Political Parties

Bulgarian Socialist Party (8.89%)

Movement for Rights and Freedoms (13.57%)

We Continue the Change (10.34%)

There is Such a People (4.22%)

Revival (5.93%)

Democratic Bulgaria (5.80%)

GERB (51.25%)

Facebook
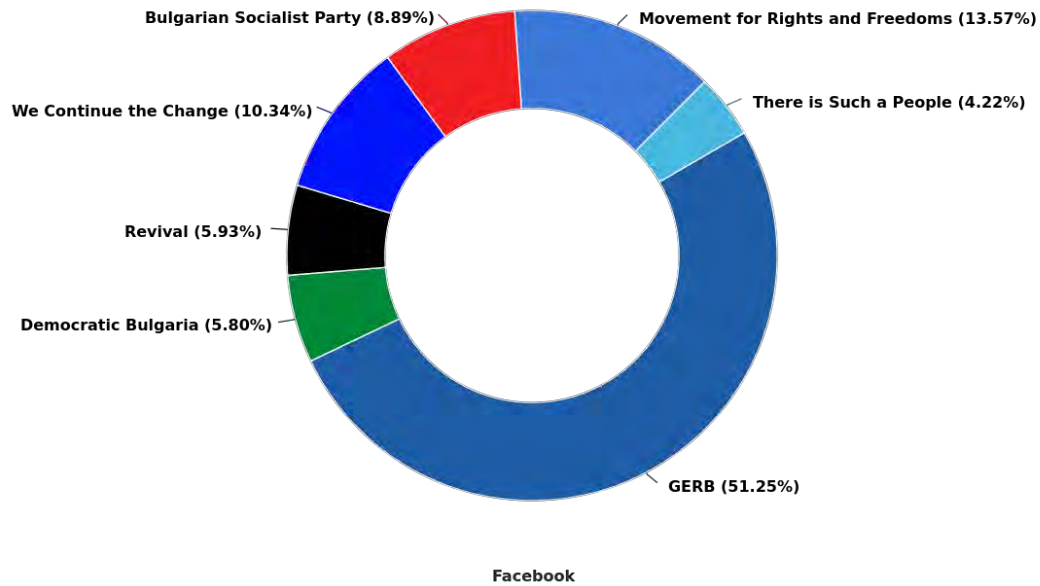
Nearly half of the content referenced GERB, mainly criticizing the party's involvement in the project. The Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS) ranks second as it was frequently mentioned alongside GERB in comments related to allegations of theft and dishonesty. Moreover, We Continue the Change and Democratic Bulgaria (DB) often appeared in a negative context under posts that primarily echoed GERB statements. The Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) was commented on in connection with Bulgarian President Rumen Radev, Russian President Vladimir Putin, and Russia.

4.7. OLAF Investigation into Public Procurement of Police Cars

4.7.1. Background

The beginning of 2021 was marked by a high-level scandal widely covered by both national and regional media. On February 1, various outlets reported that OLAF, EU's Antifraud Office, had made public its suspicions that the President Rumen Radev's Anticorruption Secretary Plamen Uzunov had been involved in some shady dealings concerning a procedure for the purchase of a specific set of vehicles for the Ministry of Interior in March 2017. By using EU funds to buy SUVs from an older batch instead of brand new police all-terrain vehicles, the latter had breached the terms of its grant agreement with the European Commission. At that time, Uzunov was acting Minister of Interior [192]. Therefore, OLAF recommended that the Bulgarian authorities return nearly EUR 6 million and that they consider the possibility of an investigation against Ministry officials [193]. Moreover, the Specialized Prosecutor's Office announced that the Supreme Cassation Prosecutor's Office had sent the OLAF report on January 6. It also clarified that the materials had been attached to already initiated pre-trial proceedings related to influence peddling. The Specialized Prosecutor's Office explained that although two people had been charged, the charges were yet to be specified, as they were connected to information on committed corruption crimes [194]. Some websites even mentioned that these "two people" were Plamen Uzunov and the businessperson Plamen Bobokov.

For its part, the Presidency made a formal statement, according to which "repeating, from time to time, that, as acting Minister of Interior in 2017, Plamen Uzunov had concluded a contract for the supply of 290 all-terrain vehicles for the Ministry of Interior, will not make it true […] The procedure for the purchase of the vehicles in question began with the second government of Prime Minister Boyko Borissov in 2016 and ended with the signing of a contract ten months after the expiration of Plamen Uzunov's mandate as acting Minister of Interior" [195]. As a response, GERB published a special note that read: "We consider the desire of the presidential institution to transfer responsibility for the investigation to someone else as an attempt to spread a political umbrella over its Anticorruption Secretary Plamen Uzunov. We remind you that he is already being investigated for trading in influence" [196].

Meanwhile, in an interview for the Bulgarian National Television, Ville Itala, OLAF's Director-General, said: "I strongly urge the Bulgarian Prosecutor's Office to pay attention to our recommendations for the initiation of an investigation into the abuse of power in favor of a third party. This is a clear signal from our side that no one is above the law and OLAF, together with its partners in Europe, will work tirelessly to protect European taxpayers' money" [197]. In a similar context, Radan Kanev, founder of Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria, noted that the current OLAF investigation was looking into a complaint from several years ago, adding: "This shows that the European institutions work slowly, which is precisely why we must be prepared for other subsequent reports of this kind" [198].

Soon after, GERB's MP Spas Garnevski called on President Rumen Radev to withdraw his candidacy for a second presidential term, in light of the then upcoming presidential elections, which eventually took place in November 2021. Boyko Borissov also commented on the matter, saying that "as usual, the thief cries thief and the Presidency always needs someone to blame" [199]. In response, the Presidency issued a formal statement: "The Prime Minister's memory clearly needs to be refreshed after he bragged to the media, on October 7, 2018, about the funds absorbed by his government and the delivered cars. Today, however, he has no recollection of the public procurement negotiated by his subordinate administration" [200]. In contrast, BSP's leader Korneliya Ninova viewed the President's intention to extend his term as "an honest and open position." In addition, the party said that the OLAF scandal was "more of a legal matter," although it had sparked "political disputes and an exchange of remarks" [201]. Another one of its representatives, Georgi Mihaylov, even observed the following: "It is interesting that the OLAF investigation should come right before the start of the election campaign" [202].

The news attracted the attention of Tihomir Bezlov from the Center for the Study of Democracy who described it as "an example of the influence of the big business in Bulgaria, which has managed, within two or three different governments, to make the state buy its jeeps, its product. Then, again successfully, the big business has managed to bypass the Commission for the Protection of Competition and the Administrative Court. This case is the result of a clash between political forces and demonstrates the control oligarchs exert over all institutions" [203]. He even

speculated that OLAF's investigation into influence peddling could be part of "a strategic idea for a case to be created for the European Chief Prosecutor Laura Kövesi. However, the European Prosecutor's Office depends on the national investigators, so I am skeptical about the outcome. The case's indictment and hearing will take place in a Bulgarian court. Kövesi's big problem is the kind of support she will get from the national institutions, not only in Bulgaria, as well as the budget she will be allocated, especially since in Romania she had the privilege of having a huge budget" [204].

The Anticorruption Fund also commented on the case, saying that "since 2017, the Ministry of Interior had made at least two orders for the purchase of lower grade off-road vehicles," calling on OLAF to publish all documentation on the emergency financial aid from the European Commission and the related public procurement [205].

On February 22, the media reported that Plovdiv's Administrative Court had ruled that the arrests of Plamen Uzunov and Plamen Bobokov in 2020 were illegal. The warrants only stated that the arrests had been made in connection with a case investigated by the Specialized Prosecutor's Office. The outlets clarified that this was the same investigation in which Uzunov and Bobokov had been accused of influence peddling and of the purchase of 290 lower grade vehicles [206].
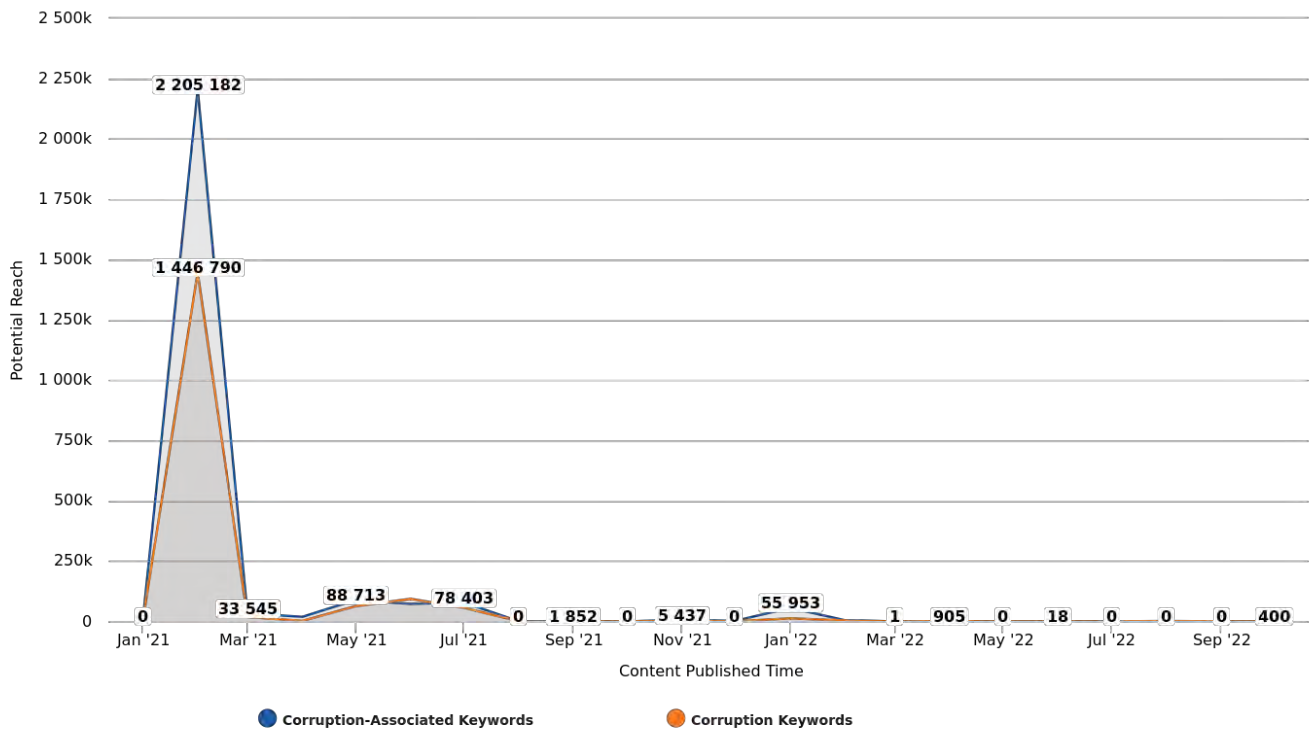
Even though most of the content was published in February 2021, subsequent articles also briefly mentioned the investigation while highlighting other subjects. For instance, according to a widely circulated piece that appeared in May that year, then Minister of Interior Boyko Rashkov ordered the dismissal of the Ministry's Administrative Secretary Boyko Slavchev who led the departmental commission that purchased the 290 jeeps investigated by OLAF [207].

4.7.2. Online Coverage

4.7.2.1 Overall Metrics and Volume Comparison

The online coverage surrounding the story neared 1,900 articles. More than half of the content was published by Prominent Sources (around 1100), followed by Less Prominent Sources (around 350) and Media Aggregators (around 280). Influence Networks were the least active.

The sources monitored in the context of this story share a similar audience demographic, with people between the ages of 25 and 44 constituting the largest percentage of the readership. In addition, the traffic was generated primarily from Bulgaria. However, the sources differ in terms of how they gained the said traffic. Prominent Sources received it either directly or via search engines, Less Prominent Sources—directly, and Media Aggregators via a search engine. Influence Networks gained their traffic mainly through social media and direct clicks.

The results show that words associated with corruption were used twice as much as the word "corruption" itself. Due to the national interest in the matter, the story was extensively covered by sources categorized as National Media.
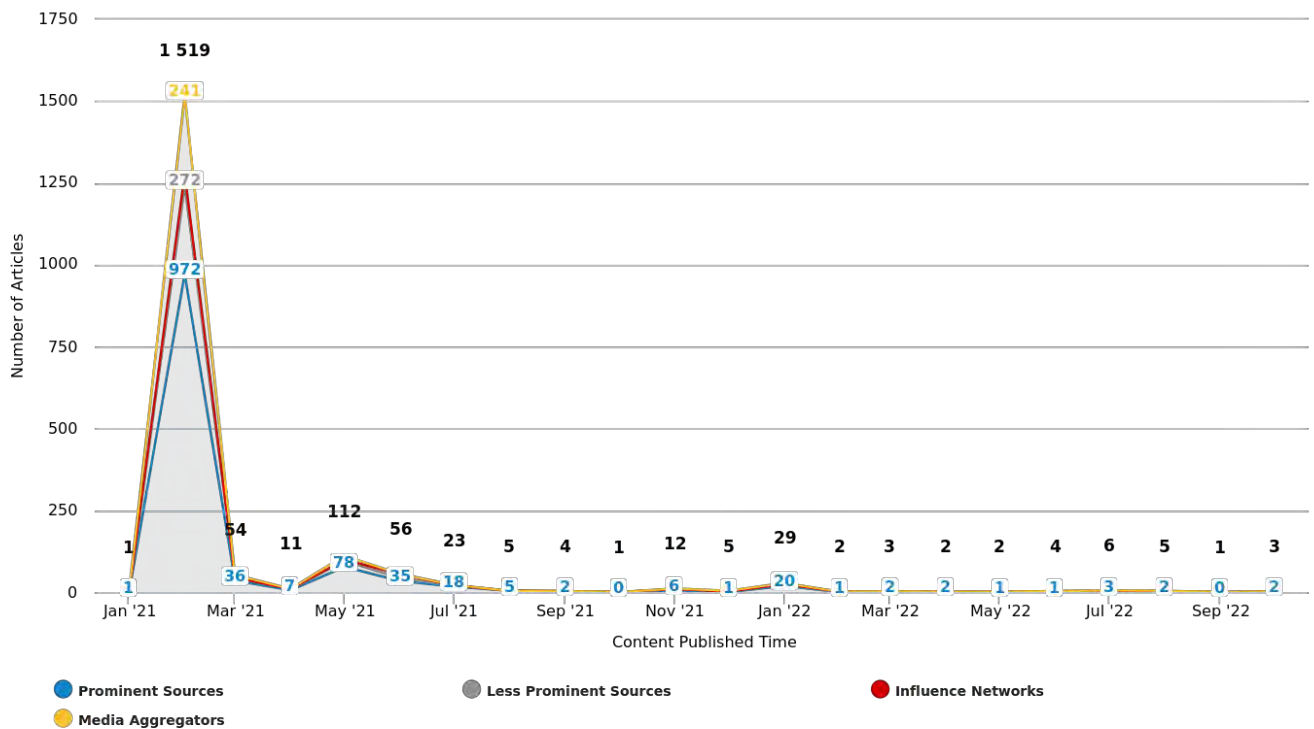
Top Keywords (by volume)

A tag-cloud representation of the most frequently used keywords or phrases within the monitored story. The size of each word in the cloud is a relative indicator of the term's popularity, thereby allowing for the discernment of the most prominent and widely discussed points of interest. In this particular case, the most frequently mentioned keywords include OLAF (the European Antifraud Office), the word "automobiles," and the family name of Bulgarian President Rumen Radev. Other prominent keywords are the names of then Prime Minister Boyko Borissov, as well as the name of the political party he leads (GERB). President Rumen Radev's Anticorruption Secretary Plamen Uzunov, who was in fact the one under investigation, also appeared among the common mentions.

Volume Comparison – Corruption Keywords vs. Corruption-Associated Keywords

An analysis of the volume distribution of the pieces of content that reference corruption directly or indirectly. The results show that words associated with corruption were used twice as much as the word "corruption" itself.

Potential Reach Comparison – Corruption Keywords vs. Corruption-Associated Keywords

Potential reach distribution of the pieces of content, which reference corruption either directly or indirectly. The potential reach distribution pattern mirrors the volume distribution of the content.

Stacked Volume Comparison (by source type)

Stacked volume distribution of the story per type of sources. Prominent Sources published the most content on the story, followed by Less Prominent Sources and Media Aggregators, which circulated a similar amount of content. Influence Networks were the least interested in the story.

Stacked Potential Reach Comparison (by source type)
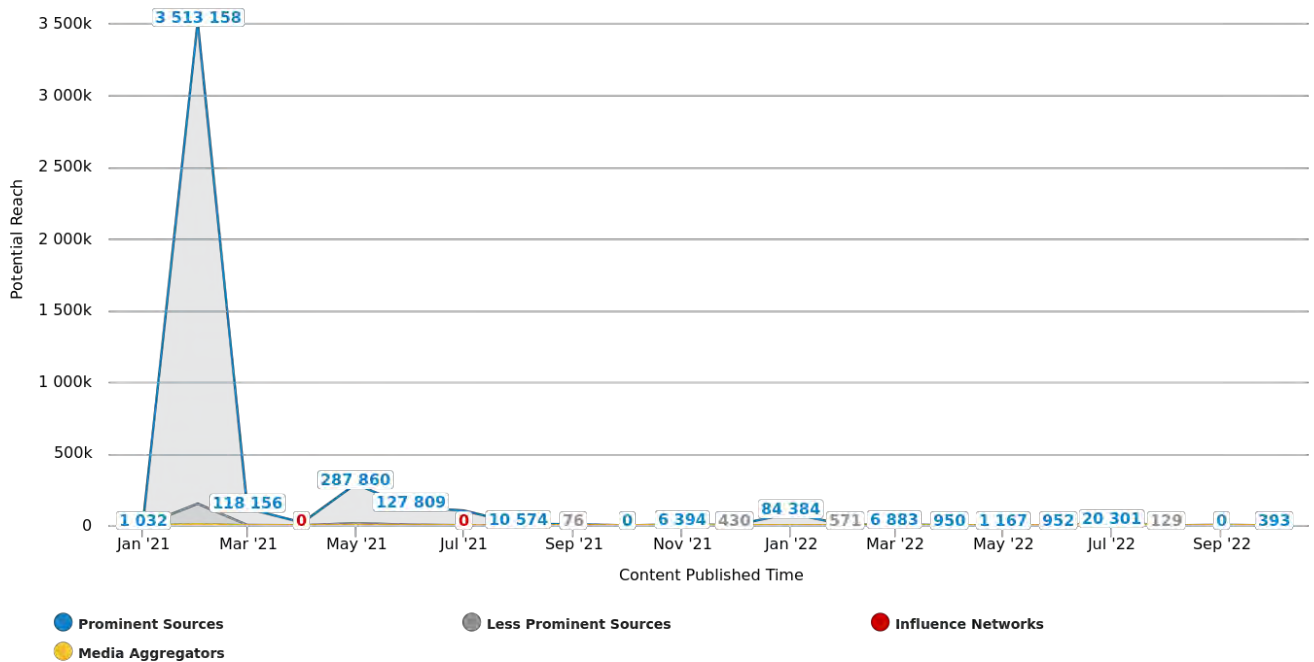
Stacked potential reach distribution of the story per type of sources. The chart clearly shows the dominant potential reach of Prominent Sources, which overshadows the rest of the source types. One of the reasons for the high potential reach of the Prominent Sources is the fact that the Bulgarian section of the German international broadcaster Deutsche Welle released a relevant piece titled "Bulgaria—the Defective Democracy" [208].

Volume Comparison - Regional vs National Sources
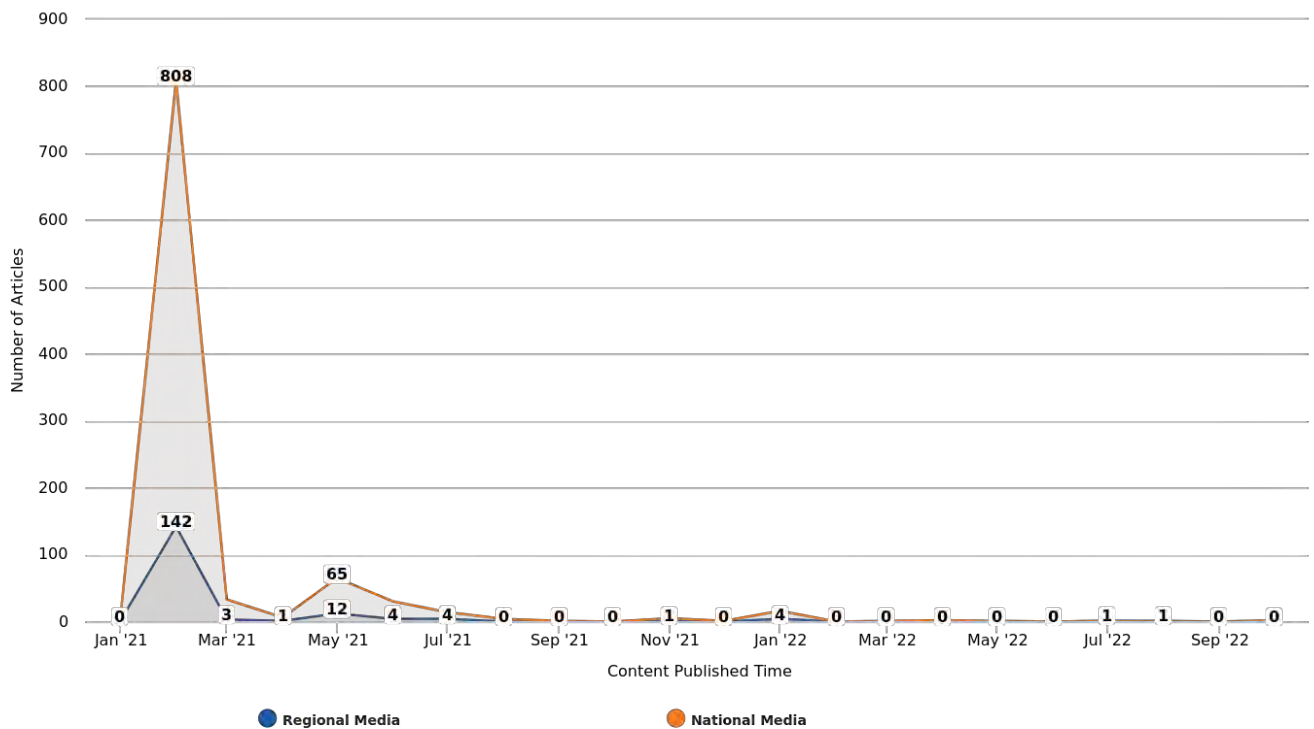
Volume distribution of the story in the National and Regional Media. National Media published more content related to the story compared to Regional Media.

Potential reach Comparison - Regional vs National Sources
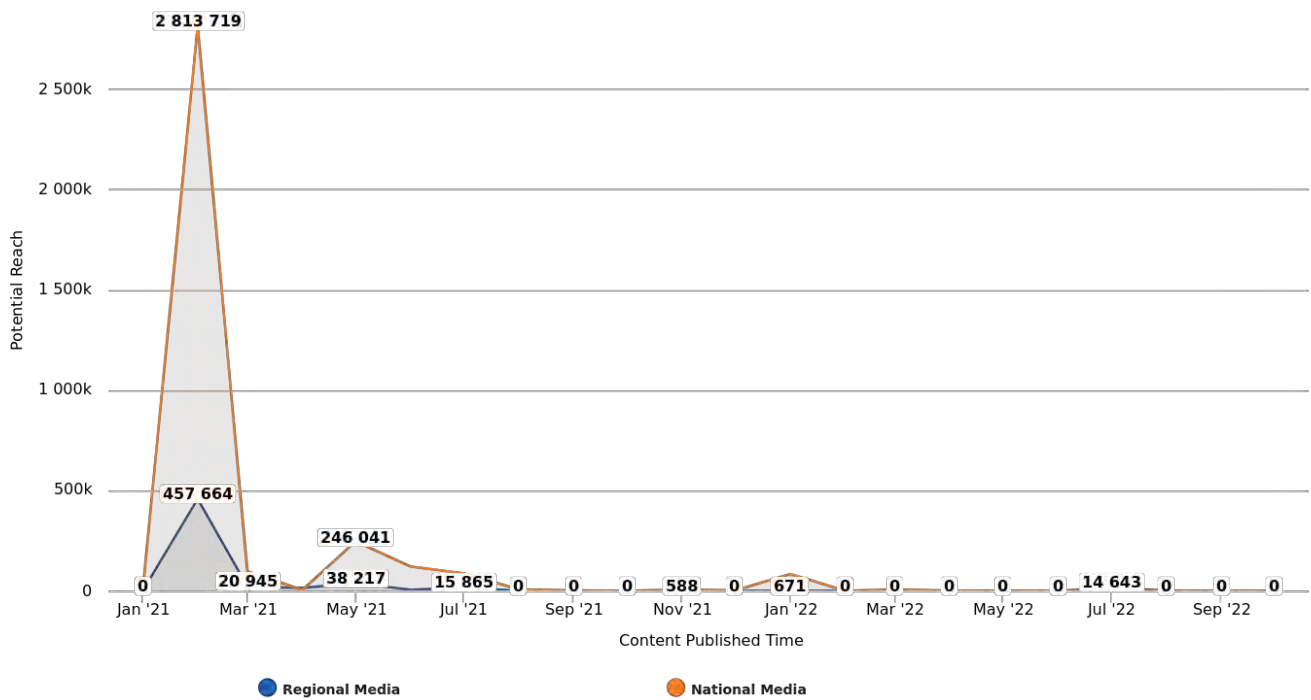
Potential reach distribution of the story in the National and Regional Media. The potential reach of National Media sources far exceeds that of Regional Media, due not only to Regional Media's more limited audience, but also to the lower amount of published content.
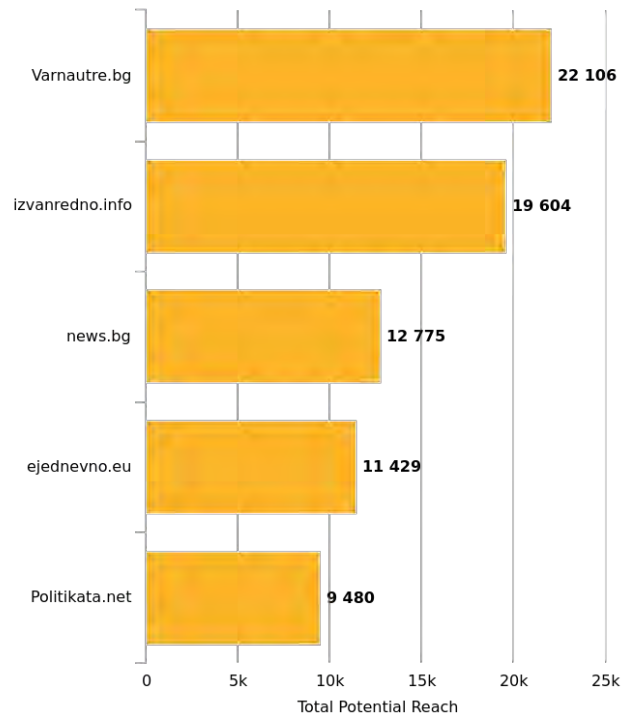
4.7.2.2 Online Coverage by Source Type
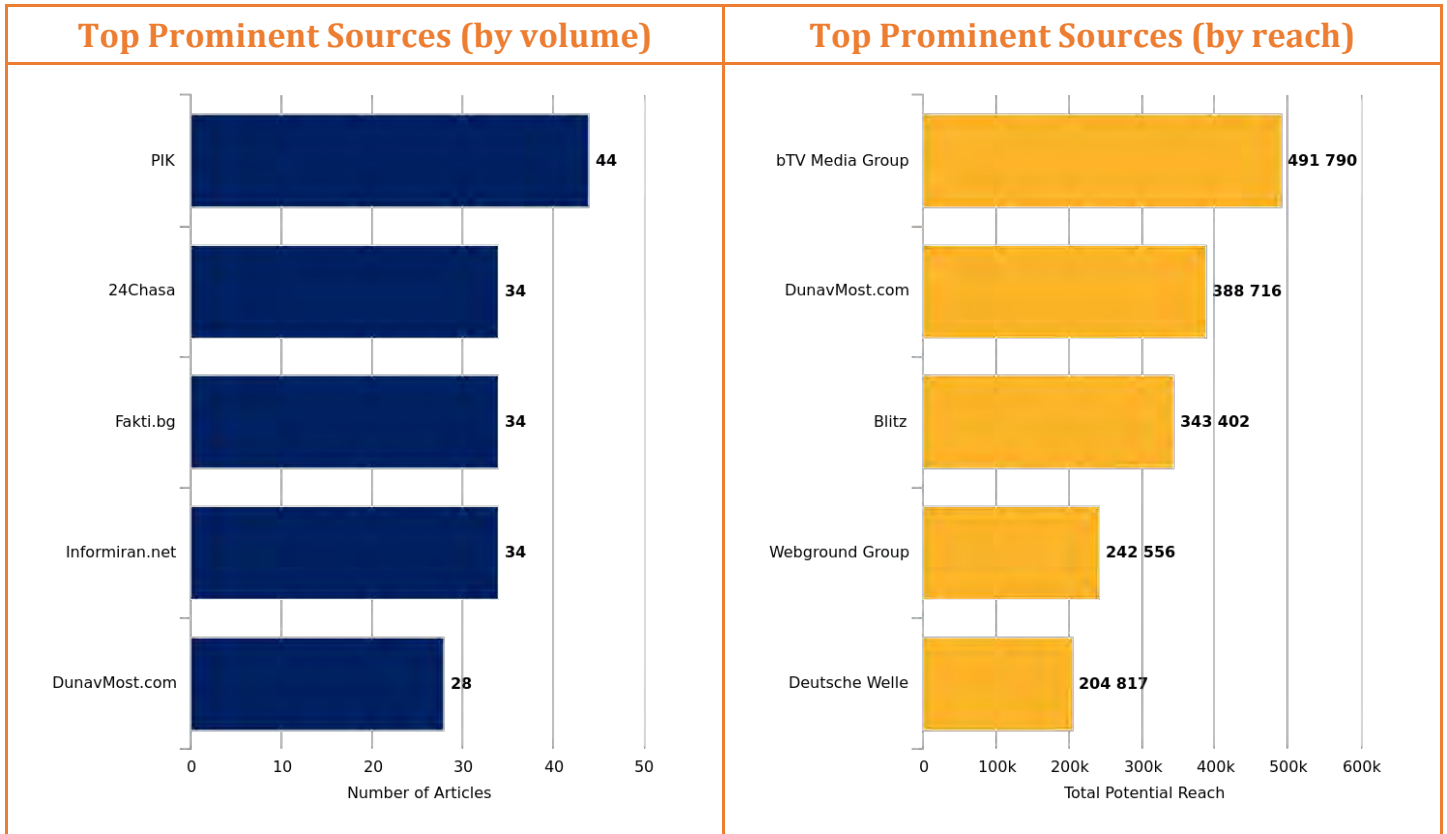
Top Prominent Sources (by volume)

Top Prominent Sources (by reach)

The chart on the left displays the Top Prominent Sources (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Prominent Sources (by potential reach). The numbers point to the conclusion that even though some sources publish less in terms of volume, they manage to reach a considerably wider audience.
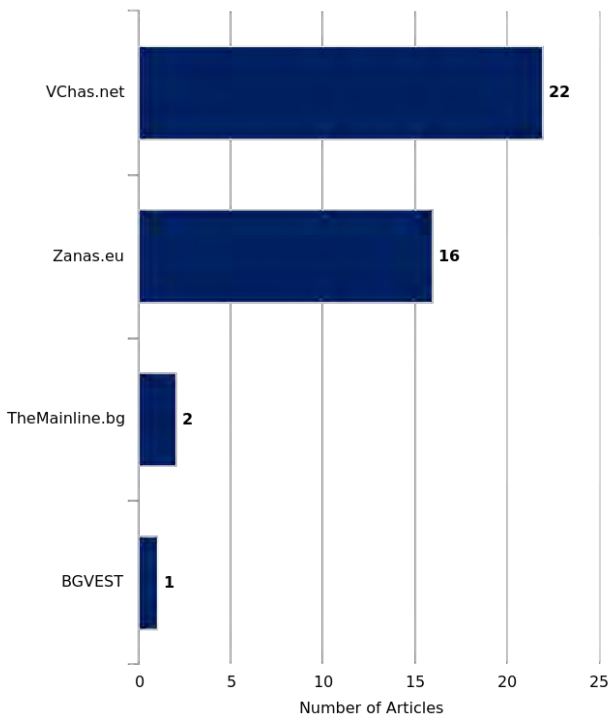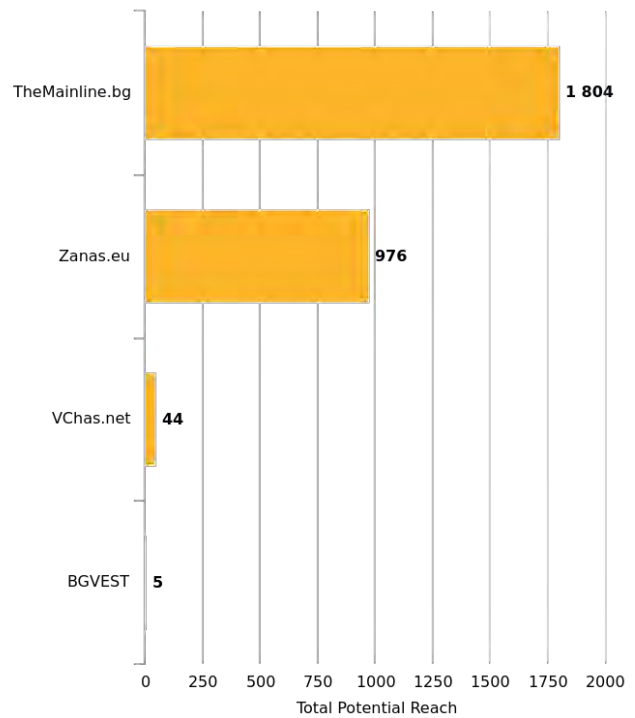
Top Less Prominent Sources (by volume)

Source	Number of Articles
news.bg	25
Classa.bg	18
B2BMagazine.bg	14
Mignews.info	13
izvanredno.info	13

Top Less Prominent Sources (by reach)

Source	Total Potential Reach
Varnautre.bg	22 106
izvanredno.info	19 604
news.bg	12 775
ejednevno.eu	11 429
Politikata.net	9 480

The chart on the left displays the Top Less Prominent Sources (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Less Prominent Sources (by potential reach). "News BG" published the most content on the story, however, "Varna Utre," which is not among the Top 10 Sources in terms of volume, reached the widest audience.
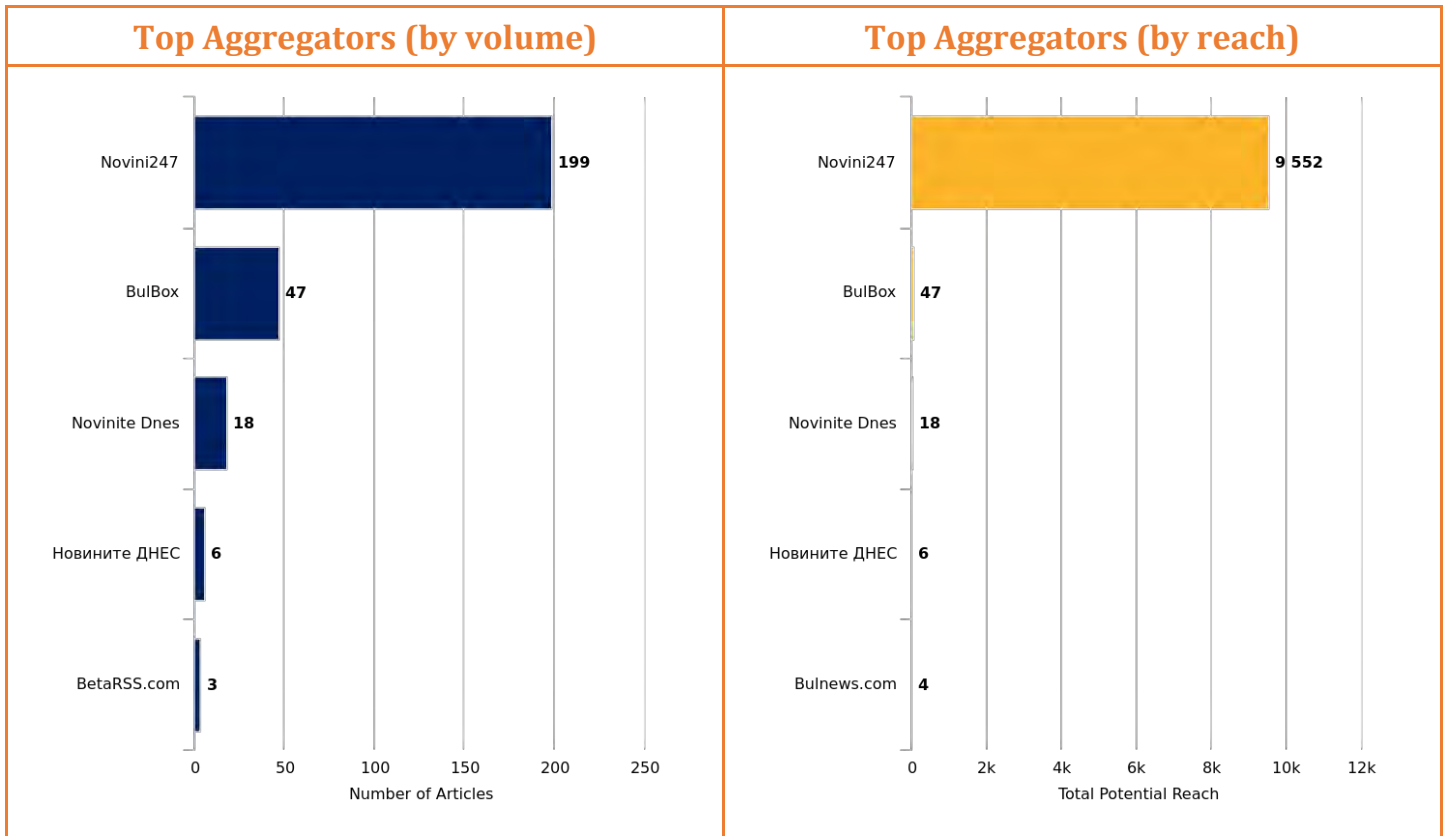
Top Influence Networks (by volume)

Network	Number of Articles
VChas.net	22
Zanas.eu	16
TheMainline.bg	2
BGVEST	1

Top Influence Networks (by reach)

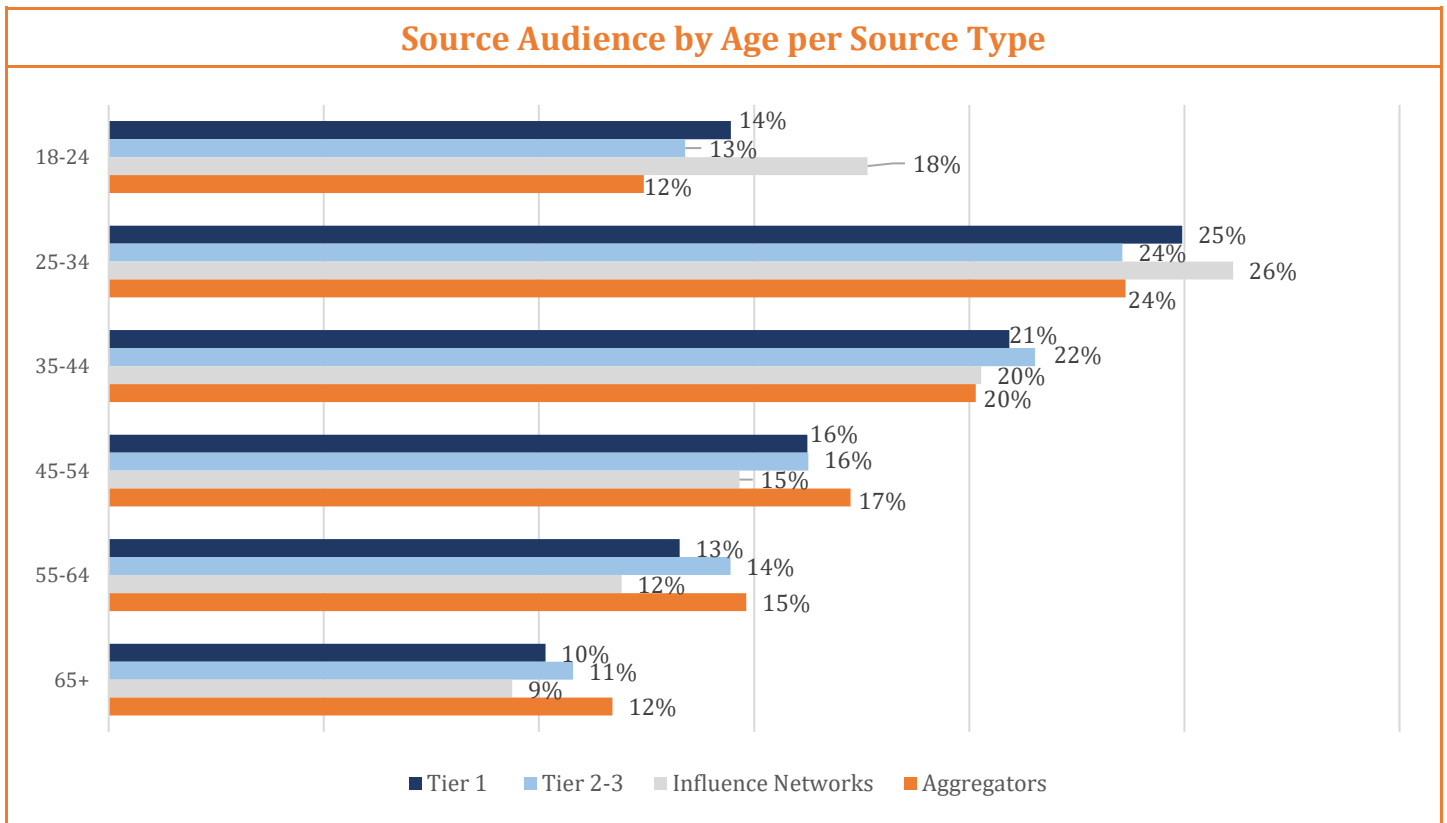| Network	Total Potential Reach
TheMainline.bg	1 804
Zanas.eu	976
VChas.net	44
BGVEST	5

The chart on the left displays the Top Influence Networks (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Influence Networks (by potential reach). Although "V Chas" published the most content, "The Mainline" had the biggest potential reach.

Top Aggregators (by volume)

Top Aggregators (by reach)

The chart on the left displays the Top Media Aggregators (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Media Aggregators (by potential reach). "Novini247" published the most content and had the biggest potential reach.

4.7.2.3 Online Coverage: Source Audience

Source Audience by Age per Source Type

■ Tier 1   ■ Tier 2-3   ▨ Influence Networks   ■ Aggregators

The chart illustrates the different level of engagement with the four types of monitored sources (Prominent Sources, Less Prominent Sources, Media Aggregators, and Influence Networks) among six age groups. The result shows that people most interested in the story are between the ages of 25 and 44. The people above 65 years of age comprise the lowest audience percentage and, in this case, engaged mainly with Media Aggregators.
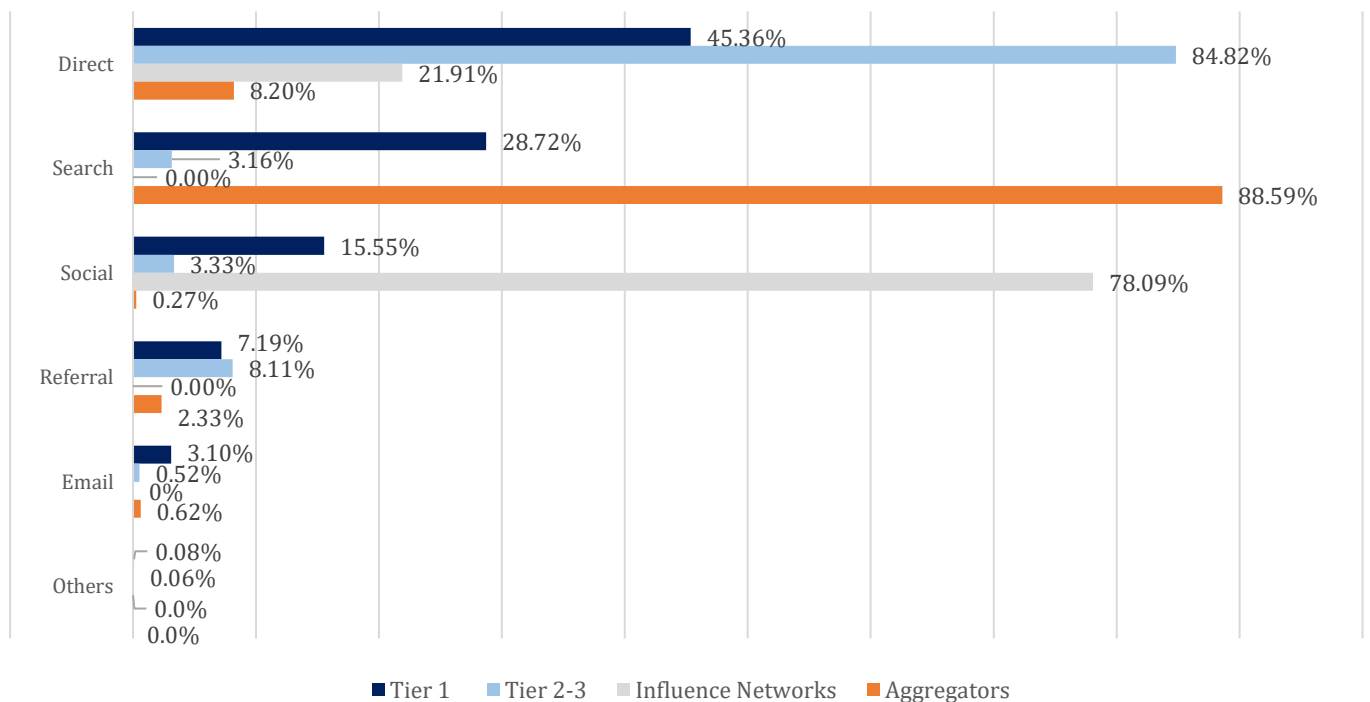
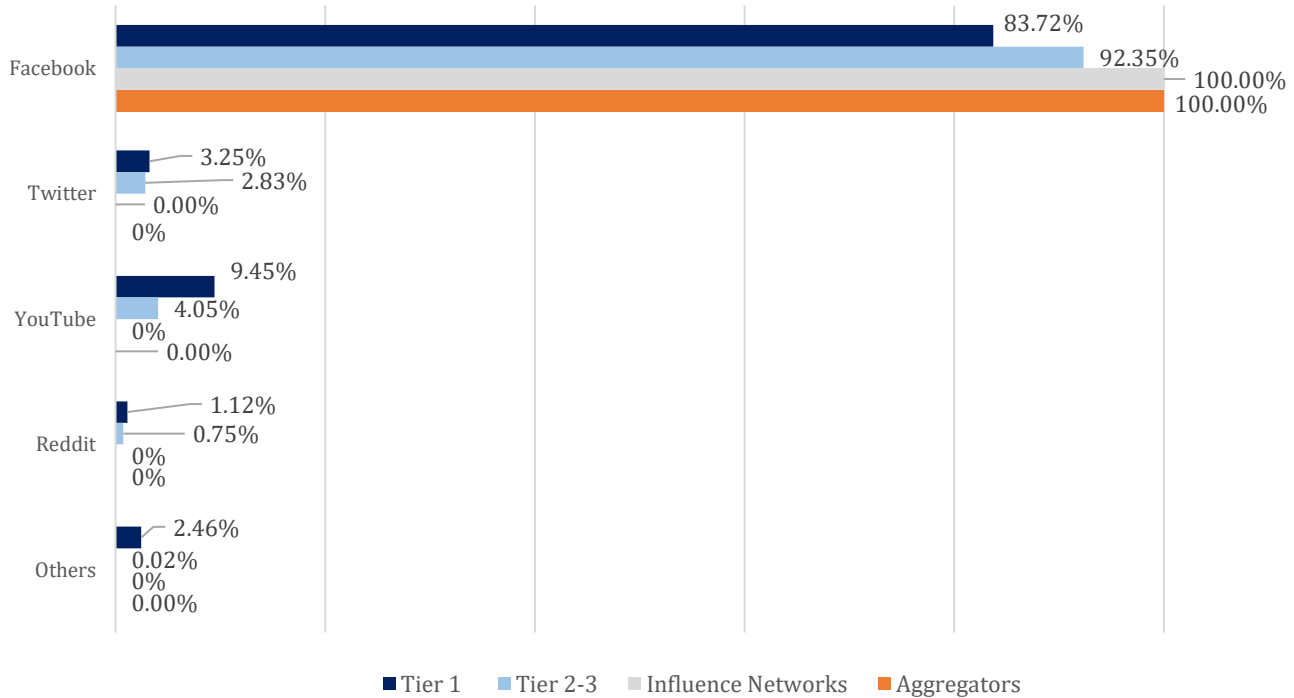# Source Audience by Top Countries per Source Type
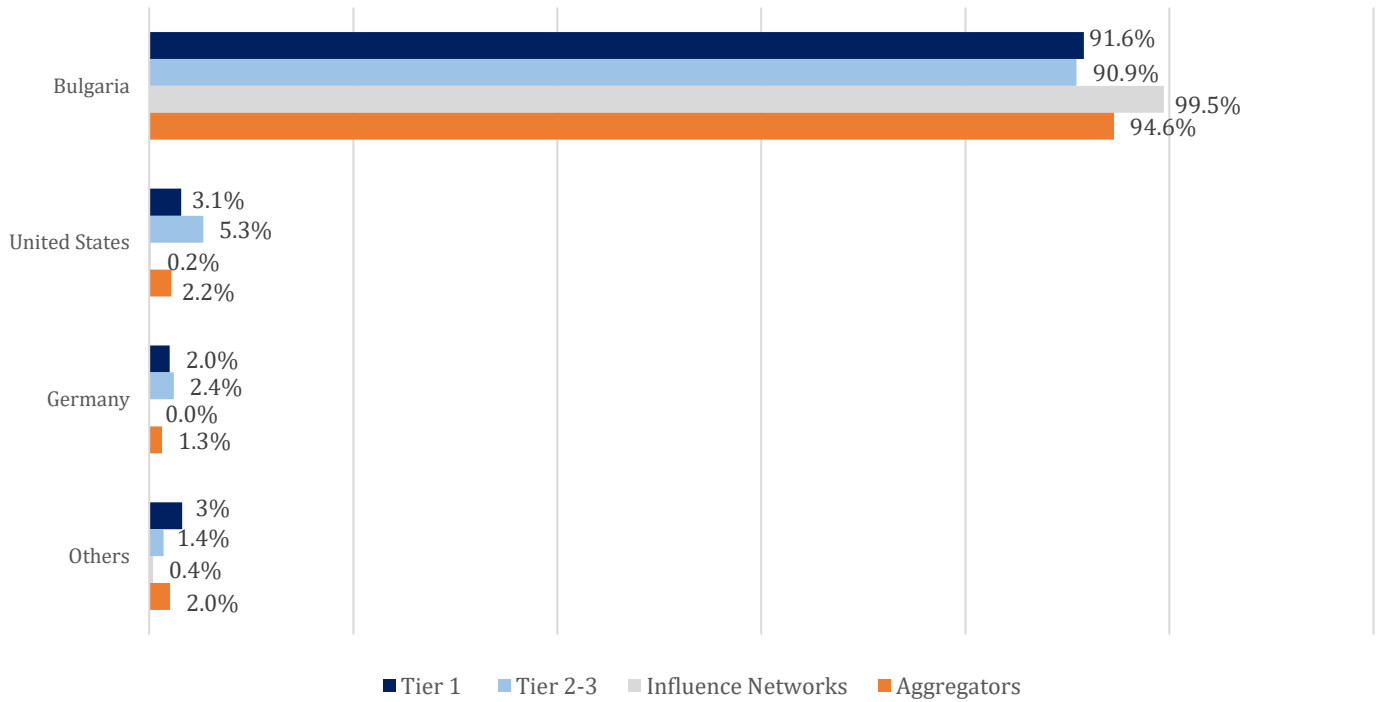
The chart displays the geographical distribution of the websites visitors per source type. The traffic comes mostly from Bulgaria, with the United States taking the second place among all source types, except for Influence Networks.

Source Audience by Traffic per Source Type

The chart compares the source of traffic and its volume generated by the four monitored source types. Prominent Sources gained most of their traffic directly or via a search engine. Less Prominent Sources and Media Aggregators gained most of their traffic directly. Influence Networks gained traffic through social media and, to a lesser degree, via direct clicks.
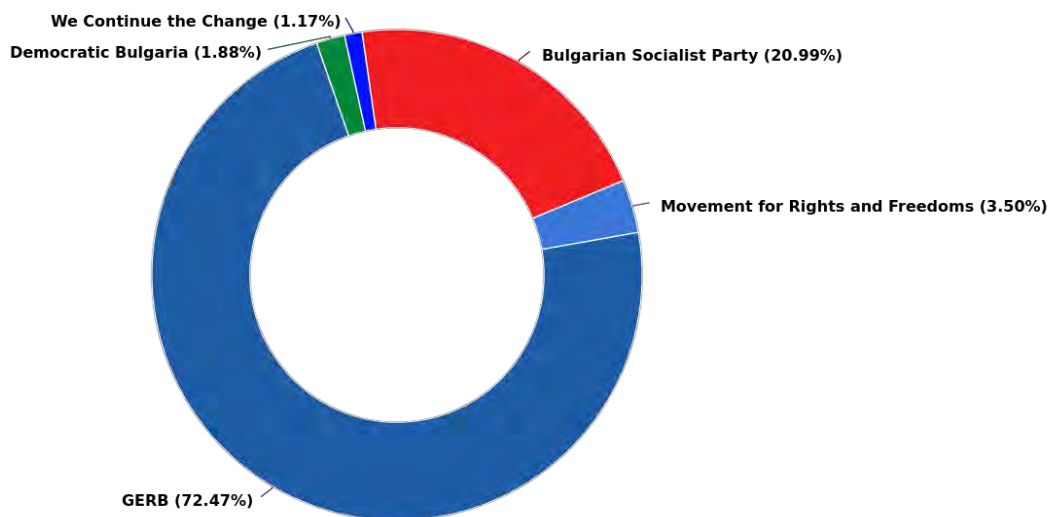
Source Audience by Social Network per Source Type

The chart illustrates the source audience distribution according to the traffic of the website gained via social network per source type. The findings highlight Facebook's dominance in all monitored types of sources.

4.7.2.4 Online Coverage: Political Parties (by volume)

Top Mentioned Political Parties

The chart presents the most mentioned political parties in the context of the story. The results highlight the predominant mentions of GERB, as the OLAF investigation scandal created a dynamic exchange of accusations between President Rumen Radev and then Prime Minister and GERB leader Boyko Borissov. The Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), on the other hand, was the second most mentioned political entity, mainly due to media outlets reporting on its support for President Rumen Radev in light of the accusations. After President Radev announced his intention to run for a second mandate, BSP's leader Korneliya Ninova congratulated him on the decision.

4.7.3. Social Coverage (Facebook)

The OLAF investigation story received significant attention on Facebook in February 2021 when the EU's Antifraud Office made public the suspicions of corruption schemes involving Plamen Uzunov, the Anticorruption Secretary of Bulgarian President Rumen Radev. While official pages shared a low number of posts, social media users discussed the case quite actively, which led to a rise in the number of comments. The Top Social Authors include the PIK news outlet, which criticized President Rumen Radev and, in turn, generated a significant engagement volume. One of the most used keywords within the story was "Borissov," as then Prime Minister and GERB leader Boyko Borissov was implicated in the alleged corruption schemes. Consequently, GERB was the most frequently mentioned political party.

Overall Volume (per month)
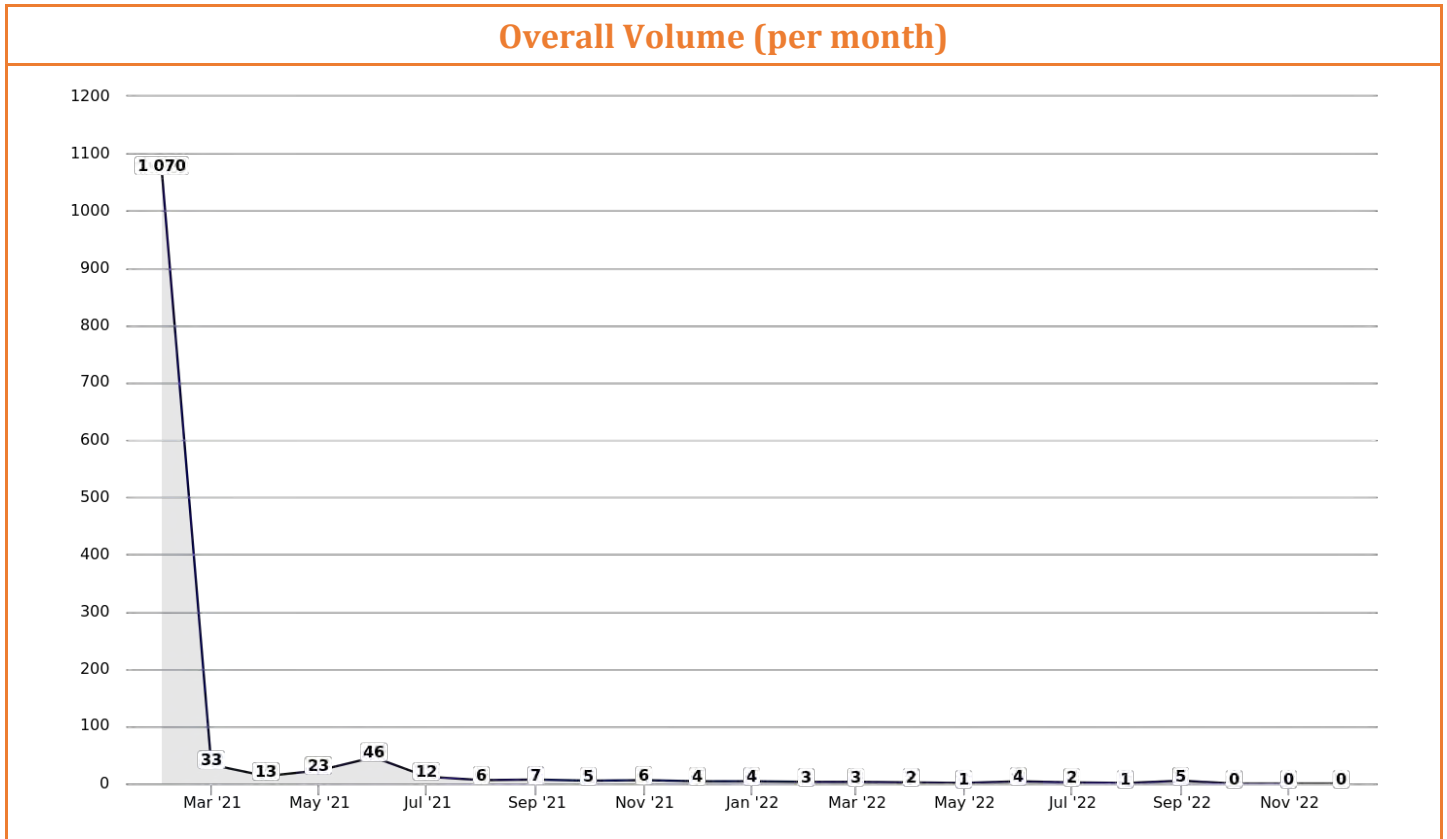
The Facebook peak of the story coincided with that in online media (February 2021), when the EU's Antifraud Office OLAF made public its suspicions of corruption schemes involving Plamen Uzunov, Bulgarian President Rumen Radev's Anticorruption Secretary. Overall, the story did not receive a lot of attention from official pages, which shared a small number of posts. Social users, on the other hand, were much more active in discussing the case, which led to a rise in the number of comments. The subsequent interactions over the following months were decidedly limited.

Top 10 Social Authors (by volume)
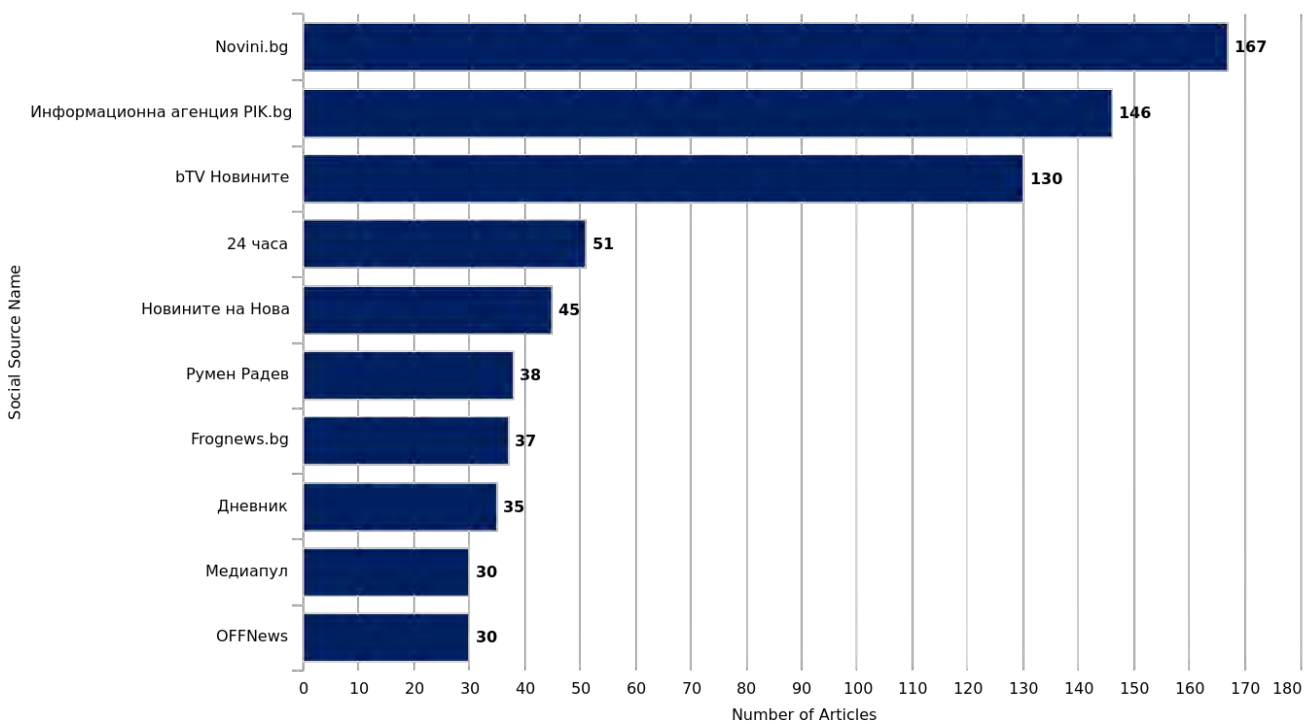
The Top Social Authors in terms of engagements include official media outlets pages, among them PIK, which is known for its sensationalist reporting style. Its posts, markedly critical of President Radev's Anticorruption Secretary Plamen Uzunov, generated a significant number of comments. Meanwhile, President Rumen Radev's official page also garnered attention, with social media users accusing him of involvement in the corrupt schemes. It is worth noting that many of the accusations were republished in an identical manner by multiple users within a specific time frame.
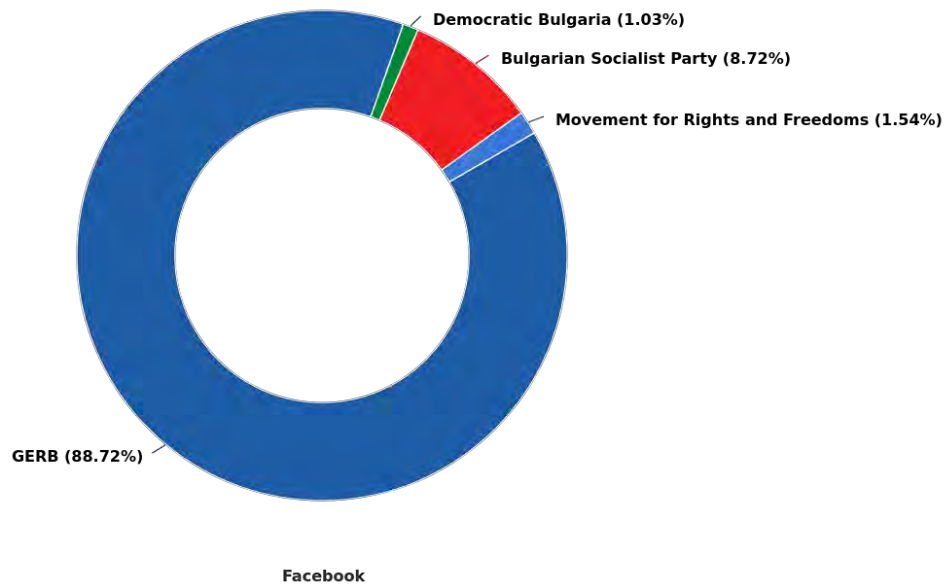
Top Keywords (by volume)
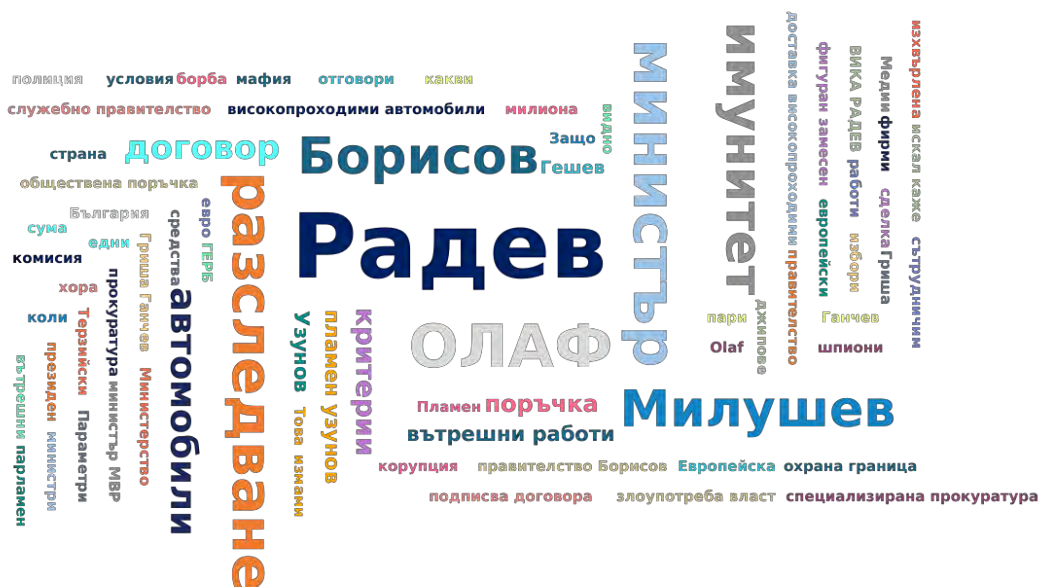
The story's most prominently featured keywords include "Radev," "Minister," "OLAF," "investigation," and "Borissov." The latter was used mainly in the comments implicating then Prime Minister and GERB leader Boyko Borissov in the alleged corruption schemes.

4.7.3.1 Social Coverage: Political Parties (by volume)

Top Mentioned Political Parties

Democratic Bulgaria (1.03%)

Bulgarian Socialist Party (8.72%)

Movement for Rights and Freedoms (1.54%)

GERB (88.72%)

Facebook

The political party that was most frequently mentioned in the context of the story was GERB, accounting for 88% of the content. The Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) was mentioned in only 9% of the content, despite the fact that President Rumen Radev, who is supported by the party, frequently figured in the comments. The GERB mentions either focused on the party's statements regarding the OLAF investigation, or accused it of participating in the alleged corruption dealings.

4.8. Illegal Organ Transplant Scandal at Lozenets Hospital

4.8.1. Background

The beginning of June 2021 witnessed a major scandal in the Bulgarian Health Sector. The former government hospital Lozenets was implicated in a criminal scheme for organ transplants of foreign citizens, amid other violations. News outlets revealed that even though Bulgarian law prohibits transplants from a living donor to unrelated people, since 2019 up to the end of April 2021, 14 kidney transplants from living donors (foreigners from Moldova and Ukraine) had been performed there. A month prior to that, another violation was detected—a liver transplant from a cadaver donor had been performed on a patient taking the fourth place on the transplant waiting list, instead of the first suitable recipient. Later it became clear that the transplant procedure had been performed on a Bulgarian senior civil official [209].

The same day the news broke out, caretaker Minister of Health Dr. Stoycho Katsarov announced, at a briefing of the Council of Ministers, that the management of Lozenets Hospital was to be replaced due to systematic violations, among which were the illegal transplants and the abuses related to the National Health Insurance Fund (NHIF). According to Minister Katsarov, a journalistic investigation had uncovered that more than 60 of the patients registered at the hospital for the month of November 2022 were never in fact treated there. Allegedly, immediately after the inspection had been launched, the hospital had transferred the funds allocated for those patients back to NHIF, noting that the whole misunderstanding could be explained with a technical error [210].

A day after the briefing, Lozenets Hospital came out with a statement that the accusations of abuse of NHIF funds ("draining the Health Fund") were untenable and false. The medical facility also stated that all legal requirements for the performed transplantations had been met. In connection with the organ transplant of a senoir civil official, Lozenets Hospital stated that it did not differentiate between its patients and that it was guided by medical criteria and indications for urgency. The case in question concerned a newly discovered oncological disease, the development of which could be prevented only with an urgent replacement of the affected liver. Moreover, the emergency status had been announced in a timely manner at the Transplantation Agency [211].

Among the several interviews that circulated in the online media was that with medical law specialist Maria Petrova, who commented on the accusations. In her view, violations of this scale could not have been possible without the knowledge and the assistance of all responsible institutions, including the Ministry of Health. She highlighted the following: "All involved in the illegal transplants acted as an organized criminal group. [...] I believe that if, after the facts presented by Dr. Katsarov, no one bears criminal responsibility, as a society we should question not only our health system, but also our justice system. I expect to see indictments and cases in court" [212].

Three days after the management replacements, the law enforcement authorities started the interrogations. Both employees and victims testified before the General Directorate for Combating Organized Crime and the Prosecutor's Office. The former Marketing Manager of the Lozenets Hospital, Michelle Levi, who was also among those questioned, gave an interview for Nova. He stated that there were in fact illegal transplants at the medical facility, as he personally knew of five such cases. When asked why the staff of the hospital remained silent for so long without reporting any of the violations, Mr. Levi stated that they had been scared, as Professor Spasov [Lozenets's former director] had always claimed that he had political protections [213].

On June 4, various media outlets reported that the entire management had been replaced and that the new director, Associate Professor Radosvet Gornev, was eager to clear the name of the hospital and the reputation of the staff. Days after the replacement was announced, the former director, Professor Lyubomir Spasov, filed an appeal to suspend the registration of the new management of the health facility, which was consequently approved by the Sofia City Court. On June 18, after the completion of the proceedings on Spasov's appeal, the Bulgarian Registry Agency officially entered the new management of Lozenets Hospital in its lists [214].

The main storyline was covered predominantly in June 2021, after which the content published on the matter significantly decreased until the end of 2021 and the beginning of 2022, when media outlets picked up a new development. In the middle of November, the Commission for Anticorruption and Illegal Assets Forfeiture (CACIAF) established a conflict of interest

related to the assignment of the new director of Lozenets Hospital. CACIAF's investigation, following a signal that Associate Professor Gornev has signed an additional agreement to his employment contract both as employer and employee, revealed that he had also voted at a meeting of the Board of Directors for his own release as Head of the Surgery Clinic and reassignment as a doctor-surgeon. Moreover, when signing his additional agreement, he had negotiated with himself. As a result Gornev was fined BGN 10,000 [215]. In an open letter, published on his Facebook page, Gornev denied the claims and shared his position on the matter.

Nearly a month later, the different websites actively shared a headline originally published by Nova: "The Expanding Scandal with Lozenets Hospital." According to the piece, the institution's Board of Directors had claimed that the medical facility had been managed unilaterally with no transparency whatsoever. At that time, Dr. Stoycho Katsarov, who originally ordered the replacement of the management back in June, was already former Minister of Health. He stated that, despite the fact that the hospital owed a BGN 40 million debt, the

management had received huge bonuses. Associate Professor Gornev denied all accusations [216]. Nevertheless, in January 2022, due to these conflicts, then Minister of Health Asena Serbezova replaced the management of the hospital for the second time.

The media coverage of the Lozenets Hospital scandal ceased almost completely after the abovementioned events. Occasionally, news outlets would publish an article or two reminding of the events that transpired in June 2021. An article from December 2021, published by the Bulgarian weekly newspaper Capital criticized the multiple financial grants bestowed to the hospital by the Ministry of Health over the years, without the latter seeking any accountability for how that financial aid was being used. "Also, since last year, when the long-time director Professor Lyubomir Spasov […] was fired, it is not clear whether anyone has taken responsibility for the hospital's mismanagement and debt, for the organ trafficking channel detected there, and for the fact that the former Chief Secretary of the Council of Ministers during Boyko Borissov's cabinet had managed to receive a transplant before three other patients on the waiting list" [217].

4.8.2. Online Coverage

4.8.2.1 Overall Metrics and Volume Comparison

Overall, the Lozenets Hospital scandal received a rather small amount of coverage compared to the rest of the monitored stories—a total of approximately 1,700 articles. The majority of them were published by Prominent Sources, followed by Media Aggregators and Less Prominent Sources. It is worth mentioning that the Influence Networks published very few articles.

The four types of sources mentioned above were also compared based on variables related to their source audience. People between the ages of 25 and 44 comprised the biggest percentage of the readership. In addition, the traffic was generated mostly from

Bulgaria. However, the said traffic was gained in different ways. Prominent Sources did so through direct clicks and a search engine, Less Prominent Sources by way of direct clicks, and Media Aggregators via a search engine. Only the Influence Networks received traffic mainly from social media.

The majority of the articles contained vocabulary strongly associated with corruption, as opposed to direct mentions of the word "corruption" or its derivatives. Due to the national interest in the matter, the story was covered in detail by sources categorized as National Media.

Top Keywords (by volume)

A tag-cloud representation of the most used keywords or phrases in the context of the monitored story. The words' size is a relative indicator of the term's popularity. In this case, the word "hospital" and "Lozenets" (the name of the medical facility at the cent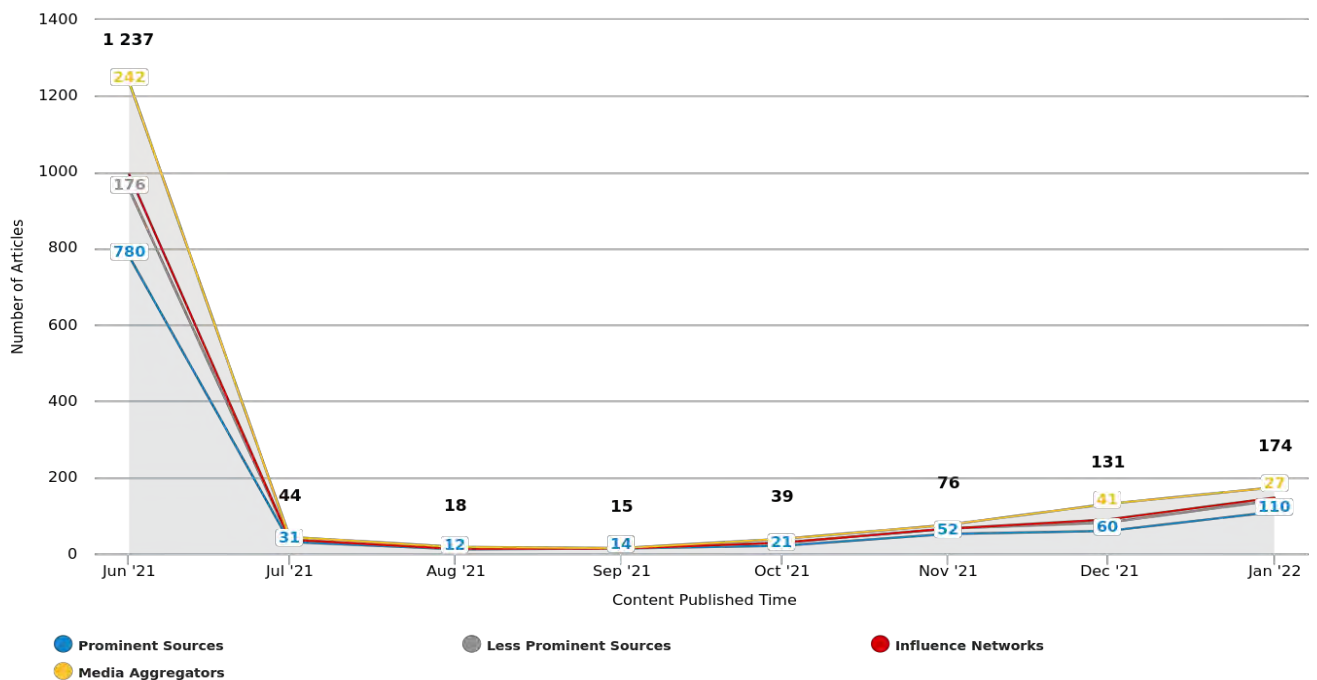er of the scandal) are among the most mentioned keywords. Other popular keywords include "transplants," "Health Minister," and the family name of then caretaker Minister of Health Stoycho Katsarov. It is worth mentioning that "Lyubomir Spasov" (Director of the hospital at the time of the scandal), "Michelle Levi" (Marketing Manager at the hospital at the time of the scandal) and "Slavi Trifonov" (TV host, musician, and founder of the There is Such a People political party) were among the most mentioned names. The latter appeared due to multiple news outlets commenting on his social media post, in which he accused Bulgarian media of inadequacy: "And what is Bulgarian media doing? Is it investigating the case, looking for those involved, looking for the donors, seeking the truth about the hospital? Nothing of the kind. They are dealing with the retirement of the otherwise likeable Prof. Todor Kantardzhiev. This is what they focus on when it comes to the healthcare sector" [218].

Volume Comparison – Corruption Keywords vs. Corruption-Associated Keywords

Volume distribution of the pieces of content, which reference corruption either directly or indirectly. In the case of the Lozenets Hospital scandal, the majority of the content references corruption indirectly.

# Potential Reach Comparison – Corruption Keywords vs. Corruption-Associated Keywords

Potential reach distribution of the pieces of content, which reference corruption either directly or indirectly. The potential reach of the articles that explicitly use the word "corruption" and its derivatives is very low, in line with their volume.

# Stacked Volume Comparison (by source type)

Stacked volume distribution of the Lozenets Hospital story per type of sources. Prominent Sources were most prolific in terms of volume, followed by Media Aggregators and Less Prominent Sources. The Influence Networks were the least active.

## Stacked Potential Reach Comparison (by source type)
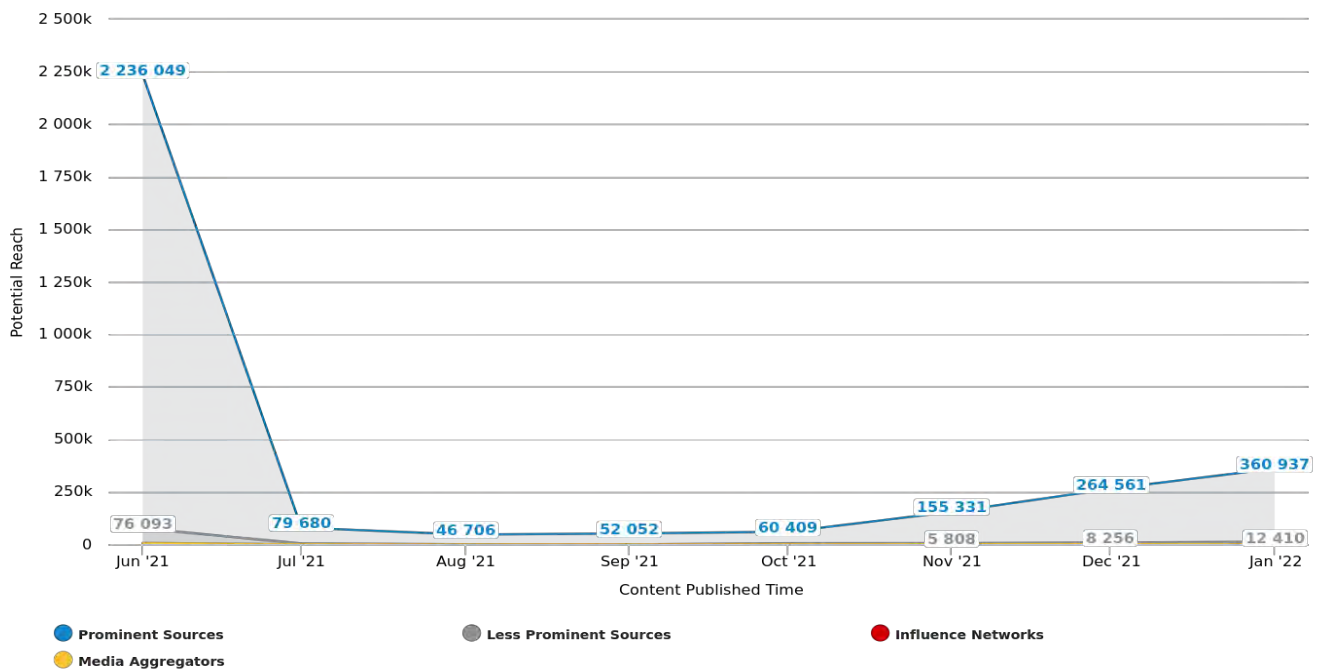
Stacked potential reach distribution of the story per type of sources. Prominent Sources have the widest potential reach, followed by Less Prominent Sources. In this case, Media Aggregators and Influence Networks have a potential reach so low that, when compared to that of Prominent Sources, it is indistinguishable in the chart.

Volume Comparison - Regional vs National Sources
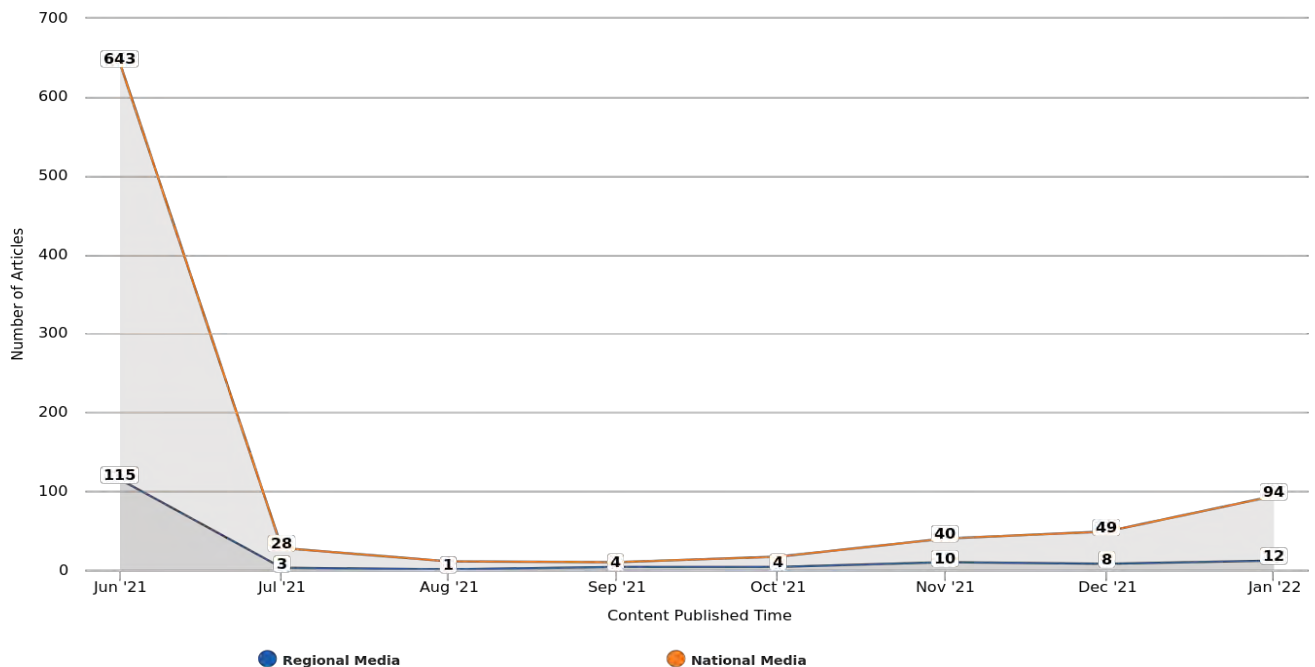
Volume distribution of the story in the National and Regional Media. National Media published more content compared to Regional Media.
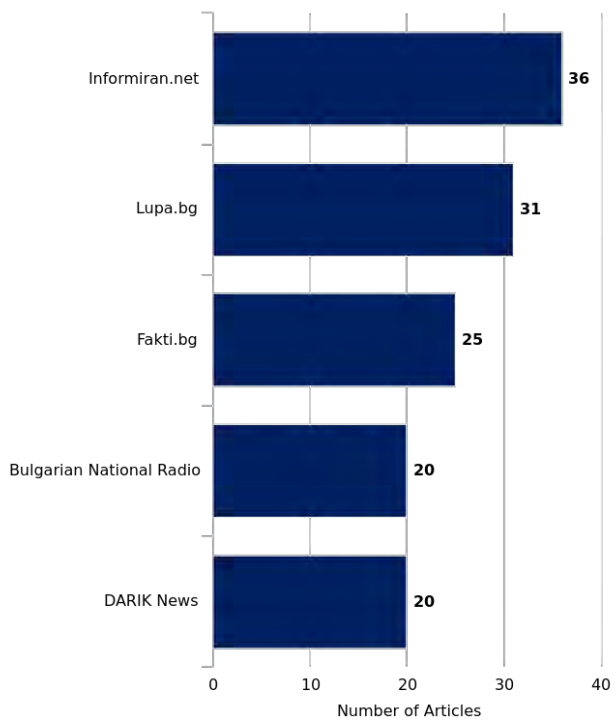
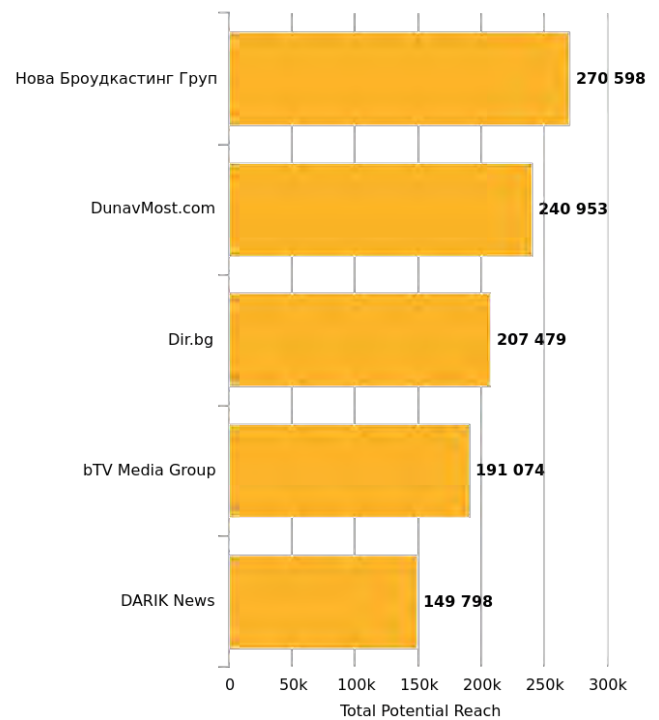## Potential reach Comparison - Regional vs National Sources
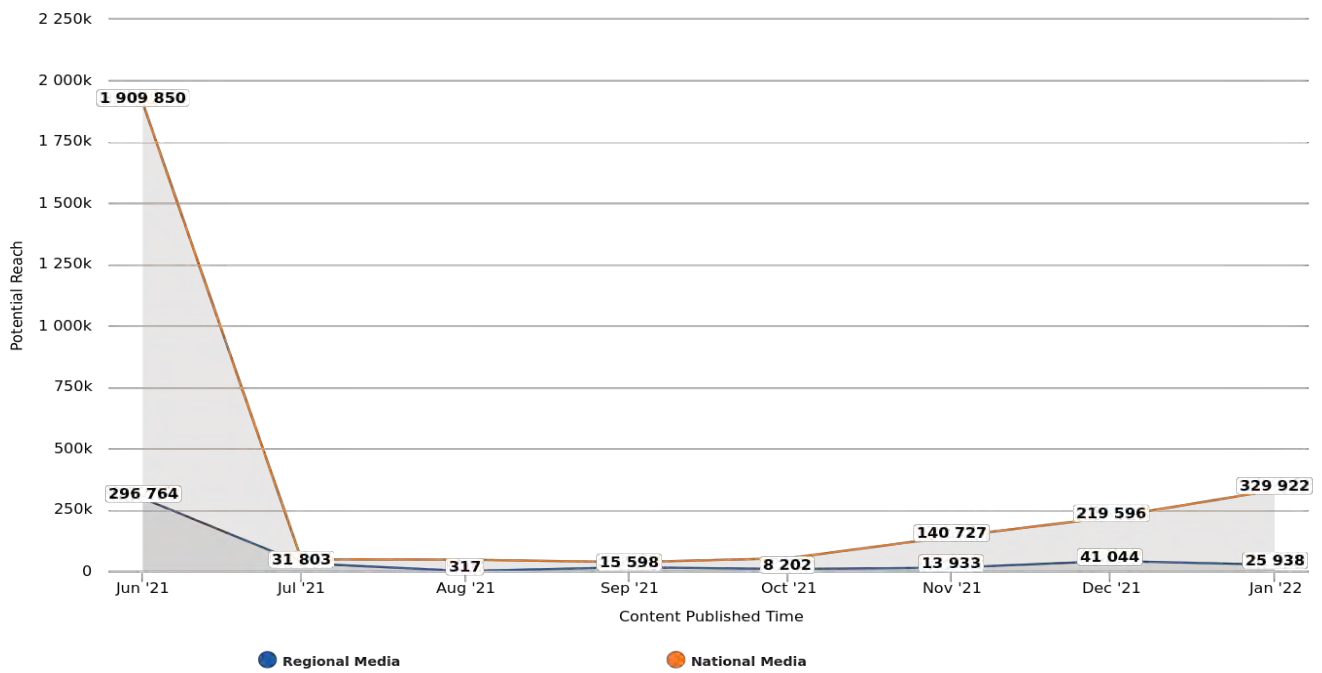
Potential reach distribution of the Lozenets Hospital story in the National and Regional media. The potential reach of National Media sources far exceeds that of Regional Media, due not only to Regional Media's more limited audience, but also to the lower amount of published content.

4.8.2.2 Online Coverage by Source Type
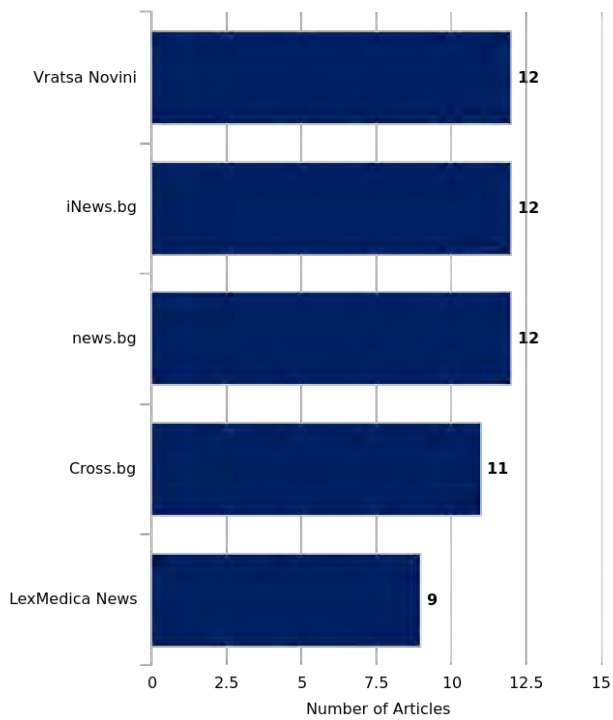
Top Prominent Sources (by volume)

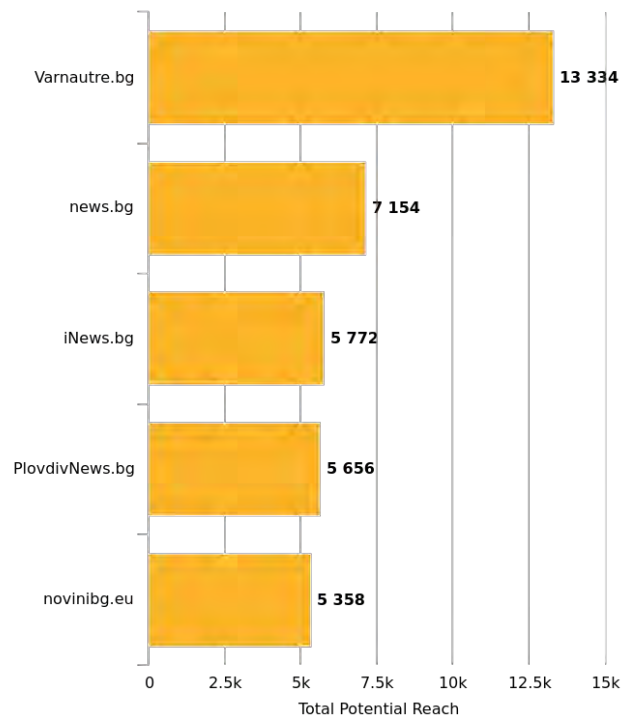**Top Prominent Sources (by reach)**

The chart on the left displays the Top Prominent Sources (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Prominent Sources (by potential reach). The numbers point to the conclusion that even though some sources publish less in terms of volume, they manage to reach a considerably wider audience.
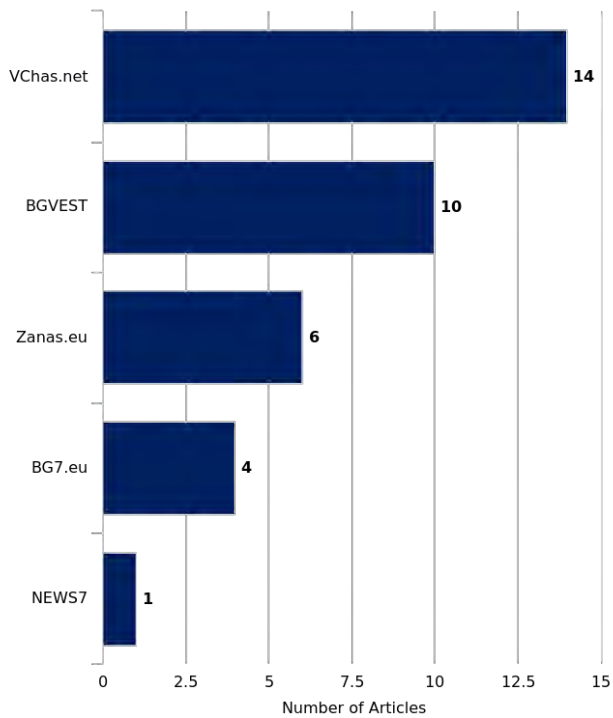
Top Less Prominent Sources (by volume)

Source	Number of Articles
Vratsa Novini	12
iNews.bg	12
news.bg	12
Cross.bg	11
LexMedica News	9

Top Less Prominent Sources (by reach)

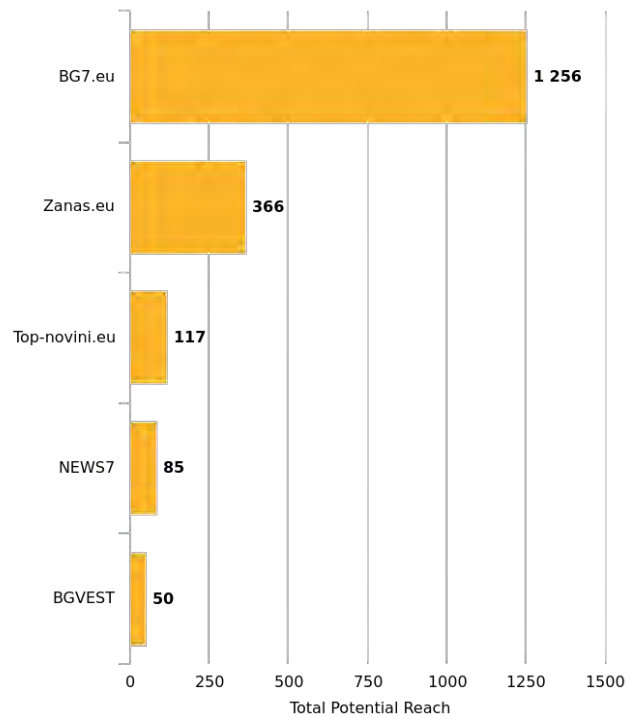| Source	Total Potential Reach
Varnautre.bg	13 334
news.bg	7 154
iNews.bg	5 772
PlovdivNews.bg	5 656
novinibg.eu	5 358

The chart on the left displays the Top Less Prominent Sources (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Less Prominent Sources (by potential reach). "Cross.bg" published the most content on the story, however, "Varna Utre," which is not among the Top 10 Sources in terms of volume, reached the widest audience.

Top Influence Networks (by volume)

Network	Number of Articles
VChas.net	14
BGVEST	10
Zanas.eu	6
BG7.eu	4
NEWS7	1

Top Influence Networks (by reach)

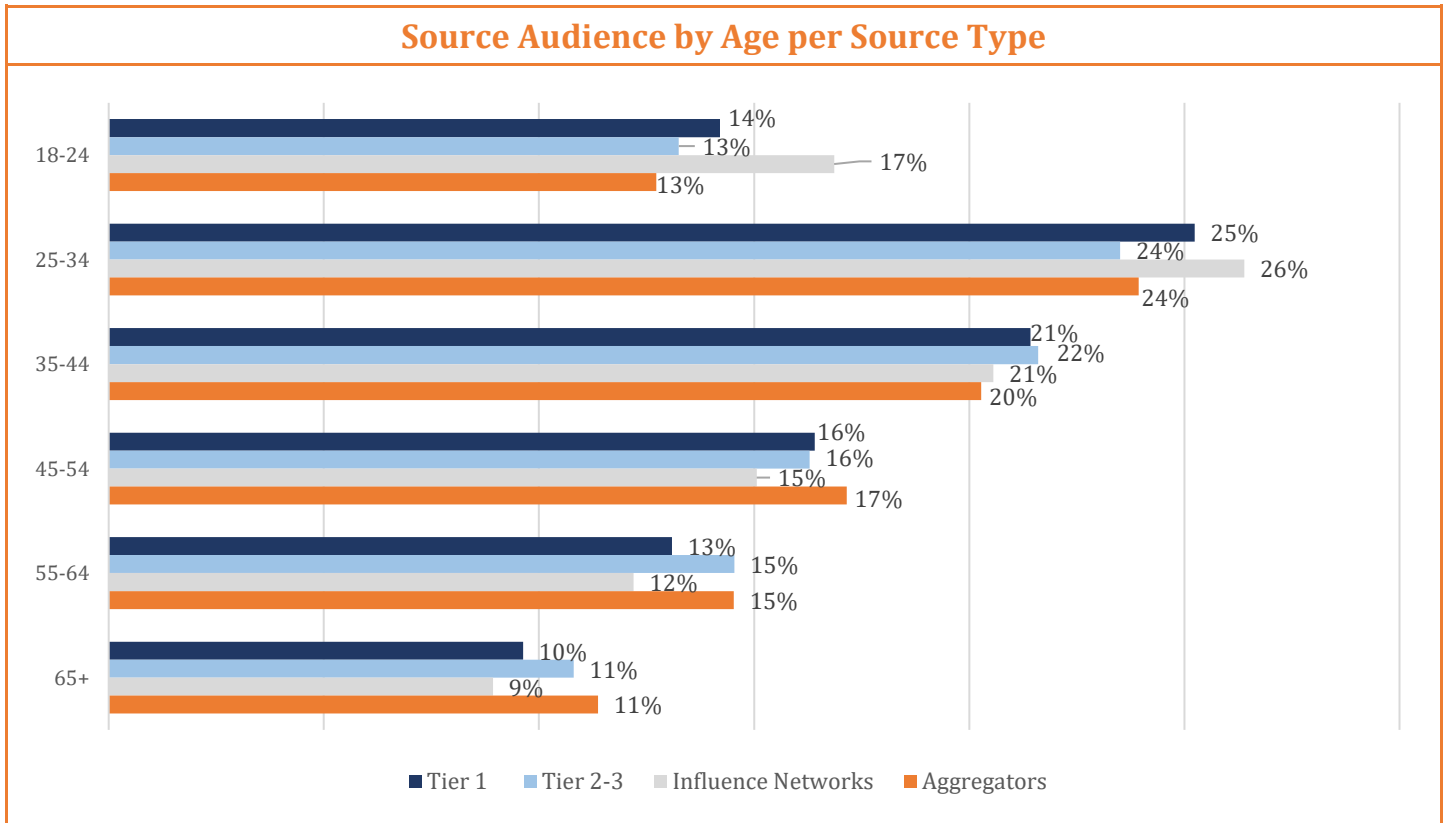| Network	Total Potential Reach
BG7.eu	1 256
Zanas.eu	366
Top-novini.eu	117
NEWS7	85
BGVEST	50

The chart on the left displays the Top Influence Networks (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Influence Networks (by potential reach). Although "V Chas" published the most content, "BG7" had the biggest potential reach.

Top Aggregators (by volume)

	Number of Articles
Novini247	191
BulBox	123
BetaRSS.com	24
ЧАС ПИК	3
Bulnews.com	1

Top Aggregators (by reach)

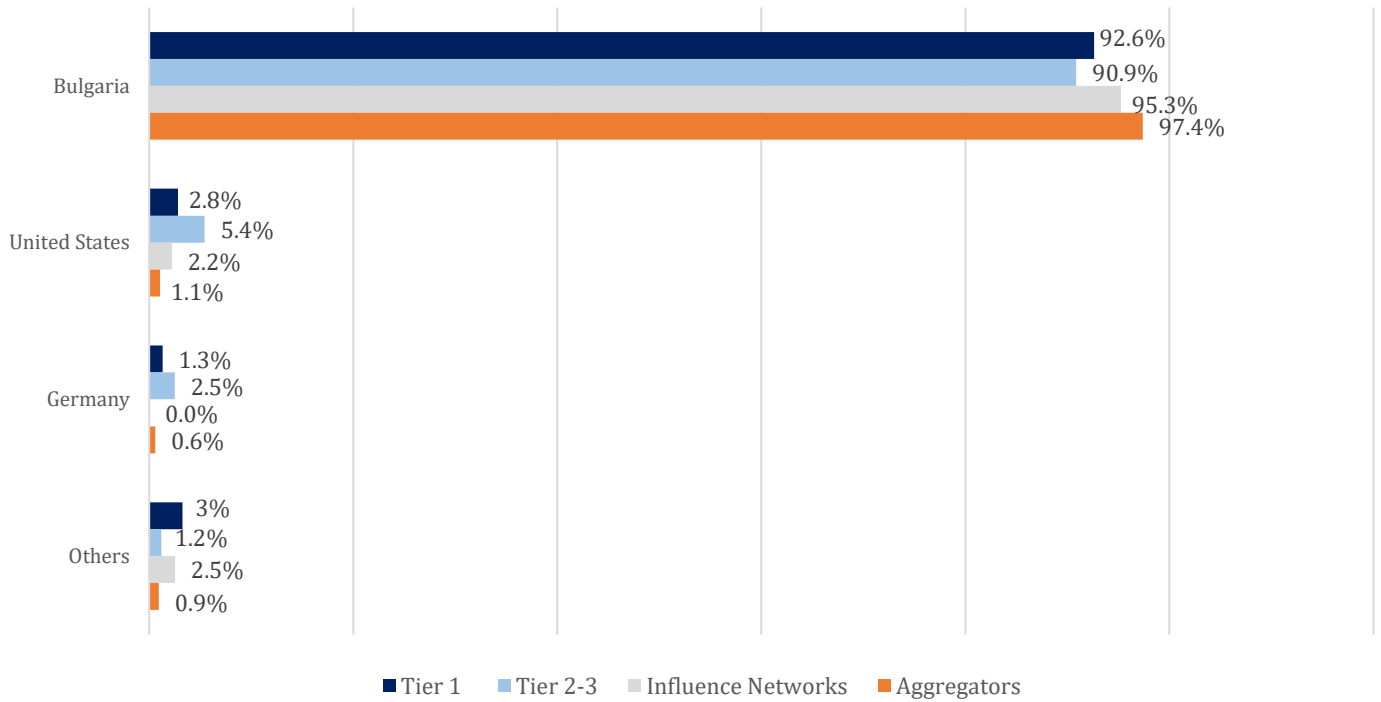|	Total Potential Reach
Novini247	9 168
Novinarsko.eu	682
BulBox	123
BetaRSS.com	24
ЧАС ПИК	9

The chart on the left displays the Top Media Aggregators (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Media Aggregators (by potential reach). "Novini247" published the most content and had the biggest potential reach.

4.8.2.3 Online Coverage: Source Audience

Source Audience by Age per Source Type

■ Tier 1   ■ Tier 2-3   ■ Influence Networks   ■ Aggregators

The chart illustrates the different level of engagement with the four types of monitored sources (Prominent Sources, Less Prominent Sources, Media Aggregators, and Influence Networks) among six age groups. The result shows that the people most interested in the story are between the ages of 25 and 44. The people above 65 years of age comprised the lowest audience percentage and engaged mainly with Less Prominent Sources and Media Aggregators.

Source Audience by Top Countries per Source Type

Bulgaria
- 92.6%
- 90.9%
- 95.3%
- 97.4%

United States
- 2.8%
- 5.4%
- 2.2%
- 1.1%

Germany
- 1.3%
- 2.5%
- 0.0%
- 0.6%

Others
- 3%
- 1.2%
- 2.5%
- 0.9%

■ Tier 1   ■ Tier 2-3   ■ Influence Networks   ■ Aggregators

The chart displays the geographical distribution of the websites visitors per source type. The traffic comes mostly from Bulgaria, with the United States taking the second place among all source types.

Source Audience by Traffic per Source Type

Direct
- 38.66%
- 87.06%
- 29.33%
- 8.60%

Search
- 25.65%
- 0.70%
- 0.00%
- 82.53%

Social
- 15.23%
- 3.11%
- 70.67%
- 6.18%

Referral
- 9.71%
- 8.52%
- 0.00%
- 2.17%

Email
- 10.68%
- 0.54%
- 0%
- 0.52%

Others
- 0.07%
- 0.07%
- 0.0%
- 0.00%

■ Tier 1   ■ Tier 2-3   ■ Influence Networks   ■ Aggregators

The chart compares the source of traffic and its volume generated by the four monitored source types. Prominent Sources gained most of theirs directly or via a search engine. Less Prominent sources received most of their traffic directly, while Media Aggregators via a search engine. Influence Networks, on the other hand, were accessed mostly via social media, followed closely by direct clicks.

Source Audience by Social Network per Source Type
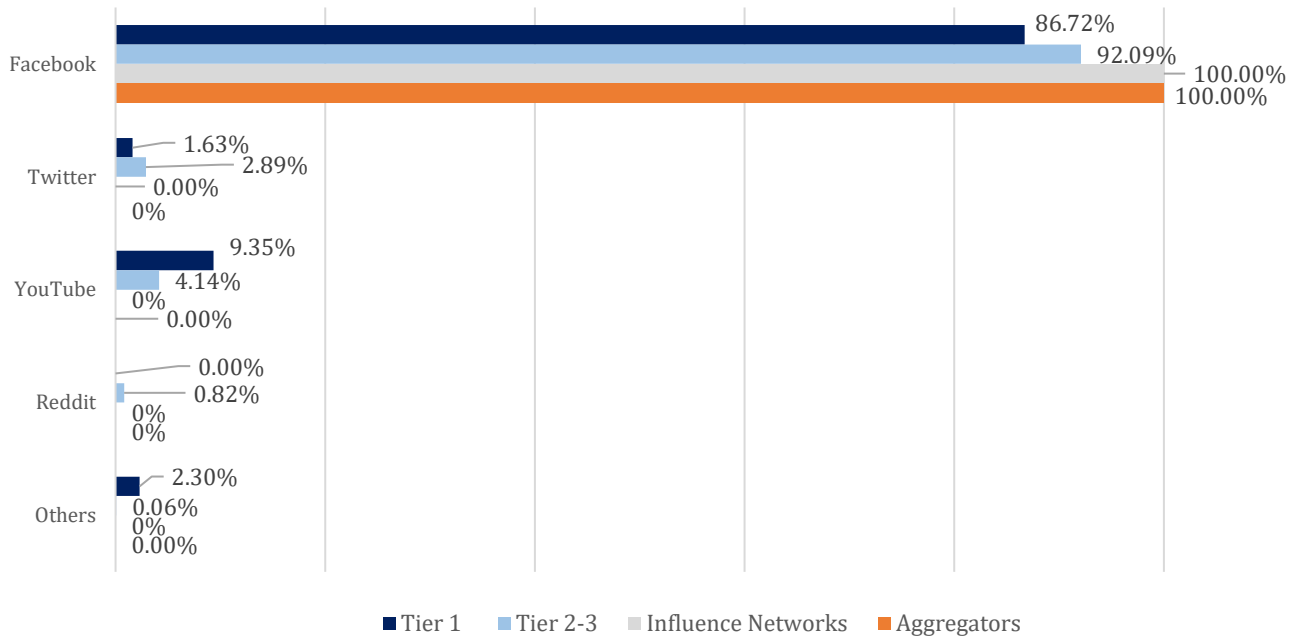
The chart illustrates the source audience distribution according to the traffic of the website gained via social network per source type. The findings highlight Facebook's dominance (in all four monitored types of sources), which can be explained by the fact that it is the most popular social network in Bulgaria. In fact, 100% of the traffic from social media to Media Aggregators and Influence Networks was achieved through Facebook.

4.8.2.4 Online Coverage: Political Parties (by volume)

## Top Mentioned Political Parties
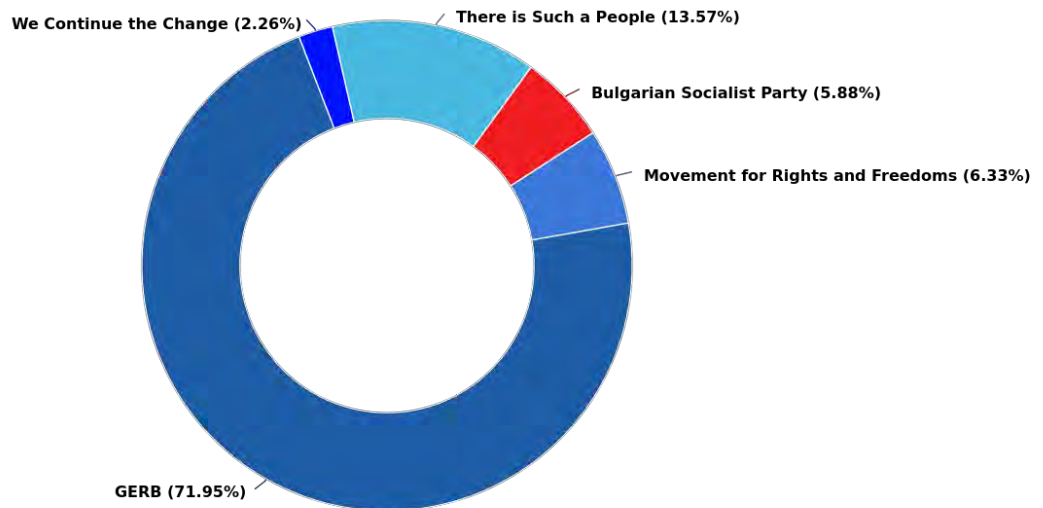
The chart presents the most mentioned political parties in the context of the Lozenets Hospital scandal. GERB ranked first with a little over 82% of all mentions, due to publications, predominantly by Prominent Sources, which point to the fact that the illegal transplants at the Lozenets Hospital had happened during the third cabinet of Boyko Borissov, founder and leader of the said party. In addition, a number of outlets, including BIRD (The Bureau for Investigative Reporting and Data), reported that the senior civil official, who received a liver transplant before three other people on the transplant waiting list, was Veselin Dakov, Chief Secretary of the Council of Ministers in Boyko Borissov's government [219]. On the other hand, There is Such a People received nearly 10% of all mentions, in light of its founder and leader Slavi Trifonov's critics towards the Bulgarian media's coverage of the case.

4.8.3. Social Coverage (Facebook)

The Lozenets Hospital story witnessed its first significant content peak in June 2021, after news reports revealed the health facility's involvement in a criminal scheme. The dismissal of the Director and the subsequent appointment of a new management team further increased the social media engagement. Official media outlets pages were a lot more active than Facebook users. The most frequently used keywords were "Lozenets" and "hospital," while words related to transplantation operations were less commonly mentioned, which indicates that the central issue of the scandal did not receive as much attention as in the online media. The majority of the content referred to GERB, followed by There Is Such a People. The comparatively low user engagement with the scandal revealed a lack of interest in the story on Facebook, despite the seriousness of the issue.

Overall Volume (per month)
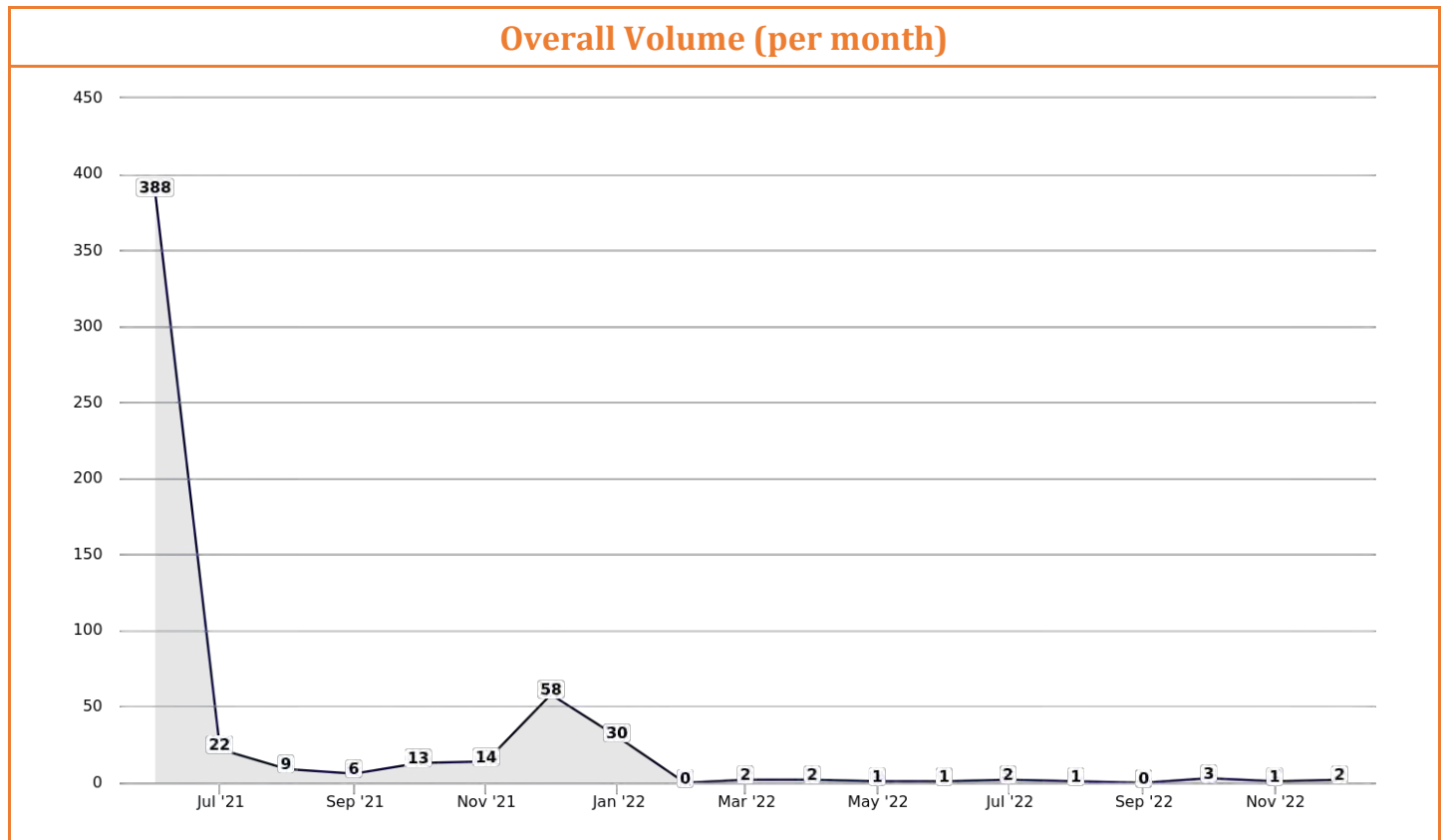
The chart above depicts the story's volume distribution over time. It witnessed its first significant content spike in in June 2021, following the publication of news reports revealing that Lozenets Hospital was involved in a criminal scheme to conduct organ transplants on foreign nationals. At the end of 2021 and the beginning of 2022, the Facebook content increased once again because of the dismissal of the hospital's director by then Caretaker Minister of Health Stoycho Katsarov, and the subsequent appointment of a new management team by the next Minister of Health Asena Serbezova in January. Many users were dissatisfied with the dismissal, with some of them even arguing that simply removing the Director from his position was not enough and that legal action should have been taken earlier.

Top 10 Social Authors (by volume)

Overall, the official media outlets pages were the most active in terms of posts and engagements, with the top ones being "Novini ot Bulgaria i Sveta" (which reshares news from "Informiran.net"), followed by Nova and BTV. While the former published the biggest number of posts during the monitored period, its page did not receive any interactions from social media users. In contrast, the posts by the popular media outlets Nova and BTV attracted a higher proportion of comments.

Top Keywords (by volume)

The tag cloud reveals that the words "Lozenets" and "hospital" were the most commonly used ones in the context of the story. It is worth noting that words related to transplantation were not as frequently mentioned.

4.8.3.1 Social Coverage: Political Parties (by volume)

Top Mentioned Political Parties

Democratic Bulgaria (2.04%)
Bulgarian Socialist Party (4.08%)
Movement for Rights and Freedoms (6.12%)
There is Such a People (8.16%)
GERB (79.59%)

Facebook

GERB was referenced in almost 80% of the content, due to allegations that the illegal transplants in Lozenets Hospital had happened during GERB leader Boyko Borissov's third cabinet. There Is Such a People ranked second. This could be attributed to the criticism voiced by the party's leader Slavi Trifonov towards the online media's coverage of the subject. Even though other political entities also expressed their views on the case, they received only brief mentions.

4.9. Krasno Selo Mayor Investigated by CACIAF

4.9.1. Background

On February 23, 2021, national media outlets reported that Rosina Stanislavova, the Democratic Bulgaria-backed (DB) Mayor of Sofia's Krasno Selo District, was suspected of having paid herself and her employees a third of the money received under a EU program for providing patronage care for elderly people and people with disabilities [220]. On the following day, Stanislavova argued that the accusations were "an attempt for a scandal to be created through manipulation. The chairman of the financial commission provided documents with incorrect content. The spent funds are controlled by the monitoring body" [221]. In the meantime, Metodi Lalov, Municipal Councilor and a DB representative, demanded "clear, categorical, and motivated answers" from Stanislavova regarding her involvement. He reminded his readers that "half of the municipal councilors receive BGN 2,000 for one hour of work per month for their allegedly busy schedule in the Sofia Municipal Privatisation and Investment Agency, the Specialized Municipal Privatization Fund, and the Municipal Guarantee Fund for Small- and Medium-sized Enterprises. Ever since I was appointed a Municipal Councilor, I have been fighting against this practice and thanks to these efforts, the amount was at least halved, down from BGN 4,000. However, the Sofra coalition has reached a consensus and continues to distribute millions of Bulgarian levs annually from these funds and through other channels. This is how you buy comfort and obedience" [222]. In addition, Democratic Bulgaria as a whole withdrew its political trust from Stanislavova and called on her to recover the sum she had unlawfully appropriated (about BGN 7,000). After her refusal to do so, however, the coalition donated the equivalent amount to the NGO SOS Children's Villages [223].

On the other hand, Malina Edreva, Chairperson of the GERB-SDS coalition in the Metropolitan Municipal Council, said that "the withdrawal of political trust from the DB-backed Mayor of the Krasno Selo District is merely an attempt by the political parties in the union to evade taking responsibility for the actions of a person who, thanks to their efforts, has gained the trust of the citizens" [224]. In addition, in an article published by the Bulgarian language edition of Deutsche Welle, Anthropology Professor Ivaylo Dichev noted that the Stanislavova case had "tarnished the reputation of the biggest moralists [DB] just before the elections, which caused a certain type

of media to gloat" and posed the following question: "Do Sofia, Varna, and Plovdiv really need district mayors? They do not have any actual power. They pray to the great municipality for every lev. And they do not even control street cleaning or pothole filling" [225].

Soon after, the Supreme Administrative Prosecutor's Office requested information from the Minister of Labor and Social Policy on how European funds had been spent under the program "Patronage care for the elderly people and people with disabilities" in all of Sofia's districts. For its part, the managing body of the Operational Program "Human Resources Development" also launched an inspection of the project, and specifically within the Krasno Selo District [226]. In a similar context, the Commission for Anticorruption and Illegal Assets Forfeiture (CACIAF), headed by the former Chief Prosecutor Sotir Tsatsarov, announced it would check for a possible conflict of interest [227].
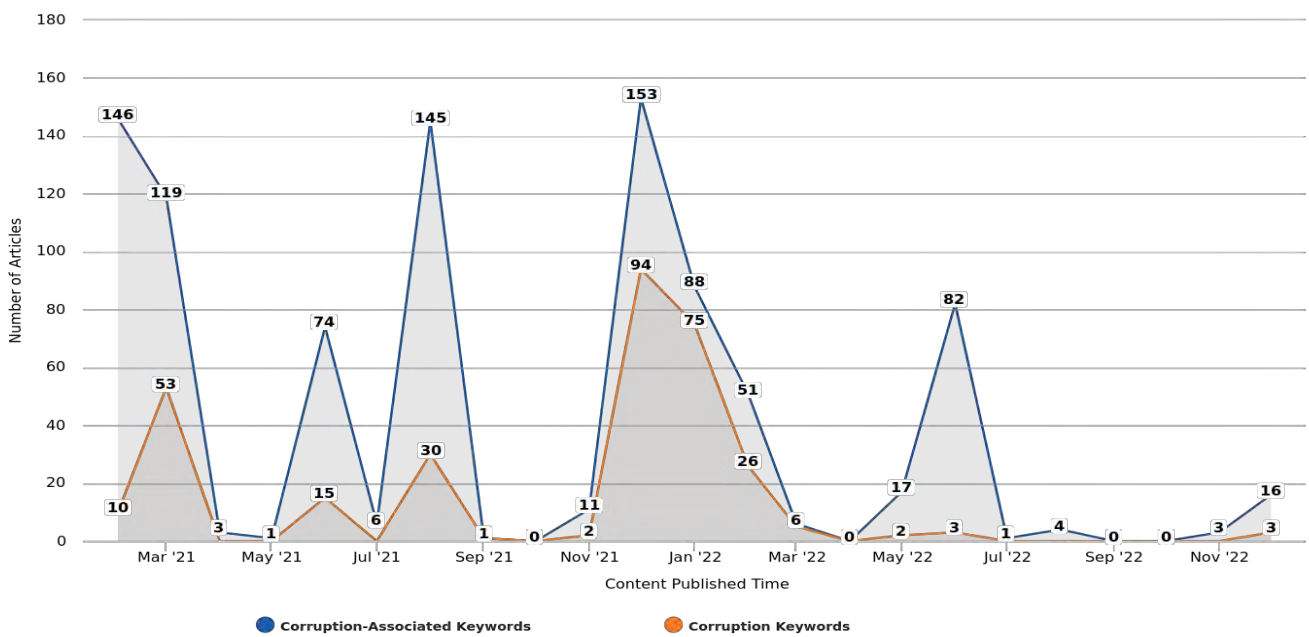
During a regular meeting held on June 9, 2021, CACIAF officially established a conflict of interest, stemming from Stanislavova's issuing of acts for her private benefit. Accordingly, Stanislavova was fined BGN 15,000 and was expected to forfeit the illegally acquired sum amounting to almost BGN 10,000 [228]. The Commission's decision was followed by a public protest against her [229].

On August 23, various websites reported that the then District Mayor had, for the second time, been penalized by CACIAF for concluding a contract of employment with her daughter, while serving as the head of a project financed with European funds. Another fine worth BGN 5,000 was imposed on her [230]. A couple of days later, Stanislavova participated in a morning talk show on the bTV Channel and declared that she would not return the money received within the EU project she headed, clarifying that the project had required her daughter's help as "it was executed at the peak of the pandemic, when people were scared and there was no one to deliver food to the elderly. At that time, the Metropolitan Municipality had abdicated its responsibilities" [231].

In December the same year, it became clear that CACIAF would be initiating a third investigation into Stanislavova's work [232]. The announcement led to yet another protest wave launched through a Facebook group created by Tsanko Donkov from the
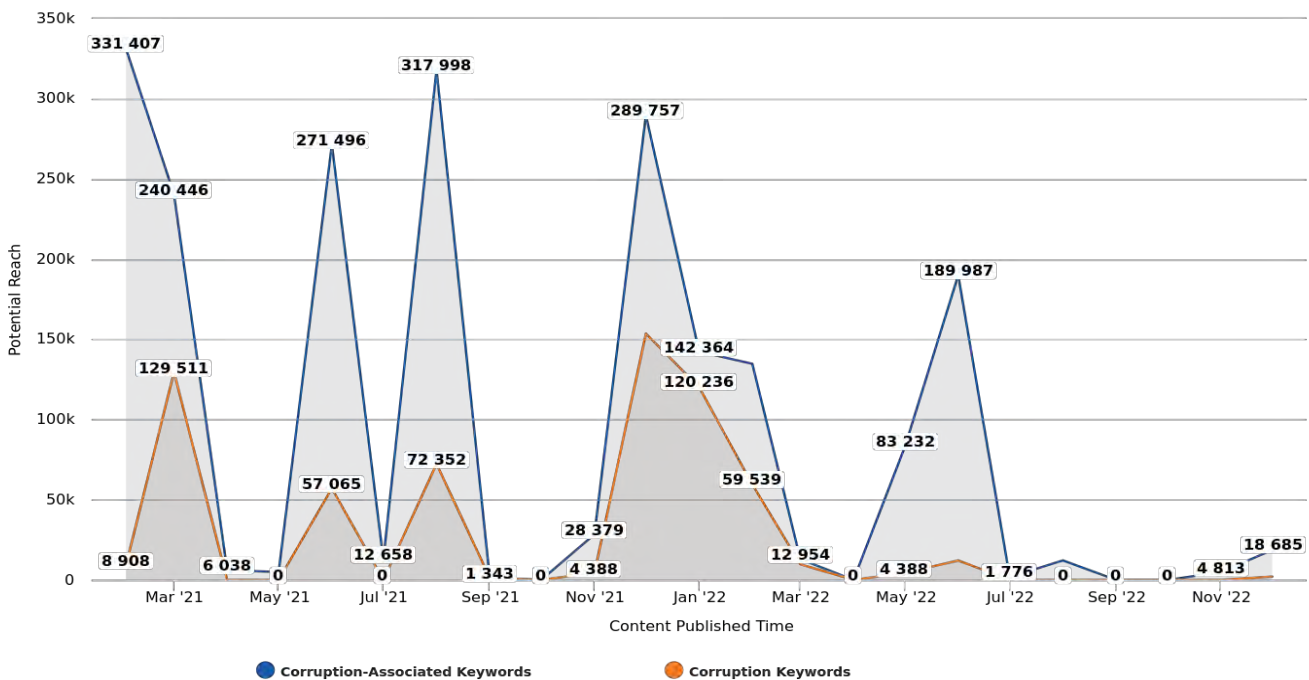
civil organization "Krasno Selo District—Initiative and Solutions for the Future." DB representatives were invited as well with one of them, Ivaylo Mirchev, even replying with the following statement: "We tried our best to fix things back at the end of 2019, we also tried in 2020, but it did not work, for which we owe people an apology" [233].

In June 2022, the abovementioned investigation concluded that Stanislavova had, in her capacity as a District Mayor, signed civil contracts with two lawyers, including for their participation in standing municipal committees, for which they were paid remuneration from the municipal budget. At the same time, she engaged them, in a personal capacity, to advise and represent her before administrative bodies and courts, for which they once again received municipal remuneration [234].

Towards the end of the monitored period, a number of outlets notified the general public that Rosina Stanislavova had lost the appeals against CACIAF and would have to pay back more than BGN 23,000 [235].

4.9.2. Online Coverage

4.9.2.1 Overall Metrics and Volume Comparison

The online coverage surrounding the story reached around 1,300 articles, as more than half of the content was published by Prominent Sources (around 850), followed by Media Aggregators (around 250), and Less Prominent Sources (around 200). Influence Networks were the least active.

The sources monitored in the context of this story share a similar audience demographic, with people between the ages of 25 and 44 constituting the largest percentage of the readership. In addition, the traffic was generated primarily from Bulgaria. However, the sources differ in terms of how they gained the said traffic. Prominent Sources received most of it directly or via search engines, Less Prominent Sources—directly, and Media Aggregators from a search engine. Influence Networks gained traffic mainly through social media and direct clicks.

The results also show that the use of words associated with corruption was almost three times more common than the direct mention of the word "corruption" or its derivatives. Due to the national interest in the matter, the story was extensively covered by sources categorized as National Media.

Top Keywords (by volume)

A tag-cloud representation of the most frequently used keywords or phrases within the monitored story. The chart depicts each word's size relative to its popularity, providing an insight into the most prominent and widely discussed points of interest. In this particular case, the most frequently mentioned keywords were the family name of Rosina Stanislavova, then Mayor of Sofia's Krasno Selo District, who was at the center of the scandal, as well as the name of the district itself. The most frequently mentioned keywords also include "conflict of interest," "CIACAF," "Democratic Bulgaria," "prosecution," and "daughter."

Volume Comparison – Corruption Keywords vs. Corruption-Associated Keywords


An analysis of the volume distribution of the pieces of content that reference corruption directly or indirectly. The results show that the use of corruption-associated vocabulary is almost three times more common than the direct mention of the word "corruption" or its forms.

## Potential Reach Comparison – Corruption Keywords vs. Corruption-Associated Keywords

Potential reach distribution of the pieces of content, which reference corruption either directly or indirectly. The potential reach distribution pattern mirrors the volume distribution of the content.

Stacked Volume Comparison (by source type)
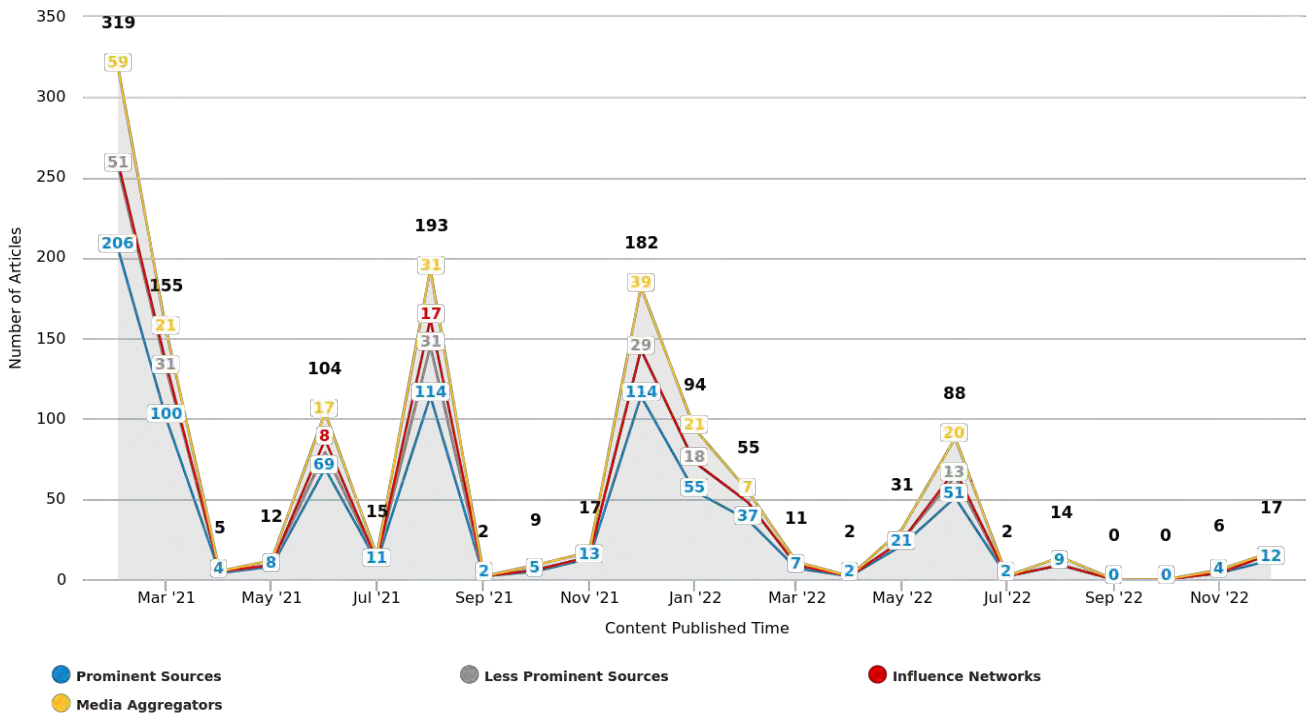
Stacked volume distribution of the story per type of sources. Prominent Sources published more than half of the content, followed by Media Aggregators and Less Prominent Sources. Influence Networks published less than 40 articles, the majority of which appeared in August 2021, forming a small peak of headlines such as "The Mayor of Krasno Selo Shows Insolence on Live TV: Asks Why the Host's Young Child is not on the [COVID-19] Front Line" [236].

Stacked Potential Reach Comparison (by source type)
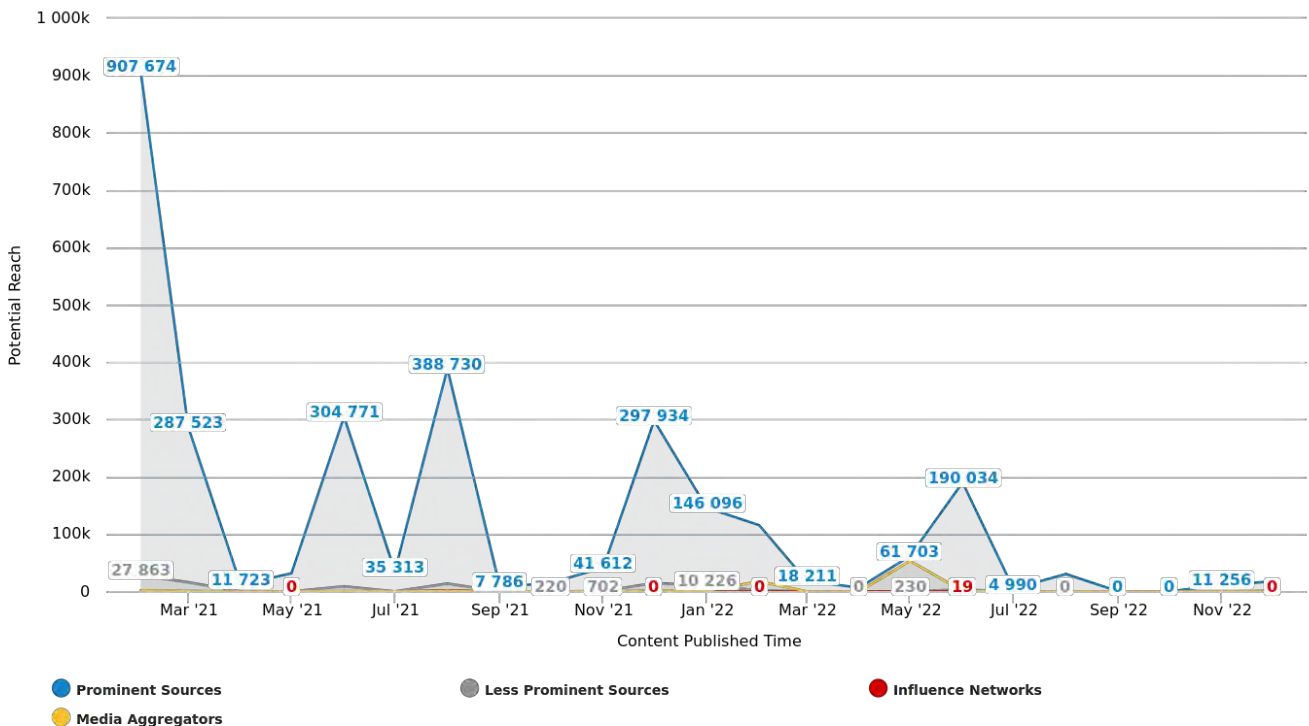
Stacked potential reach distribution of the story per type of sources. The chart clearly shows the dominant potential reach of Prominent Sources, which overshadows the rest.

Volume Comparison - Regional vs National Sources
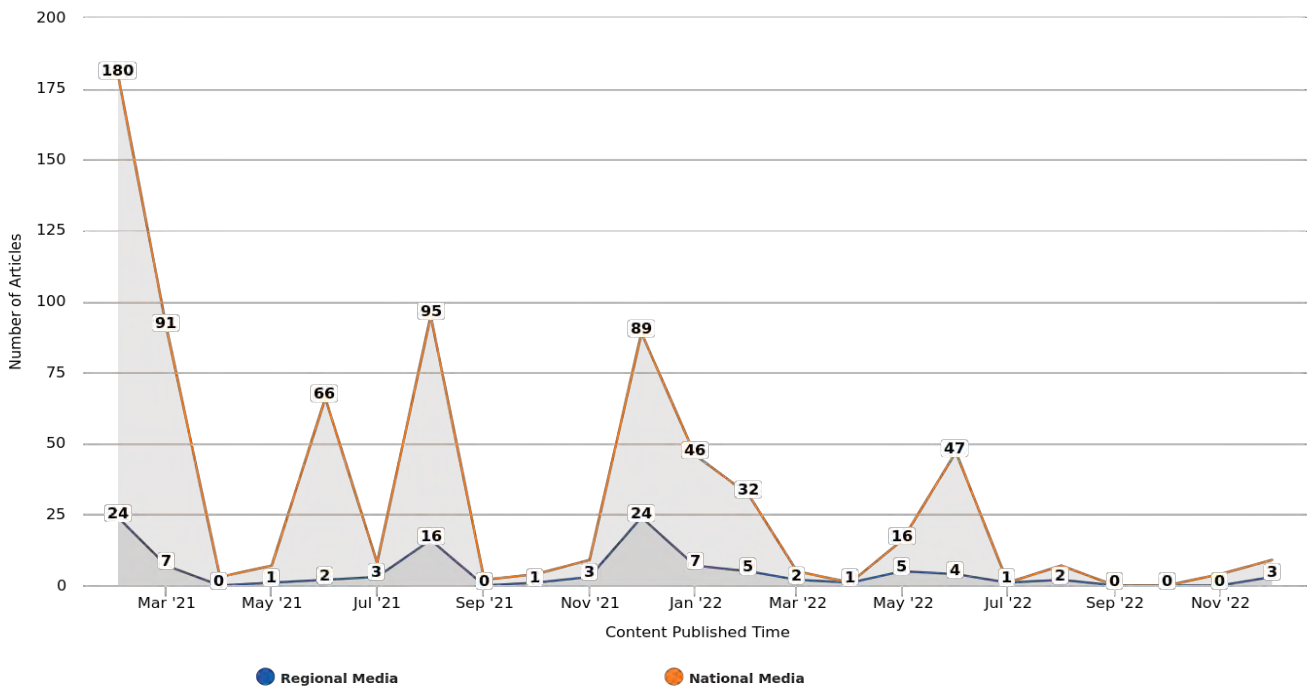
Volume distribution of the story in the National and Regional Media. National Media published nearly 7 times more content compared to Regional Media.

Potential reach Comparison - Regional vs National Sources
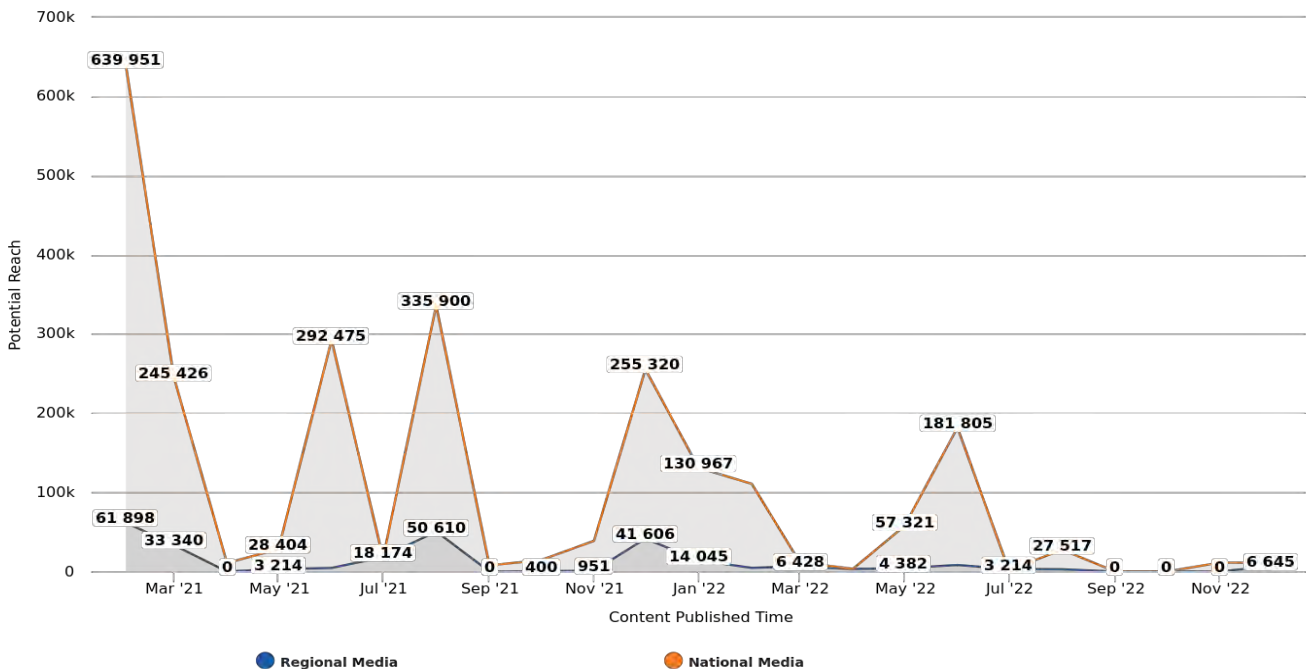
Potential reach distribution of the story in the National and Regional Media. The potential reach of National Media sources far exceeds that of Regional Media, due not only to Regional Media's more limited audience, but also to the lower amount of published content.

4.9.2.2 Online Coverage by Source Type

Top Prominent Sources (by volume)

Source	Number of Articles
24Chasa	42
Blitz	35
Tribune.bg	29
Fakti.bg	20
24 Plovdiv	19

Top Prominent Sources (by reach)

Source	Total Potential Reach
Blitz	360 073
Deutsche Welle	204 817
24Chasa	170 982
Нова Броудкастинг Груп	142 420
Tribune.bg	117 392

The chart on the left displays the Top Prominent Sources (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Prominent Sources (by potential reach). The numbers point to the conclusion that even though some sources publish less in terms of volume, they manage to reach a considerably wider audience.

Top Less Prominent Sources (by volume)

Source	Number of Articles
Cross.bg	13
news.bg	12
Classa.bg	7
ABCNews.bg	6
BIG5.bg	6

Top Less Prominent Sources (by reach)

Source	Total Potential Reach
Varnautre.bg	26 668
Kliuki.bg	10 827
news.bg	7 154
izvanredno.info	6 032
Telegraph	4 034

The chart on the left displays the Top Less Prominent Sources (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Less Prominent Sources (by potential reach). "Cross.bg" published the most content on the story, however, "Varna Utre," which is not among the Top 10 Sources in terms of volume, reached the widest audience.

Top Influence Networks (by volume)

Network	Number of Articles
Zanas.eu	7
BGVEST	6
BG7.eu	5
VChas.net	5
NEWS7	1

Top Influence Networks (by reach)

Network	Total Potential Reach
TheMainline.bg	902
Sportove.info	476
Zanas.eu	427
Top-novini.eu	117
NEWS7	85

The chart on the left displays the Top Influence Networks (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Influence Networks (by potential reach). Although "Za Nas" published the most content, "The Mainline" had the biggest potential reach.
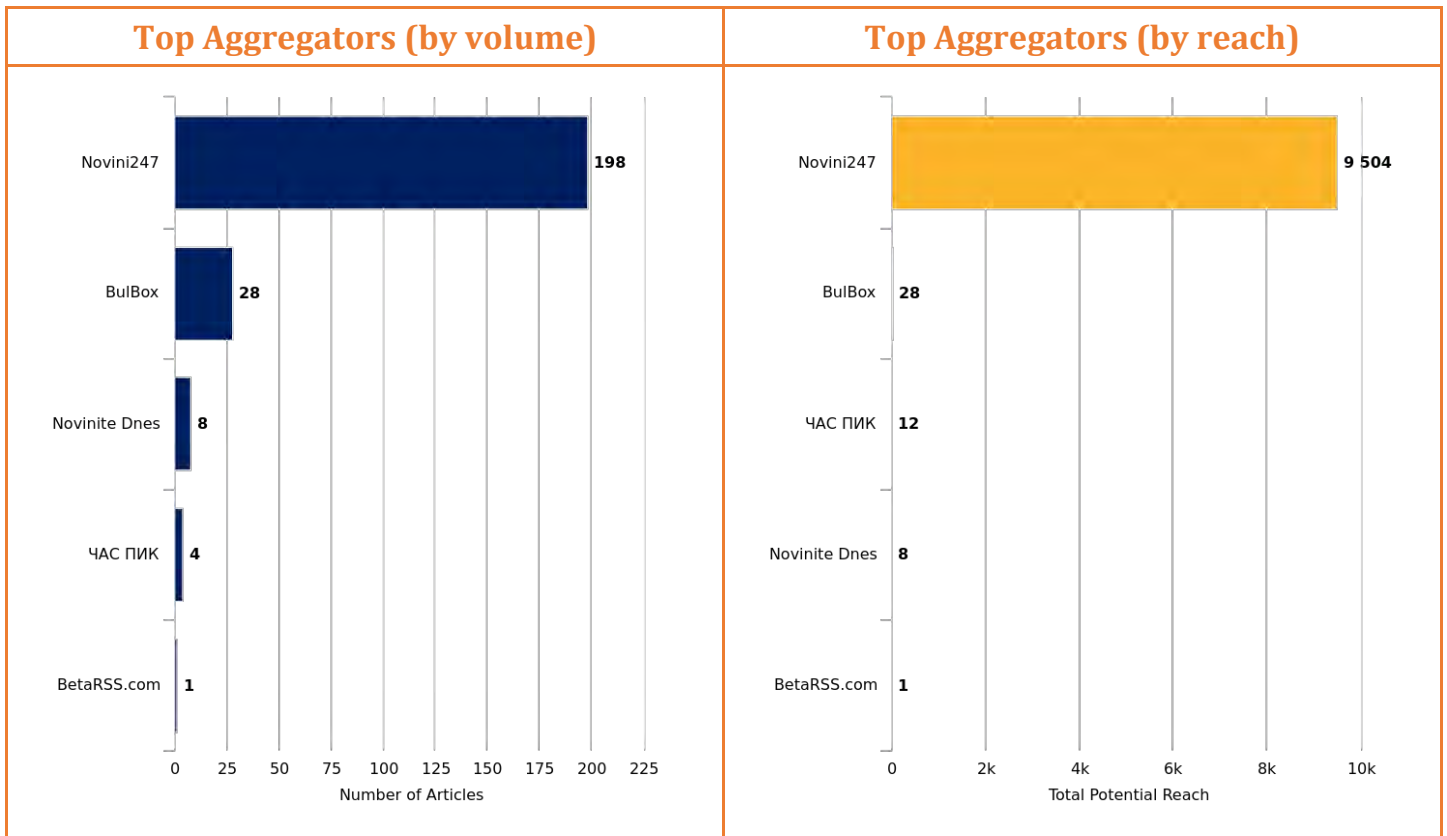
Top Aggregators (by volume)

Aggregator	Number of Articles
Novini247	198
BulBox	28
Novinite Dnes	8
ЧАС ПИК	4
BetaRSS.com	1

Top Aggregators (by reach)

Aggregator	Total Potential Reach
Novini247	9 504
BulBox	28
ЧАС ПИК	12
Novinite Dnes	8
BetaRSS.com	1

The chart on the left displays the Top Media Aggregators (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Media Aggregators (by potential reach). "Novini247" published the most content and had the biggest potential reach.

4.9.2.3 Online Coverage: Source Audience

Source Audience by Age per Source Type

The chart illustrates the different level of engagement with the four types of monitored sources (Prominent Sources, Less Prominent Sources, Media Aggregators, and Influence Networks) among six age groups. The result shows that the people most interested in the story are between the age of 25 and 44. The people above 65 years of age comprise the lowest audience percentage and, in this case, engaged mainly with Media Aggregators.

Source Audience by Top Countries per Source Type

The chart displays the geographical distribution of the websites visitors per source type. The traffic comes mostly from Bulgaria, with the United States taking the second place among all source types.

Source Audience by Traffic per Source Type

Direct
- Tier 1: 45.57%
- Tier 2-3: 87.08%
- Influence Networks: 11.09%
- Aggregators: 8.20%

Search
- Tier 1: 28.99%
- Tier 2-3: 0.56%
- Influence Networks: 0.00%
- Aggregators: 88.61%

Social
- Tier 1: 13.27%
- Tier 2-3: 3.20%
- Influence Networks: 88.91%
- Aggregators: 0.27%

Referral
- Tier 1: 6.43%
- Tier 2-3: 8.57%
- Influence Networks: 0.00%
- Aggregators: 2.33%

Email
- Tier 1: 5.69%
- Tier 2-3: 0.52%
- Influence Networks: 0%
- Aggregators: 0.58%

Others
- Tier 1: 0.05%
- Tier 2-3: 0.07%
- Influence Networks: 0.0%
- Aggregators: 0.01%

Legend: ■ Tier 1 ■ Tier 2-3 ■ Influence Networks ■ Aggregators

The chart compares the source of traffic and its volume generated by the four monitored source types. Prominent Sources gained most of their traffic directly or via a search engine. Media Aggregators gained traffic through a search engine, while Less Prominent sources gained most of their traffic via direct clicks. Influence Networks gained traffic through social media and, to a lesser degree, from direct clicks.

Source Audience by Social Network per Source Type

Facebook
- Tier 1: 80.82%
- Tier 2-3: 92.16%
- Influence Networks: 100.00%
- Aggregators: 100.00%

Twitter
- Tier 1: 3.19%
- Tier 2-3: 2.87%
- Influence Networks: 0.00%
- Aggregators: 0%

YouTube
- Tier 1: 11.87%
- Tier 2-3: 4.12%
- Influence Networks: 0%
- Aggregators: 0.00%

Reddit
- Tier 1: 1.27%
- Tier 2-3: 0.79%
- Influence Networks: 0%
- Aggregators: 0%

Others
- Tier 1: 2.85%
- Tier 2-3: 0.06%
- Influence Networks: 0%
- Aggregators: 0.00%

Legend: ■ Tier 1 ■ Tier 2-3 ■ Influence Networks ■ Aggregators
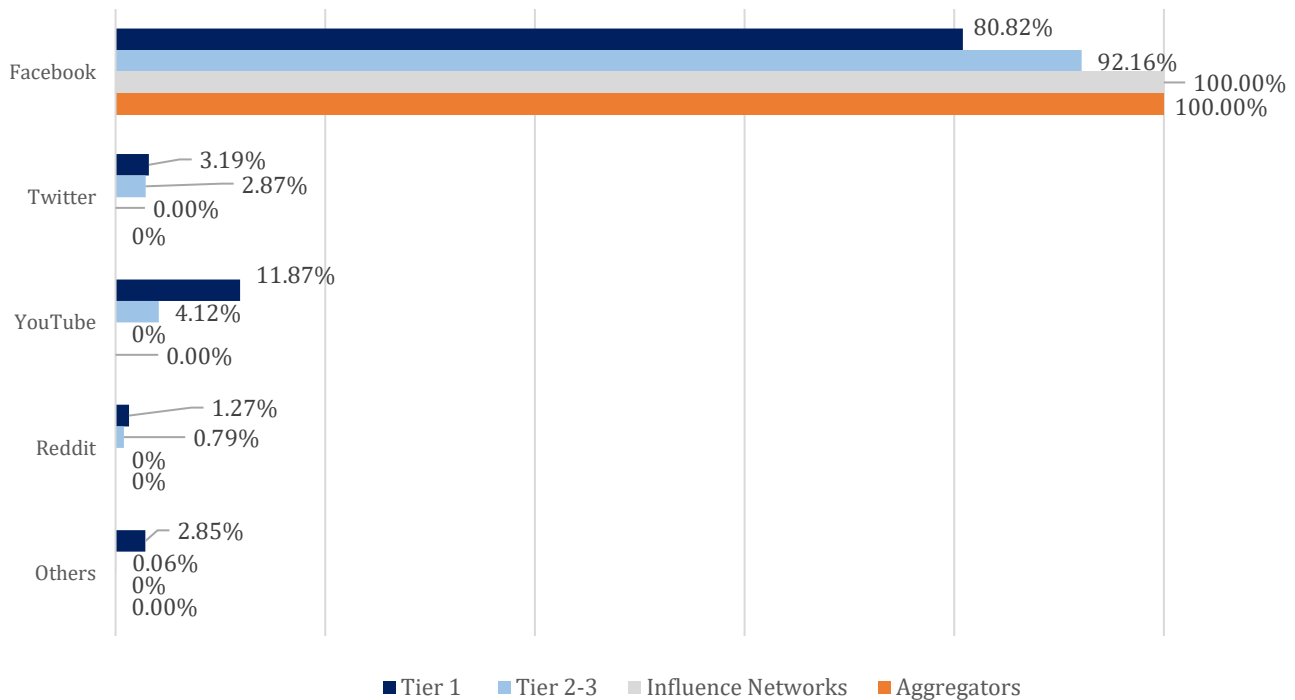
The chart illustrates the source audience distribution according to the traffic of the website gained via social network per source type. The findings highlight Facebook's dominance in all monitored types of sources.

4.9.2.4 Online Coverage: Political Parties (by volume)
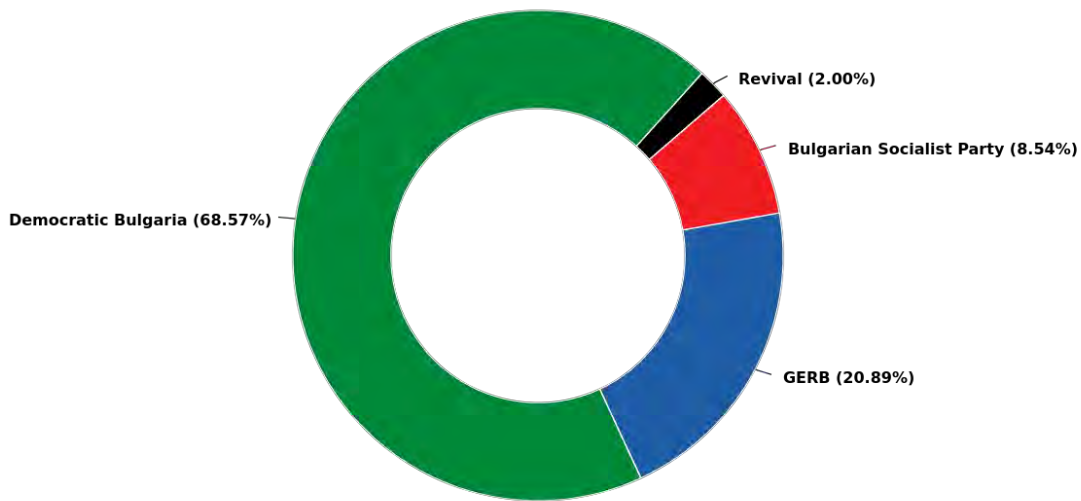
Top Mentioned Political Parties

Revival (2.00%)
Bulgarian Socialist Party (8.54%)
Democratic Bulgaria (68.57%)
GERB (20.89%)

The chart presents the most mentioned political parties in the context of the story. The results show that Democratic Bulgaria (DB) ranked first, as it was the political entity that had initially backed the investigated Mayor of Krasno Selo Rosina Stanislavova. After the eruption of the scandal, however, it withdrew its political trust from her. The second most mentioned political entity was GERB, as various outlets reported on statements made by its members. At the beginning of the story, the media quoted Metodi Lalov, Municipal Councilor and a DB representative, who, when questioning Stanislavova, said that "the citizens and councilors from GERB want to hear the specific sums of money" [237].

4.9.3. Social Coverage (Facebook)

Initially, the Krasno Selo Mayor scandal did not receive much attention on Facebook. However, the content surged after a conflict of interest had been established. The main keywords included "Rosina," "elderly people," "people with disabilities," and "money." The political party Democratic Bulgaria was heavily criticized for nominating Rosina Stanislavova, who was later investigated for corruption, for the position of a District Mayor.

Overall Volume (per month)
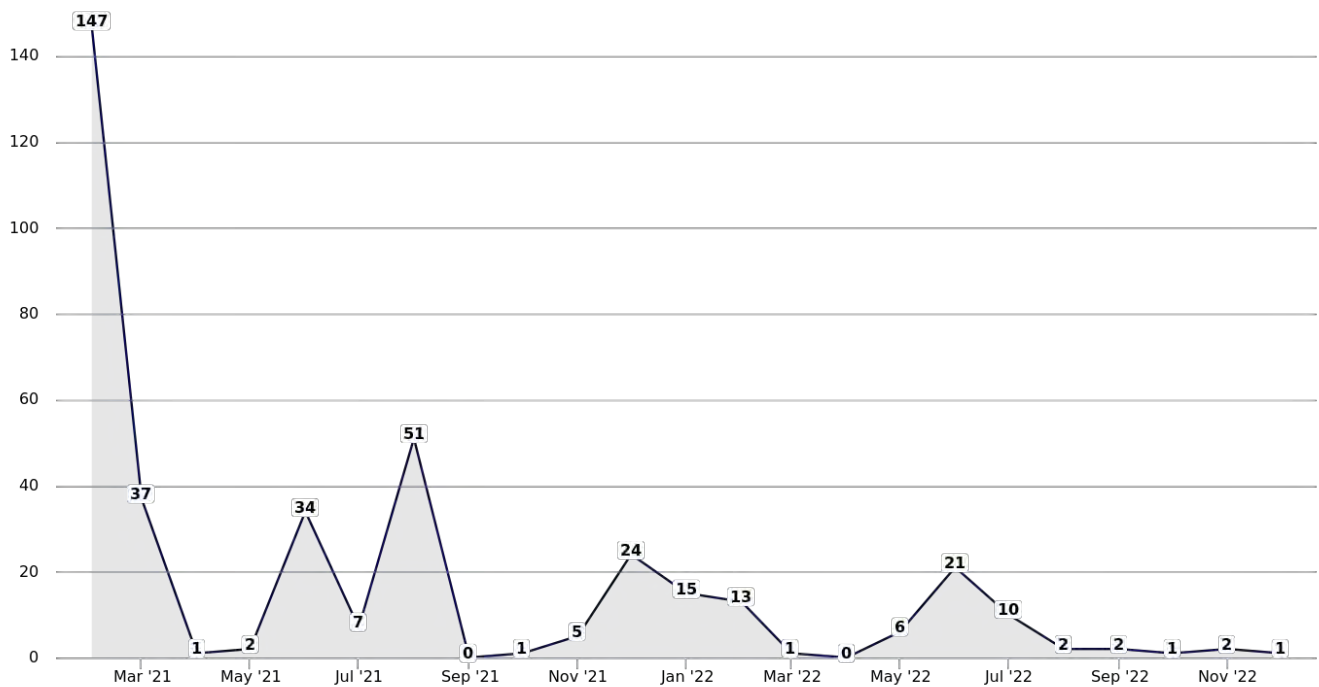
A big number of the posts and comments related to the scandal were concentrated at the end of February, when the allegations against the Krasno Selo District Mayor Rosina Stanislavova were made public. Many users criticized her and blamed Democratic Bulgaria for nominating her. In June 2021, the commission in charge of the case confirmed that a conflict of interest had occurred, which resulted in a surge of content. The subsequent rounds of controversial debates followed the BGN 15,000 fine imposed on Stanislavova and her second penalty from August.

Top 10 Social Authors (by volume)
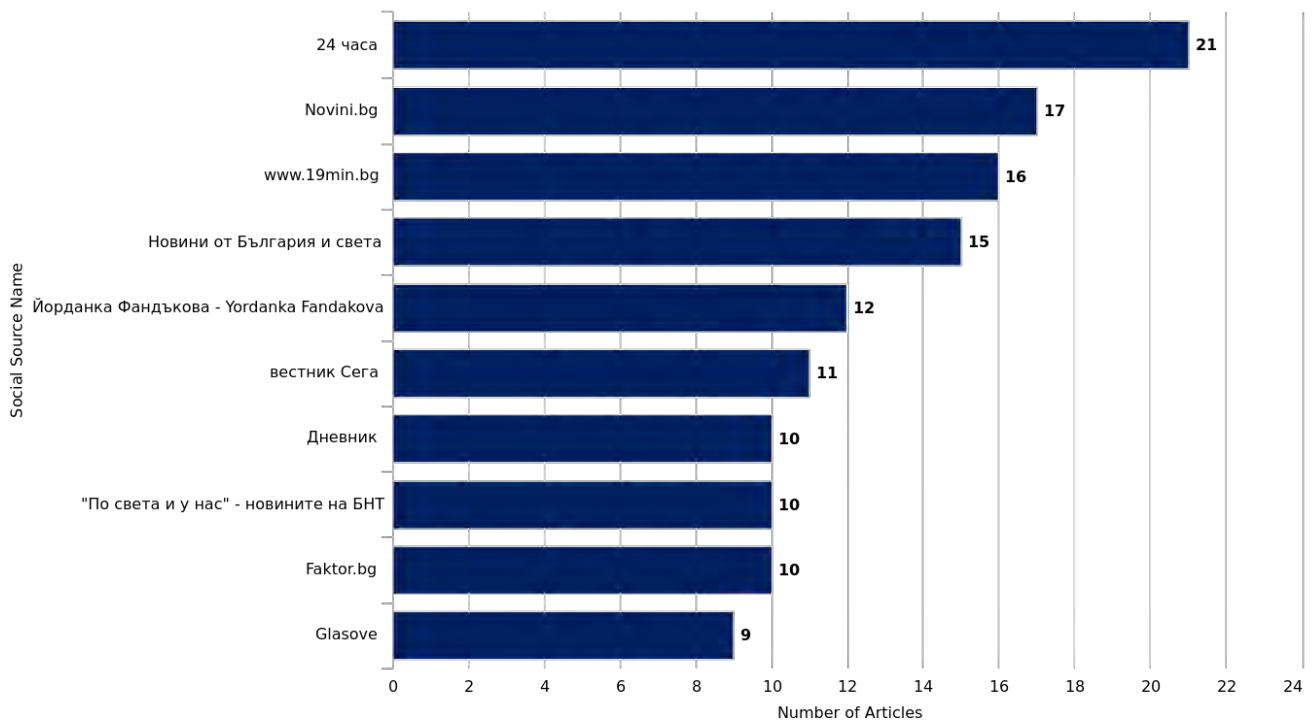
Despite publishing related news regularly during the monitored period, official media outlets pages received relatively low engagement. Mayor of Sofia Yordanka Fandakova's account stood out, as users interacted with her posts in connection with the scandal.

Top Keywords (by volume)
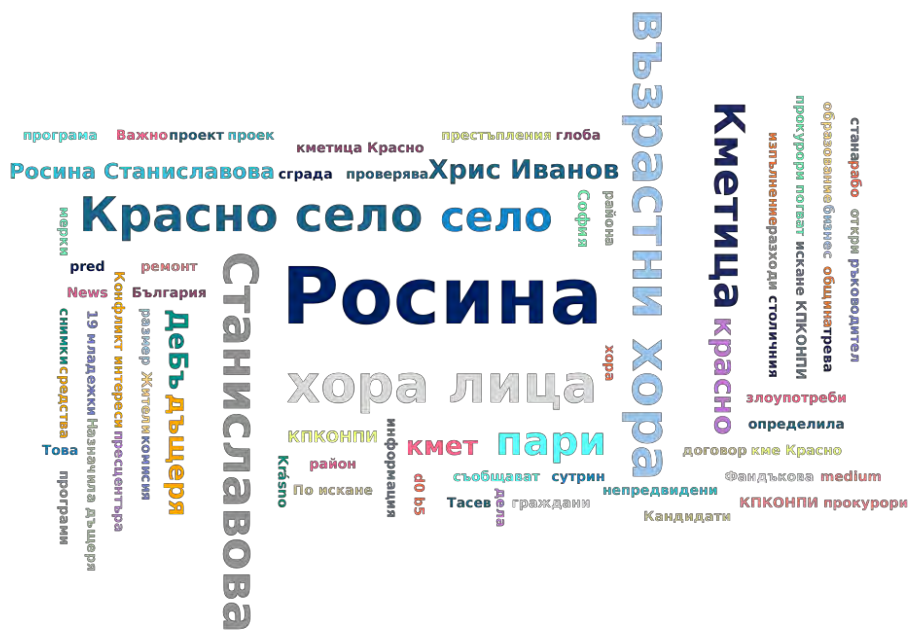
Among the most mentioned keywords were "Rosina" (as in Rosina Stanislavova, then Mayor of Krasno Selo District), followed by "elderly people" and "people with disabilities." The word "money" also appeared frequently, indicating the relevance of the corruption scheme to the story.

4.9.3.1 Social Coverage: Political Parties (by volume)

Top Mentioned Political Parties

Bulgarian Socialist Party (2.42%)
There is Such a People (1.21%)
GERB (6.67%)
Democratic Bulgaria (89.70%)

Facebook
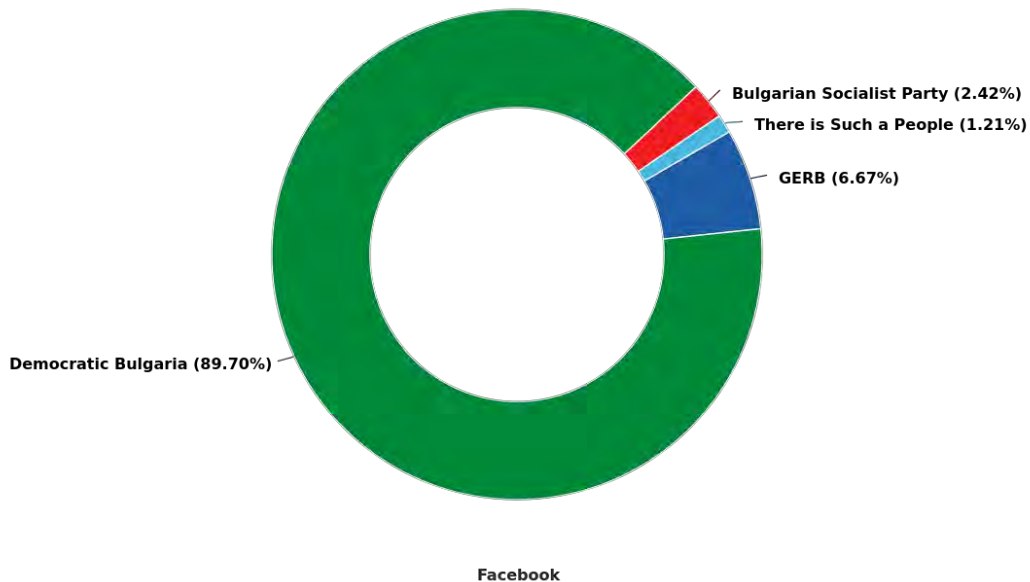
Democratic Bulgaria was referenced in 91% of the content, as many accounts criticized the party's decision to nominate Rosina Stanislavova as a District Mayor. In addition, GERB and the Bulgarian Socialist Party were also briefly mentioned.

4.10. Sofia Street Lighting Public Procurement

4.10.1. Background

At the end of January, 2022, the Bulgarian non-governmental watchdog organization Spasi Sofia revealed that Deputy Mayor for Transport, Christian Krastev, had signed "scandalously unprofitable contracts" for street lighting maintenance worth BGN 74 million. According to the NGO's official website, the deal allowed for the "draining of millions" due to artificially inflated prices [238]. Immediately after the announcement, other websites began citing Boris Bonev, Spasi Sofia's Founder and a City Council Member at Sofia Municipality, who said, in an interview for the bTV Channel, that the local authorities had implemented a public order for the construction and maintenance of street lighting at prices up to 77 times higher than the market ones. In addition, it was claimed that the employees in charge of the street lighting maintenance received a monthly salary of BGN 7000. Bonev also demanded that Christian Krastev submit his resignation [239]. On the same day (January 30), then Prime Minister Kiril Petkov said: "Due to the way public procurement in Sofia is conducted, a street lamp on one side of the street costs BGN 1587, while on the other side of the same street the same lamp costs BGN 5755. This means that we really need to establish an Anticorruption Commission with investigative functions as soon as possible" [240]. Moreover, he also ordered an official investigation into the matter. For her part, Sofia's Mayor Yordanka Fandakova ordered an "internal audit" of the procedures for the selection of contractors, including an investigation of the assigned responsibilities and the respective payments [241].

On January 31, national media outlets reported that the Prosecutor's Office, the Ministry of Interior, the State Agency for National Security, and the Commission for Anticorruption and Illegal Assets Forfeiture would be launching several investigations into the matter, with the latter double-checking any indications that persons occupying high public positions might have engaged in corrupt activities [242]. In a similar context, the Sofia City Prosecutor's Office declared that it would take up questions regarding the pricing discrepancy [243]. In the meantime, the Log-Siberia EOOD Company, which had been in charge of the contract execution, accused Bonev of manipulating the information and explained that "the comparison of individual prices is extremely incorrect, as the public procurement includes two different components, which are evaluated together. What happened is that Mr. Bonev failed to take into consideration the technical support cost, when presenting the prices of the new lighting fixtures. We view this omission as completely intentional. The documents actually show that Log-Siberia's maintenance fees are significantly lower than those of the other company" [244]. Soon after, various websites quoted Christian Krastev who said that "Boris Bonev should apologize to the people of Sofia because he misled them," adding: "I can't wait for the investigation to be over as it will prove that there are no irregularities whatsoever" [245].

At the beginning of February, Ivan Takov, Deputy Chairman of the "BSP for Bulgaria" group and of the Committee on Finance and Budget in Sofia's Municipal Council, demanded that Krastev resigns from his office and complained that "the lighting in Sofia in general is very bad. There are entire neighborhoods and streets without a single working light bulb" [246]. In addition, BSP's Sofia branch declared that "many of the newer neighborhoods in the capital lack adequate street lighting. Despite the financial resources allocated every year, the expected result is not achieved." The party representatives also hinted that there was no capacity for the said resources to be used as originally intended. Furthermore, BSP insisted that "maintenance, construction, and all other basic communal activities should be carried out by municipal enterprises" [247].

Finally, on February 3, the newspaper Capital published an analytical piece, subsequently republished by other media outlets, according to which "the numbers can be presented selectively, which, in turn, leads to confusion" and that "the costs incurred so far seem to be roughly similar, regardless of the company" [248].

4.10.2. Online Coverage

4.10.2.1 Overall Metrics and Volume Comparison

The online coverage surrounding the public order for Sofia's street lighting amounted to approximately 700 articles, making it the smallest of all corruption narratives included in this report. The majority of the content was published by Prominent Sources (around 400), followed by Media Aggregators (around 170). Less Prominent Sources and Influence Networks were the least active on the story.

The sources monitored in the context of this story share a similar audience demographic, with people between the ages of 25 and 44 constituting the largest percentage of the readership. In addition, the traffic was generated primarily from Bulgaria. However, the sources differ in terms of how they gained the said traffic. Prominent Sources received most of it directly or via search engines, Less Prominent Sources—directly, and Media Aggregators via a search engine. Influence Networks gained their traffic mainly through social media and direct clicks.

The majority of the articles referred to corruption indirectly. Due to the national interest in the matter, the story was extensively covered by sources categorized as National Media.

Top Keywords (by volume)

A tag-cloud representation of the most frequently used keywords or phrases within the monitored story. The size of each word in the cloud is a relative indicator of the term's popularity, thereby allowing for the discernment of the most prominent and widely discussed points of interest. In this particular case, the most frequently mentioned keywords include the names of Spasi Sofia's Founder and a City Council Member at Sofia Municipality Boris Bonev, whose NGO was the first to raise the issue. Other frequently mentioned keywords are "street lighting," "Sofia," "public procurement," "CIACAF," and "inspection."

## Volume Comparison – Corruption Keywords vs. Corruption-Associated Keywords
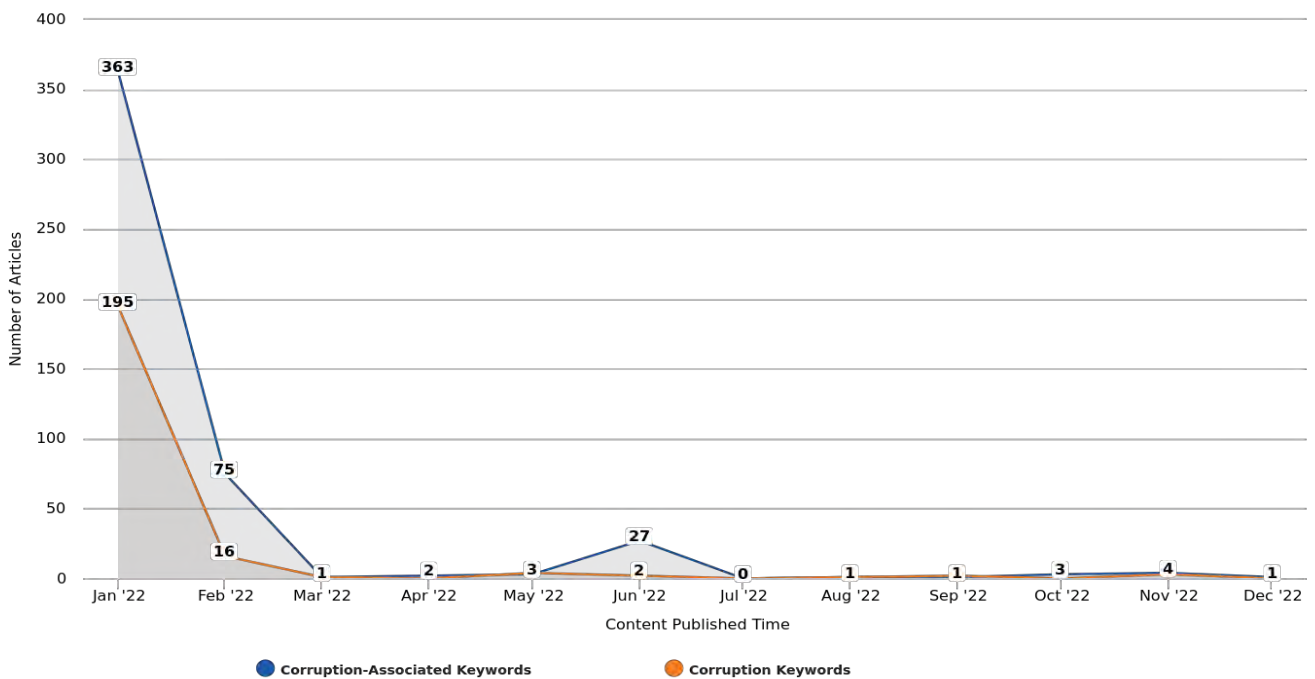
An analysis of the volume distribution of the pieces of content that reference corruption directly or indirectly. In this case, the content featured corruption-related vocabulary more than it did the word "corruption" itself or its derivatives.

## Potential Reach Comparison – Corruption Keywords vs. Corruption-Associated Keywords

Potential reach distribution of the pieces of content, which reference corruption either directly or indirectly. The potential reach distribution pattern mirrors the volume distribution of the content.

Stacked Volume Comparison (by source type)

- Prominent Sources
- Less Prominent Sources
- Influence Networks
- Media Aggregators
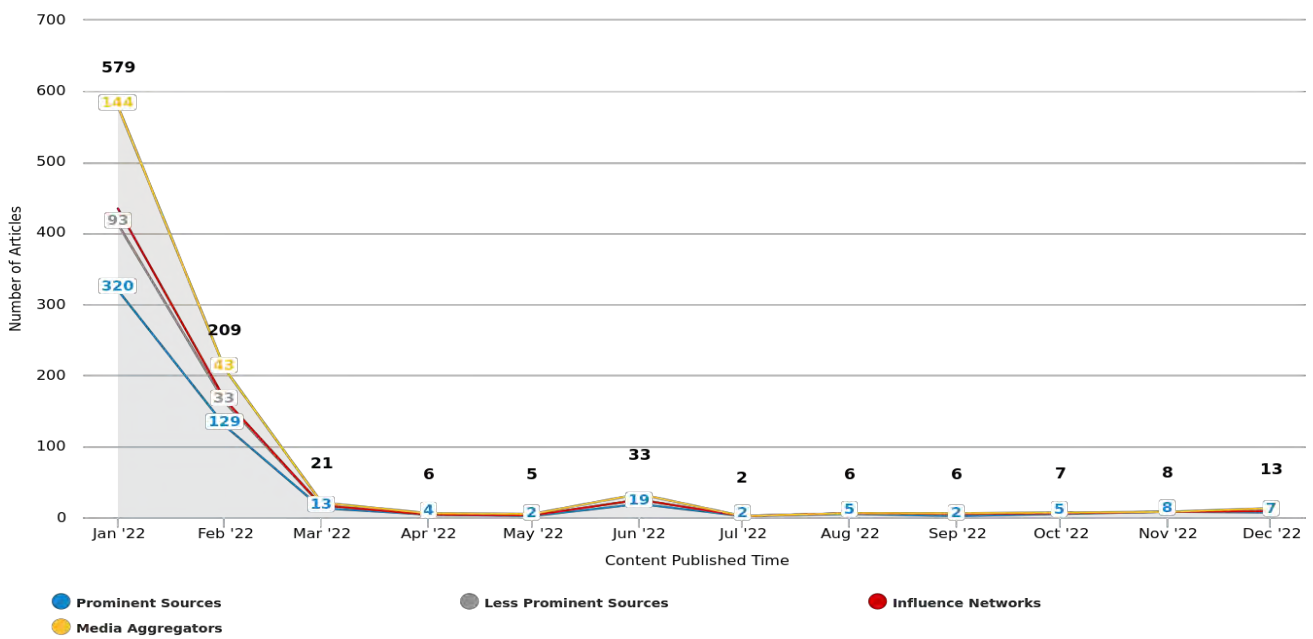
Stacked volume distribution of the story per type of sources. Prominent Sources were the most active, followed by Media Aggregators and Less Prominent Sources. The story in question was of little interest to the Influence Networks, which published the least number of articles.

Stacked Potential Reach Comparison (by source type)
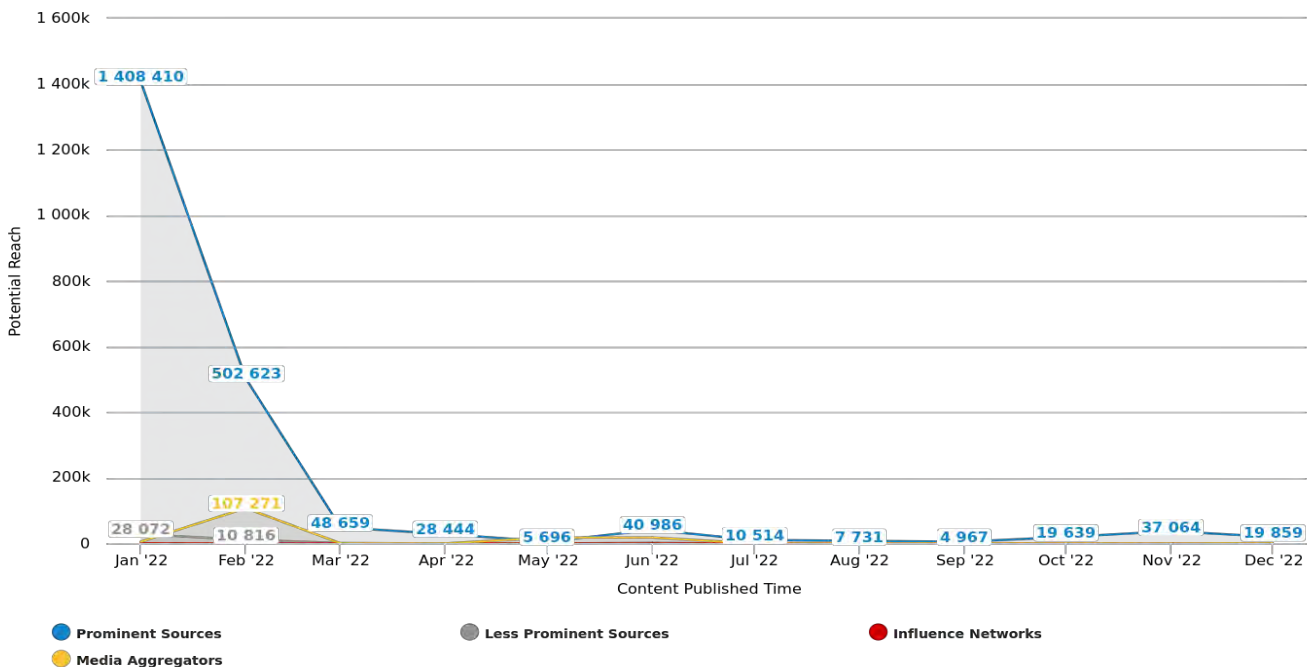
- Prominent Sources
- Less Prominent Sources
- Influence Networks
- Media Aggregators

Stacked potential reach distribution of the story per type of sources. Prominent Sources overshadowed the rest. One of the reasons is the fact that the Bulgarian section of the German international broadcaster Deutsche Welle released a relevant piece titled "Lamps for 73 Million: When Will the Whole Truth about Corruption in Sofia Come to Light?" [249].

Volume Comparison - Regional vs National Sources
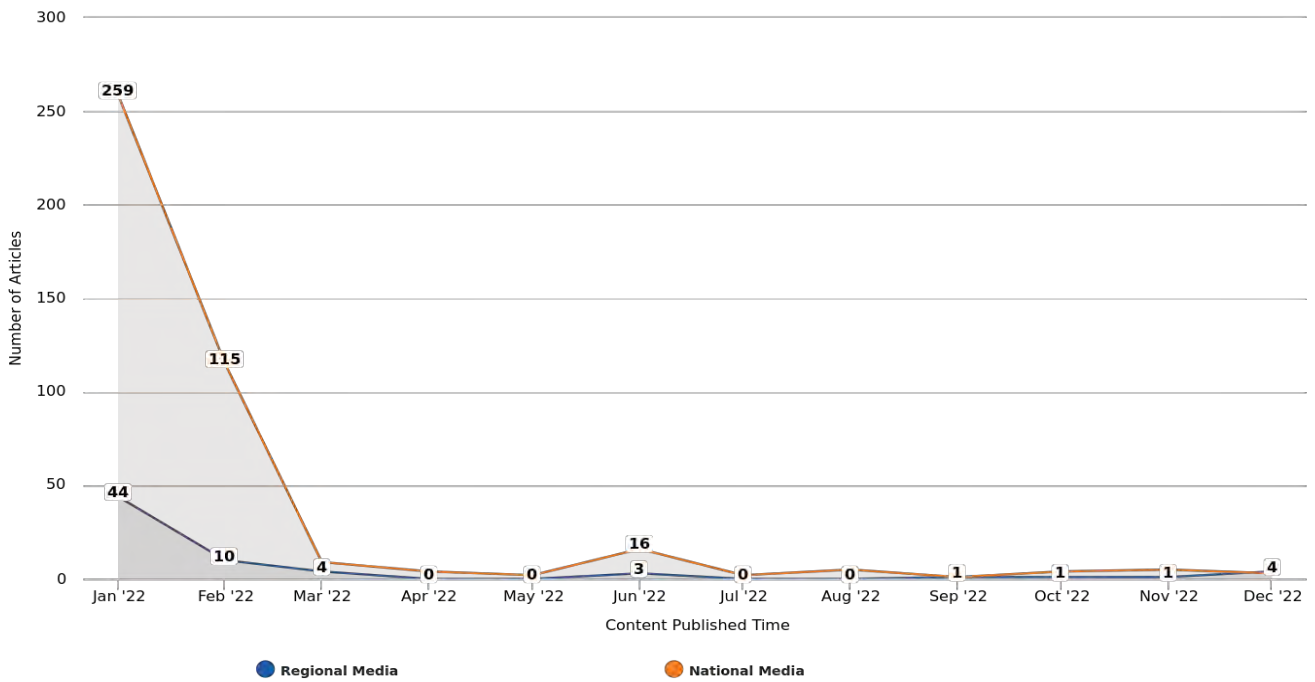
Volume distribution of the story in the National and Regional Media. National Media published more content compared to Regional Media.

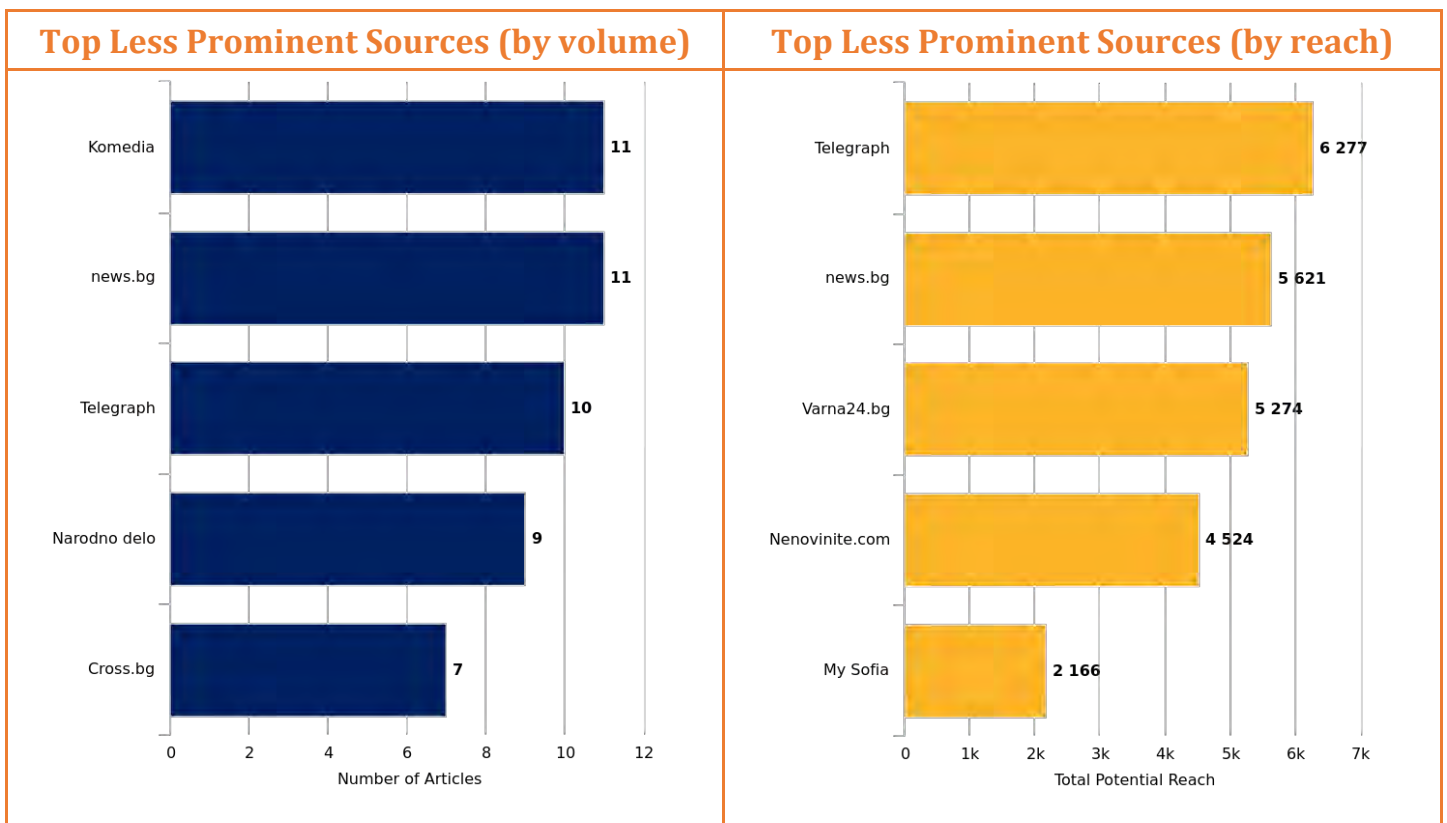# Potential reach Comparison - Regional vs National Sources
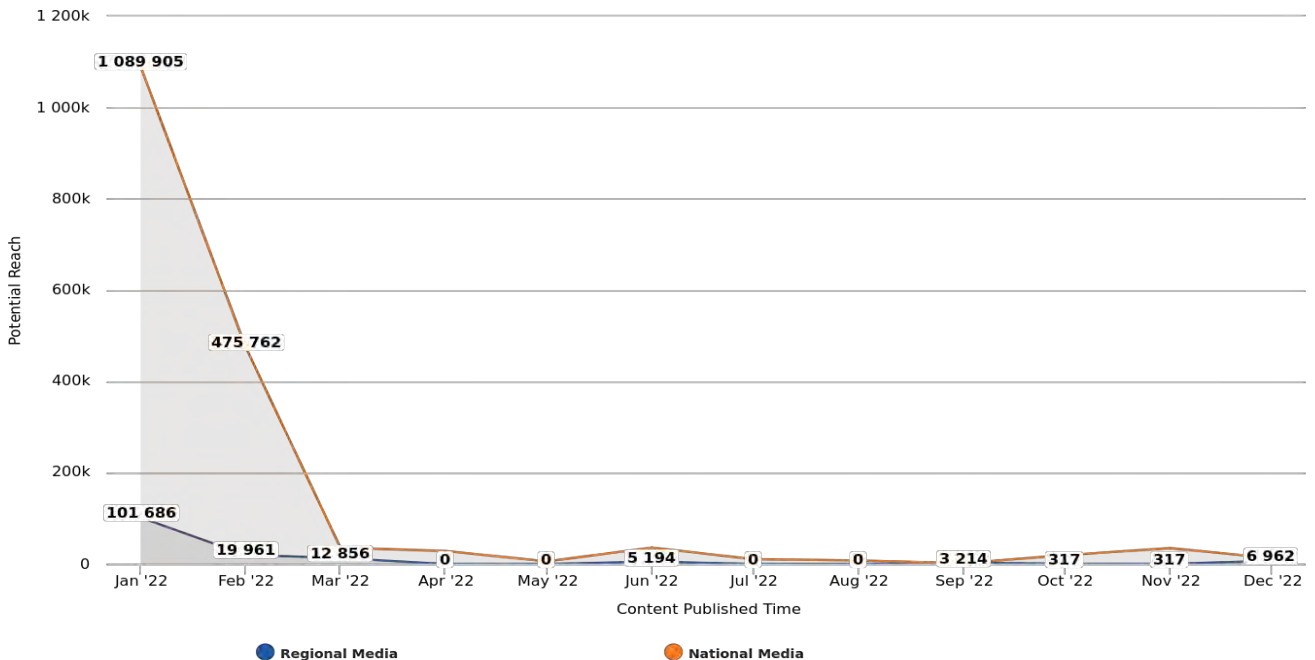
Potential reach distribution of the story in the National and Regional Media. The potential reach of National Media sources far exceeds that of Regional Media, due not only to Regional Media's more limited audience, but also to the lower amount of published content.
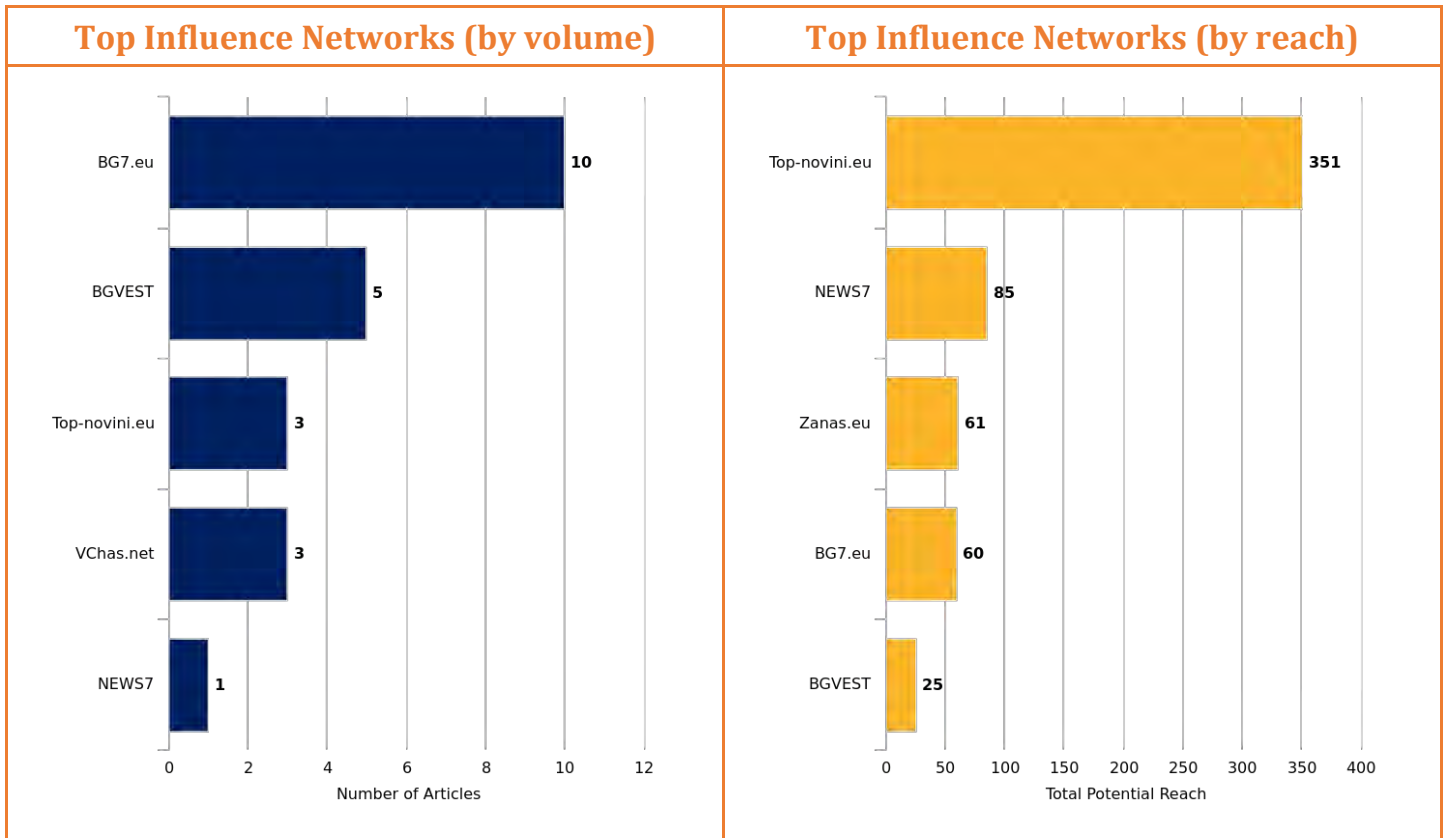
4.10.2.2 Online Coverage by Source Type
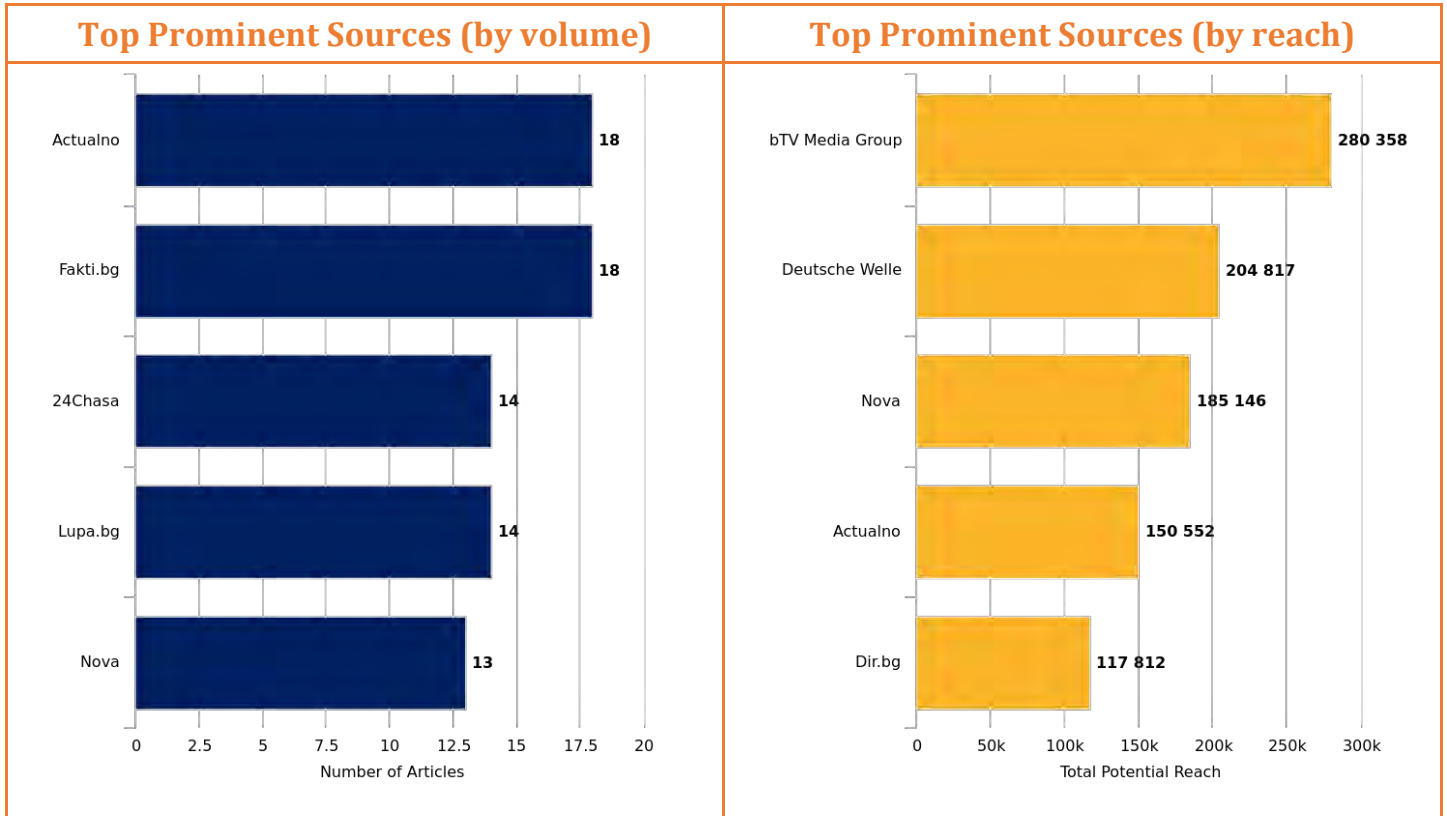
Top Prominent Sources (by volume)

Source	Number of Articles
Actualno	18
Fakti.bg	18
24Chasa	14
Lupa.bg	14
Nova	13

Top Prominent Sources (by reach)

Source	Total Potential Reach
bTV Media Group	280 358
Deutsche Welle	204 817
Nova	185 146
Actualno	150 552
Dir.bg	117 812

The chart on the left displays the Top Prominent Sources (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Prominent Sources (by potential reach). The numbers point to the conclusion that even though some sources publish less in terms of volume, they manage to reach a considerably wider audience.

Top Less Prominent Sources (by volume)

Source	Number of Articles
Komedia	11
news.bg	11
Telegraph	10
Narodno delo	9
Cross.bg	7

Top Less Prominent Sources (by reach)

Source	Total Potential Reach
Telegraph	6 277
news.bg	5 621
Varna24.bg	5 274
Nenovinite.com	4 524
My Sofia	2 166

The chart on the left displays the Top Less Prominent Sources (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Less Prominent Sources (by potential reach). "Komedia" published the most content on the story, however, "Telegraph," which is not among the Top 10 Sources in terms of volume, reached the widest audience.
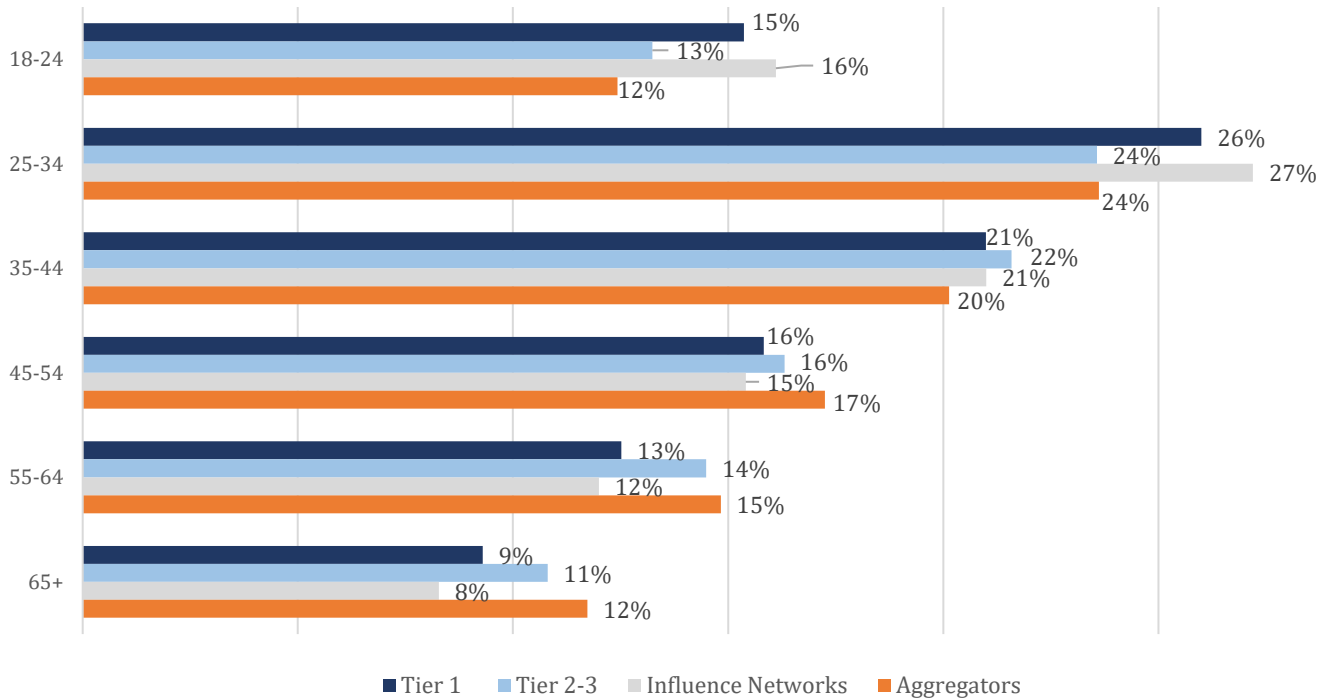
Top Influence Networks (by volume)

Network	Number of Articles
BG7.eu	10
BGVEST	5
Top-novini.eu	3
VChas.net	3
NEWS7	1

Top Influence Networks (by reach)

Network	Total Potential Reach
Top-novini.eu	351
NEWS7	85
Zanas.eu	61
BG7.eu	60
BGVEST	25

The chart on the left displays the Top Influence Networks (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Influence Networks (by potential reach). Although "BG7" published the most content, "Top Novini" had the biggest potential reach.
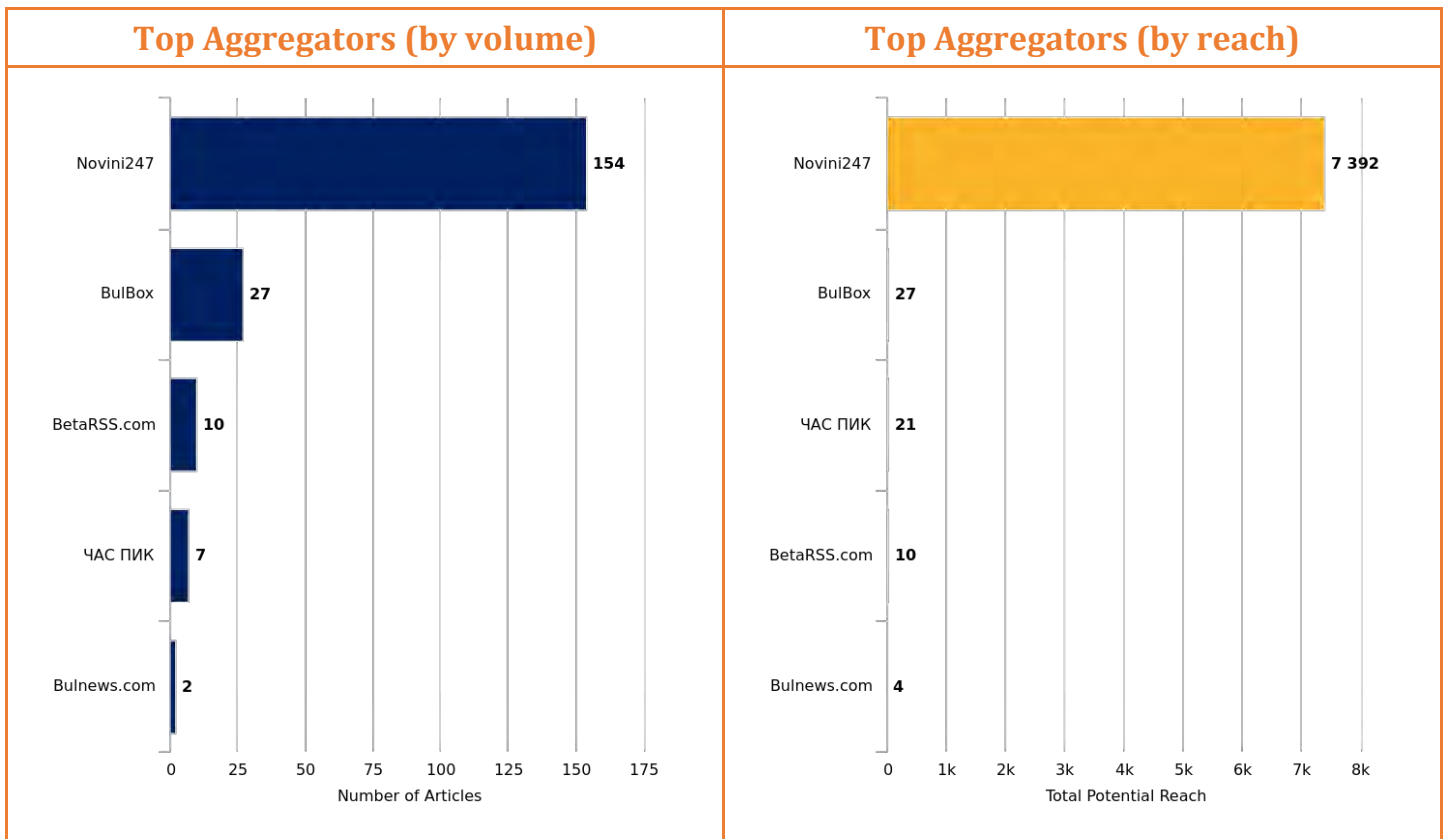
Top Aggregators (by volume)

Aggregator	Number of Articles
Novini247	154
BulBox	27
BetaRSS.com	10
ЧАС ПИК	7
Bulnews.com	2

Top Aggregators (by reach)

Aggregator	Total Potential Reach
Novini247	7 392
BulBox	27
ЧАС ПИК	21
BetaRSS.com	10
Bulnews.com	4

The chart on the left displays the Top Media Aggregators (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Media Aggregators (by potential reach). "Novini247" published the most content and had the biggest potential reach.

4.10.2.3   Online Coverage: Source Audience

Source Audience by Age per Source Type

18-24
- Tier 1: 15%
- Tier 2-3: 13%
- Influence Networks: 16%
- Aggregators: 12%

25-34
- Tier 1: 26%
- Tier 2-3: 24%
- Influence Networks: 27%
- Aggregators: 24%

35-44
- Tier 1: 21%
- Tier 2-3: 22%
- Influence Networks: 21%
- Aggregators: 20%

45-54
- Tier 1: 16%
- Tier 2-3: 16%
- Influence Networks: 15%
- Aggregators: 17%

55-64
- Tier 1: 13%
- Tier 2-3: 14%
- Influence Networks: 12%
- Aggregators: 15%

65+
- Tier 1: 9%
- Tier 2-3: 11%
- Influence Networks: 8%
- Aggregators: 12%

■ Tier 1   ■ Tier 2-3   ■ Influence Networks   ■ Aggregators

The chart illustrates the different level of engagement with the four types of monitored sources (Prominent Sources, Less Prominent Sources, Media Aggregators, and Influence Networks) among six age groups. The result shows that the people most interested in the story are between the ages of 25 and 44. The people above 65 years of age comprise the lowest audience percentage. It is worth noting that, in this case, they engaged mostly with Less Prominent Sources and Media Aggregators.

Source Audience by Top Countries per Source Type

Bulgaria
- Tier 1: 89.0%
- Tier 2-3: 91.5%
- Influence Networks: 96.0%
- Aggregators: 96.5%

United States
- Tier 1: 3.3%
- Tier 2-3: 5.0%
- Influence Networks: 1.9%
- Aggregators: 1.4%

Germany
- Tier 1: 3.2%
- Tier 2-3: 2.3%
- Influence Networks: 0.0%
- Aggregators: 0.8%

Others
- Tier 1: 5%
- Tier 2-3: 1.2%
- Influence Networks: 2.1%
- Aggregators: 1.3%

■ Tier 1   ■ Tier 2-3   ■ Influence Networks   ■ Aggregators

The chart displays the geographical distribution of the websites visitors per source type. The traffic comes mostly from Bulgaria, with the United States taking the second place among all source types.

Source Audience by Traffic per Source Type

Direct
38.90%
84.86%
40.18%
8.21%

Search
29.29%
3.66%
0.00%
88.63%

Social
16.93%
2.97%
59.82%
0.27%

Referral
8.43%
7.98%
0.00%
2.33%

Email
6.39%
0.48%
0%
0.56%

Others
0.06%
0.05%
0.0%
0.0%

■ Tier 1 ■ Tier 2-3 ■ Influence Networks ■ Aggregators
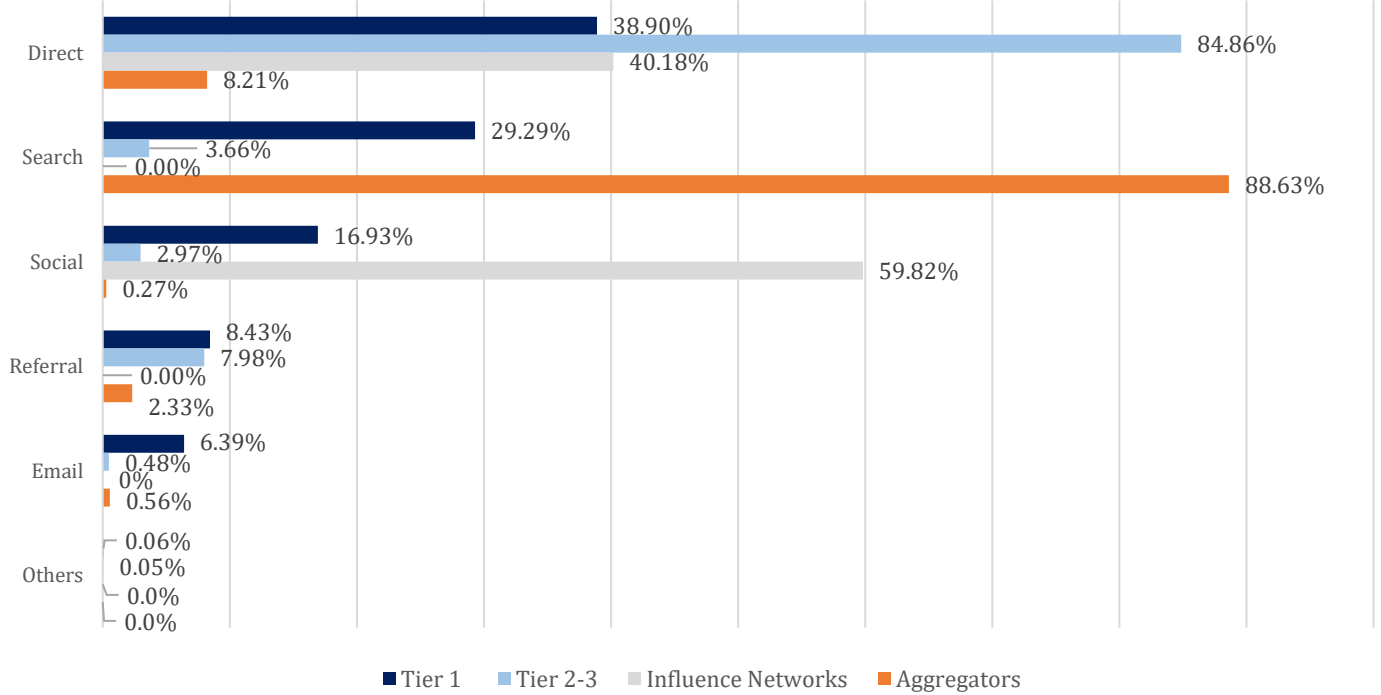
The chart compares the source of traffic and its volume generated by the four monitored source types. Prominent Sources gained most of their traffic directly or via a search engine. Less Prominent Sources and Media Aggregators gained most of their traffic directly. Influence Networks gained traffic via social media and, to a lesser degree, from direct clicks.

Source Audience by Social Network per Source Type

Facebook
82.08%
92.74%
100.00%
100.00%

Twitter
4.76%
2.67%
0.00%
0%

YouTube
8.47%
3.82%
0%
0.00%

Reddit
1.93%
0.73%
0%
0%

Others
2.76%
0.04%
0%
0.00%

■ Tier 1 ■ Tier 2-3 ■ Influence Networks ■ Aggregators
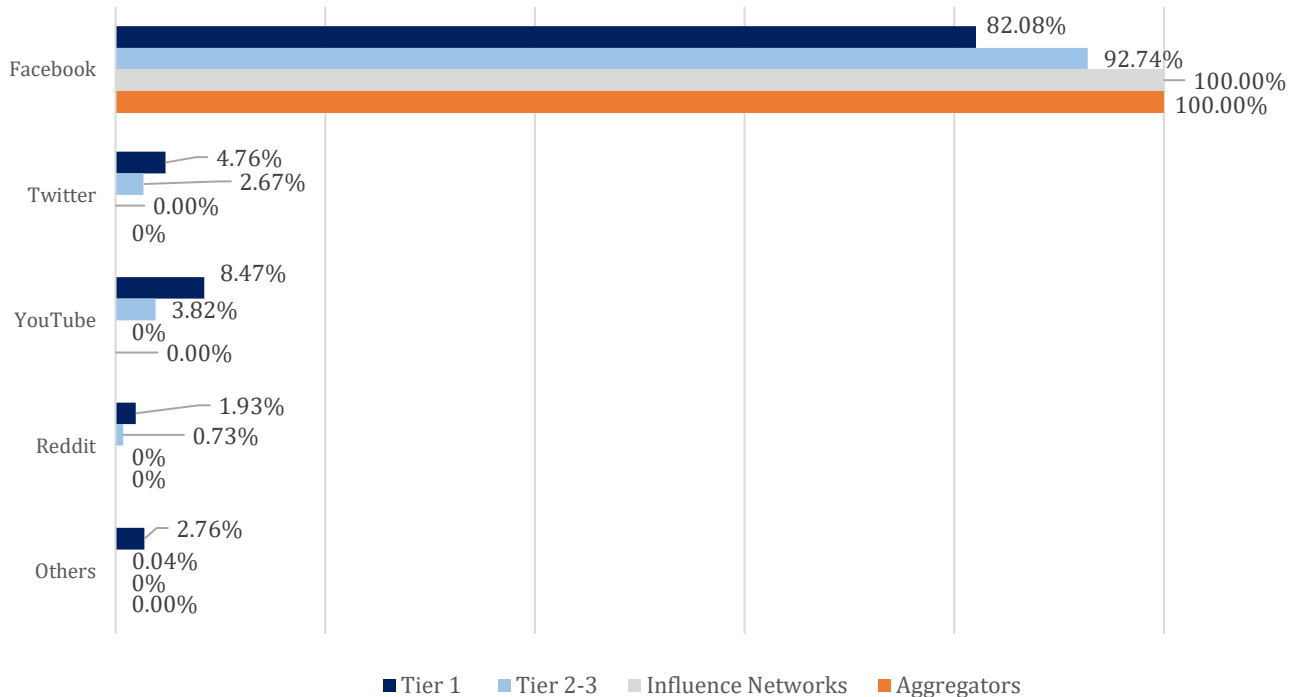
The chart illustrates the source audience distribution according to the traffic of the website gained via social network per source type. The findings highlight Facebook's dominance in all monitored types of sources.

4.10.2.4 Online Coverage: Political Parties (by volume)
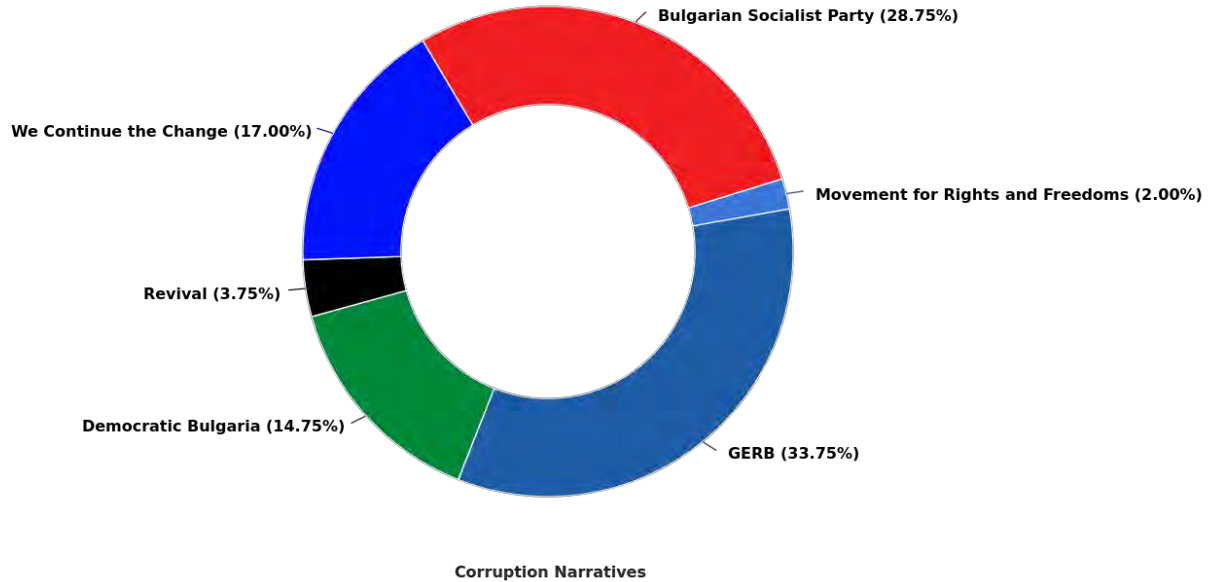
Top Mentioned Political Parties

Bulgarian Socialist Party (28.75%)

Movement for Rights and Freedoms (2.00%)

We Continue the Change (17.00%)

Revival (3.75%)

GERB (33.75%)

Democratic Bulgaria (14.75%)

Corruption Narratives

The chart presents the most mentioned political parties in the context of the story. The findings show that GERB and the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) were the most frequently mentioned, followed by We Continue the Change and Democratic Bulgaria. GERB was featured in many articles, as it was the political entity exerting the biggest influence on Sofia's development since 2005 and until the parliamentary elections in November 2021, when We Continue the Change came first in all three electoral districts in the city. Moreover, the main confrontation regarding the public order of Sofia's street lighting was between City Council Member at Sofia Municipality Boris Bonev and then Deputy Mayor for Transport Christian Krastev. According to an article by Flagman, Christian Krastev was GERB's "preferred candidate" for the position of Sofia's Mayor, which prompted the "ambitious" Boris Bonev to eliminate the competition by highlighting the irregularities in the public order of Sofia's street lighting [250].

BSP, on the other hand, was mentioned frequently due to an interview with a member of the party, Ivan Takov, then Deputy Chair of the Committee on Finance and Budget, for the Bulgarian National Radio, in which he criticized the general state of Sofia's lighting and called on the responsible authorities to perform an inspection and reveal the truth regarding the issue [251].

4.10.3. Social Coverage (Facebook)

The analysis of the Facebook activity in relation to the Sofia street lighting scandal revealed that that the story had received little engagement, indicating a lack of interest among the users. The primary account posting about the scandal was Spasi Sofia, the non-government organization that discovered the price differences in the public procurement contracts. GERB was the most mentioned political party. Overall, the analysis suggests that the public is interested in corruption-related scandals, but engagement may vary depending on the story's broader significance.

Overall Volume (per month)
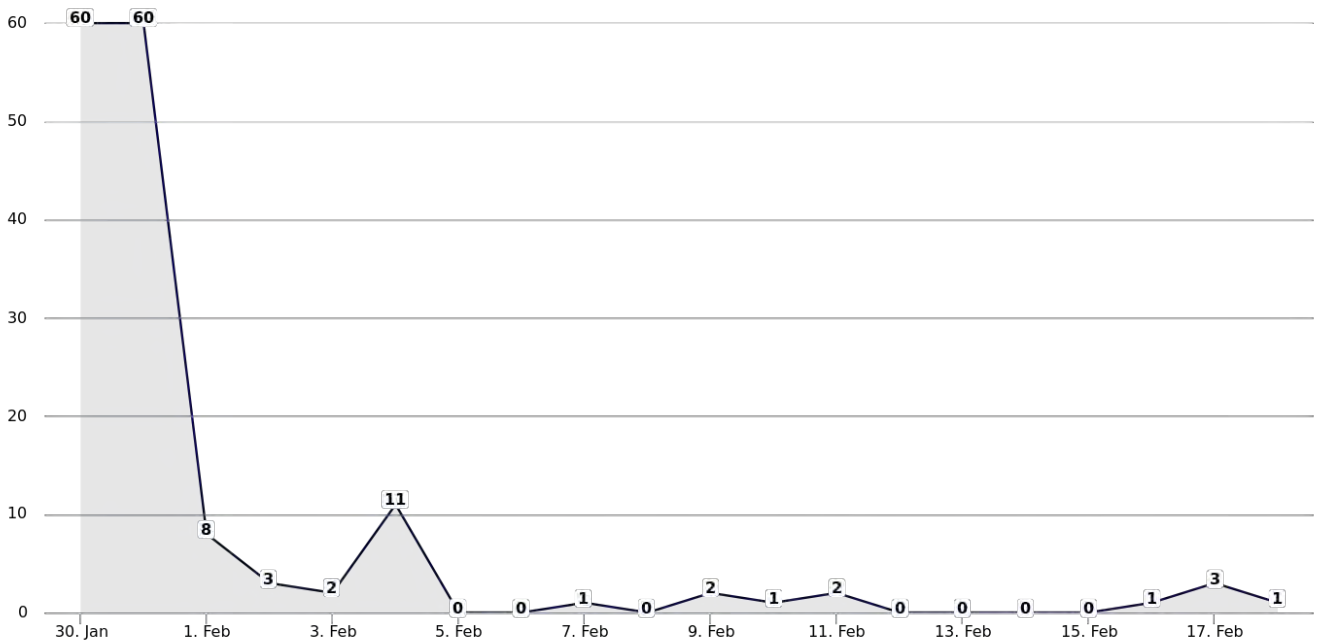
There was a significant content spike in 2022, which gained momentum after Spasi Sofia, a Bulgarian non-governmental watchdog organization, revealed that Christian Krastev, then Sofia's Deputy Mayor for Transport, had authorized street lighting maintenance contracts worth BGN 74 million that were later deemed highly unprofitable.

Top 10 Social Authors (by volume)
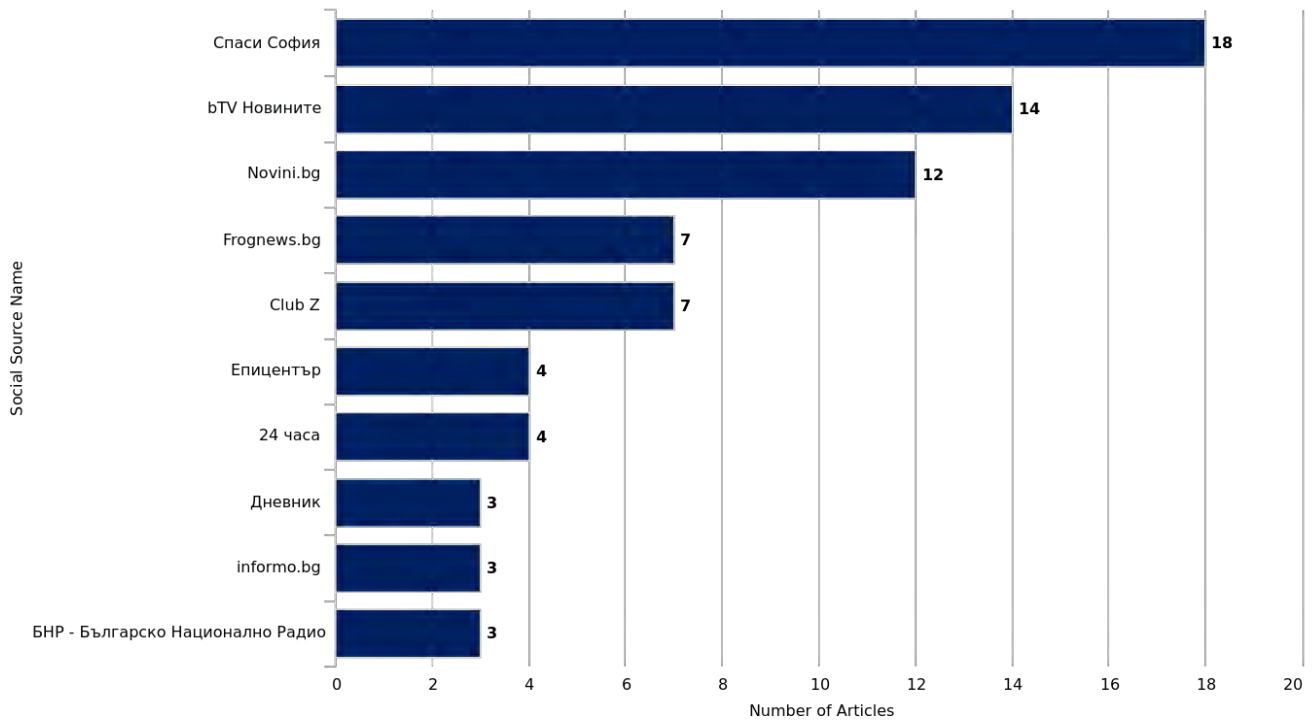
Spasi Sofia's account ranked first by number of posts. This is not surprising since the NGO was the first to launch an investigation into the street lighting and, consequently, posted about the case development throughout the period. The content that appeared on its page received a decent number of supportive engagements. A number of official media outlets pages also shared the story, but the level of engagement they attracted was negligible.

Top Keywords (by volume)

The tag cloud above reveals the most frequently used keywords related to the story, with "Sofia," "lighting," "prices," and "Bonev" (as in Boris Bonev, Spasi Sofia's founder) among the top mentioned. Then Deputy Mayor for Transport, Christian Krastev, who was accused of signing the disadvantageous contracts, appeared only briefly, which suggests that Facebook users were more interested in the main narrative than in the specific details.

4.10.3.1 Social Coverage: Political Parties (by volume)

Top Mentioned Political Parties

Bulgarian Socialist Party (6 / 42.86%)

We Continue the Change (1 / 7.14%)

Democratic Bulgaria (1 / 7.14%)

GERB (6 / 42.86%)
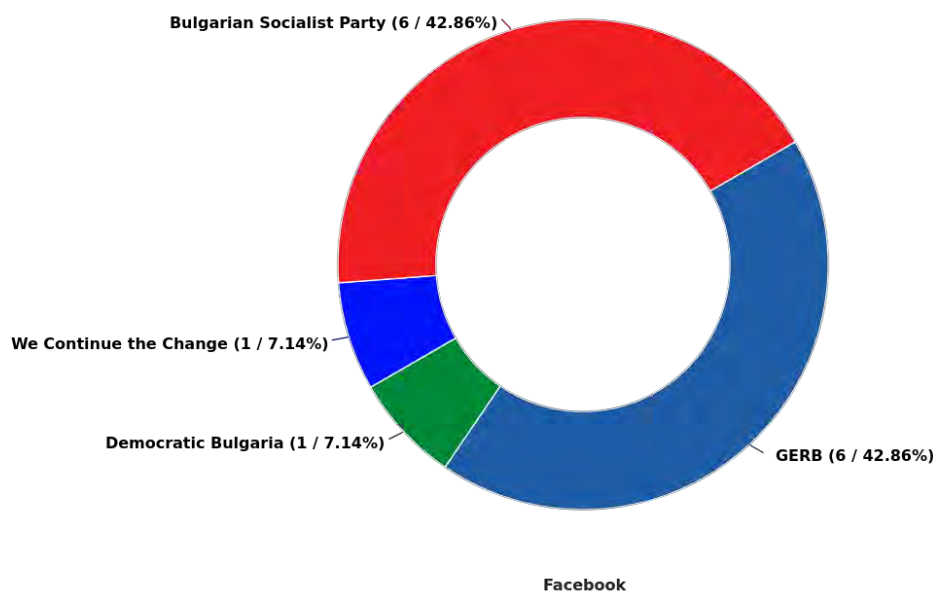
Facebook

Facebook users mainly mentioned the political party GERB and its representatives Yordanka Fandakova (Sofia's Mayor) and Christian Krastev (then Deputy Mayor of Transport). The Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) ranked second in terms of mentions, as it called for the Mayor's resignation after Spasi Sofia's findings were made public.

5. Anticorruption Narratives

5.1. Boyko Borissov's Arrest

5.1.1. Background

Around the middle of March, regional media quoted GERB's leader, Boyko Borissov, who said: "The only thing left is for me to be arrested. We are witnessing grain robbery, business robbery, soaring electricity prices. And now the media even helpfully explained that everything is a consequence of the war" [252]. His statement came during a visit to the city of Vratsa where he met with local farmers and livestock producers. A few days later, on March 17, both national and regional media outlets published thousands of articles related to the news of his arrest. According to various reports, Borissov had been detained alongside his media advisor Sevdalina Arnaudova and the former Finance Minister Vladislav Goranov. Some sources noted that they had received official confirmation from the Ministry of Internal Affairs and that the large-scale operation had been the result of an investigation led by the European Prosecutor's Office [253]. The authorities carried out thorough searches at several locations and indicated that "the action is urgent," meaning that the local Prosecutor's Office was not informed about it in advance. Later that day, Borissov's lawyer Menko Menkov announced that the former was expected to be remanded in custody for a period of 24 hours [254]. According to Menkov, the affair was related to "an accusation of blackmail, but it is not clear who has been blackmailed, nor for what, nor when" [255].

Upon the news release, the media began republishing opinions expressed by different politicians and other notable persons. Then Prime Minister Kiril Petkov wrote on Facebook that "No one is above the law!" [256], while Revival's leader Kostadin Kostadinov posted the following: "Boyko Borissov was detained two days prior to the arrival of the American Minister of Defense, who will ask Bulgaria to provide weapons to Ukraine. It is a complete coincidence, of course. We have yet to find out what exactly is going on, if there are any arrests or detentions, or if Borissov and his group are simply being checked at the moment. One thing is clear, though. The Bulgarian people have been waiting for such an operation for years. Its launch at the current moment means that, obviously, the masters of our country have fallen into a rather difficult situation. And they will try in every possible way to win the trust of the Bulgarians" [257]. In addition, Vassil Bozhkov, an infamous Bulgarian businessman sanctioned by several foreign governments and currently thought to be residing in

the UAE, also commented on the arrest, saying: "For two years, Geshev [Chief Public Prosecutor since November 26, 2019] did everything in his power to get rid of his accomplices, right after I provided indisputable evidence of the biggest racket in the country's history. Following my testimony before the European Prosecutor's Office last month, today Boyko Borissov, Vladislav Goranov, and Menda Stoyanova [GERB representative and former member of the Bulgarian National Assembly] were finally arrested. The truth always comes out" [258]. What is more, former MP Mika Zaykova came up with a "conspiracy theory," according to which Borissov had staged his own arrest [259].

On the other hand, the GERB politician Tomislav Donchev noted that "in a normal country, the arrest of a prime minister would cause a big scandal [...] What we are currently witnessing resembles political repression" [260]. A similar sentiment was expressed by his fellow party member Emil Radev, who claimed that this is "unprecedented political revanchism incompatible with the democratic legal order" [261]. The TV channel Nova published on its official website a summary of other statements by pro-GERB commentators, among them the writer and journalist Lyuben Dilov Jr. who posted, on his Facebook profile, that the arrest is a "great way to divert attention from force majeure decisions: Are we in NATO or are we not? What about the electricity, fuel, oil, etc. prices? Every day is fair day in the village of the giddy-headed!" [262]. The said channel also cited the European People's Party (EPP) President, Manfred Weber, who wrote: "The EPP Group in the European Parliament and the EPP are very concerned by the events in Sofia last night. The detention of opposition leader and former Prime Minister of Bulgaria Boyko Borissov raises many questions which need to be clarified urgently. First of all by the Bulgarian police who appear to have taken action without an arrest warrant, and secondly by the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO) who are said by the Bulgarian authorities to have provided the evidence that led to the arrest. Any alleged misuse of EU funds needs to be investigated without exception. This includes the responsibility of authorities to provide explanations to the public. The fight against corruption can only be successful if it is based on a clear separation of powers and due process within the framework of the rule of law" [263]. In this context,

the newspaper Capital published a piece that deemed "unsuccessful" GERB's attempt "to engage the European Parliament in the defense of Borissov through the EPP Group" [264].

On March 18, national media reported that Boyko Borissov had been released from custody as no charges had been brought against him. Immediately after, he stated: "What happened was a brutal return to communist times. Last night, while we were having dinner, the police entered and turned the whole house upside down. No accusations, no nothing. We spent 24 hours in a cell without a single policeman showing up, as if it was 1944," adding: "I am worried that next time they might kill me." [265]. For her part, the speaker of the Sofia City Prosecutor's Office, Desislava Petrova, highlighted the fact that then PM Kiril Petkov had been the first to be interrogated in relation to the case and that he had disclosed information about "a meeting with Laura Kövesi [European Chief Prosecutor and former Prosecutor General of Romania], with whom they had discussed Vassil Bozhkov's public claims that he had been blackmailed by Borissov, Arnaudova, and Goranov." Petrova clarified that "Vassil Bozhkov himself was not questioned" [266]. Over the following days, Borissov's lawyer said that "Kiril Petkov and Laura Köveshi have stirred an absolute precedent of a scandal, which will have consequences" [267]. In a separate statement, he declared that "Borissov is a world-class politician. He will not sue the state, neither by way of local institutions, nor through international ones. He will not sue Prime Minister Kiril Petkov either" [268].

On March 21, the media circulated the first official statement made by the European Prosecutor's Office, which confirmed "the receipt of several signals from Bulgaria containing serious allegations of fraud concerning European funds, in addition to systemic corruption displayed by senior public officials [...] Further details will not be released so that the investigation outcomes are not jeopardized. If any future information could be made public, this would be done proactively" [269]. Around the same time, the now former member of the Bulgarian National Assembly, Stanislav Balabanov, expressed the opinion that the arrest and the almost immediate release that followed "showed once again to the Bulgarian society and perhaps for the first time to the European Prosecutor's Office that we do not really have a Prosecutor's Office. Our current one simply continues to guard the criminal status quo" [270].

A month later, on April 14, the Sofia District Court announced its ruling that the arrest of former Prime Minister Boyko Borissov in mid-March had been illegal. The news caused a scandal to erupt in the Parliament between the ruling party and the opposition. GERB's representative Desislava Atanasova asked: "Who forced you, my poor Mr. Kiril Petkov, to start this outrage with the spell "no one is above the law"? You are not above the law either, though. My poor Mr. Petkov, which force of nature installed you as a Prime Minister? Do you have any idea?". We Continue the Change, however, defended Petkov with MP Iskren Petkov responding to Atanasova as follows: "This so-called force of nature is the Bulgarian citizens' hope for justice" [271]. Finally, in September, national media reported that the European Parliament would discuss the circumstances surrounding the arrest as part of the general debate session titled "Fundamental Rights in the EU" [272].

5.1.2. Online Coverage

5.1.2.1 Overall Metrics and Volume Comparison

The arrest of former Prime Minister Boyko Borissov was the biggest anticorruption narrative monitored as part of this report with more than 18,000 articles published in relation to it. Prominent Sources published the biggest amount of content (around 9,000), followed by Media Aggregators (around 4,500), and Less Prominent Sources (around 3,100). Influence Networks published the least content (around 1,600).

The sources monitored in the context of this story share a similar audience demographic, with people between the ages of 25 and 44 constituting the largest percentage of the readership. In addition, the traffic was generated primarily from Bulgaria. However, the sources differ in terms of how they gained the said traffic. Prominent Sources and Media Aggregators received most of it directly or via search engines, Less Prominent Sources—directly, and Influence Networks through social media.

The majority of the articles published on the story referred to corruption indirectly. Due to the national interest in the matter and the involvement of all major political forces in the country, the story was extensively covered by sources categorized as National Media.

Top Keywords (by volume)
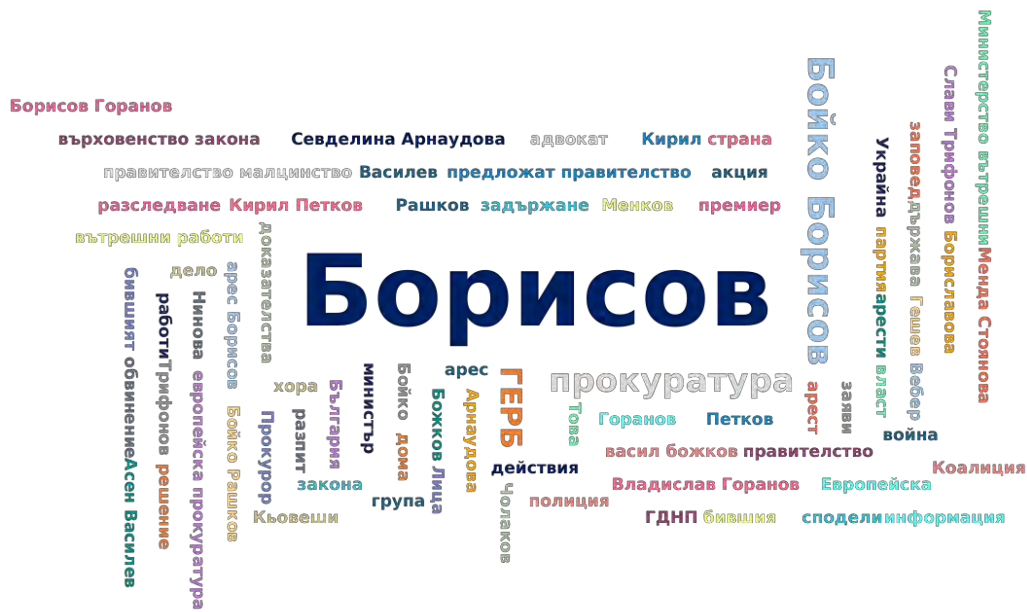
A tag-cloud representation of the most frequently used keywords or phrases within the monitored story. The size of each word in the cloud is a relative indicator of the term's popularity, thereby allowing for the discernment of the most prominent and widely discussed points of interest. In this particular case, the most frequently mentioned keywords were the names of former Prime Minister Boyko Borissov, his political party GERB, and the "prosecutor's office." Other significant words include "investigation," "government," "law," "detention," and the names of Borissov's media advisor Sevdalina Arnaudova, as well as his associates Vladislav Goranov and Menda Stoyanova, who were apprehended alongside him.

Volume Comparison – Corruption Keywords vs. Corruption-Associated Keywords
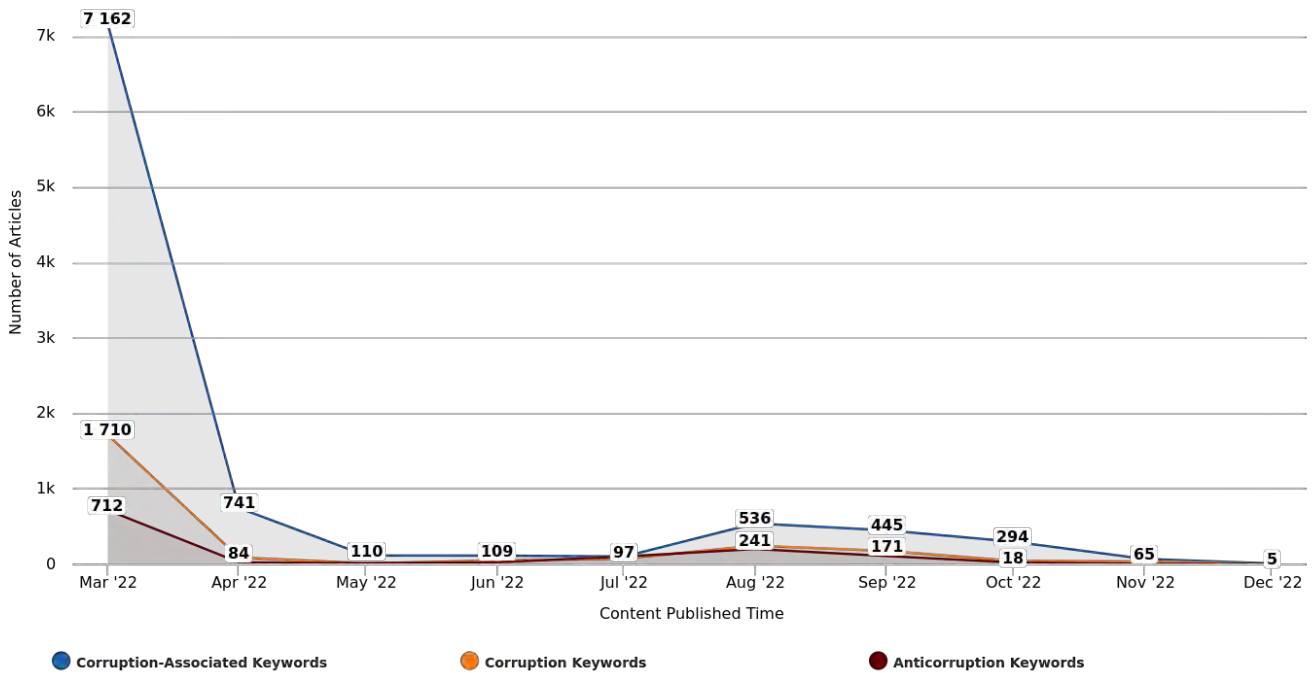
An analysis of the volume distribution of the pieces of content that reference corruption, either directly or indirectly, and the pieces of content that reference anticorruption directly. In the case of Boyko Borissov's arrest, the content was found to feature many words associated with corrupt practices. The term "corruption" and its derivatives were used sparingly, whereas the word "anticorruption" was even less frequently employed. This suggests a general perception of the story as a negative, rather than a positive and proactive step aimed at addressing the overall issues.

Potential Reach Comparison – Corruption Keywords vs. Corruption-Associated Keywords
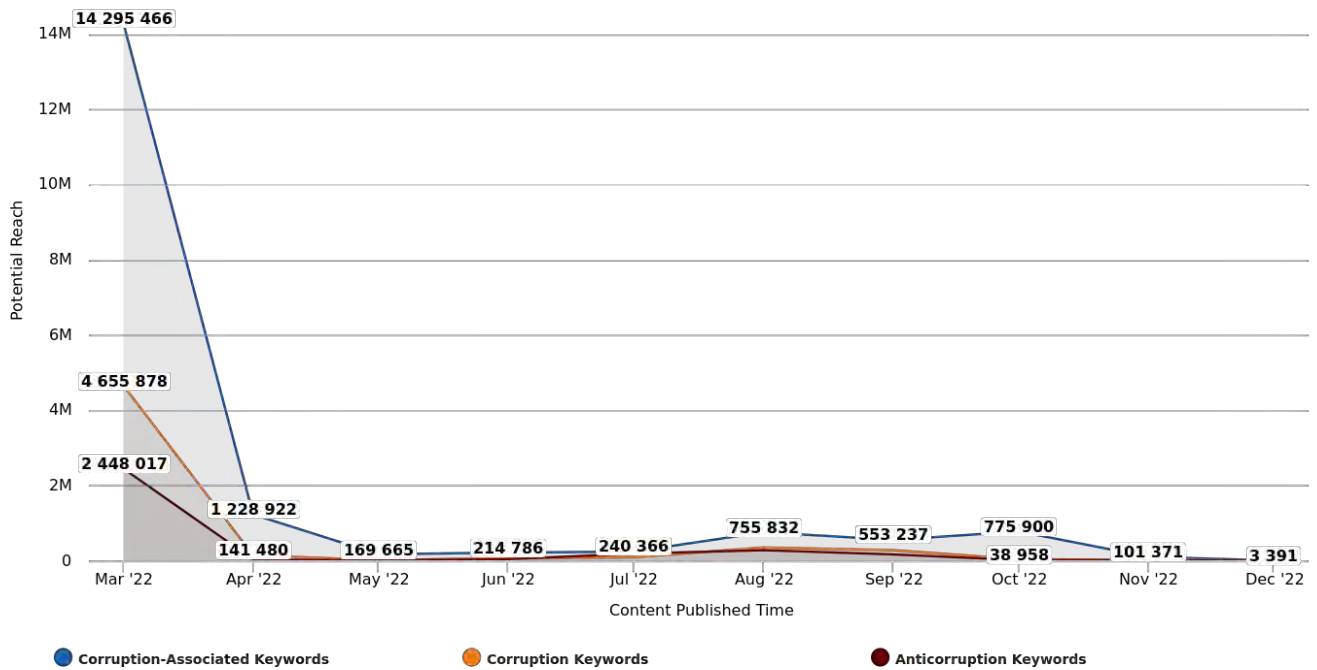
Corruption-Associated Keywords   **Corruption Keywords**   **Anticorruption Keywords**

Potential reach distribution of the pieces of content, which reference corruption either directly or indirectly, and the pieces of content, which reference anticorruption directly. The potential reach distribution pattern closely parallels the volume distribution of the content. Specifically, the content that references corruption indirectly tends to have the widest potential reach, followed by the content that references corruption directly, and lastly the content that refers to anticorruption.

Stacked Volume Comparison (by source type)
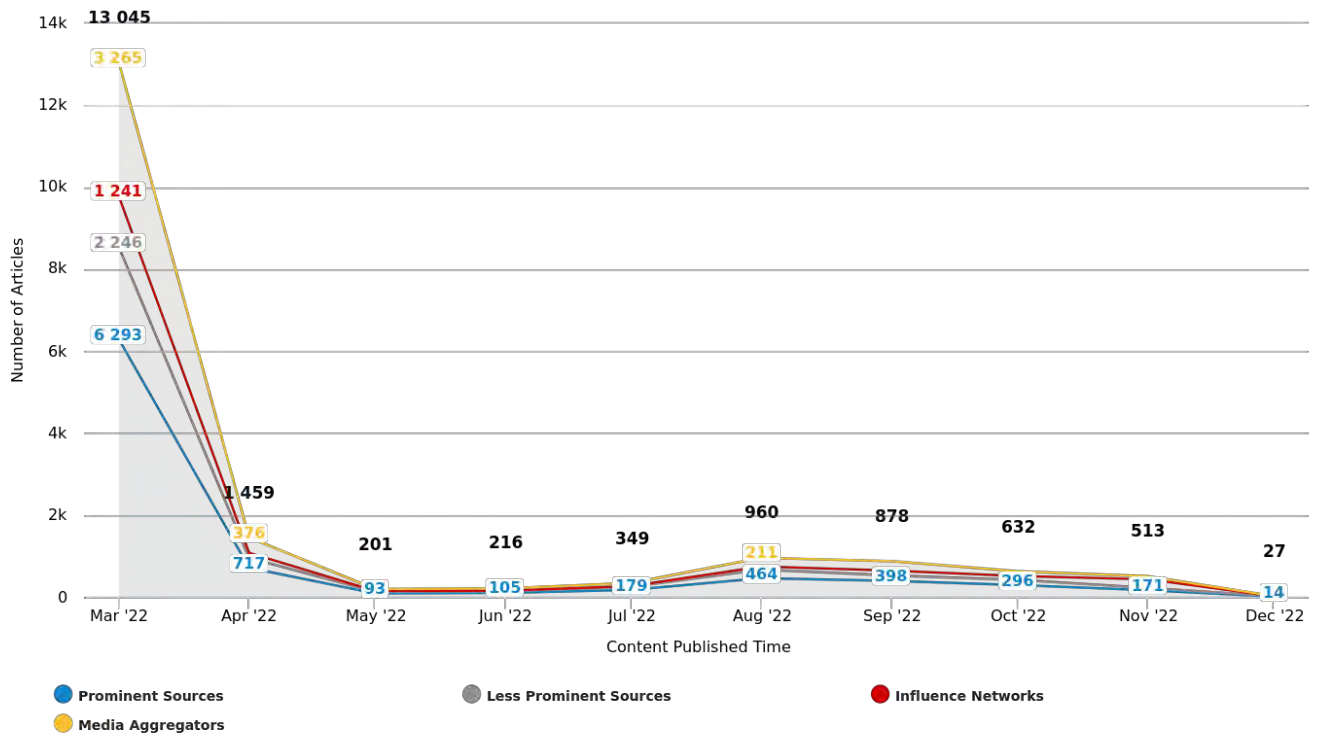
Prominent Sources   **Less Prominent Sources**   **Influence Networks**
Media Aggregators

Stacked volume distribution of the story per type of sources. Prominent Sources were most prolific in terms of volume, followed by Media Aggregators and Less Prominent Sources. The Influence Networks were the least active, republishing various headlines with no specific coordination in this case.

Stacked Potential Reach Comparison (by source type)
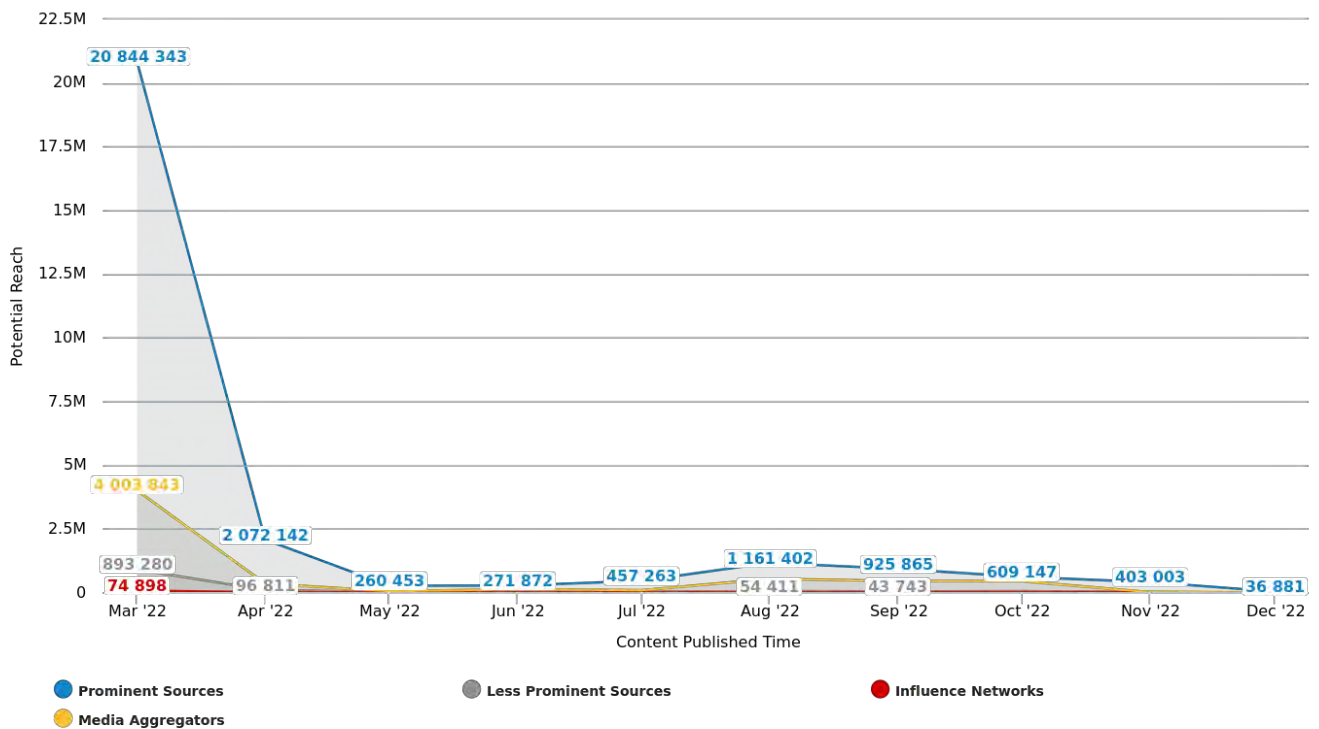
Stacked potential reach distribution of the story per type of sources. Prominent Sources have the widest potential reach, followed by Less Prominent Sources and Media Aggregators. The Influence Networks' potential reach was so low that it is almost indistinguishable in the chart.
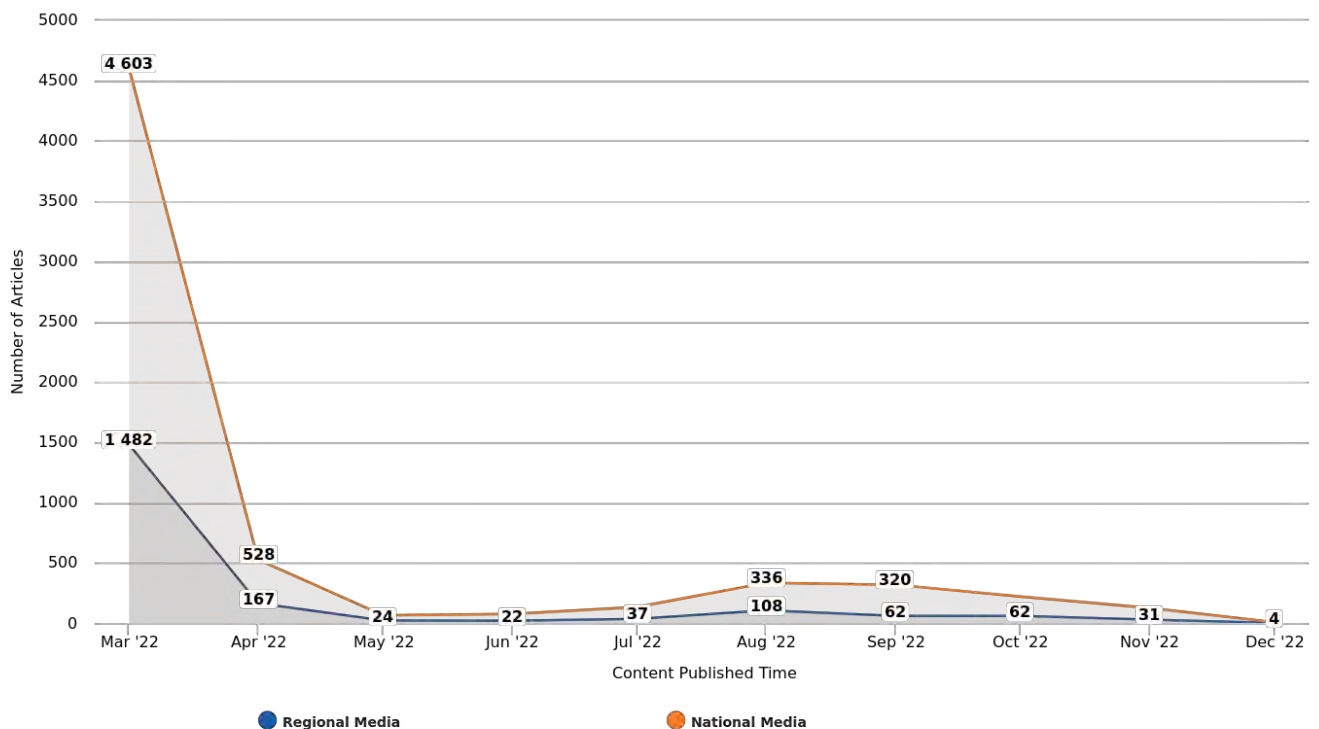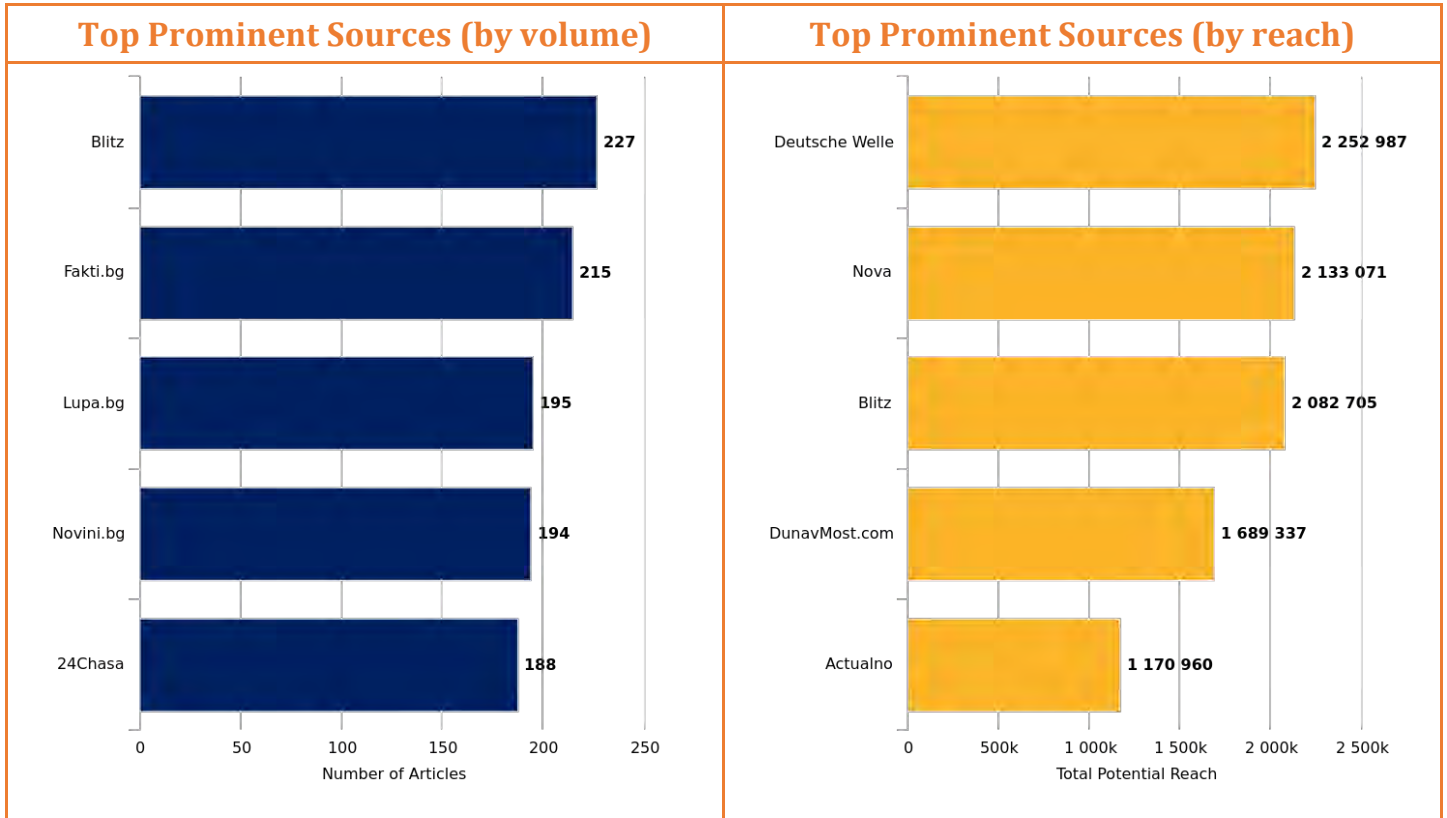
Volume Comparison - Regional vs National Sources

Volume distribution of the story in the National and Regional Media. National Media published more content compared to Regional Media.

Potential reach Comparison - Regional vs National Sources
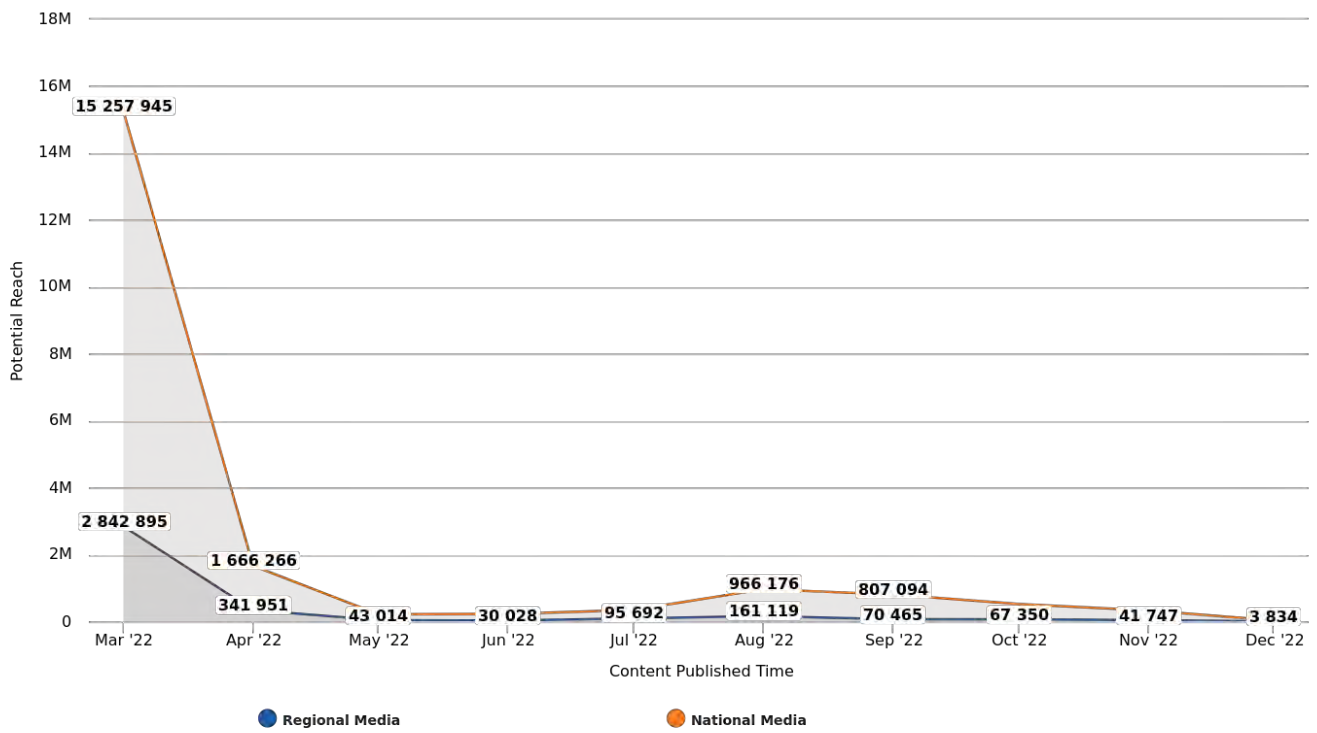
Potential reach distribution of the story in the National and Regional Media. The potential reach of National Media sources far exceeds that of Regional Media, due not only to Regional Media's more limited audience, but also to the lower amount of published content.
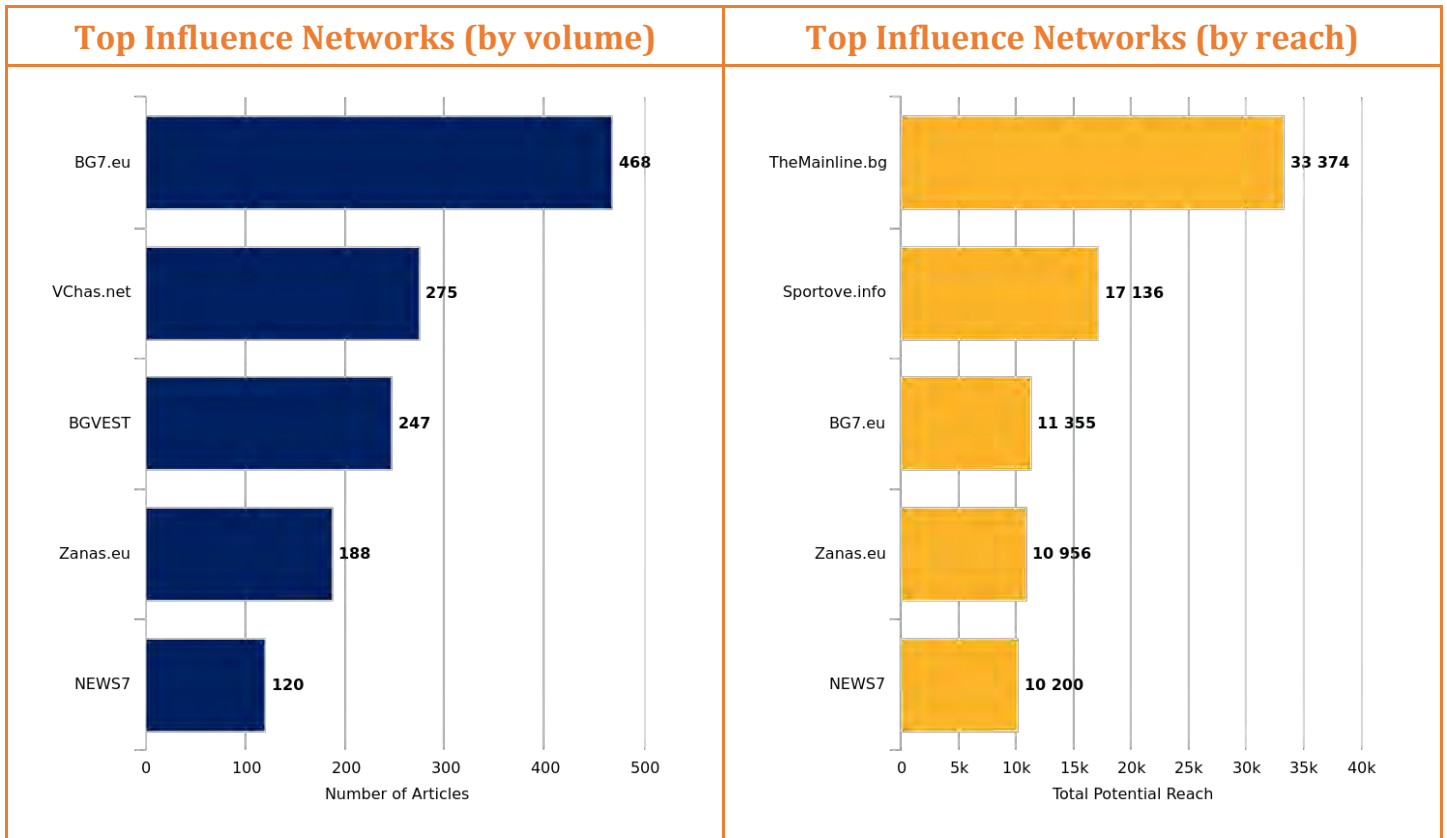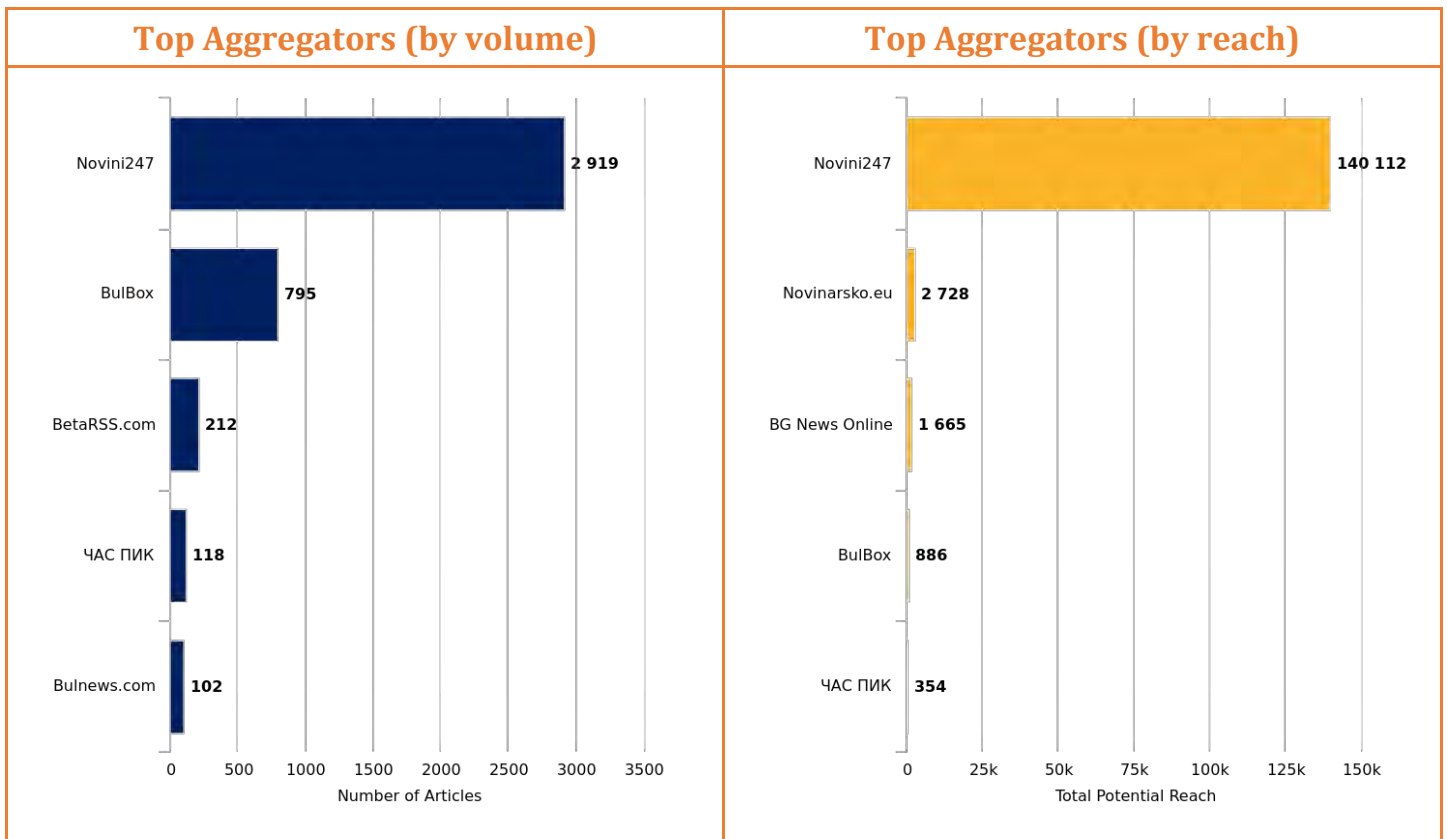
5.1.2.2 Online Coverage by Source Type

Top Prominent Sources (by volume)

Source	Number of Articles
Blitz	227
Fakti.bg	215
Lupa.bg	195
Novini.bg	194
24Chasa	188

Top Prominent Sources (by reach)

Source	Total Potential Reach
Deutsche Welle	2 252 987
Nova	2 133 071
Blitz	2 082 705
DunavMost.com	1 689 337
Actualno	1 170 960

The chart on the left displays the Top Prominent Sources (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Prominent Sources (by potential reach). The numbers point to the conclusion that even though some sources publish less in terms of volume, they manage to reach a considerably wider audience.

Top Less Prominent Sources (by volume)

Source	Number of Articles
Komedia	117
Varna24.bg	104
King of Net	97
news.bg	73
Telegraph	71

Top Less Prominent Sources (by reach)

Source	Total Potential Reach
novinibg.eu	121 025
Varna24.bg	116 662
Rodopi24 Blogspot	111 420
Politikata.net	92 430
PlovdivNews.bg	76 356
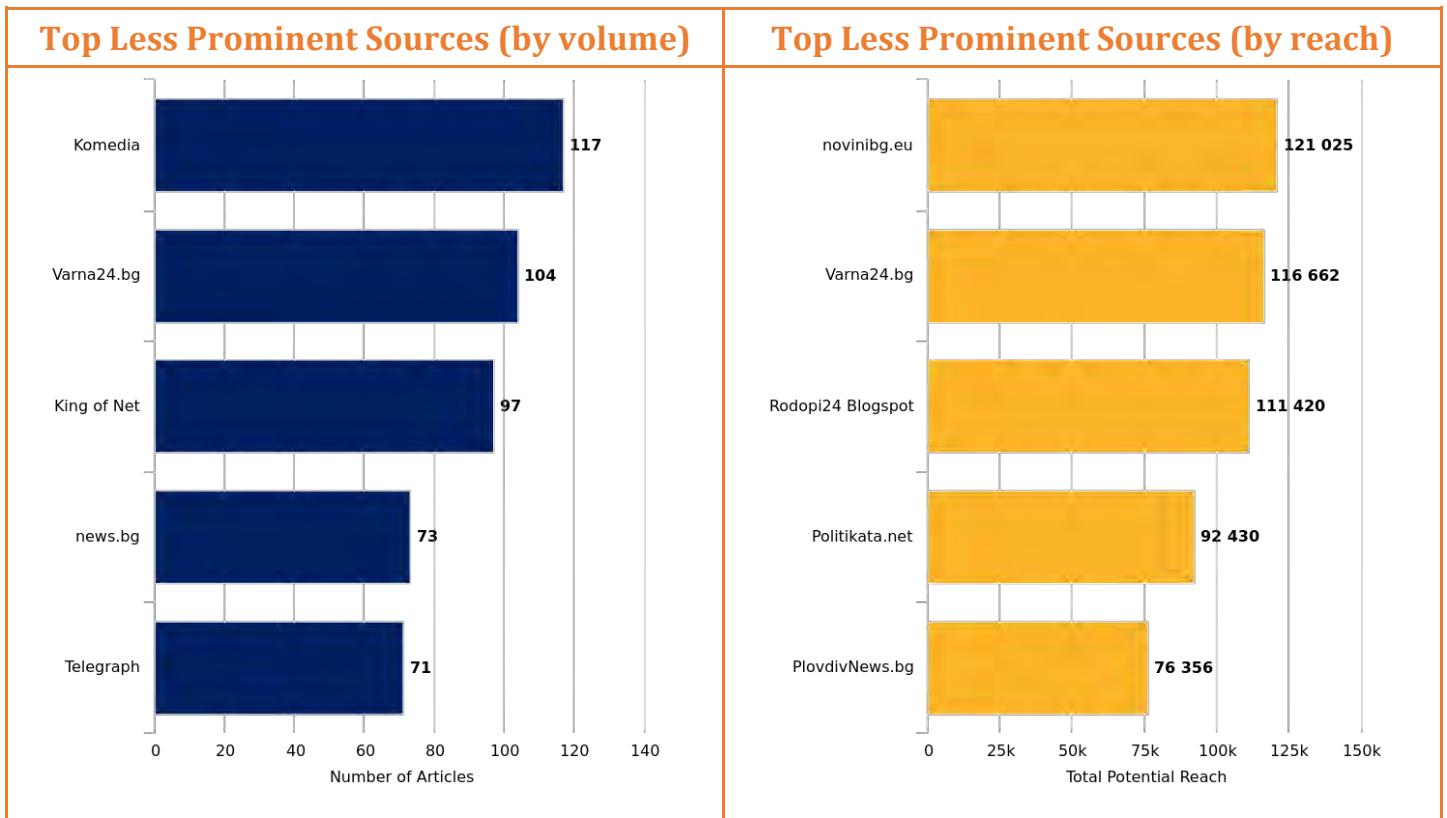
The chart on the left displays the Top Less Prominent Sources (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Less Prominent Sources (by potential reach). "Komedia" published the most content on the story, however, "Novini BG," which is not among the Top 10 Sources in terms of volume, reached the widest audience.
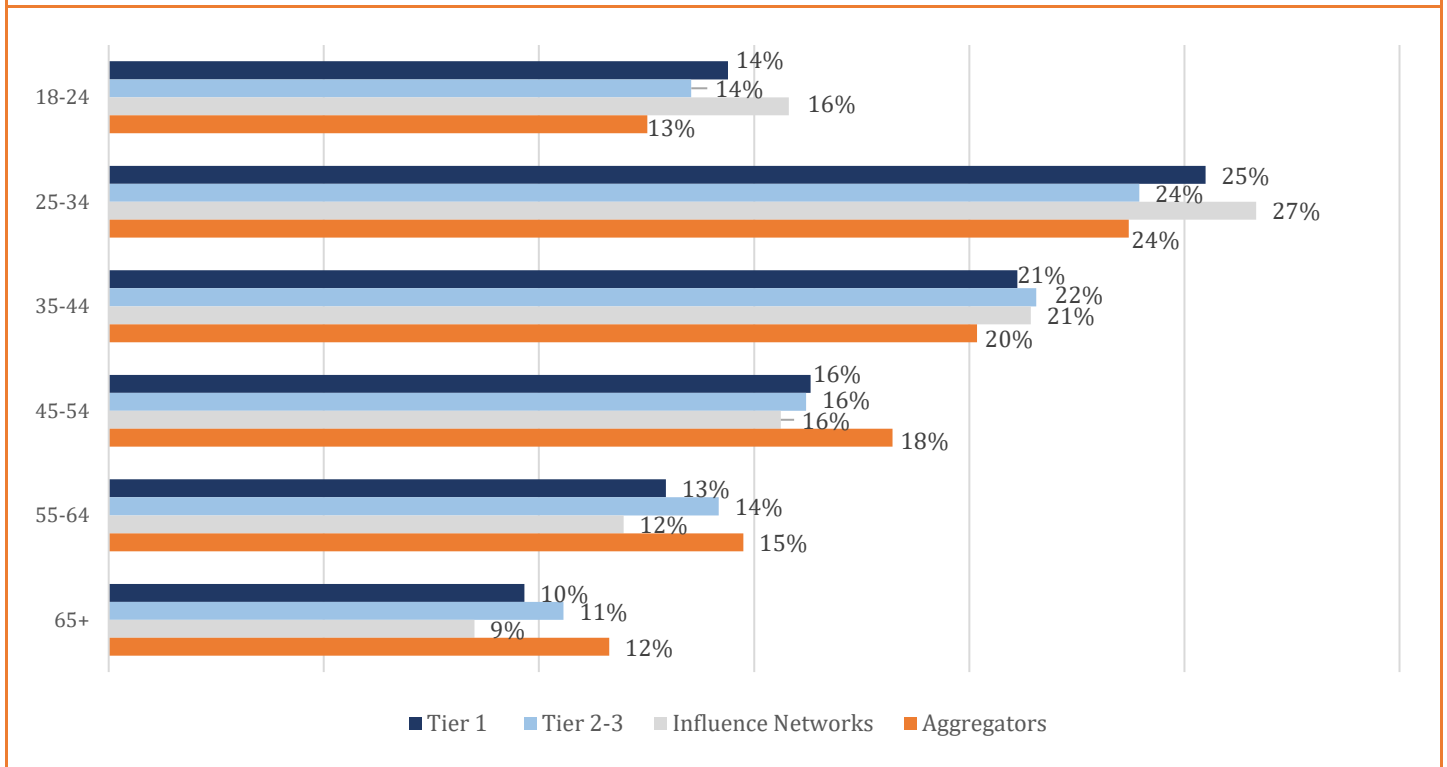
Top Influence Networks (by volume)

Network	Number of Articles
BG7.eu	468
VChas.net	275
BGVEST	247
Zanas.eu	188
NEWS7	120

Top Influence Networks (by reach)

Network	Total Potential Reach
TheMainline.bg	33 374
Sportove.info	17 136
BG7.eu	11 355
Zanas.eu	10 956
NEWS7	10 200

The chart on the left displays the Top Influence Networks (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Influence Networks (by potential reach). Although "BG7" published the most content, "The Mainline" had the biggest potential reach.

Top Aggregators (by volume)

Aggregator	Number of Articles
Novini247	2 919
BulBox	795
BetaRSS.com	212
ЧАС ПИК	118
Bulnews.com	102

Top Aggregators (by reach)

Aggregator	Total Potential Reach
Novini247	140 112
Novinarsko.eu	2 728
BG News Online	1 665
BulBox	886
ЧАС ПИК	354

The chart on the left displays the Top Media Aggregators (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Media Aggregators (by potential reach). "Novini247" published the most content and had the biggest potential reach.

5.1.2.3 Online Coverage: Source Audience

Source Audience by Age per Source Type

Legend: ■ Tier 1 ■ Tier 2-3 ■ Influence Networks ■ Aggregators

Age	Tier 1	Tier 2-3	Influence Networks	Aggregators
18-24	14%	14%	16%	13%
25-34	25%	24%	27%	24%
35-44	21%	22%	21%	20%
45-54	16%	16%	16%	18%
55-64	13%	14%	12%	15%
65+	10%	11%	9%	12%

The chart illustrates the different level of engagement with the four types of monitored sources (Prominent Sources, Less Prominent Sources, Media Aggregators, and Influence Networks) among six age groups. The result shows that the people most interested in the story are between the ages of 25 and 44. The people above 65 years of age comprise the lowest audience percentage. It is worth noting that, in this case, they engaged mainly with Less Prominent Sources and Influence Networks.

Source Audience by Top Countries per Source Type

Legend: ■ Tier 1 ■ Tier 2-3 ■ Influence Networks ■ Aggregators

Country	Tier 1	Tier 2-3	Influence Networks	Aggregators
Bulgaria	89.2%	91.2%	97.1%	96.6%
United States	3.9%	4.4%	1.5%	1.4%
Germany	2.6%	2.1%	0.0%	0.8%
Others	4%	2.3%	1.5%	1.2%

The chart displays the geographical distribution of the websites visitors per source type. The traffic comes mostly from Bulgaria, with the United States taking the second place among all source types.

Source Audience by Traffic per Source Type

Direct
- Tier 1: 39.92%
- Tier 2-3: 79.98%
- Influence Networks: 16.69%
- Aggregators: 8.32%

Search
- Tier 1: 27.37%
- Tier 2-3: 6.44%
- Influence Networks: 0.01%
- Aggregators: 86.94%

Social
- Tier 1: 20.01%
- Tier 2-3: 6.21%
- Influence Networks: 83.30%
- Aggregators: 1.90%

Referral
- Tier 1: 6.48%
- Tier 2-3: 6.88%
- Influence Networks: 0.00%
- Aggregators: 2.29%

Email
- Tier 1: 6.18%
- Tier 2-3: 0.44%
- Influence Networks: 0%
- Aggregators: 0.55%

Others
- Tier 1: 0.04%
- Tier 2-3: 0.1%
- Influence Networks: 0%
- Aggregators: 0%

■ Tier 1 ■ Tier 2-3 ■ Influence Networks ■ Aggregators
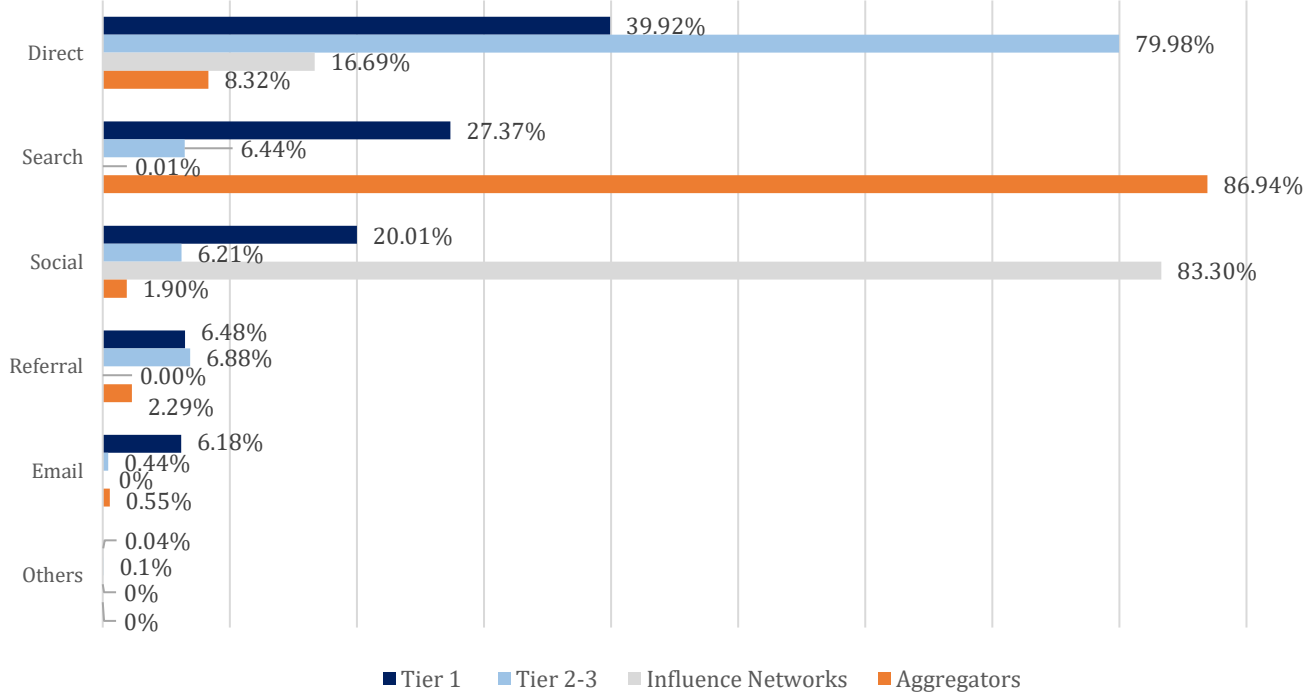
The chart compares the source of traffic and its volume generated by the four monitored source types. Prominent Sources and Media Aggregators gained most of it directly or via a search engine. Less Prominent sources gained their traffic predominantly through direct clicks and Influence Networks—via social media.

Source Audience by Social Network per Source Type
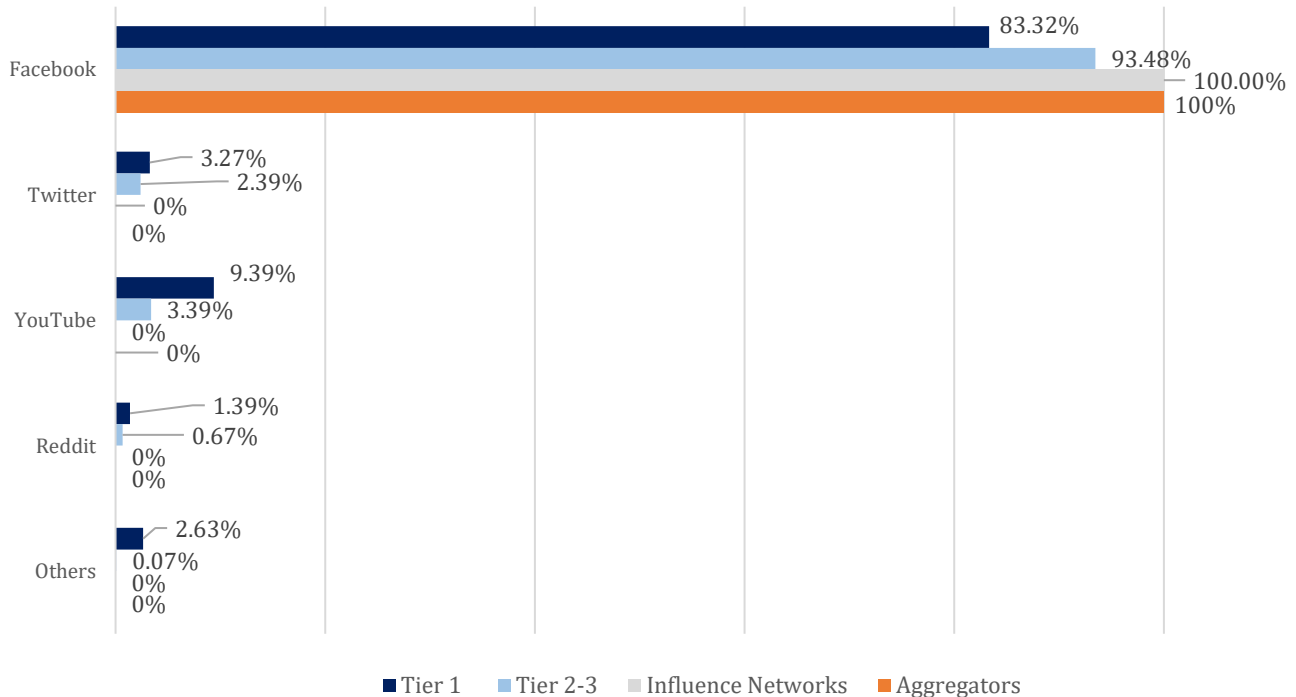
Facebook
- Tier 1: 83.32%
- Tier 2-3: 93.48%
- Influence Networks: 100.00%
- Aggregators: 100%

Twitter
- Tier 1: 3.27%
- Tier 2-3: 2.39%
- Influence Networks: 0%
- Aggregators: 0%

YouTube
- Tier 1: 9.39%
- Tier 2-3: 3.39%
- Influence Networks: 0%
- Aggregators: 0%

Reddit
- Tier 1: 1.39%
- Tier 2-3: 0.67%
- Influence Networks: 0%
- Aggregators: 0%

Others
- Tier 1: 2.63%
- Tier 2-3: 0.07%
- Influence Networks: 0%
- Aggregators: 0%

■ Tier 1 ■ Tier 2-3 ■ Influence Networks ■ Aggregators

The chart illustrates the source audience distribution according to the traffic of the website gained via social network per source type. The findings highlight Facebook's dominance in all monitored types of sources.

5.1.2.4 Online Coverage: Political Parties (by volume)

Top Mentioned Political Parties

Revival (2.06%)

Democratic Bulgaria (5.89%)

We Continue the Change (10.47%)

There is Such a People (6.19%)

Bulgarian Socialist Party (5.73%)

Movement for Rights and Freedoms (2.87%)

GERB (66.80%)

Corruption Narratives
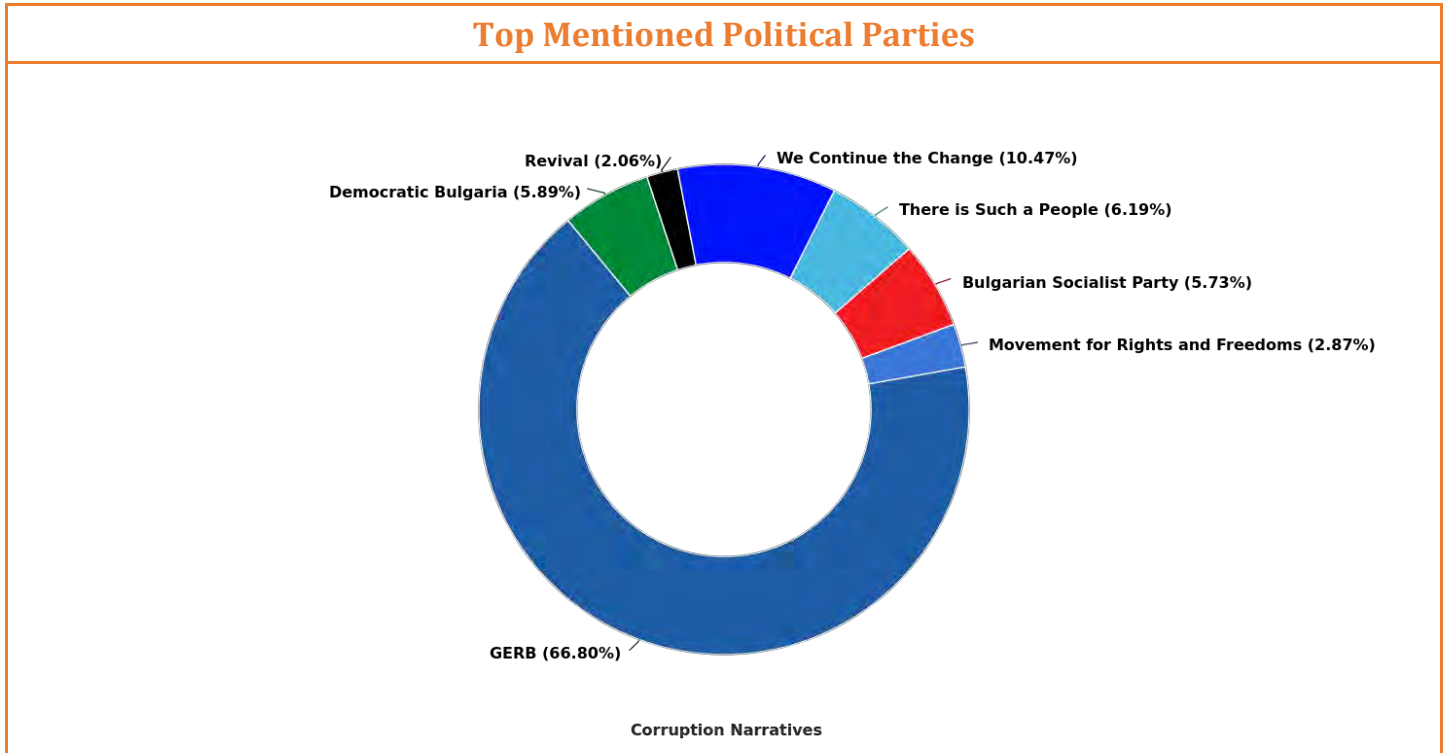
The chart presents the most mentioned political parties in the context of Boyko Borissov's arrest. GERB ranked first with a little over 66%, due to the fact that its leader and former Prime Minister was arrested alongside several other members of the party. We Continue the Change took the second place with 10.5%, followed by There is Such a People with a bit over 6%, and the Bulgarian Socialist Party and Democratic Bulgaria with nearly 6% each. We Continue the Change was mentioned as the then ruling political party that initiated the arrests and, therefore, was a vital part of the subsequent discussions. The rest of the parties were mentioned mostly due to media outlets quoting their leaders' or members' reactions to the arrest.

5.1.3. Social Coverage (Facebook)

The arrest of former Prime Minister Boyko Borissov in March 2022 triggered a flurry of public discussions in Facebook that persisted throughout the year. The story gained prominence on March 18, the day of Borissov's release, sparking heated debates as users weighed in on the issue. In April, the Sofia District Court ruled that Borissov's arrest had been illegal, which led to a fresh wave of comments. Despite this, social media content gradually decreased after April, with user interactions accounting for 80% of the content. The keywords related to Borissov and his party, as well as the words

associated with his arrest, portrayed him in a negative light. Political parties received relatively low levels of attention, except for GERB and We Continue the Change, with the former accounting for 73% of the total content. The biggest number of publications can be traced to the Facebook accounts of media outlets that are primarily critical of GERB. PIK stood out as the second most active social author with posts against the opposition party under Kiril Petkov's leadership. Overall, the Facebook content pointed towards a division between users, with some in favor of the arrest and others against it.

Overall Volume (per month)
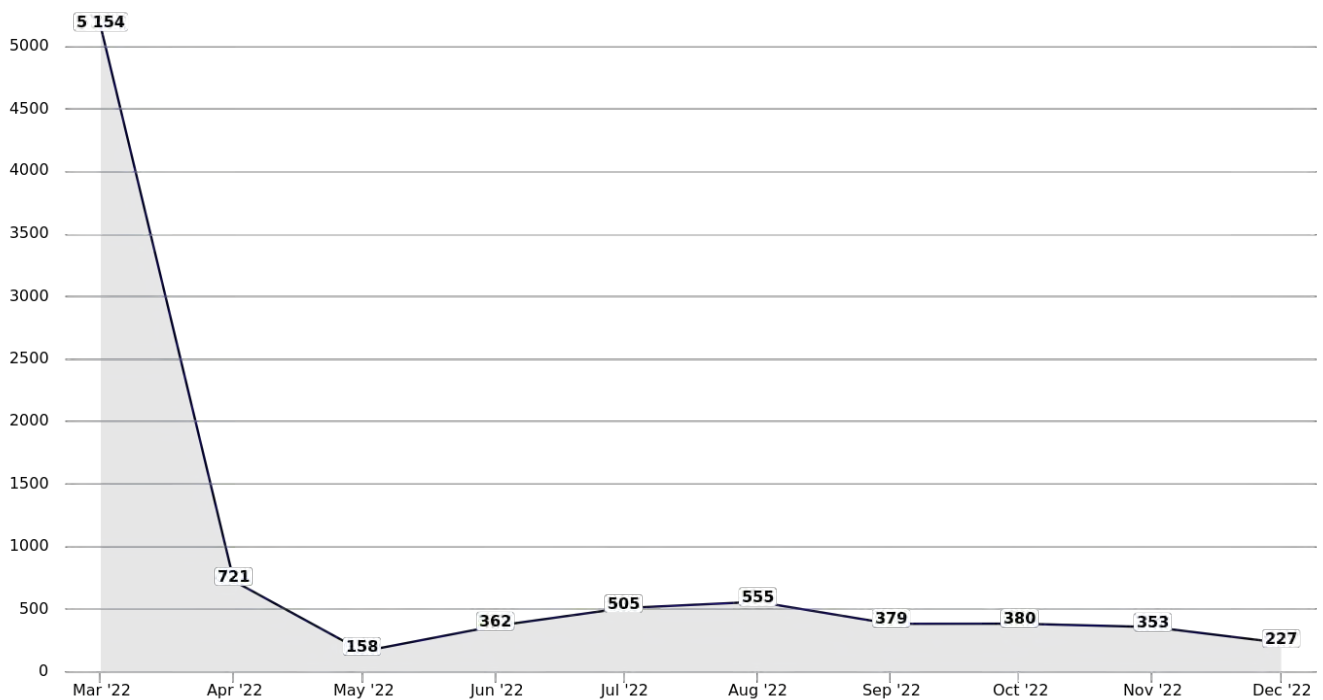
The story gained momentum in March 2022, following the arrest of Boyko Borissov with the discussions related to the event persisting throughout the rest of the year. The initial news coverage was met with disbelief, which was partly due to the media's scattered and misinformed reporting. On March 18, the day of Boyko Borissov's release, the story sparked heated debates on Facebook. Following the announcement by the Sofia District Court in April that Borissov's arrest had been deemed illegal, the content surged once again. After April, the number of relevant posts gradually decreased and user interactions accounted for 80% of the content. Many of the comments appeared to be unrelated to the original posts under which they were written.

Top 10 Social Authors (by volume)
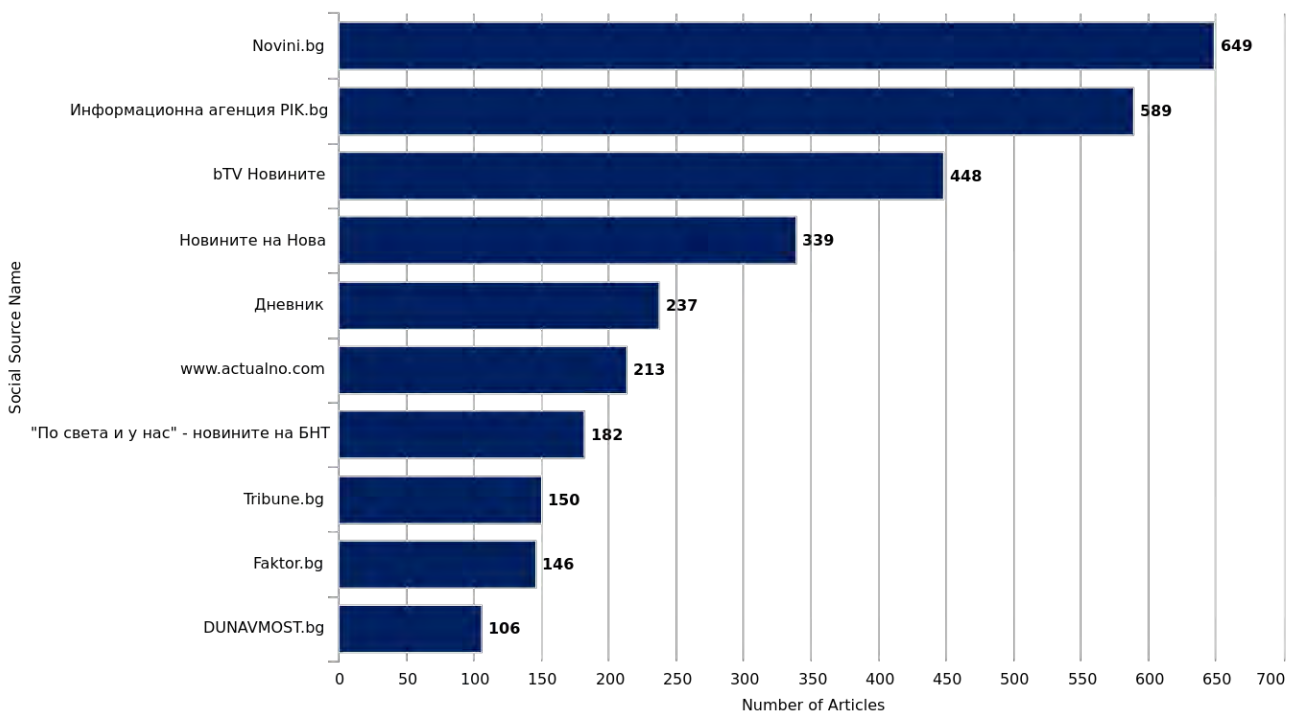
As illustrated by the chart above, the biggest number of publications can be traced to the Facebook accounts of media outlets that are primarily critical of GERB. Furthermore, PIK stood out as the second most active social author with posts against the opposition party under Kiril Petkov's leadership.

Top Keywords (by volume)

The tag cloud above includes keywords related to Boyko Borissov and his party, as well as words associated with his arrest, which are central to the story. The term "Communist Borissov" also appears in the cloud, indicating a negative portrayal of the former Prime Minister. Overall, the Facebook content and, consequently, the most frequently used keywords, point towards a division between the users with some in favor of the arrest and others against it. A distinctive number of comments referred to the incident as a form of political revanchism organized by then Prime Minister Kiril Petkov. Users referred to his Facebook post, published shortly before the arrest, according to which "No one is above the law." The phrase was turned against Petkov with people claiming his actions hint at alleged corrupt dealings. Different profiles also shared the opinion that the aim of the arrest was to distract the public from steps taken by the Petkov government. Other users described their disbelief and joy. Many mentioned that this action had been long overdue and that other GERB members should be prosecuted as well.

5.1.3.1 Social Coverage: Political Parties (by volume)

Top Mentioned Political Parties
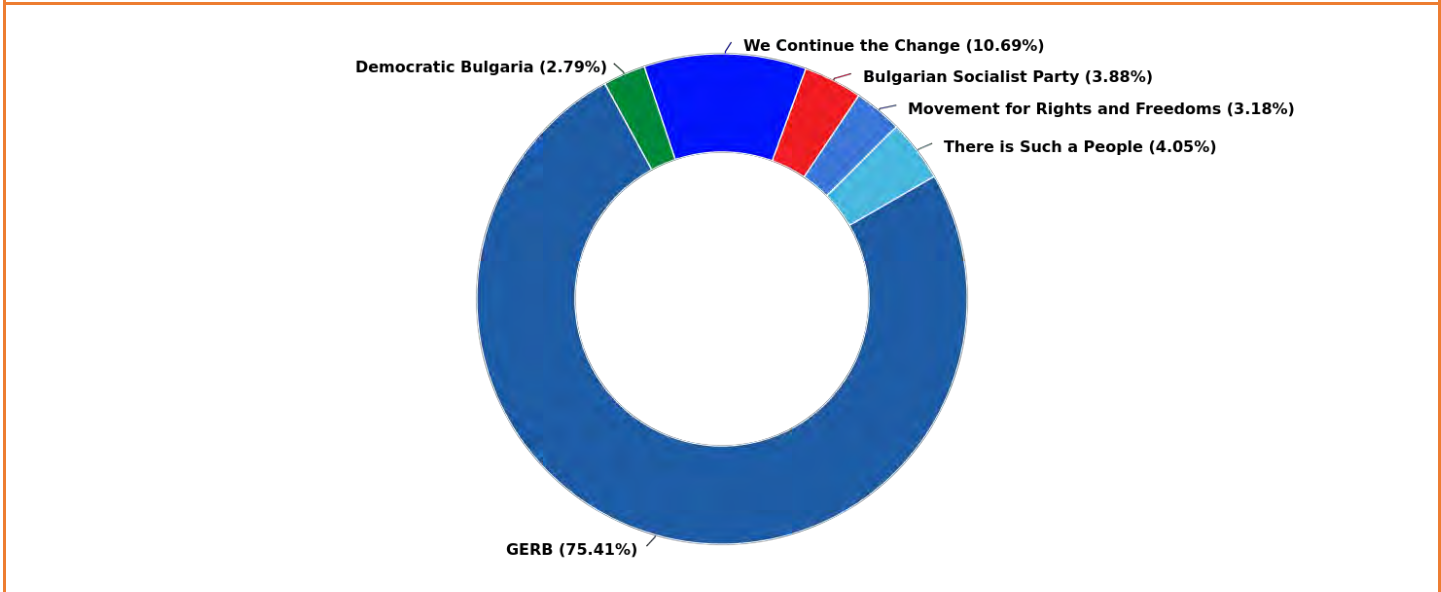
GERB's mentions accounted for 73% of the total content. This is likely due to both the arrest of the party's leader and the ongoing discussions for and against the party. On March 17, Prime Minister Kiril Petkov wrote a Facebook post stating that "No one is above the law!". The sentence generated a lot of discussion, causing We Continue the Change to receive the second highest number of mentions in the context of the story. All other political parties received relatively low levels of attention as they only expressed their perspectives on the matter, without taking any action of consequence.

5.2. Establishment of the Revision Commission

5.2.1. Background

After the April 2021 Parliamentary elections, the coalition that Maya Manolova, National Ombudsman until September 2019, led, initially named Stand Up! Mafia, Get Out!, became part of the 45th National Assembly. During the campaign, Manolova stressed that among the coalition's priorities would be a revision of Boyko Borissov's government [273]. Soon after, an official proposal for the establishment of a Revision Commission was submitted [274], which was then accepted with a unanimous vote. Media outlets commented that even GERB deputies had been in favor [275]. At its first meeting, the Commission[6] announced its intention to audit the work of nine priority sectors over the past four years, including the TurkStream project [276]. In relation to the latter, Maya Manolova, accompanied by representatives of the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), Democratic Bulgaria (DB), and There is Such a People, paid a special visit to the company Bulgartransgaz, demanding to receive documents confirming its transactions related to TurkSteam's extension in Bulgaria, or the so-called Balkan Stream. In response, GERB deemed the visit "a treacherous invasion" and asked for Manolova's resignation [277]. However, the party ultimately gave up on this idea, saying that the Commission had been created "solely for pre-election purposes" and would not do anything "in practical or legal terms" [278].

Towards the end of April, the Commission announced that it would summon to a hearing the former Ministers of Energy and Regional Development, Temenuzhka Petkova and Petya Avramova, as well as the directors of the state enterprises Bulgartransgaz, Avtomagistrali, and the Road Infrastructure Agency [279]. In turn, most of the state-owned companies in question refused to cooperate and boycotted the work of the deputies. The latter received only four answers to the twenty-six letters they sent to the concerned entities [280].

On May 5, various media outlets reported that the businessperson Svetoslav Ilchovski, one of the big Bulgarian landowners, had notified the Commission that he had been blackmailed to sell his grain produce below market price by the owner of the company Gradus, who had spoken, according to Ilchovski, on behalf of then Prime Minister Boyko Borissov [281].

He also noted that the gold bars, which gained popularity after photos of Borissov's bedroom were leaked to the press, had actually been a bribe from the same businessperson who had blackmailed him. In addition, he claimed that a mysterious woman, who came to be known as Mata Hari, had taken the photos. His hearing, however, was abruptly interrupted by GERB MPs who entered the hall shouting [282]. Manolova considered that "the hysterical attempts to thwart yesterday's meeting of the Commission reveal how scared GERB is of the truth," adding that "this is the beginning of the end of the current governance style" [283].

Even though some suspected the model Magi Bader to be the woman behind the camera, she publicly denied the claim and threatened to sue all outlets that proposed a connection between her and Borissov [284]. For his part, DB's Hristo Ivanov posed the following question: "When will the Bulgarian Prosecutor's Office finally establish Mata Hari's identity? This is not really a question of intimacy, but of finding the witness who can conclusively confirm the presence, in the Prime Minister's bedroom, of sums that cannot be explained by his tax statement" [285].

Afterwards, Borissov commented that Maya Manolova's witness was "trying to stir up old controversies," continuing that "this is the only way they [the Commission] can cover up their incompetence" [286]. For her part, BSP's leader Korneliya Ninova requested that the Prosecutor's Office launch an investigation into the matter [287], while the civil movement BOETS[7] reported the case to the European Public Prosecutor's Office, the European Antifraud Office OLAF, and the European Commission [288]. Almost immediately after, the Bulgarian Prosecutor's Office began its official investigation into Ilchovski's statements [289].

Meanwhile, the company Gradus announced that it would file all possible cases against the landowner and refer the competent authorities to protect its "rights and legitimate interests affected by the false statements that he [Ilchovski] made and spread" [290].

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6 Its full name is the Temporary Revision Commission for the Establishment of Abuses and Violations in the Spending of Funds by the Council of Ministers, the Ministries, the State Bodies, the State and Municipal Enterprises, the Companies with More than Fifty Percent State and Municipal Participation, and the Local Authorities over the Last Five Years.

7 Although the combined letters form the Bulgarian word for "fighter," the abbreviation actually means "Bulgaria United by One Goal."

In the middle of May, Manolova commented on the work of the Caretaker Cabinet, highlighting that "we [Stand Up! Mafia, Get Out!] expect the acting ministers to continue the revision. [...] The whole truth about Borissov's administration and the way in which the Bulgarian citizens' money was spent should be revealed" [291]. In a similar context, different outlets informed their readers that the Prosecutor's Office had already received 22 violation signals from the Commission [292].

Two months later, speaking during a session of the 46th National Assembly, Maya Manolova submitted a proposal for the re-establishment of the Revision Commission tasked with reviewing the actions of the previous parliament [293]. After it was officially approved, it was discussed that in addition to the previous cases under its radar, the body would now evaluate the investigated entities based on their "impact on the pockets of the Bulgarian citizens, including their household budget and their standard of living" [294].

It is to be noted that throughout the monitored period, a big number of texts mentioned the Commission as part of the background information required for a better overall comprehension of the news scope.

5.2.2. Online Coverage

5.2.2.1 Overall Metrics and Volume Comparison

The online coverage surrounding the story amounted to around 14,000 articles, as more than half of the content was published by Prominent Sources (around 8,500), followed by Media Aggregators (around 2,300) and Less Prominent Sources (around 2,200). Influence Networks were the least active.

The sources monitored in the context of this story share a similar audience demographic, with people between the ages of 25 and 44 constituting the largest percentage of the readership. In addition, the traffic was generated primarily from Bulgaria. However, the sources differ in terms of how they gained the said traffic. Prominent Sources received most of it directly or via search engines, Less Prominent Sources—directly, and Media Aggregators from a search engine. Influence Networks gained traffic mainly through social media and direct clicks.

The results also show that the content heavily featured words associated with corrupt practices. On the other hand, the term "corruption" and its derivatives were used two times less, while the word "anticorruption" was the least mentioned in the context of the story.

Top Keywords (by volume)

A tag-cloud representation of the most frequently used keywords or phrases within the monitored story. The chart depicts each word's size relative to its popularity, providing an insight into the most prominent and widely discussed points of interest. In this particular case, these include the family names of Maya Manolova, leader of Stand up! Mafia, Get Out! and businessperson Svetoslav Ilchovski, one of the big Bulgarian landowners, who had notified the Revision Commission that he had been blackmailed to sell his grain produce below market price by the owner of the company Gradus, who had spoken, according to Ilchovski, on behalf of then Prime Minister Boyko Borissov. The name of Borissov was also among the most mentioned keywords, alongside his political party GERB. Other frequently used keywords include "Commission for Revision," "government," "Bulgaria," "elections," and "prosecution."

Volume Comparison – Corruption Keywords vs. Corruption-Associated Keywords


An analysis of the volume distribution of the pieces of content that reference corruption, either directly or indirectly, and the pieces of content that reference anticorruption directly. The articles in question were found to heavily feature vocabulary associated with corrupt practices. Notably, the term "corruption" or its derivatives were used two times less, while the word "anticorruption" was the least employed in the context of the story.

Potential Reach Comparison – Corruption Keywords vs. Corruption-Associated Keywords

Potential reach distribution of the pieces of content, which reference corruption either directly or indirectly. The potential reach distribution pattern mirrors the volume distribution of the content.

Stacked Volume Comparison (by source type)
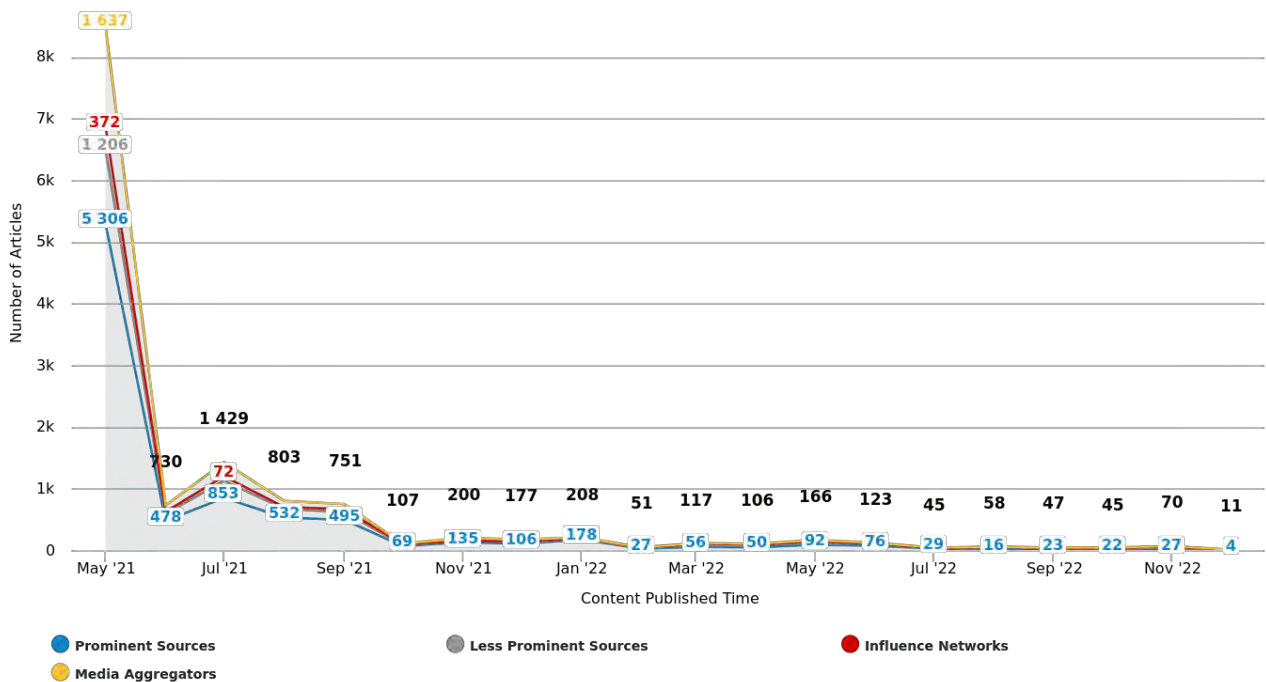
Stacked volume distribution of the story per type of sources. Prominent Sources published more than half of the content, followed by Less Prominent Sources and Media Aggregators. Influence Networks published less than 700 articles. The latter, however, were noticeably active during certain periods, creating a peak in May 2021, at the beginning of the story and two months before the second parliamentary elections in Bulgaria for that year. The majority of the articles shared by the Influence Networks at that time were about Svetoslav Ilchovski's accusations towards Ivan Angelov, owner of the company Gradus, and former Prime Minister Boyko Borissov. The two main mushroom websites were "V Chas" and "Za Nas." However, the relevant content was removed from their websites at a later stage. Some of the most popular headlines include: "The Head of Gradus on the Accusations of the "Secret" Witness: Drug Addict and Drunkard!"; "Dark Clouds Hang Over Manolova's "Secret" Witness, This is What Awaits Him"; "The Head of Gradus: Ilchovski is Lying, I Gave Him a BGN 5 million Loan in 2018"; "Avramova: I'm afraid of Ilchovski!"; "Toma Bikov: Today, The Revision Commission Witnessed No Facts, Only Allegations"; etc.

Stacked Potential Reach Comparison (by source type)
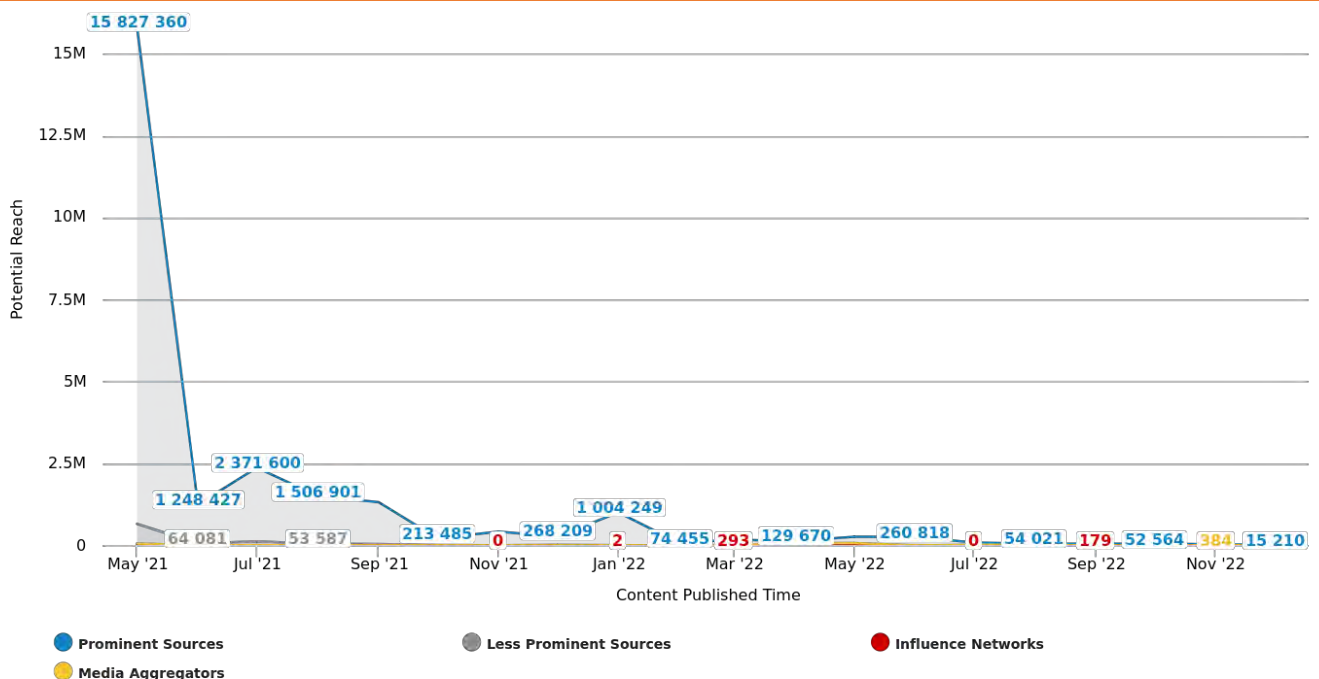
Stacked potential reach distribution of the story per type of sources. The chart clearly shows the dominant potential reach of Prominent Sources, which overshadows the rest of the source types.

Volume Comparison - Regional vs National Sources
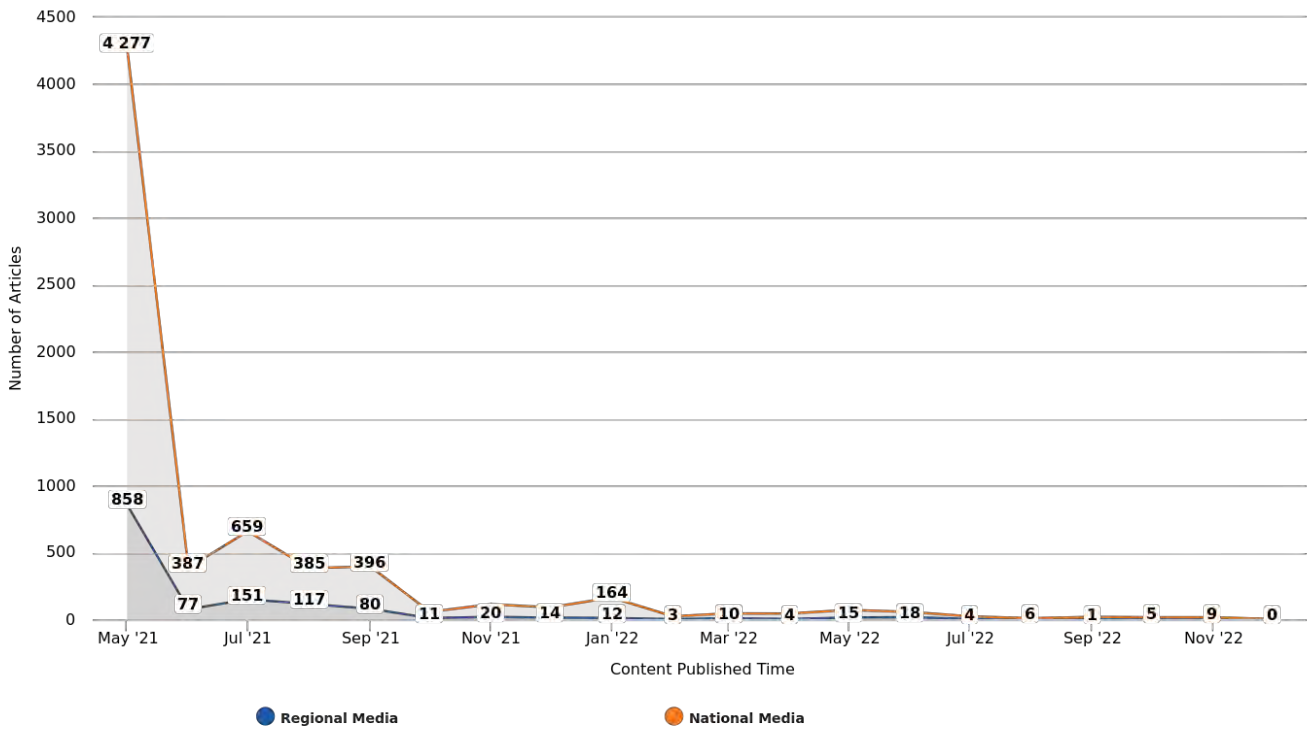
Volume distribution of the story in the National and Regional Media. National Media published nearly 5 times more content related to the story compared to Regional Media.

Potential reach Comparison - Regional vs National Sources
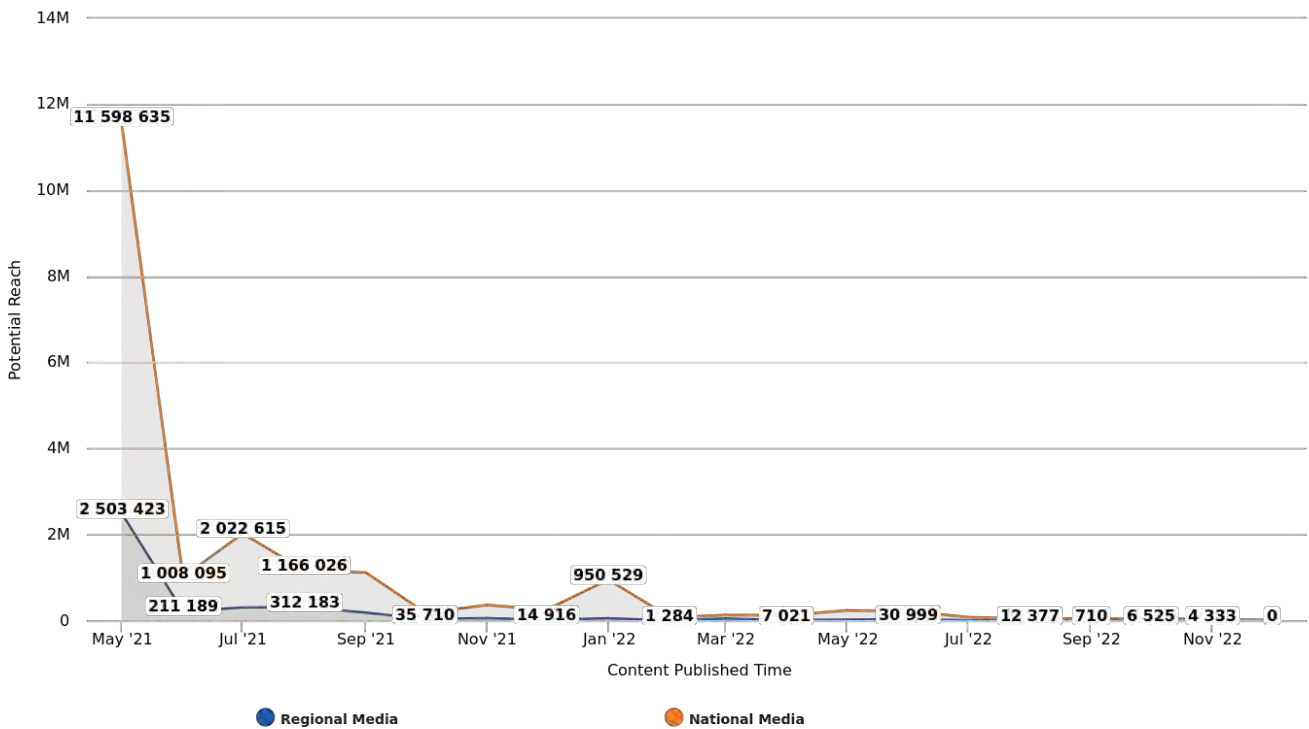
Potential reach distribution of the story in the National and Regional Media. The potential reach of National Media sources far exceeds that of Regional Media, due not only to Regional Media's more limited audience, but also to the lower amount of published content.

5.2.2.2 Online Coverage by Source Type
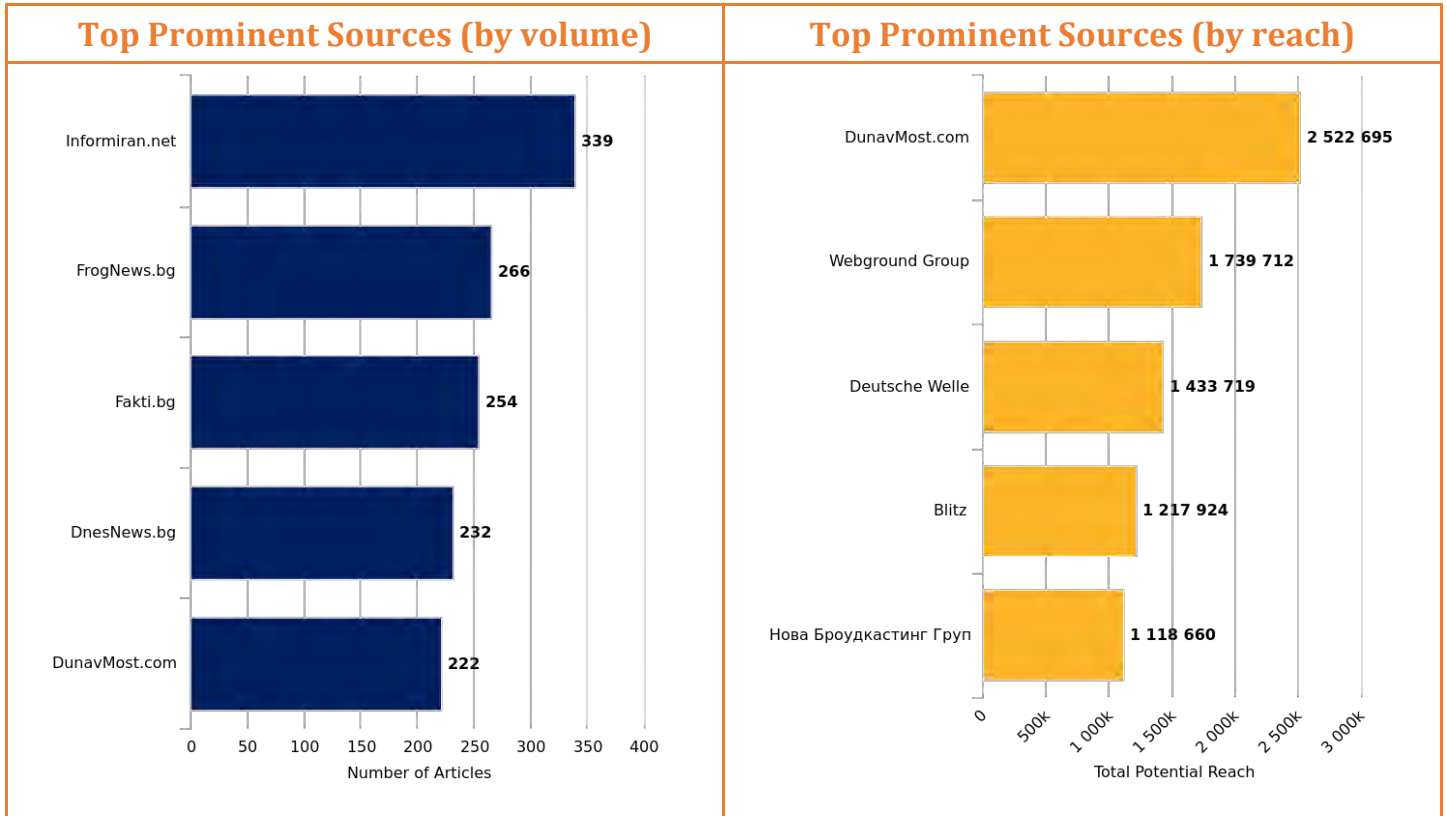
Top Prominent Sources (by volume)

Source	Number of Articles
Informiran.net	339
FrogNews.bg	266
Fakti.bg	254
DnesNews.bg	232
DunavMost.com	222

Top Prominent Sources (by reach)

Source	Total Potential Reach
DunavMost.com	2 522 695
Webground Group	1 739 712
Deutsche Welle	1 433 719
Blitz	1 217 924
Нова Броудкастинг Груп	1 118 660

The chart on the left displays the Top Prominent Sources (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Prominent Sources (by potential reach). The numbers point to the conclusion that even though some sources publish less in terms of volume, they manage to reach a considerably wider audience.

Top Less Prominent Sources (by volume)

Source	Number of Articles
Novinata.bg	108
iNews.bg	96
Mignews.info	85
Cross.bg	67
news.bg	63

Top Less Prominent Sources (by reach)

Source	Total Potential Reach
Varnautre.bg	106 672
Politikata.net	81 765
Burgas Pod Lupa	81 434
news.bg	40 579
dnews	39 312
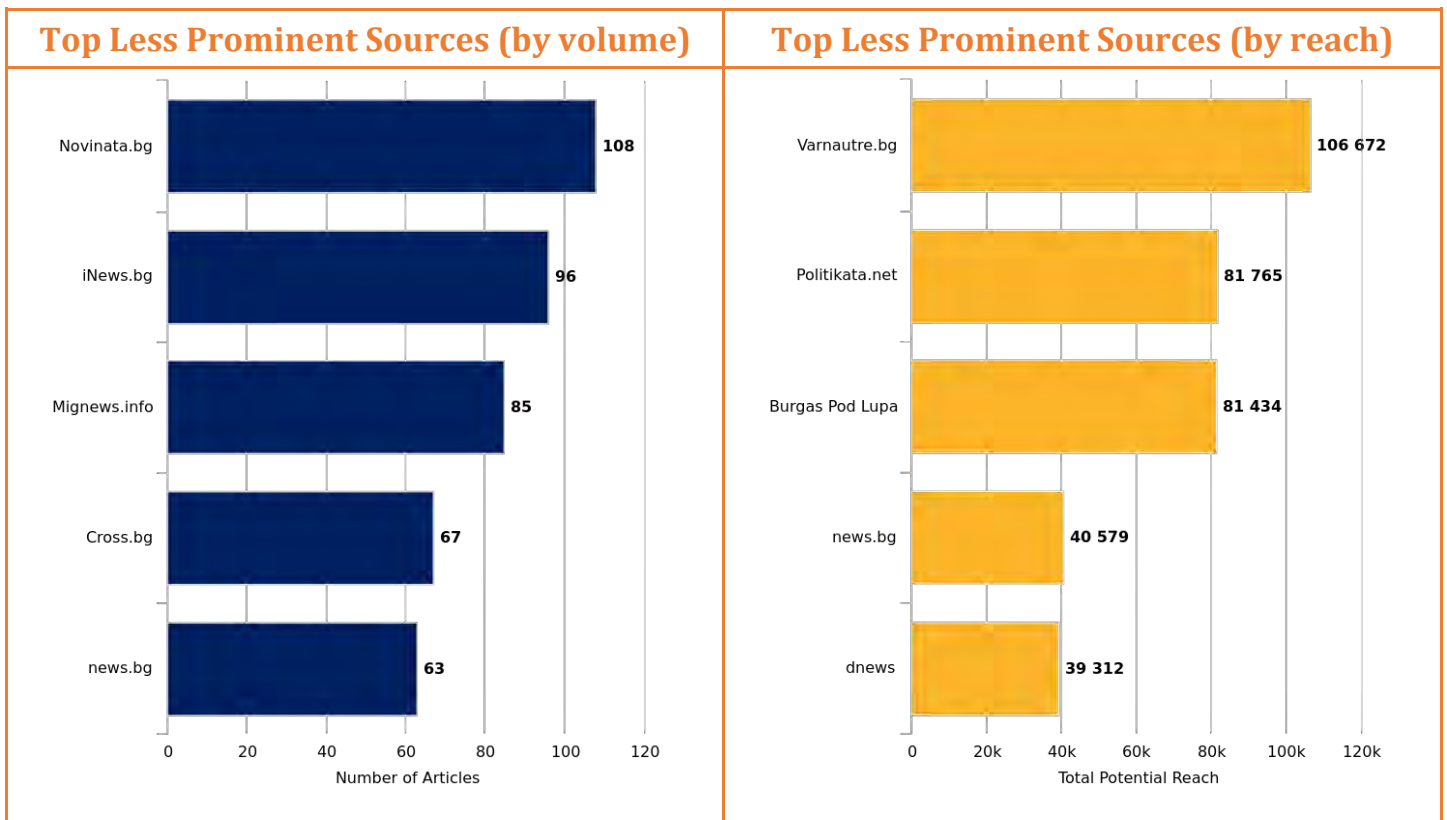
The chart on the left displays the Top Less Prominent Sources (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Less Prominent Sources (by potential reach). "Novinata" published the most content on the story, however, "Varna Utre," which is not among the Top 10 Sources in terms of volume, reached the widest audience.

Top Influence Networks (by volume)

Network	Number of Articles
VChas.net	191
Zanas.eu	117
BGVEST	59
BG7.eu	50
TheMainline.bg	13

Top Influence Networks (by reach)

Network	Total Potential Reach
TheMainline.bg	11 726
Zanas.eu	7 073
Sportove.info	3 570
utro.eu	1 429
Top-novini.eu	1 287

The chart on the left displays the Top Influence Networks (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Influence Networks (by potential reach). Although "V Chas" published the most content, "The Mainline" had the biggest potential reach.

Top Aggregators (by volume)

Aggregator	Number of Articles
Novini247	1 647
BulBox	415
Novinite Dnes	142
Новините ДНЕС	48
BetaRSS.com	28

Top Aggregators (by reach)

Aggregator	Total Potential Reach
Novini247	79 056
Topvesti.bg	3 107
Novinarsko.eu	682
BulBox	415
Novinite Dnes	142

The chart on the left displays the Top Media Aggregators (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Media Aggregators (by potential reach). "Novini247" published the most content, and had the biggest potential reach.

5.2.2.3 Online Coverage: Source Audience

Source Audience by Age per Source Type

The chart illustrates the different level of engagement with the four types of monitored sources (Prominent Sources, Less Prominent Sources, Media Aggregators, and Influence Networks) among six age groups. The result shows that the people most interested in the story are between the ages of 25 and 44. The people above 65 years of age comprise the lowest audience percentage and, in this case, engaged mainly with Less Prominent Sources and Media Aggregators.

Source Audience by Top Countries per Source Type

The chart displays the geographical distribution of the websites visitors per source type. The traffic comes mostly from Bulgaria, with the United States taking the second place among all source types.

Source Audience by Traffic per Source Type

	Tier 1	Tier 2-3	Influence Networks	Aggregators
Direct	43.69%	85.00%	16.23%	11.01%
Search	27.71%	1.74%	0.00%	85.05%
Social	15.71%	4.48%	83.76%	1.09%
Referral	7.06%	8.19%	0.01%	2.22%
Email	5.79%	0.52%	0%	0.62%
Others	0.0%	0.1%	0%	0%

■ Tier 1 ■ Tier 2-3 ■ Influence Networks ■ Aggregators

The chart compares the source of traffic and its volume generated by the four monitored source types. Prominent Sources gained most of it directly or via a search engine. Media Aggregators gained traffic through a search engine, while Less Prominent sources from direct clicks. Influence Networks gained traffic through social media and, to a lesser degree, via direct clicks.

Source Audience by Social Network per Source Type

	Tier 1	Tier 2-3	Influence Networks	Aggregators
Facebook	83.74%	92.30%	99.99%	100%
Twitter	3.44%	2.82%	0.01%	0%
YouTube	9.13%	4.02%	0%	0%
Reddit	1.23%	0.76%	0%	0%
Others	2.46%	0.10%	0%	0%

■ Tier 1 ■ Tier 2-3 ■ Influence Networks ■ Aggregators
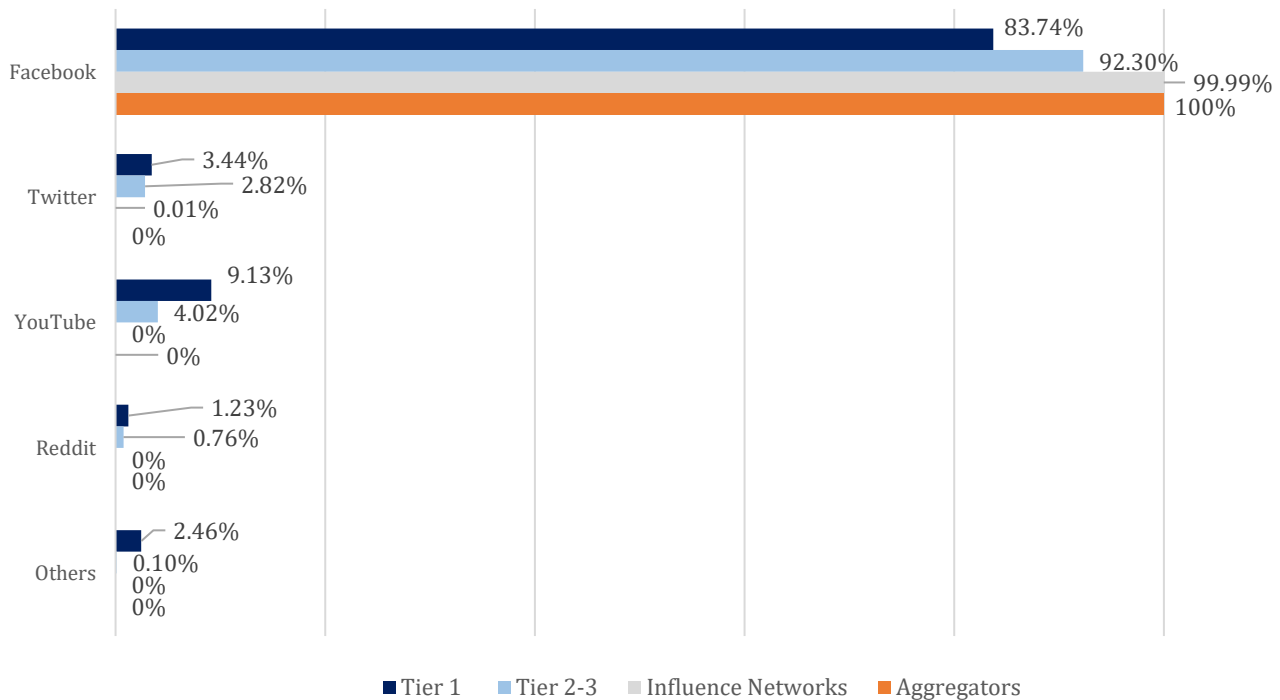
The chart illustrates the source audience distribution according to the traffic of the website gained via social network per source type. The findings highlight Facebook's dominance in all monitored types of sources.

5.2.2.4 Online Coverage: Political Parties (by volume)
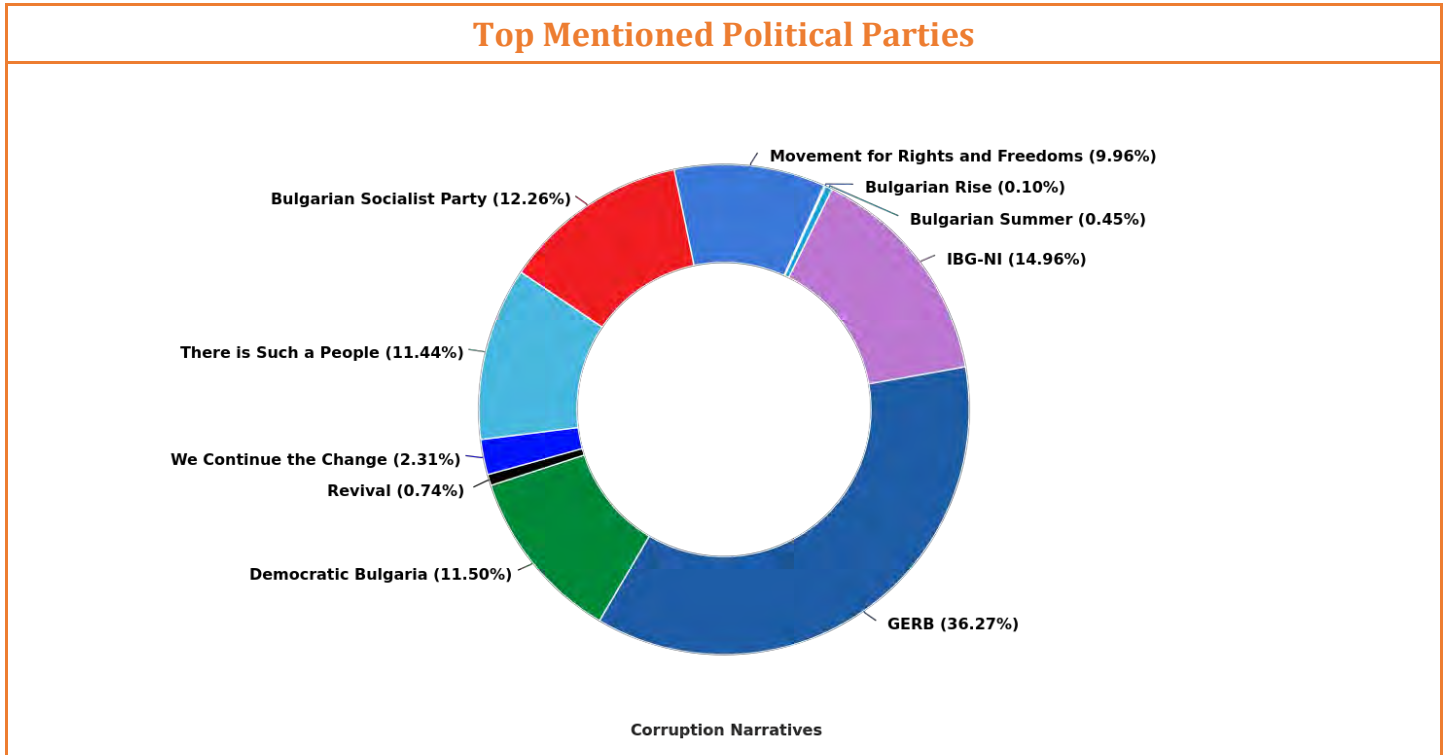
Top Mentioned Political Parties

Corruption Narratives

The chart presents the most mentioned political parties in the context of the story. The results show that GERB was the entity that appeared most frequently, as the Revision Commission was created specifically with the purpose to examine Boyko Borissov's cabinets. The rest of the parties, Stand Up.BG! We are Coming! (formerly Stand Up! Mafia, Get Out!) (15%), the Bulgarian Socialist Party (12.3%), There is Such a People (11.4%), Democratic Bulgaria (11.4%), and the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (10%), had a similar distribution of mentions. Since the majority of the relevant content was concentrated between May and June 2021, news outlets actively reported on the Revision Commission's impact on the parliamentary elections held in June that year.

5.2.3. Social Coverage (Facebook)

Overall, the analysis shows that the story of the Revision Commission and the corruption investigations it launched received significant attention on Facebook. The content peak followed a statement by Maya Manolova, who called on the Caretaker Government to continue the Commission's work after the 45th National Assembly had been dissolved. The involvement of figures such as the businessperson Stanislav Ilchovski and former Prime Minister and GERB leader Boyko Borissov turned them into the most talked-about individuals in the context of the story. Consequently, GERB was also among the most discussed political parties. Media outlets actively covered the subject, with independent pages like "Bivol" receiving a lot of user engagement.

Overall Volume (per month)
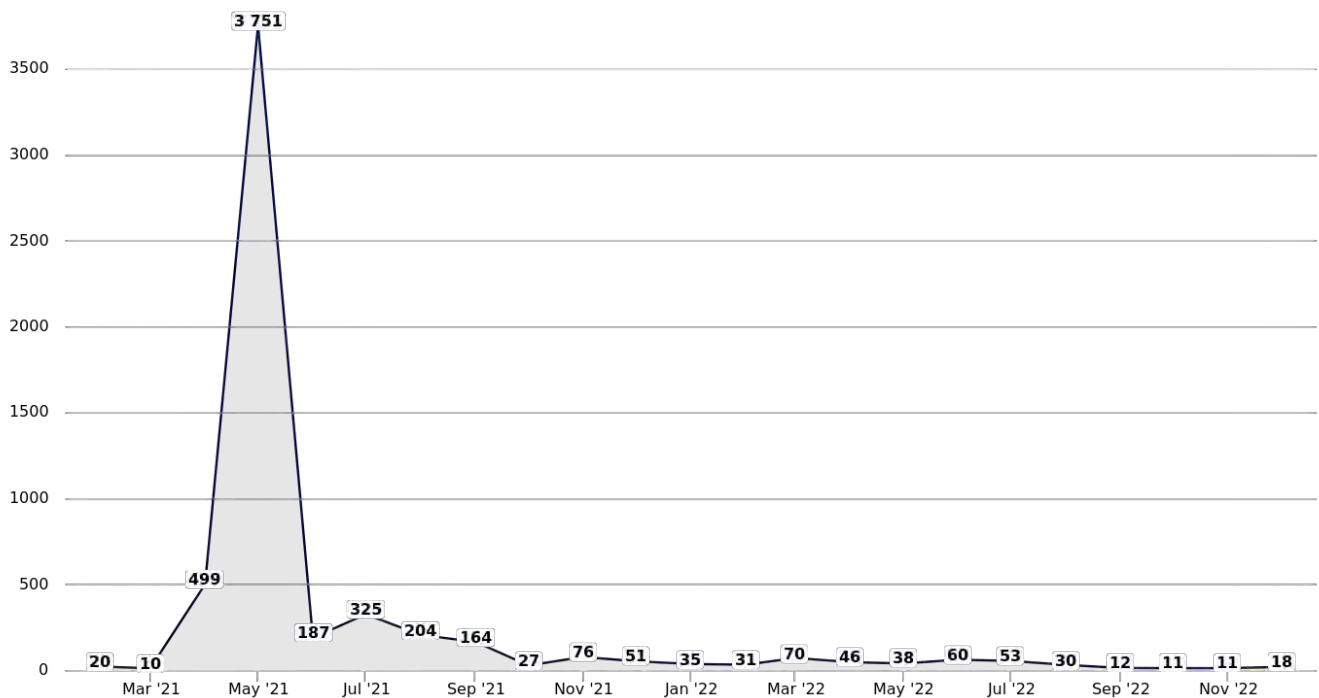
The story gained significant traction on Facebook following a statement by the Revision Commission's leader Maya Manolova, who called on the Caretaker Government to continue the investigating body's work. Another point that caught the users' attention was Stanislav Ilchovski's confession that he had been, allegedly, blackmailed by the owner of the company Gradus with the knowledge of Boyko Borissov, who was Prime Minister at the time.

Top 10 Social Authors (by volume)

Social Source Name	Number of Articles
bTV Новините	476
Novini.bg	384
Мая Манолова	330
Дневник	235
Petel.bg	218
Информационна агенция PIK.bg	202
Новини от България и света	161
Новините на Нова	147
Биволъ	127
www.actualno.com	121
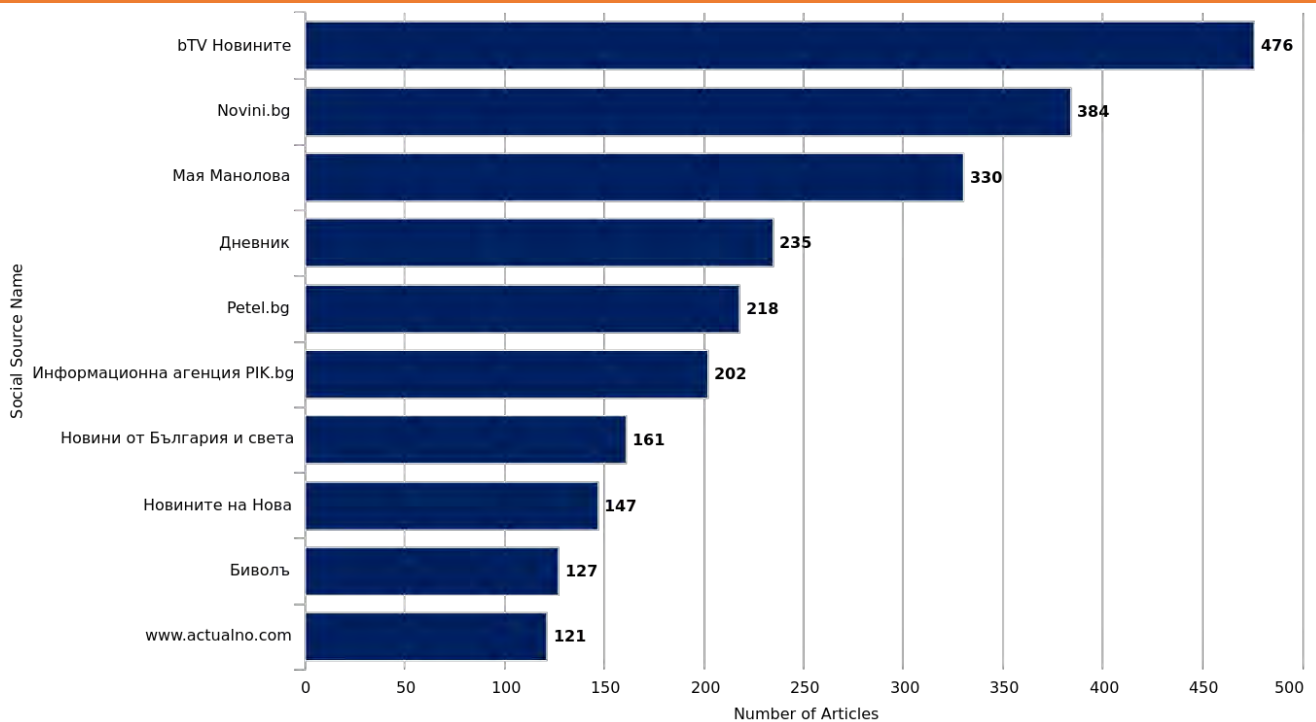
Maya Manolova's Facebook page ranked among the top three in terms of interactions. Overall, most of the comments were positive, with many suspecting Stanislav Ilchovski's statement and accusing him of direct involvement in corruption. Additionally, the official account of the independent Bulgarian online media outlet "Bivol," recognized for its coverage of corruption, organized crime, and abuse of power, remained active throughout the monitored period, providing updates on the story developments. In contrast, the sensationalist PIK page remained relatively silent, with the engagements it attracted being repetitive in nature.

Top Keywords (by volume)
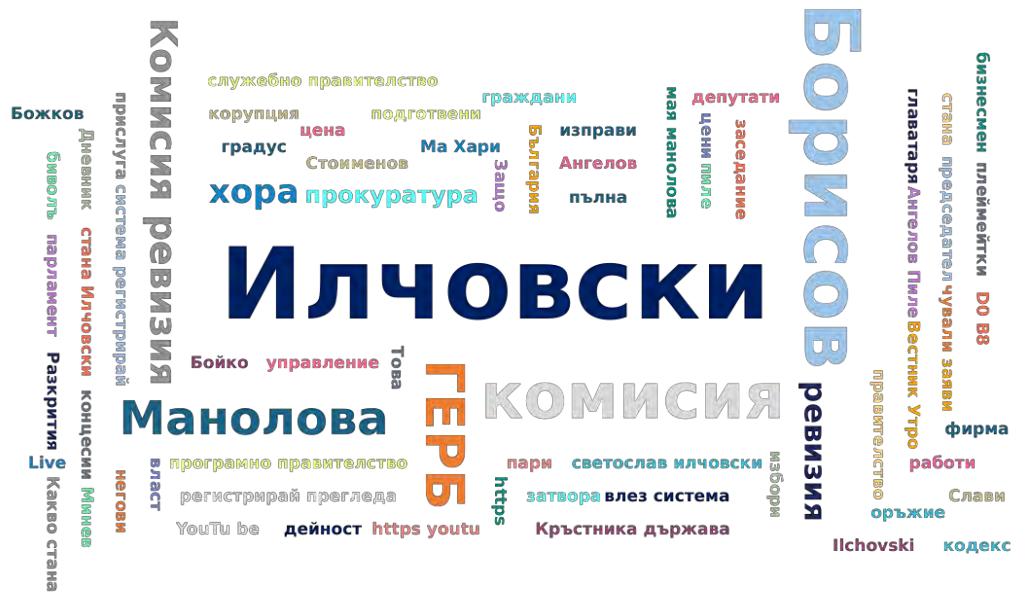
The most used keywords were "Ilchovski," "Borissov," and "Commission," followed by "GERB" and "Manolova." The prominent mentions of both men's family names indicate that although the Commission launched other investigations, the one in connection to the Gradus company actually managed to attract the users' attention.

5.2.3.1 Social Coverage: Political Parties (by volume)

Top Mentioned Political Parties
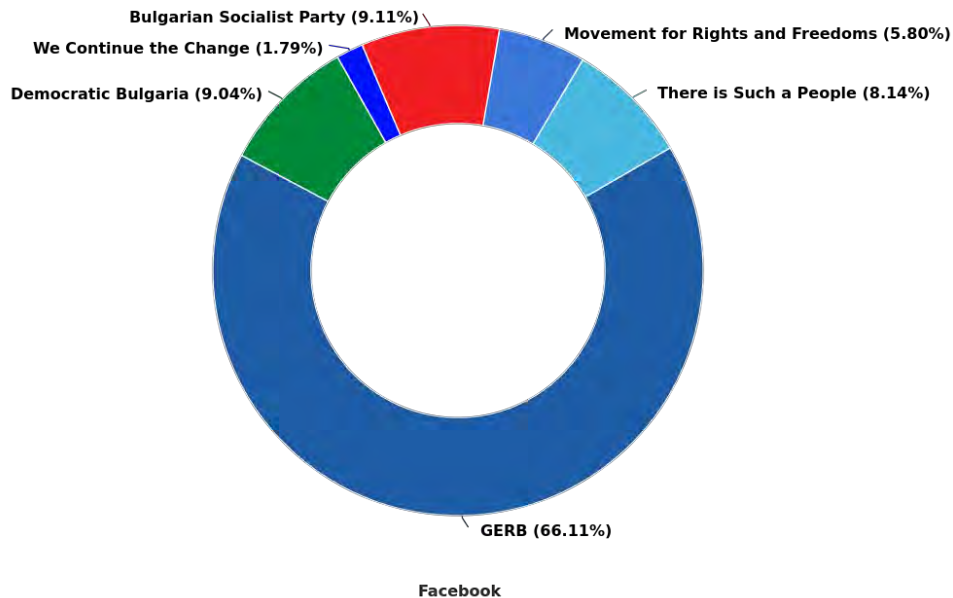
GERB is the political party that most users referred to when discussing the Revision Commission's actions. The result is unsurprising given the fact that the latter was established with the aim to investigate Boyko Borissov's former governments.

5.3. Abuses in the Hemus Motorway Construction

5.3.1. Background

The construction of the Hemus motorway was for a long time presented as one of former Prime Minister Boyko Borissov's top priorities. The project was part of a larger infrastructure development plan aimed at linking Bulgaria with other European countries. However, it was also marred by many controversies and accusations of corruption [295].

Overall, the story unfolded mostly at the end of 2021 and the beginning of 2022. The then caretaker government, led by Stefan Yanev, launched an in-depth investigation into numerous cases of suspected corruption, including that of the Motorway construction [296]. Eventually, it turned out that the advance payments had not progressed, that some expropriation procedures had been delayed, and that a number of documents had been falsified. In addition, according to the General Directorate for Combating Organized Crime, a total of EUR 45 million had been allocated in advance for the construction of the Motorway's Lot 5 without any construction activities actually taking place. In November 2021, more than 10 people suspected of stealing the money paid in advance were arrested [297]. As reported by Petar Todorov, Chief Secretary at the Interior Ministry, the money had been transferred to "shell companies" registered just days before the order of the payments.

Their owners were discovered to have a criminal record [298]. At the beginning of January 2022, the Sofia City Prosecutor's Office called then Minister of Interior Boyko Rashkov as a witness to the Hemus case after his interview with the Bulgarian National Radio, in which he said: "It is no secret to me where this money went" [299]. After appearing for questioning, he mentioned that it was now up to the Prosecutor's Office to gather evidence and identify the final recipient of the misappropriated funds, as according to him, around 30% to 40% of about BGN 53 million had been transferred in advance and that it had been redirected to GERB [300].

The investigations continued intermittently throughout the year 2022. In December, another noticeable peak occurred after several media outlets reported on Boyko Rashkov's refusal to receive a summons for questioning regarding the contracting and construction of lots 7, 8, and 9 [301].

In general, the scandal raised concerns about corruption in Bulgaria and the country's ability to manage EU funding, which, in turn, led to increased scrutiny and calls for transparency in the public procurement procedures and the infrastructure development.

5.3.2. Online Coverage

5.3.2.1 Overall Metrics and Volume Comparison

The online coverage of the story consisted of approximately 12,800 articles. Prominent Sources published over half of the content, with around 6,100 articles, followed by Media Aggregators with approximately 2,600 articles, and Less Prominent Sources with around 2,200 articles. Influence Networks were less active but still contributed significantly, with nearly 1,900 articles.

The cloud tag representation of keywords and phrases used most frequently in the story reveals the central

focus on the Hemus Motorway scandal, the GERB government, and alleged corrupt practices. Notably, indirect references to corruption are more commonly used in this context compared to the word "corruption" and its derivatives. The stacked volume and potential reach comparison charts provide insights into the distribution of the story across different source types, highlighting the dominance of Prominent Sources in terms of both volume and potential reach.

Top Keywords (by volume)

The cloud tag representation provides a visual depiction of the most frequently used keywords or phrases in the monitored story, with the size of each word indicating its popularity. This offers insights into the most prominent and widely-discussed topics during the monitored period. The keywords that were mentioned most frequently include "Hemus," "Prosecutor's Office," "GERB," "money," and the family name of then Minister of Interior Boyko Rashkov. These keywords shed light on the core of the story, revealing the connection between the Hemus Motorway and the GERB government, and highlighting alleged involvement of money in relation to corrupt practices. Notably, Boyko Rashkov's name appears at the top of the list of most mentioned keywords from Mushroom Websites.

Volume Comparison – Corruption Keywords vs. Corruption-Associated Keywords

A volume distribution analysis of the pieces of content that make reference to corruption directly or indirectly, and the pieces of content that reference anticorruption directly. In the case of the Hemus Motorway construction, the content in question was found to heavily feature words associated with corrupt practices, followed by direct references of corruption and anticorruption.

Potential Reach Comparison – Corruption Keywords vs. Corruption-Associated Keywords

Potential reach distribution of the pieces of content, which reference corruption either directly or indirectly, and the pieces of content, which reference anticorruption directly. The distribution pattern of the potential reach closely mirrors the volume distribution.

Stacked Volume Comparison (by source type)
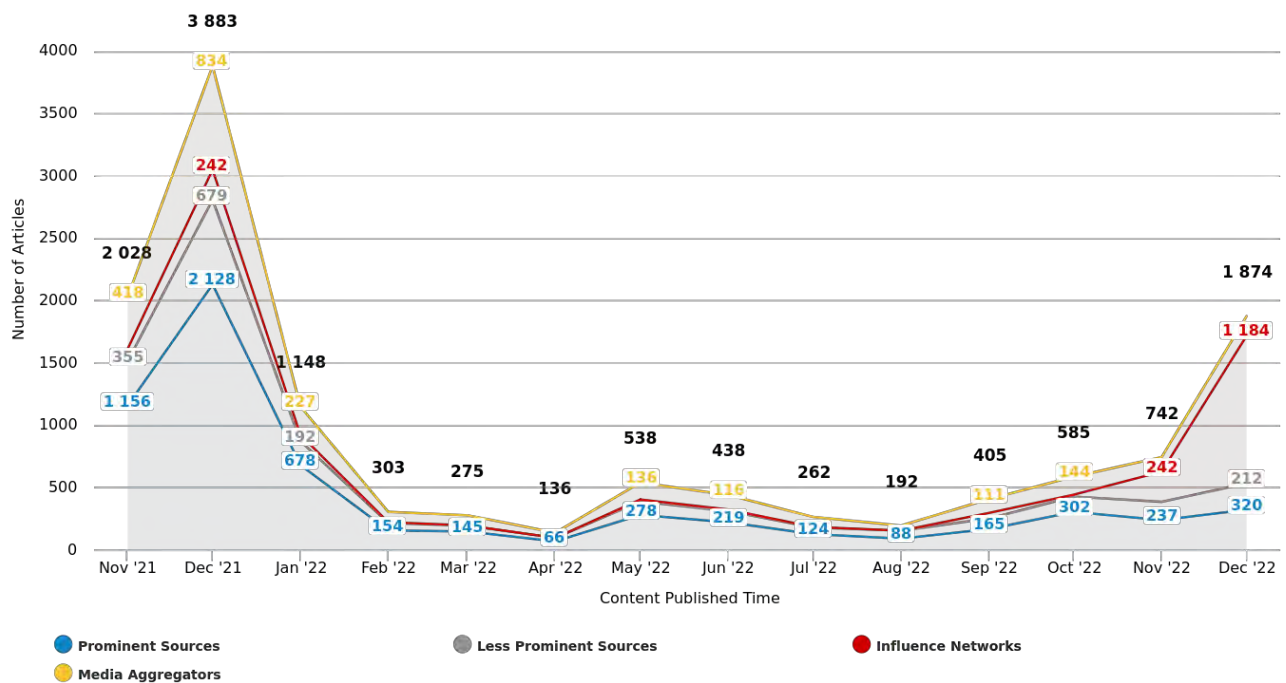
Stacked volume distribution of the story per type of sources. Prominent Sources published more than half of the content on the story, followed by Media Aggregators and Less Prominent Sources. Influence Networks published the least amount of content that was distributed into two peaks. The first peak, which occurred in November 2021, coinciding with the third parliamentary elections in Bulgaria for that year, was a result of several different headlines, most representative of which was "Rashkov is Categorical: There Will be More Arrests! [302]. The second peak occurred in December 2021 and was caused by coordinated republishing of articles with a particular focus on Boyko Rashkov, for instance: "Extraordinary: Prosecutors Summon Rashkov for Questioning, They May Also Send the Police after Him" [303].

Stacked Potential Reach Comparison (by source type)

Stacked potential reach distribution of the story per type of sources. The chart clearly shows the dominant potential reach of Prominent Sources, which overshadows the rest of the source types.

Volume Comparison - Regional vs National Sources

Volume distribution of the story in the National and Regional Media. National Media published nearly four times more content related to the story compared to Regional Media.

Potential reach Comparison - Regional vs National Sources

Potential reach distribution of the story in the National and Regional Media. The potential reach of National media sources far exceeds that of Regional Media, due not only to the more limited audience of Regional Media, but also the lower amount of published content.

5.3.2.2 Online Coverage by Source Type
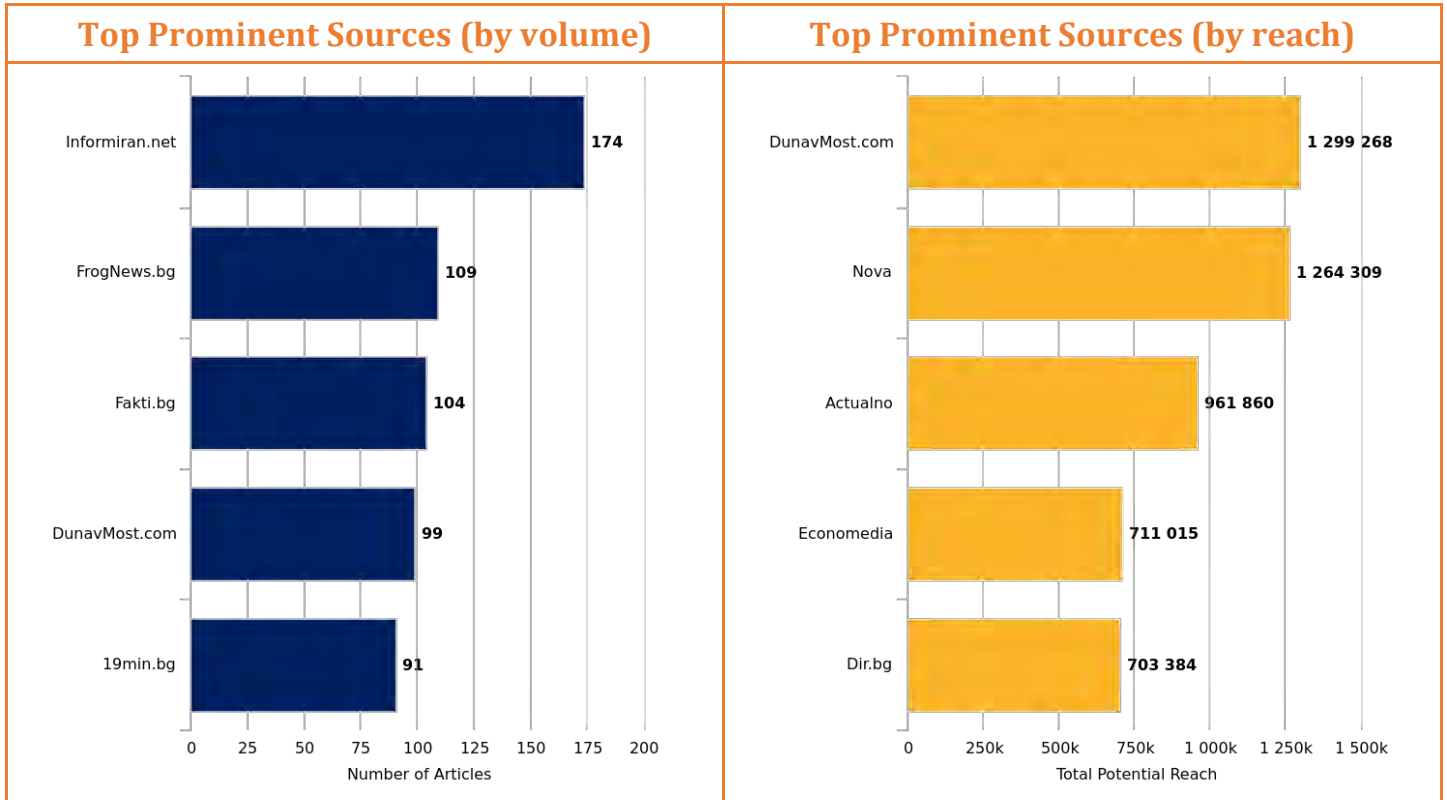
Top Prominent Sources (by volume)

Source	Number of Articles
Informiran.net	174
FrogNews.bg	109
Fakti.bg	104
DunavMost.com	99
19min.bg	91

Top Prominent Sources (by reach)

Source	Total Potential Reach
DunavMost.com	1 299 268
Nova	1 264 309
Actualno	961 860
Economedia	711 015
Dir.bg	703 384

The chart on the left displays the Top Prominent Sources (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Prominent Sources (by potential reach). The figures indicate that although certain sources publish less content in terms of volume, they are still able to attract a substantially larger audience.
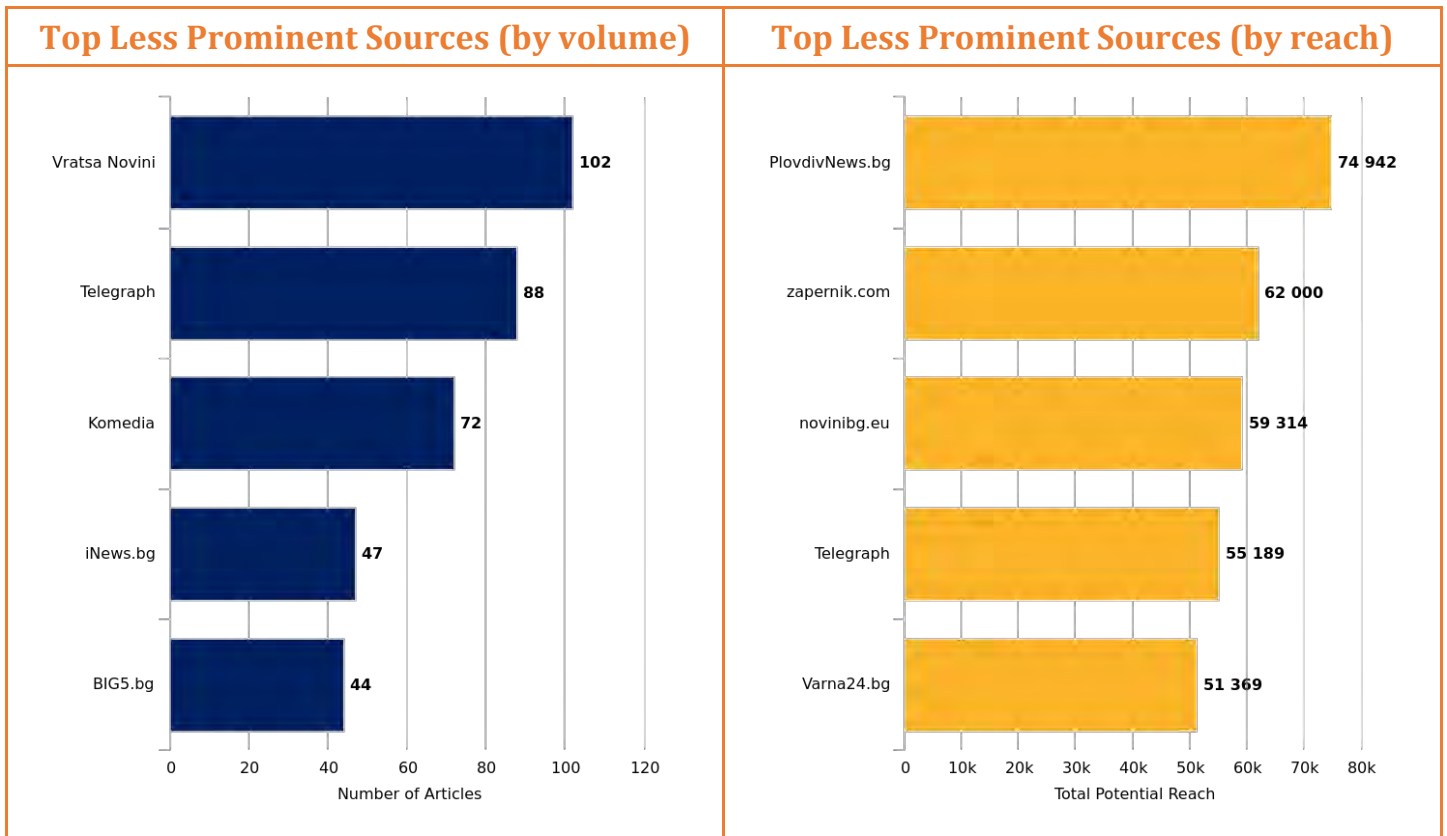
Top Less Prominent Sources (by volume)

Source	Number of Articles
Vratsa Novini	102
Telegraph	88
Komedia	72
iNews.bg	47
BIG5.bg	44

Top Less Prominent Sources (by reach)

Source	Total Potential Reach
PlovdivNews.bg	74 942
zapernik.com	62 000
novinibg.eu	59 314
Telegraph	55 189
Varna24.bg	51 369

The chart on the left displays the Top Less Prominent Sources (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Less Prominent Sources (by potential reach). "Vratsa Novini" published the most content on the story, however, "Plovdiv News", which is not among the Top 10 sources in terms of volume, reached the widest audience.

Top Influence Networks (by volume)

Top Influence Networks (by reach)

The chart on the left displays the Top Influence Networks (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Influence Networks (by potential reach). Although "BG7" published the most content, "Utro" had the biggest potential reach.

Top Aggregators (by volume)

Top Aggregators (by reach)
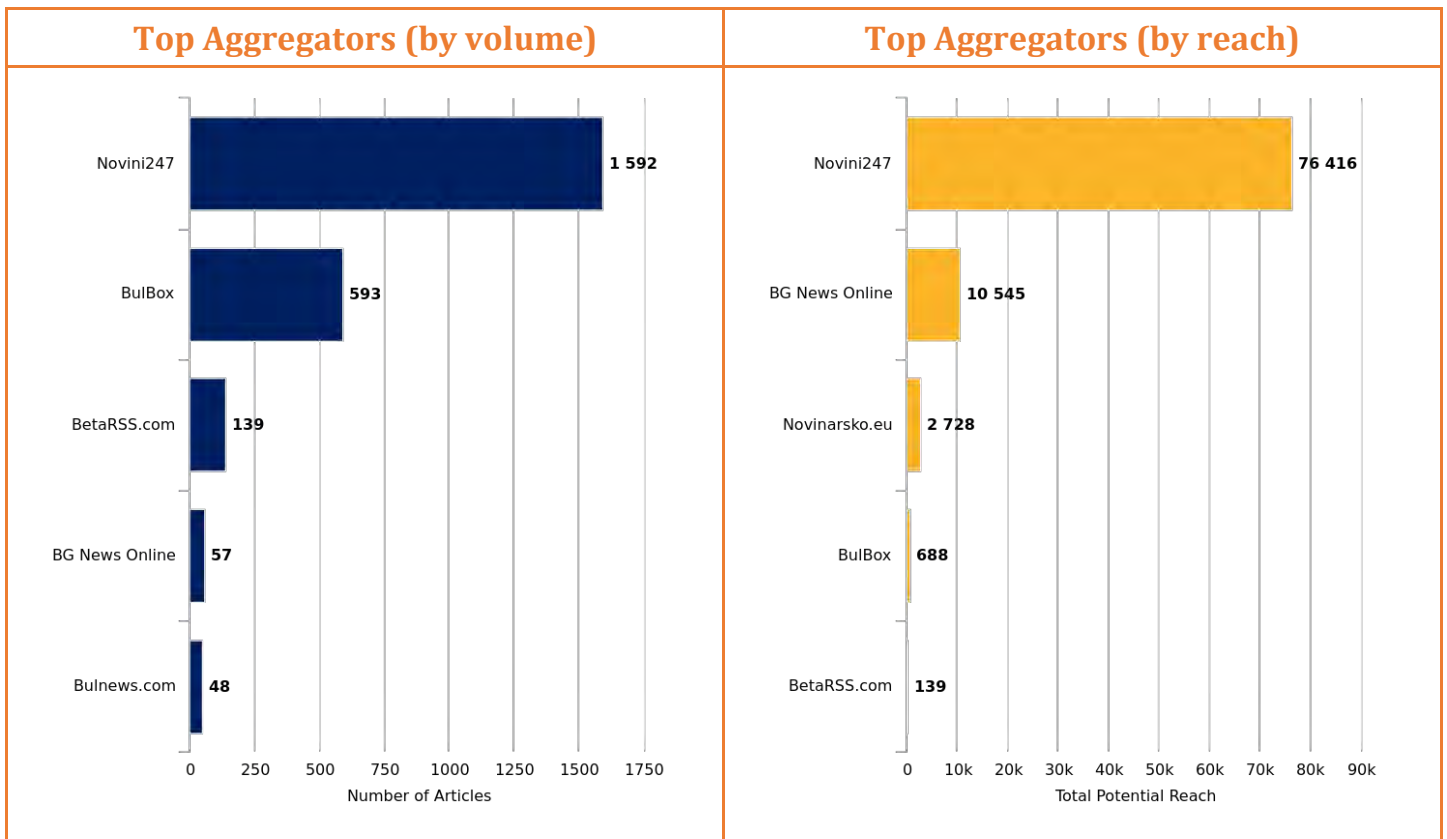
The chart on the left displays the Top Media Aggregators (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Media Aggregators (by potential reach). "Novini247" published the most content and had the biggest potential reach.

5.3.2.3 Online Coverage: Source Audience

Source Audience by Age per Source Type

The chart illustrates the different level of engagement with the four types of monitored sources (Prominent Sources, Less Prominent Sources, Media Aggregators, and Influence Networks) among six age groups. The result shows that people who are most interested in the story are between the age of 25 and 44. The people above 65 years of age comprise the lowest audience percentage, and in this case, engaged mainly with Less Prominent Sources and Media Aggregators.

Source Audience by Top Countries per Source Type

The chart displays the geographical distribution of the websites visitors per source type. The traffic comes mostly from Bulgaria, with the United States taking the second place among all source types.

Source Audience by Traffic per Source Type

Source	Tier 1	Tier 2-3	Influence Networks	Aggregators
Direct	40.54%	79.87%	30.18%	8.40%
Search	26.77%	7.82%	0%	85.59%
Social	16.82%	4.66%	69.80%	3.21%
Referral	7.87%	7.14%	0.01%	2.25%
Email	7.93%	0.45%	0%	0.54%
Others	0.1%	0.1%	0%	0%

■ Tier 1 ■ Tier 2-3 ■ Influence Networks ■ Aggregators

The chart compares the source of traffic and its volume generated by the four monitored source types. Prominent Sources, in the context of the story, gained most of their traffic directly, or via a search engine. Media Aggregators gained traffic through a search engine, while Less Prominent sources – via direct clicks. Influence Networks gained traffic through social media, and to a lesser degree, via direct clicks.

Source Audience by Social Network per Source Type

Source	Tier 1	Tier 2-3	Influence Networks	Aggregators
Facebook	86.16%	93.22%	99.99%	100%
Twitter	2.85%	2.44%	0.01%	0%
YouTube	7.98%	3.52%	0%	0%
Reddit	1.04%	0.67%	0%	0%
Others	1.97%	0.15%	0%	0%

■ Tier 1 ■ Tier 2-3 ■ Influence Networks ■ Aggregators
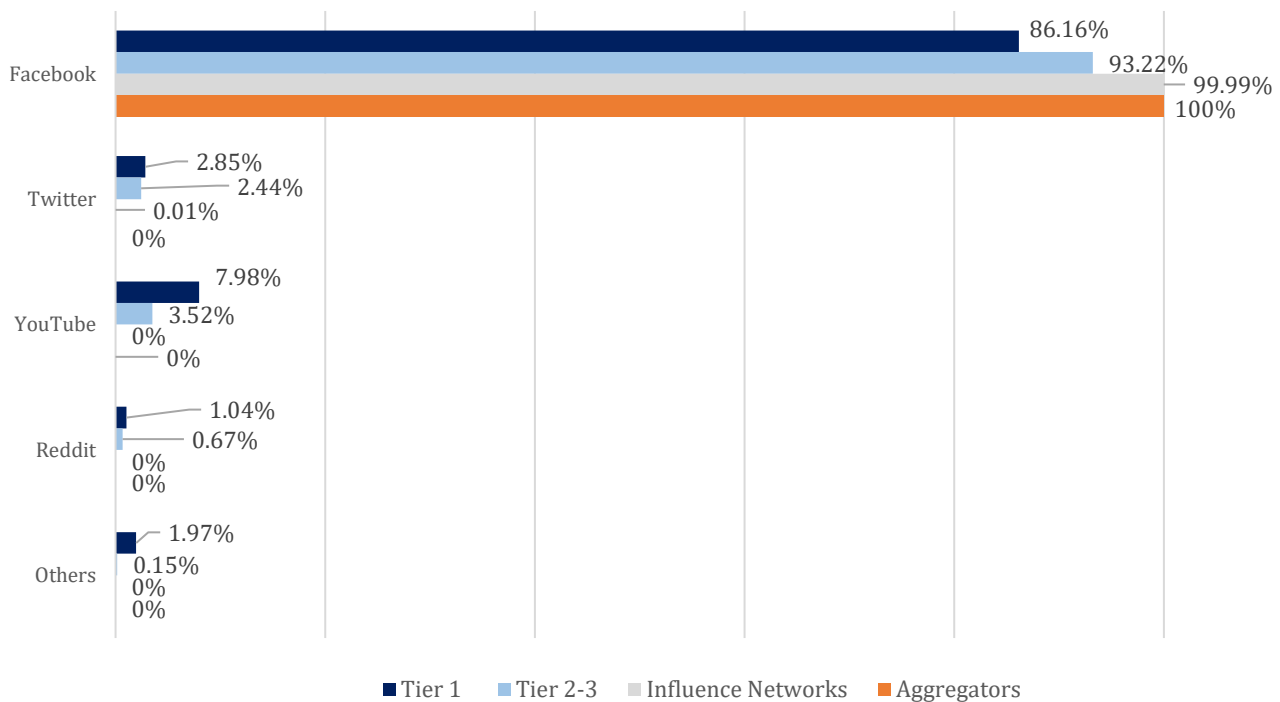
The chart illustrates the source audience distribution according to the traffic of the website gained via social network per source type. The findings highlight Facebook's dominance in all monitored types of sources.

5.3.2.4 Online Coverage: Political Parties (by volume)

Top Mentioned Political Parties

We Continue the Change (14.59%)
Revival (1.11%)
Democratic Bulgaria (2.36%)
There is Such a People (4.83%)
Bulgarian Socialist Party (4.35%)
Movement for Rights and Freedoms (5.99%)
GERB (66.77%)

Corruption Narratives

The chart provides an overview of the political parties that received the most mentions in connection with the Hemus Motorway case. The results reveal that the political party with the highest number of mentions is GERB, accounting for almost 67% of all references due to its direct involvement in the case and allegations of corruption. We Continue the Change is the second most frequently referenced party, with 15% of all mentions, primarily due to their claims of Borissov's involvement in the Hemus Motorway case. Lastly, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS) is mentioned in connection to claims that there is a potential link between the party and GERB's involvement in the case.

5.3.3. Social Coverage (Facebook)

Based on the gathered data, it is evident that the Hemus Motorway case has generated significant social media activity and public interest, with clear divisions among users who either support or oppose GERB and its alleged involvement in the scandal. Prominent social authors during the period, such as "Novini.bg," "BTV," and "Novini ot Sveta," were highly active in sharing content and engaging with Facebook users. Noteworthy pages such as "PIK" and "Epohalni Vremena" provided critical coverage of the case, with comments expressing a range of opinions often conveyed in a sarcastic or condescending tone. The most commonly used keywords suggest a potential link between the Hemus Motorway case and financial corruption, particularly implicating Borissov and GERB in the scandal. Overall, the analysis of Facebook interactions regarding the Hemus Motorway case reveals a divided public opinion. The frequent use of keywords related to corruption indicates a growing concern among the public about this issue in the country.

Overall Volume (per month)
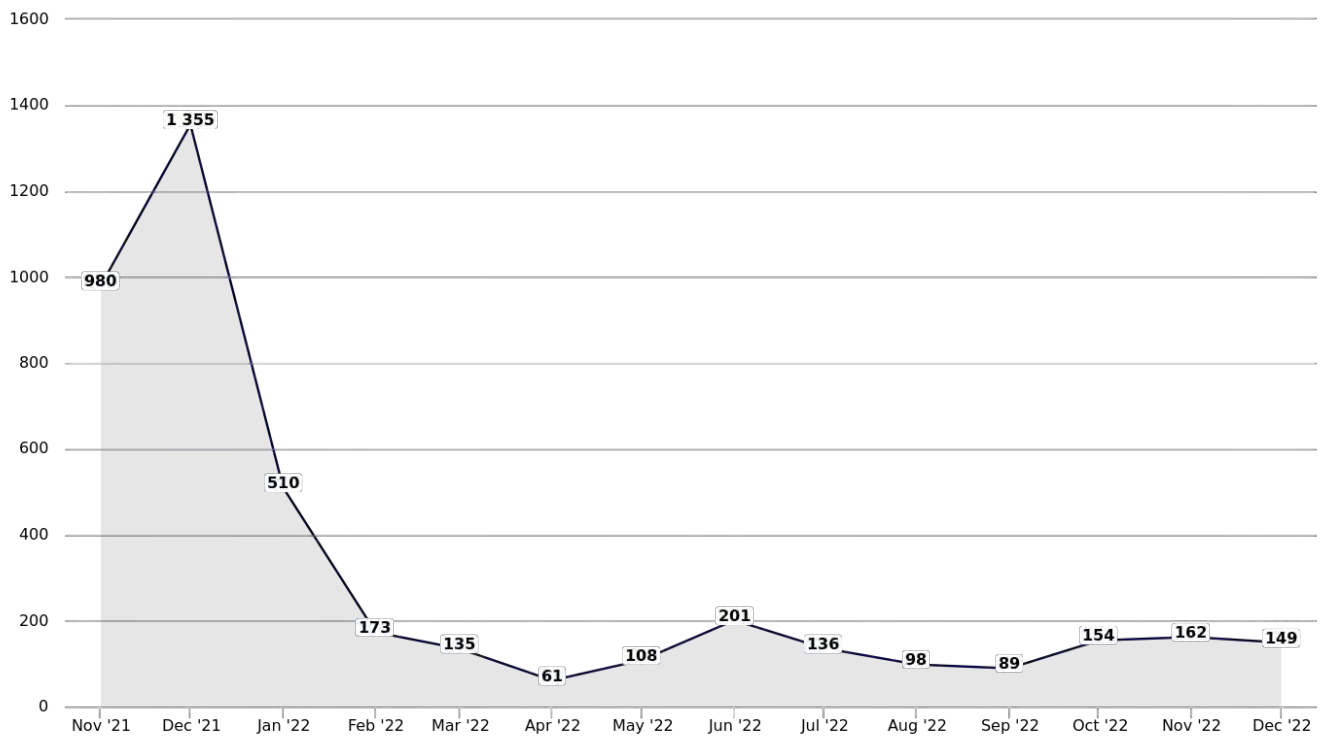
The story related to the Hemus Motorway saw significant activity on Facebook from November 2021 to January 2022, corresponding to the pattern formed by online media during the same monitored period. Facebook comments on the story indicate a clear division between the users who condemn Boyko Borissov and GERB for their involvement in the case, and those who defend the former Prime Minister and his party. In November and December 2021, there was a surge in social media activity, following the arrest of the individuals suspected of embezzling pre-paid funds. The incident sparked a significant amount of reactions. There was a split among users, with some showing interest in the outcome of the case, while others were skeptical and expressed doubt. These interactions largely stem from the fact that the majority of the content mentioned then Minister of Interior Boyko Rashkov in a negative light. However, the portion of the users who clearly oppose GERB mention the Minister in a positive way. In January, following the Prosecutor's Office calling the Interior Minister as a witness in the Hemus case, there was a spike in Facebook content, resulting in a wave of interactions that were repetitive and focused on defending GERB. Other users supported the progress of the case, hoping for its eventual resolution.

Top 10 Social Authors (by volume)

Social Source Name	Number of Articles
Novini.bg	337
bTV Новините	238
Новини от България и света	170
Новините на Нова	124
Дневник	118
Информационна агенция PIK.bg	114
Медиапул	112
www.actualno.com	102
Епохални Времена	82
Frognews.bg	65
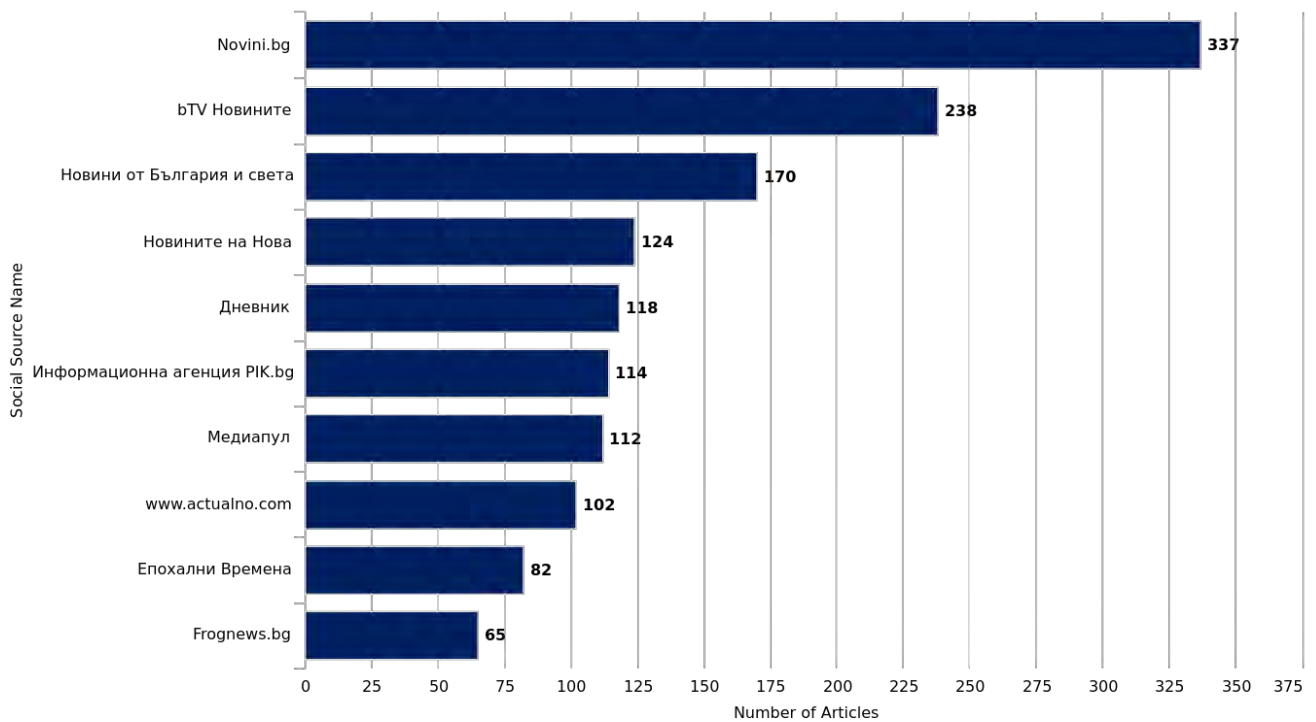
The Facebook pages "Novini.bg," "BTV," and "Novini ot Sveta" were the most active accounts during the monitored period, based on their combined number of posts. It is worth noting, that "PIK" is one of the most prominent Social Authors, whose posts are known for criticizing former Prime Minister and leader of We Continue the Change, Kiril Petkov and his government. Additionally, the page received a significant amount of comments from social media users who expressed a range of opinions, often conveyed through a sarcastic or condescending tone. Another page worth mentioning is "Epohalni Vremena," which consistently tracked the development of the story and highlighted the involvement of GERB in corrupt practices. However, their posts received minimal interactions from users, usually defending the party in question.

Top Keywords (by volume)

The chart above displays the most frequently mentioned keywords in Facebook in the context of the story. In this case, the most frequently mentioned keywords include "Hemus," "money," "Prosecutor's Office," "motorway," "Rashkov," "millions," and references to Boyko Borissov and his political party. Furthermore, Interior Minister Boyko Rashkov is featured in the visualization as one of the most discussed individuals on social media in relation to the investigation throughout the monitored period.

5.3.3.1 Social Coverage: Political Parties (by volume)

Top Mentioned Political Parties

GERB (73.99%)
We Continue the Change (6.35%)
Democratic Bulgaria (2.81%)
Bulgarian Socialist Party (3.33%)
Movement for Rights and Freedoms (9.37%)
There is Such a People (4.16%)

Facebook
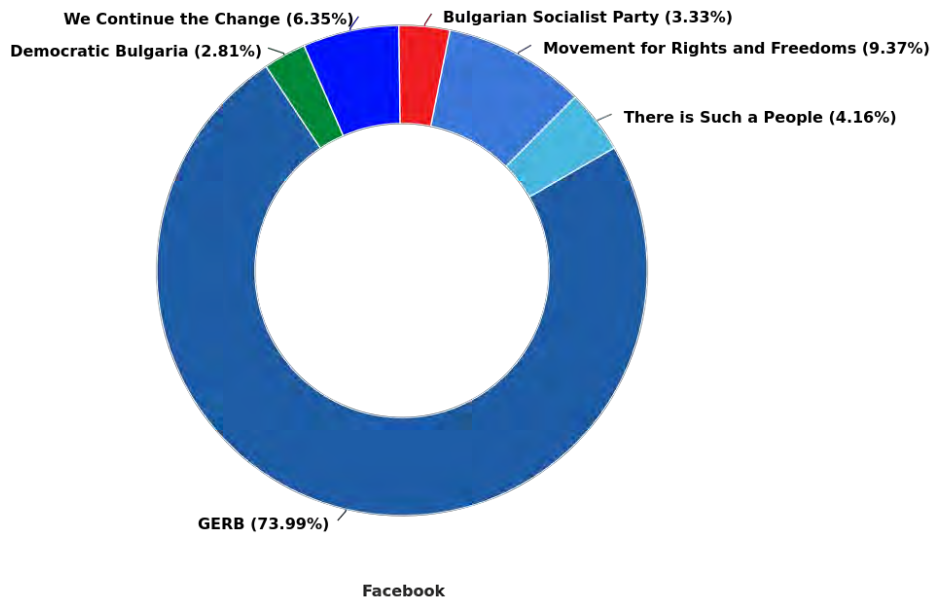
Similar to the outcome from the online coverage, social media users referred to the political party GERB the most, accounting for 76% of the total content mentioning political parties, due to its direct implication in the Hemus Motorway case and accusations of corruption. The second most referenced party is the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS), which is mentioned in relation to statements suggesting a connection between the party and GERB's involvement in the case, including claims that GERB is controlled by DPS. Accordingly, We Continue the Change (7%) and the Democratic Bulgaria (3%) were referenced in relation to their allegations that Borissov was involved in the Hemus Motorway corruption case.

5.4. Kapitan Andreevo Border Checkpoint Scandal

5.4.1. Background

At the beginning of April 2022, representatives of the National Revenue Agency (NRA), the Bulgarian Food Safety Agency (BFSA), the State Agency for National Security (DANS), and the Ministry of Interior inspected the food import procedures at the Kapitan Andreevo checkpoint at the border with Turkey. The reason for the inspection was the renewed contract of Eurolab 2011, a private company working there, which had been signed on December 31, 2021. According to BFSA, however, the contract had been concluded by the then temporary director who did not have the right to do so [304]. The inspection revealed that the "phytosanitary and animal control was executed in a purely formal manner, if at all." The news was widely republished by both national and regional media. Several dismissals followed it immediately, including that of BFSA's Deputy Executive Director Nikolay Rosnev [305].

In the middle of May, Deputy Minister of Agriculture Ivan Hristanov announced that the state would officially terminate the contract of the company in charge of collecting the fees for laboratory tests of food trucks coming from Turkey [306]. Soon after, he spoke with then Prime Minister and leader of We Continue the Change (PP) Kiril Petkov, who declared that "the struggle for the border is a struggle for statehood," adding that the National Reference Laboratory affiliated with BFSA would, from that point on, carry out the analysis of fruit and vegetable shipments passing through the Kapitan Andreevo border crossing [307]. For his part, Hristanov noted that "the current truck queues at the border with Turkey are nothing but a sabotage by a private operator who has established an artificially maintained monopoly for ten years" [308]. Mihail Kambarev, member of We Continue the Change and Chairman of the National Assembly's Anticorruption Commission, pointed out that it would be "a huge corruption risk for only one company to operate at Kapitan Andreevo" [309]. Speaking for the whole party, he also demanded a full inspection of the sanitary-veterinary control at the checkpoint spanning the last ten years [310]. Soon, it turned out that there was not a single video recording of any lab inspection during the same period [311]. An in-depth report on the case, published by the newspaper *Capital*, even highlighted that "for ten years, Boyko Borissov's government granted the monopoly over the inspections of 70,000 trucks of food and goods per year and worth over BGN 6 billion to a single private

limited liability company." The author also remarked that "the break with the private monopolist [...] is accompanied by proposal for bribes, threats, and a clear defense of the status quo by the MPs of DPS, GERB, and There is Such a People" [312].

In relation to the abovementioned bribes, PP's Rosen Kosturkov said that BFSA's Director Hristo Daskalov had been offered BGN 6 million so that the company in charge of the sanitary control at the border could remain operational [313]. Several media outlets even received an audio recording related to this matter. Its authenticity was later confirmed by Daskalov himself [314]. A number of websites reported that the person offering the bribe had been Professor Plamen Mollov, the Agency's previous director, who denied the accusations and described them as "fake news" [315]. In turn, the Anticorruption Fund reported the case to the EU Prosecutor's Office in Sofia [316], after which it was announced that European Commission auditors would conduct an independent investigation at Kapitan Andreevo in the middle of July [317].

In addition, Hristanov stated that he had been threatened at the beginning of the year [2022], immediately after he had requested the documentation pertaining to Eurolab 2011's activities at the border, due to the high number of reported irregularities [318]. In a separate interview, he said that "Bulgaria will not be admitted to the Schengen area as long as the border crossing Kapitan Andreevo is leased" [319].

For his part, Eurolab 2011 owner Vassil Dimitrov explained that the firm had already been checked by previous institutions over the years and that it had been pressured by an unnamed, at the time, businessperson only after Petkov's visit to the border checkpoint [320]. Not long after, both the Sofia and Haskovo Administrative Courts rejected as unfounded the complaints raised by Eurolab 2011 against the Bulgarian Food Safety Agency. The court established that there was no evidence to support the claim that BFSA had committed illegal actions against the company's activities [321]. Consequently, the former managed, at the beginning of July, to restore its premises, previously rented by Eurolab 2011 [322].

In the meantime, on June 22, a no confidence vote toppled Petkov's government. The then Prime Minister even claimed that, in his view, the Cabinet's actions against the "corruption schemes" at Kapitan

Andreevo had brought about the political unrest [323]. Later on, he wrote the following on Facebook: "With every remaining hour of our rule, we are taking back control of the European border at the Kapitan Andreevo crossing. We are working hard to restore the rule of law, together with the economic prosperity of Bulgaria and its control over the food quality, so that we can restore the health of the Bulgarian citizens" [324].

However, on July 19, the Sofia City Administrative Court cancelled the preliminary execution of Hristo Daskalov's order from July 1, according to which Eurolab 2011 was to immediately leave the rented premises in the Kapitan Andreevo area. The Court clarified that "the nullity of the lease agreement is the subject of the appeal proceedings against the order for its execution and not grounds for its provisional execution" [325]. Petkov commented on the decision, saying: "This is a great example as to why we must continue to fight for a judicial reform. As long as these types of solutions exist, I am afraid we are not done changing [the status quo]. But for that to happen, we must have a truly free majority" [326].

Afterwards, Hristo Daskalov said that in accordance with BFSA's contract with Eurolab 2011, the state agency had "an infinite number of cases, which will be filed in the coming days" [327]. Shortly after, Petkov made another public statement, highlighting that even though the state had regained control of the crossing, it was nevertheless surprising for the new team to discover that actually "ever since then, one out of every four or five trucks turned out to transport food full of aflatoxins, which are carcinogenic, and have previously made it into our children's meals" [328].

On September 1, the Sofia City Prosecutor's Office terminated, for lack of evidence, the pre-trial proceedings for the possible bribe offered to Hristo Daskalov in exchange for keeping the operations of the Eurolab 2011 laboratory at Kapitan Andreevo [329]. At the end of the same month, We Continue the Change presented the documentary *The Golden EU Border: Kapitan Andreevo*, which traces "how only a single private laboratory tests the quality of the food entering Bulgaria at the largest land border between Asia and the European Union" [330].

Finally, in December, PP proposed a new law banning private laboratories at all border crossings, with some outlets saying that with this step, the party's fight to return to the state the control over the plant- or animal-based foods being transported through the borders had entered a decisive phase [331].

5.4.2. Online Coverage

5.4.2.1 Overall Metrics and Volume Comparison

Overall, the Kapitan Andreevo border checkpoint scandal received a moderate amount of coverage compared to the rest of the monitored anticorruption stories, with around 5,500 articles. The majority of the content was published by Prominent Sources, followed by Media Aggregators and Less Prominent Sources. It is worth mentioning that the Influence Networks published the least amount of articles on the story.

The analysis of the top keywords used in the coverage reveals the most significant developments in the story. The name that stands out the most is that of then Deputy Minister of Agriculture Ivan Hristanov, particularly in reference to his statements about the reported incidents of harassment and threats directed towards government officials at the Kapitan Andreevo checkpoint.

The analysis of the source audience breakdown by age shows that the age group most interested in the Kapitan Andreevo scandal falls in the 25 to 44 age bracket, while people above 65 years of age comprise the lowest audience percentage and engage mostly with Media Aggregators. The geographical distribution of the websites' visitors per source type shows that the source audience of all monitored source types is mostly from Bulgaria.
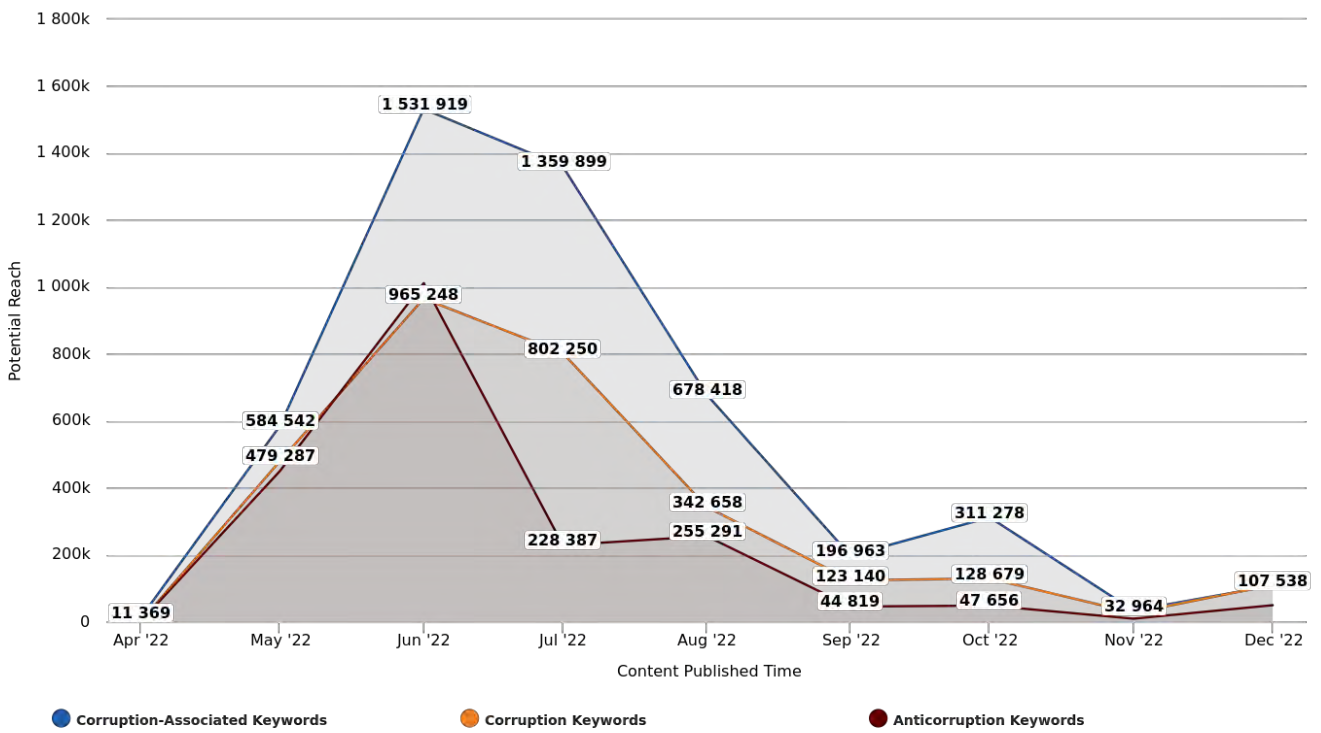
Top Keywords (by volume)
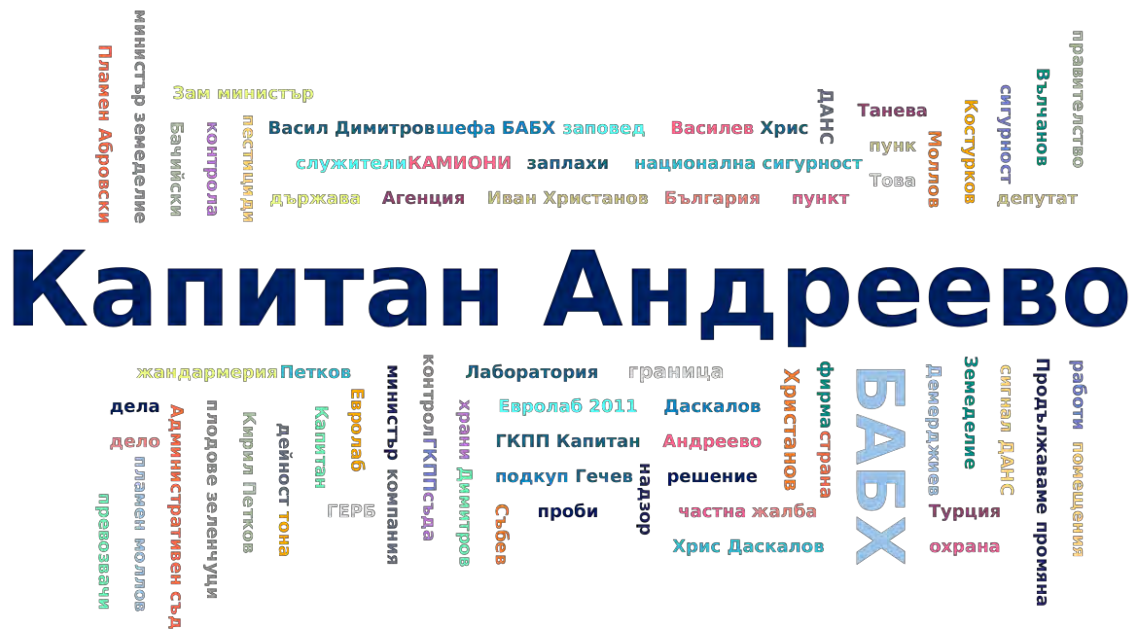
A tag-cloud representation of the most used keywords or phrases in the context of the monitored story. The words' size is a relative indicator of the term's popularity. In this particular case, the most significant keywords are "Kapitan Andreevo," "Bulgarian Agency for Food Safety," and "border," as they represent the core of the story. Notably, the name that stands out the most is that of Deputy Minister of Agriculture Ivan Hristanov, particularly in reference to his statements about the reported incidents of harassment and threats directed towards government officials at the Kapitan Andreevo checkpoint.

Volume Comparison – Corruption Keywords vs. Corruption-Associated Keywords
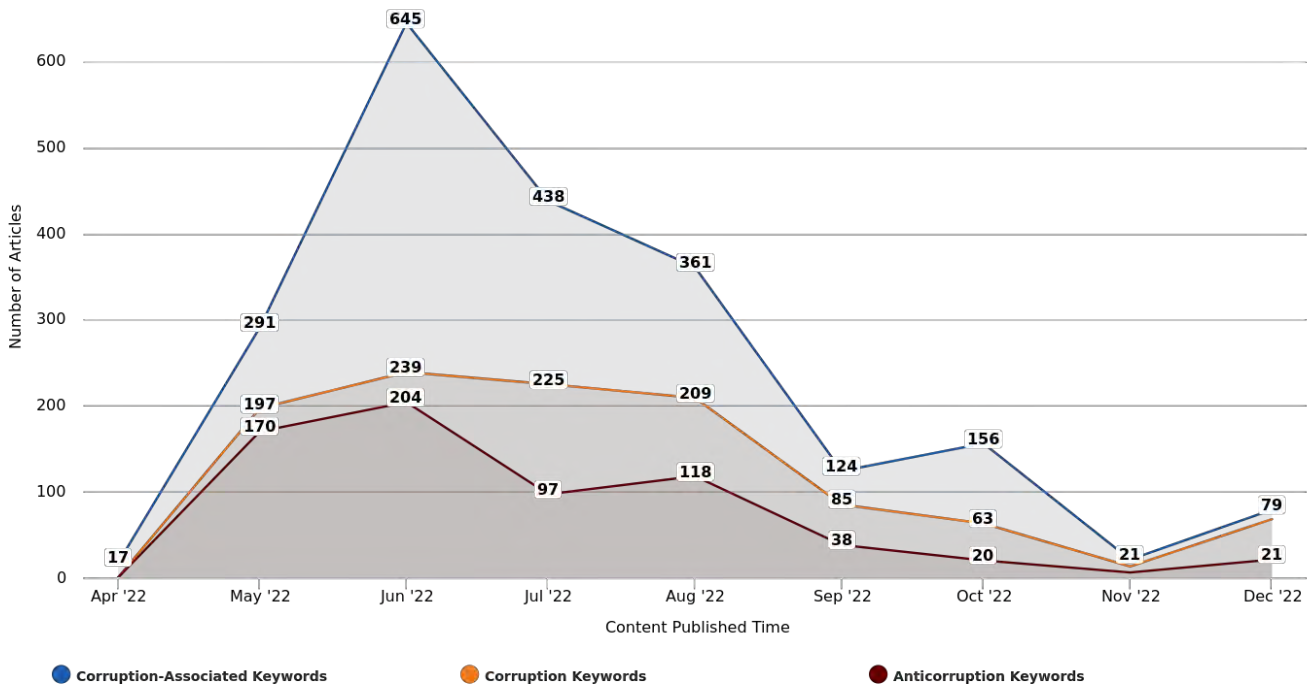
An analysis of the volume distribution of the pieces of content that make reference to corruption, whether directly or indirectly, and the pieces of content that reference anticorruption directly. In the case of the Kapitan Andreevo scandal, the content in question was found to heavily feature words associated with corrupt practices, followed by direct references of corruption. Finally, it was observed that the direct mentions of anticorruption received the lowest volume in the context of this story.

Potential Reach Comparison – Corruption Keywords vs. Corruption-Associated Keywords

- ● Corruption-Associated Keywords
- ● Corruption Keywords
- ● Anticorruption Keywords

Potential reach distribution of the pieces of content, which reference corruption either directly or indirectly. The potential reach of the articles that explicitly use the word "corruption" and its derivatives is very low, in line with their volume.

Stacked Volume Comparison (by source type)

- ● Prominent Sources
- ● Less Prominent Sources
- ● Influence Networks
- ● Media Aggregators

Stacked volume distribution of the story per type of sources. Prominent Sources were most prolific in terms of volume, followed by Media Aggregators and Less Prominent Sources. The Influence Networks were least active in online media. The entire story peaked in June and July.

Stacked Potential Reach Comparison (by source type)
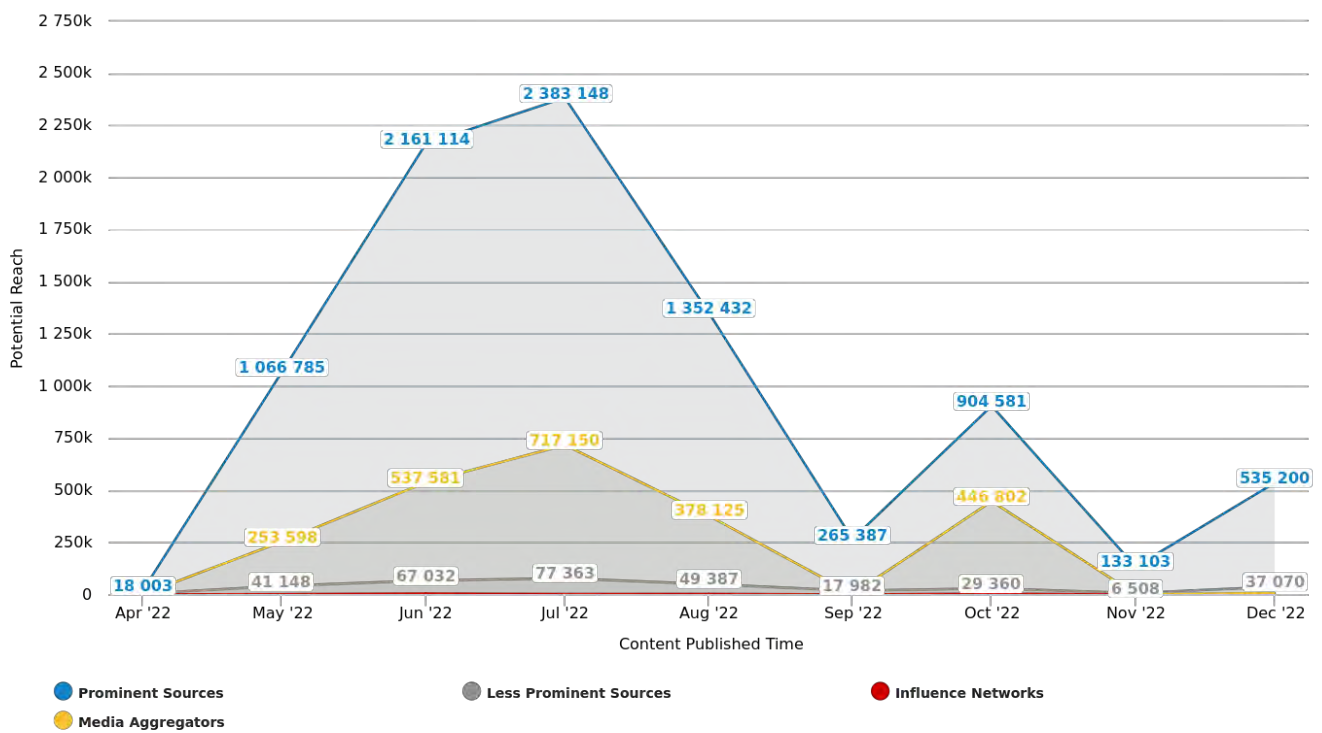
Stacked potential reach distribution of the story per type of sources. Prominent Sources have the biggest potential reach, followed by Media Aggregators.

Volume Comparison - Regional vs National Sources
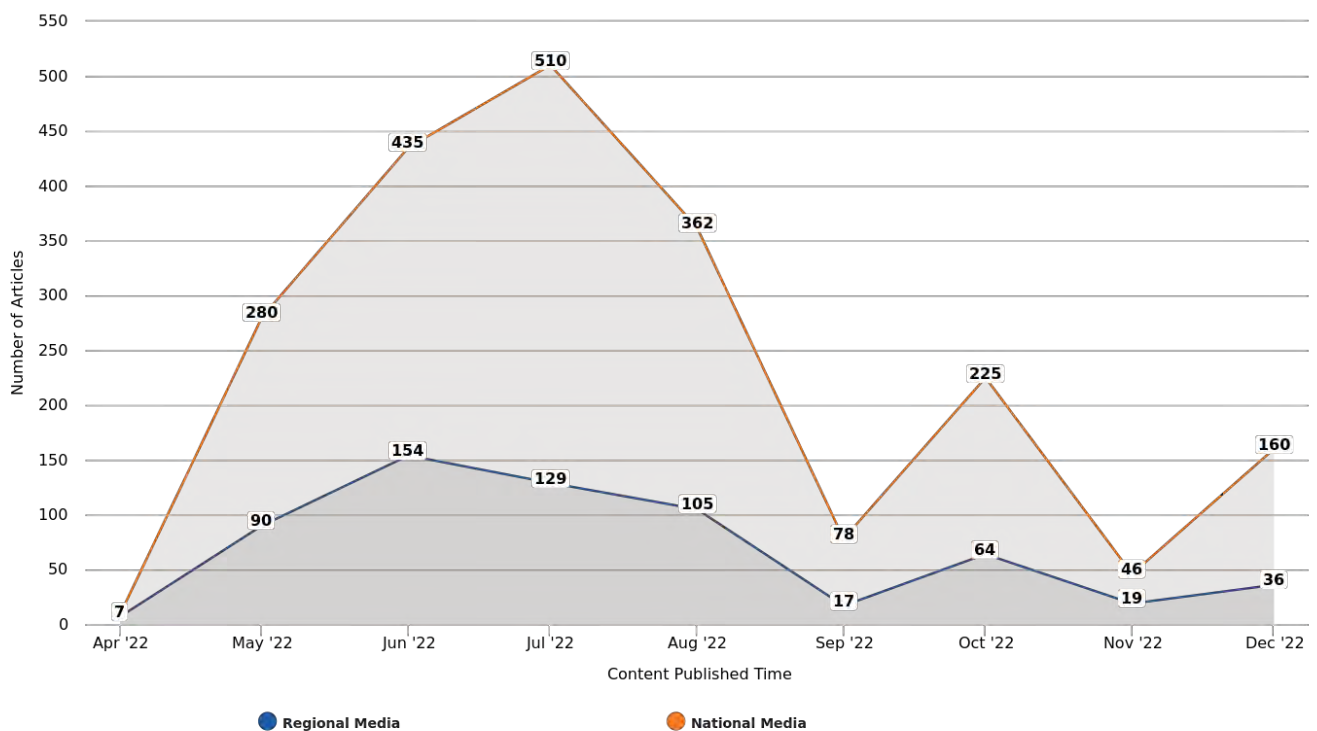
National Media covered the story more extensively than Regional Media in terms of volume. This difference in coverage can be attributed to the fact that Regional Media outlets tend to focus more on local news, whereas National Media sources have a broader scope of coverage.

Potential reach Comparison - Regional vs National Sources
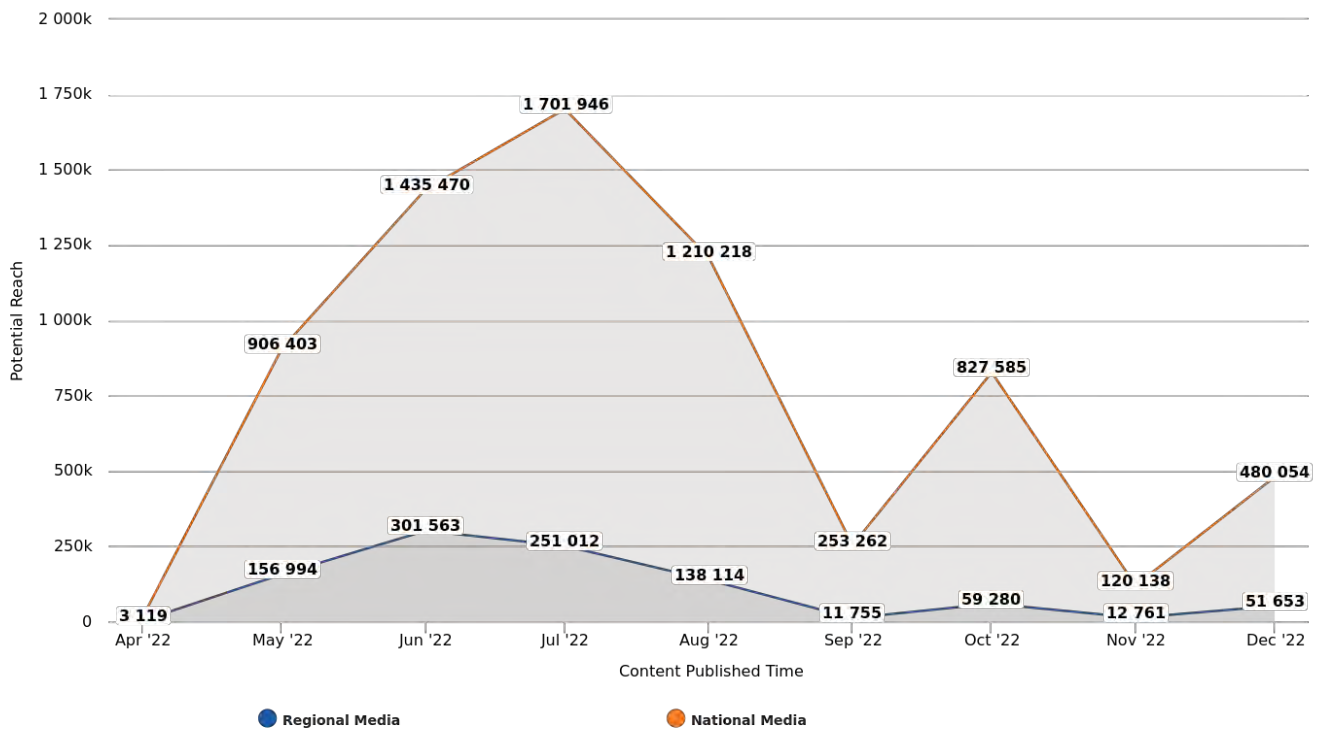
Potential reach distribution of the story in the National and Regional Media. The potential reach of National Media sources far exceeds that of Regional Media. This disparity can be attributed not only to the relatively smaller audience of Regional Media, but also to the lower volume of published content.

5.4.2.2 Online Coverage by Source Type
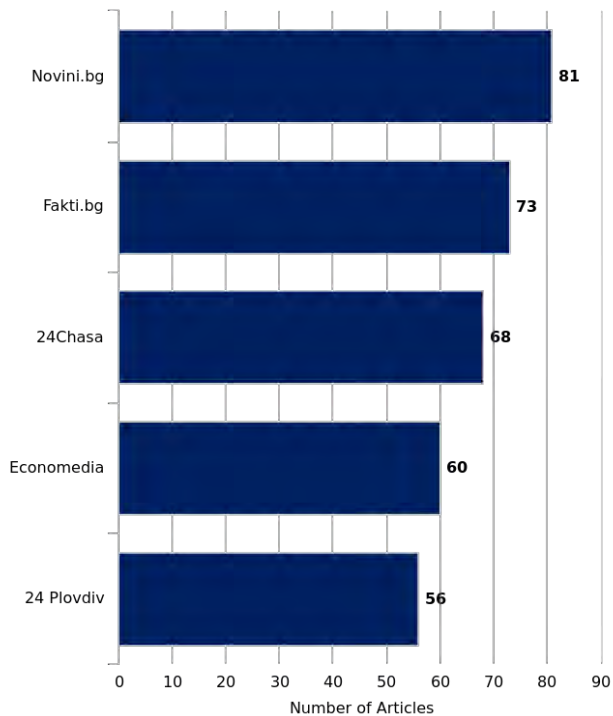
Top Prominent Sources (by volume)	Top Prominent Sources (by reach)
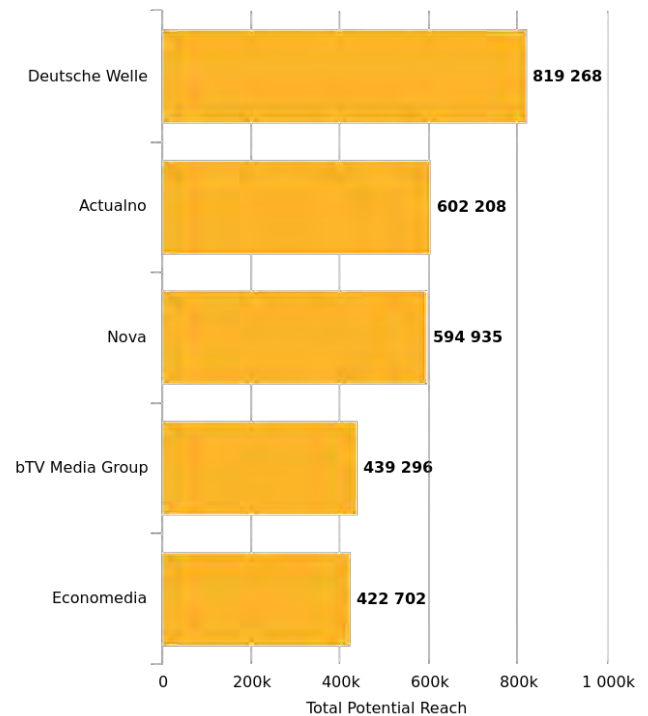
The chart on the left displays the Top Prominent Sources (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Prominent Sources (by potential reach). The numbers point to the conclusion that even though some sources publish less in terms of volume, they manage to reach a considerably wider audience. In this case, "Novini.bg" ranks first in terms of volume, but interestingly it does not appear in the Top 10 sources by potential reach.
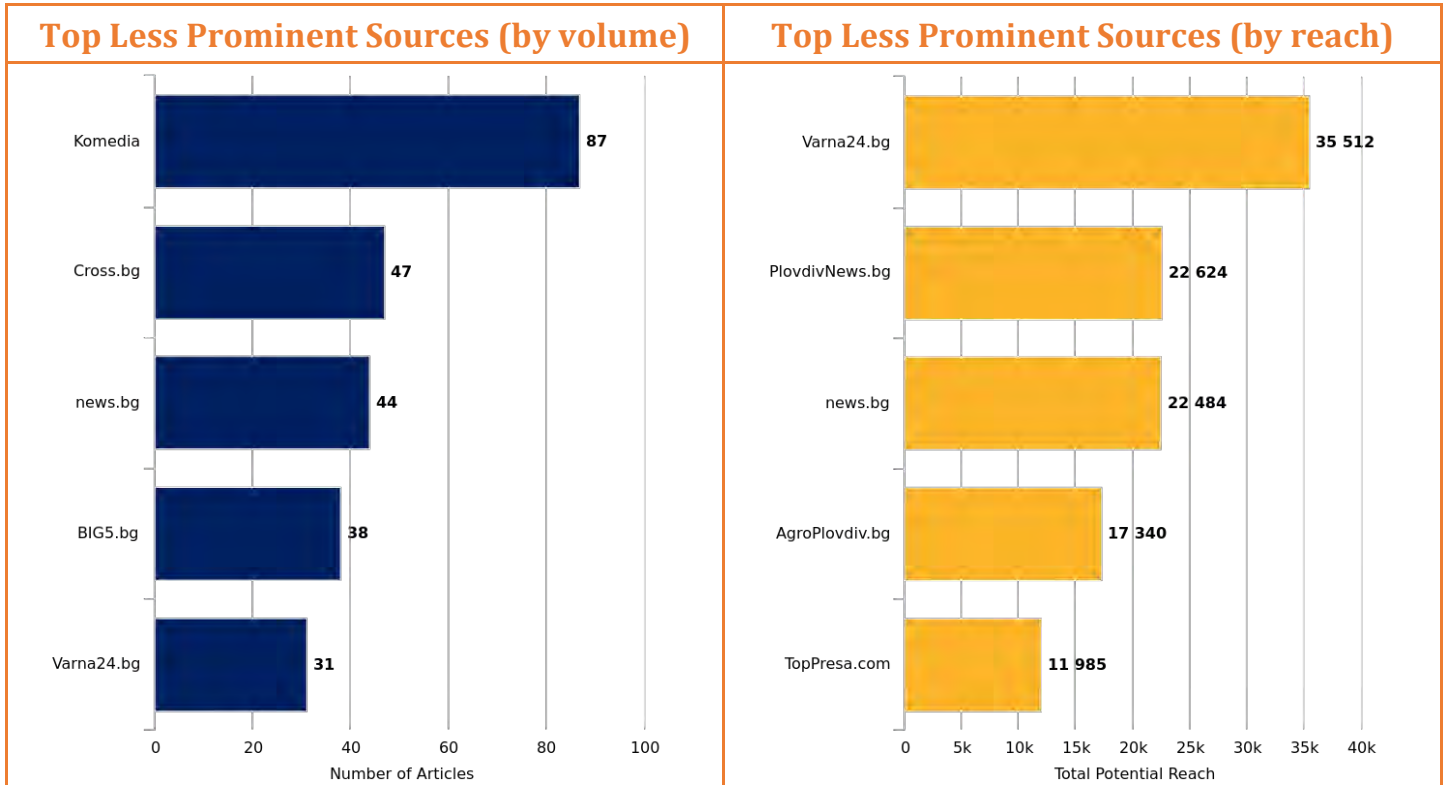
Top Less Prominent Sources (by volume)

Source	Number of Articles
Komedia	87
Cross.bg	47
news.bg	44
BIG5.bg	38
Varna24.bg	31

Top Less Prominent Sources (by reach)

Source	Total Potential Reach
Varna24.bg	35 512
PlovdivNews.bg	22 624
news.bg	22 484
AgroPlovdiv.bg	17 340
TopPresa.com	11 985

The chart on the left displays the Top Less Prominent Sources (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Less Prominent Sources (by potential reach). "Komedia" published the most content on the story, however, "Plovdiv News", which is not among the Top 10 sources in terms of volume, reached a wider audience. Furthermore, the media outlet "News.bg" ranked third both in terms of volume and in potential reach.
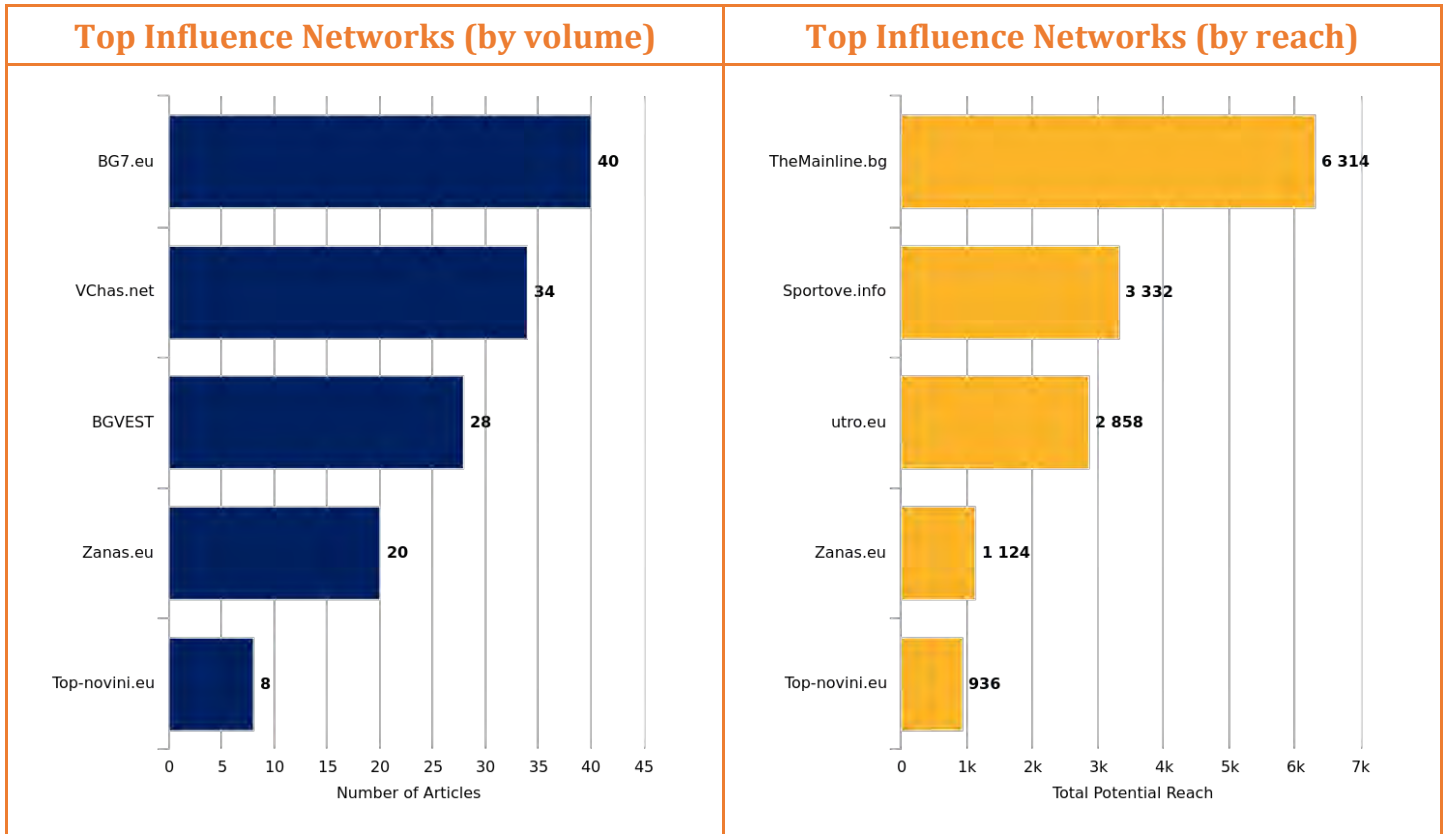
Top Influence Networks (by volume)

Network	Number of Articles
BG7.eu	40
VChas.net	34
BGVEST	28
Zanas.eu	20
Top-novini.eu	8

Top Influence Networks (by reach)

Network	Total Potential Reach
TheMainline.bg	6 314
Sportove.info	3 332
utro.eu	2 858
Zanas.eu	1 124
Top-novini.eu	936

The chart on the left displays the Top Influence Networks (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Influence Networks (by potential reach). Although "BG7.eu" published the most content, "The Mainline" had the biggest potential reach".
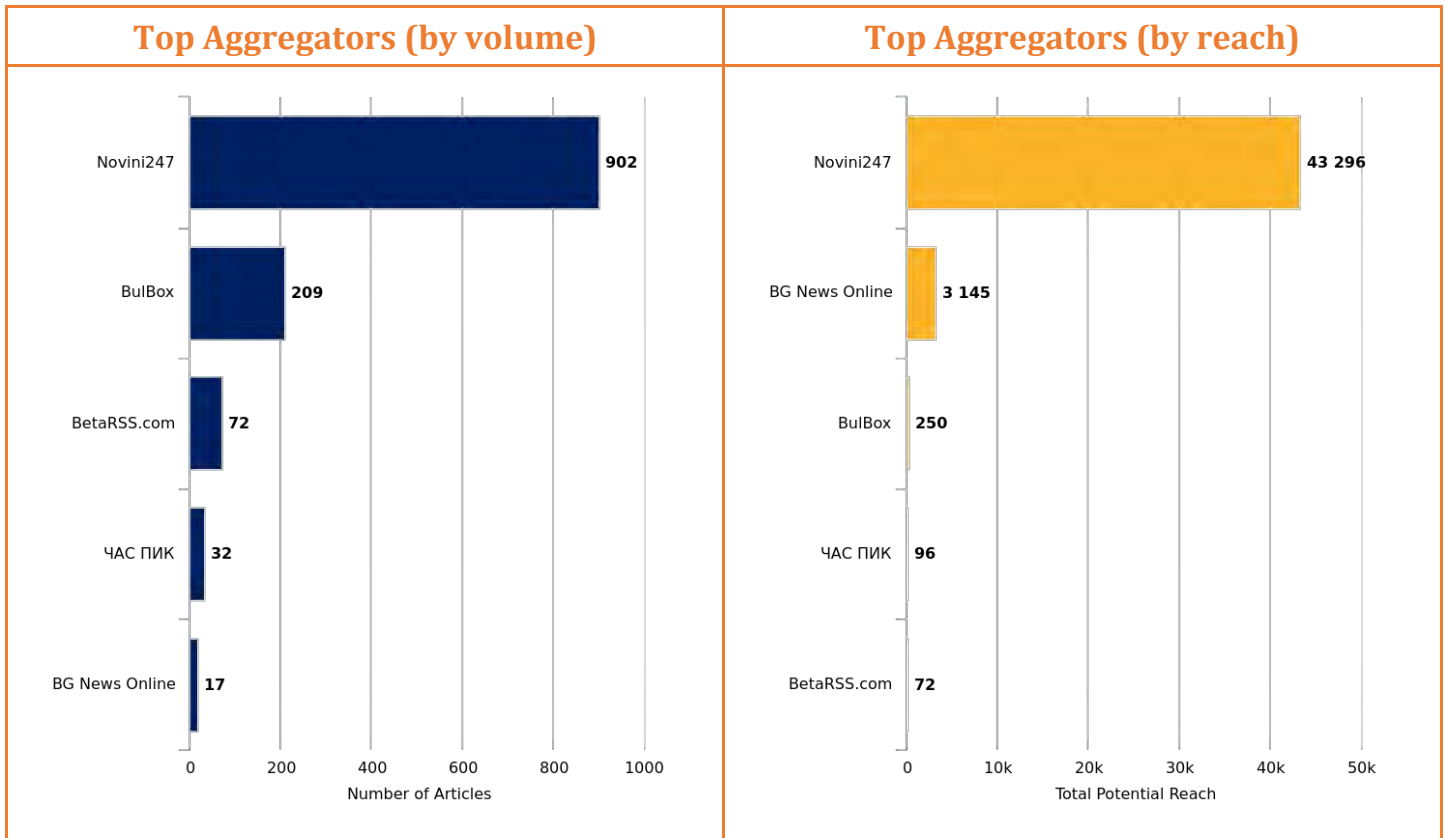
Top Aggregators (by volume)

Number of Articles

- Novini247: **902**
- BulBox: **209**
- BetaRSS.com: **72**
- ЧАС ПИК: **32**
- BG News Online: **17**

Top Aggregators (by reach)

Total Potential Reach

- Novini247: **43 296**
- BG News Online: **3 145**
- BulBox: **250**
- ЧАС ПИК: **96**
- BetaRSS.com: **72**

The chart on the left displays the Top Media Aggregators (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Media Aggregators (by potential reach). "Novini247" published the most content with the highest potential reach.

5.4.2.3 Online Coverage: Source Audience
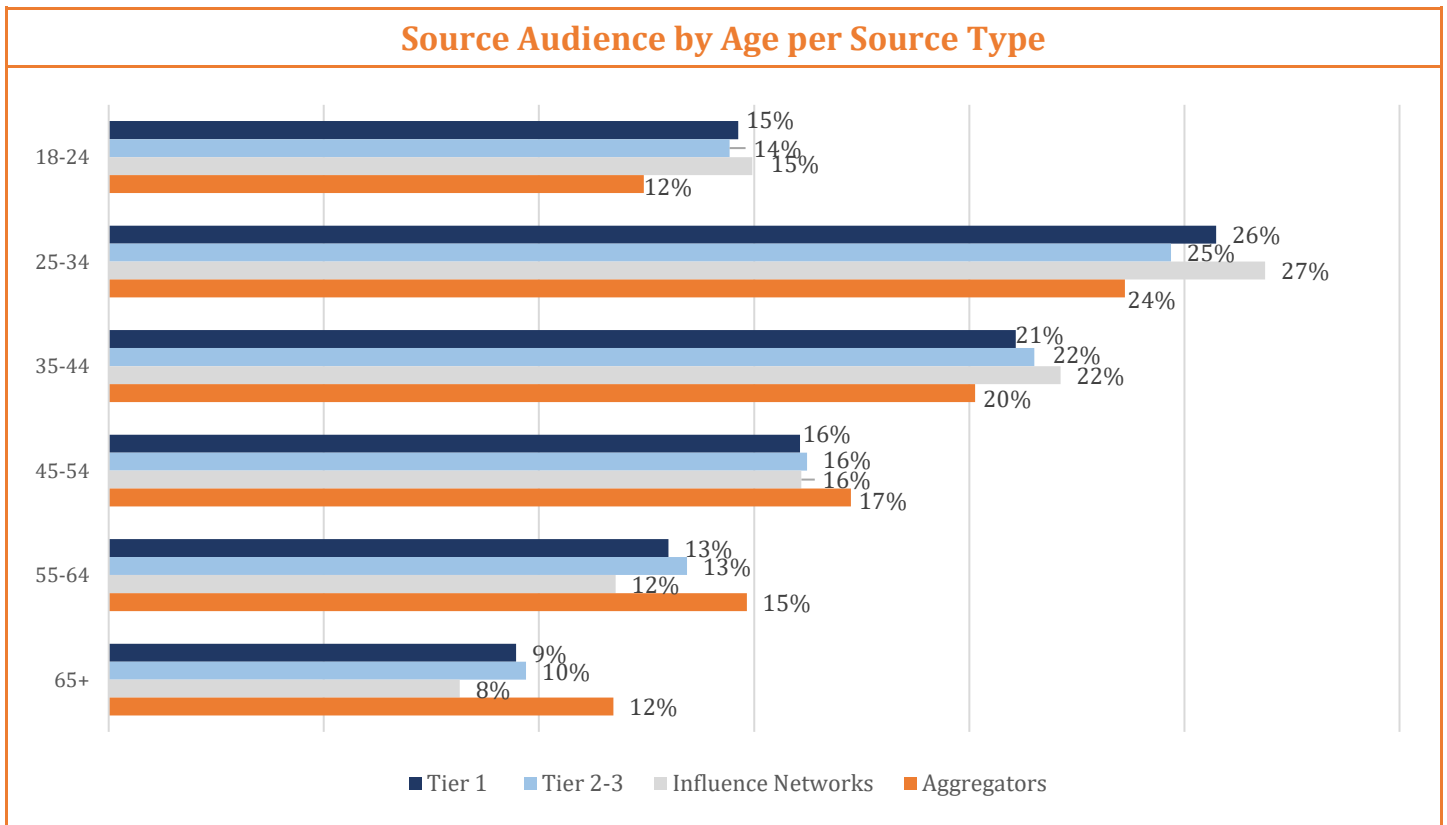
Source Audience by Age per Source Type

Age	Tier 1	Tier 2-3	Influence Networks	Aggregators
18-24	15%	14%	15%	12%
25-34	26%	25%	27%	24%
35-44	21%	22%	22%	20%
45-54	16%	16%	16%	17%
55-64	13%	13%	12%	15%
65+	9%	10%	8%	12%

The chart illustrates the different level of engagement with the four types of monitored sources (Prominent Sources, Less Prominent Sources, Media Aggregators, and Influence Networks) among six age groups. According to the findings, the age group most interested in the Kapitan Andreevo scandal falls between 25 and 44 years old. On the other hand, the people above

65 years of age comprise the lowest percentage of the audience and it is worth noting that they engage mostly with Media Aggregators.
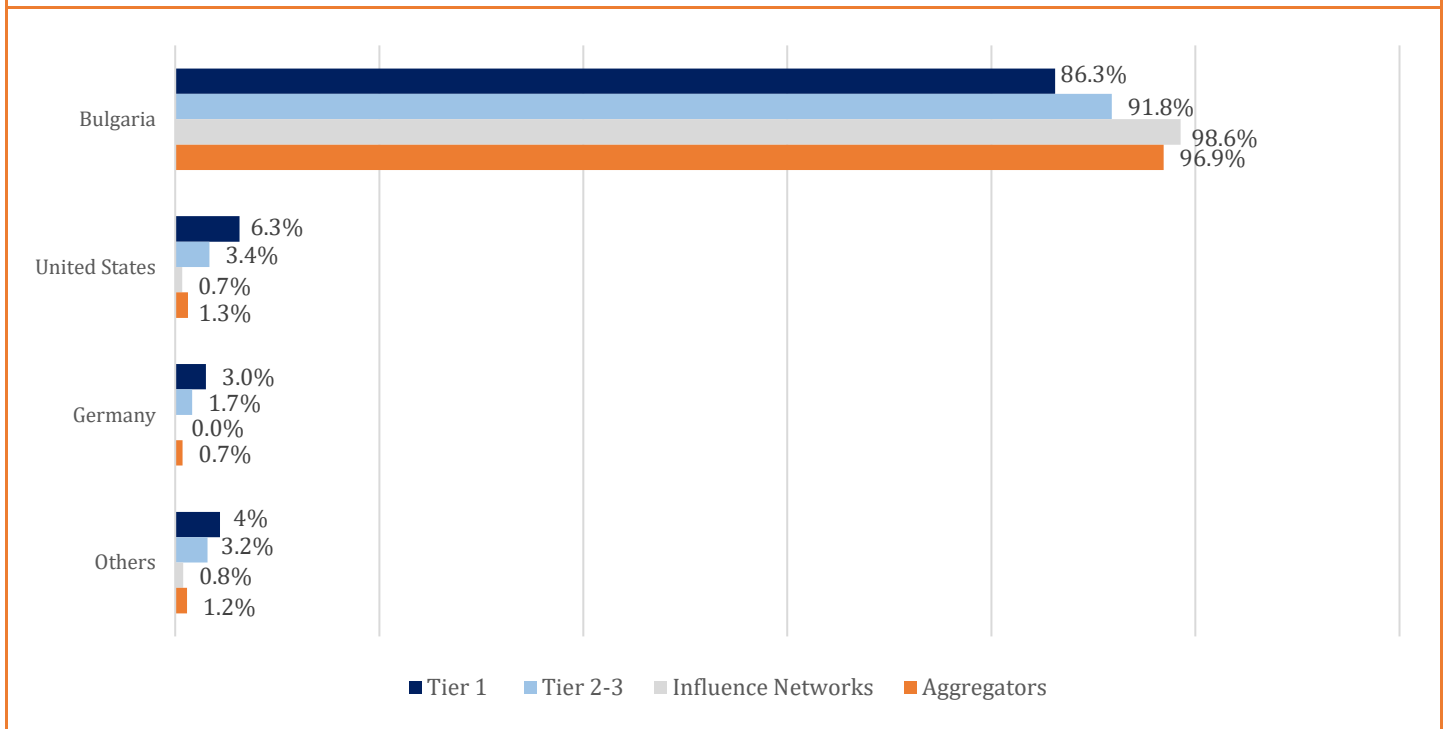
Source Audience by Top Countries per Source Type

Tier 1 ■ Tier 2-3 ■ Influence Networks ■ Aggregators

The chart displays the geographical distribution of the websites' visitors per source type. The traffic comes mostly from Bulgaria, with United States taking the second place among all source types.

Source Audience by Traffic per Source Type

Tier 1 ■ Tier 2-3 ■ Influence Networks ■ Aggregators
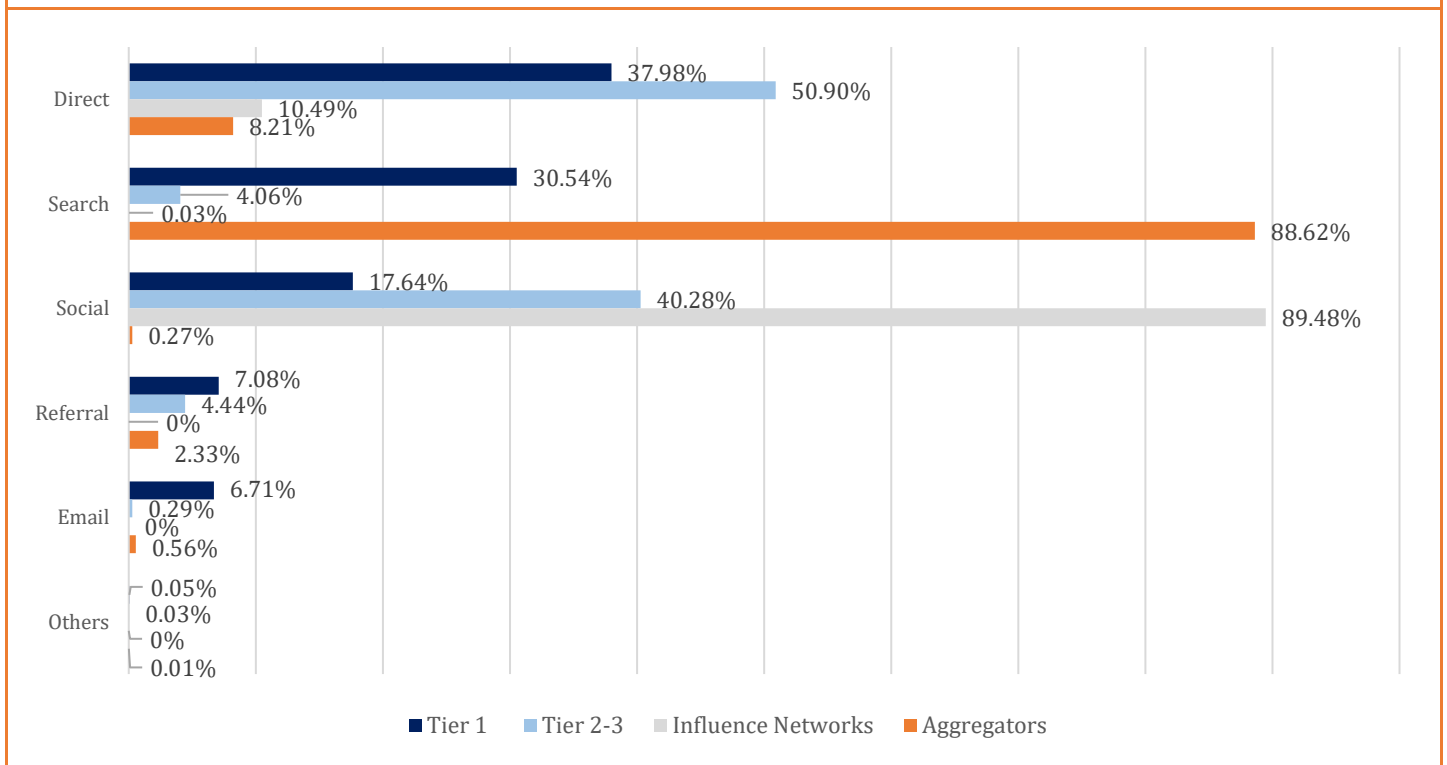
The chart compares the source of traffic and its volume generated by the four monitored source types. Prominent Sources in the context of the Kapitan Andreevo story gained most of their traffic directly, or via a search engine. Less Prominent sources gained most of their traffic directly, while Media Aggregators – via a search engine. Influence Networks, on the other hand, were accessed mostly via social media, followed by direct clicks.

Source Audience by Social Network per Source Type
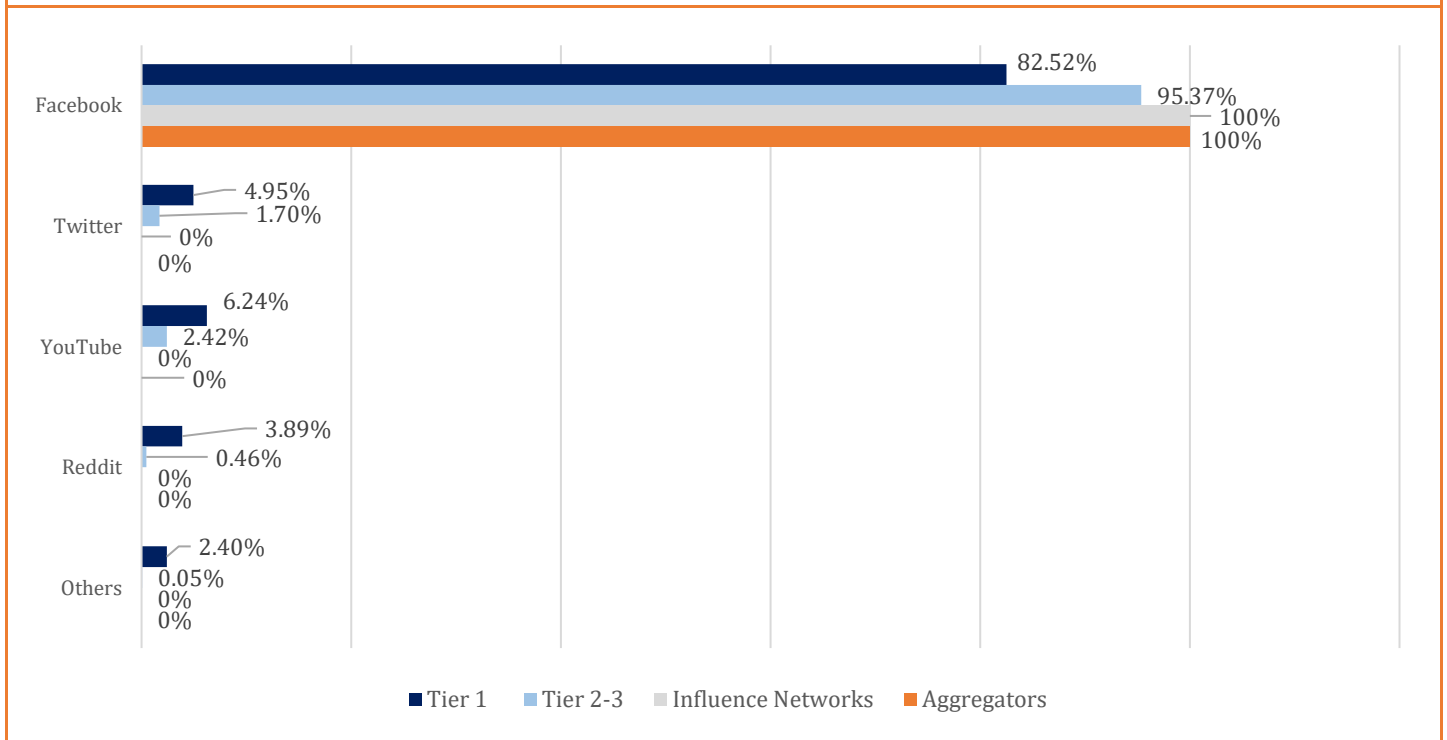
The chart depicts how the source audience is distributed based on the traffic gained through social networks for each source type. The data reveals that Facebook dominates in all four source types, which can be attributed to its immense popularity in Bulgaria. Notably, all of the traffic from social media in Media Aggregators and Influence Networks was generated solely from Facebook.

5.4.2.4 Online Coverage: Political Parties (by volume)
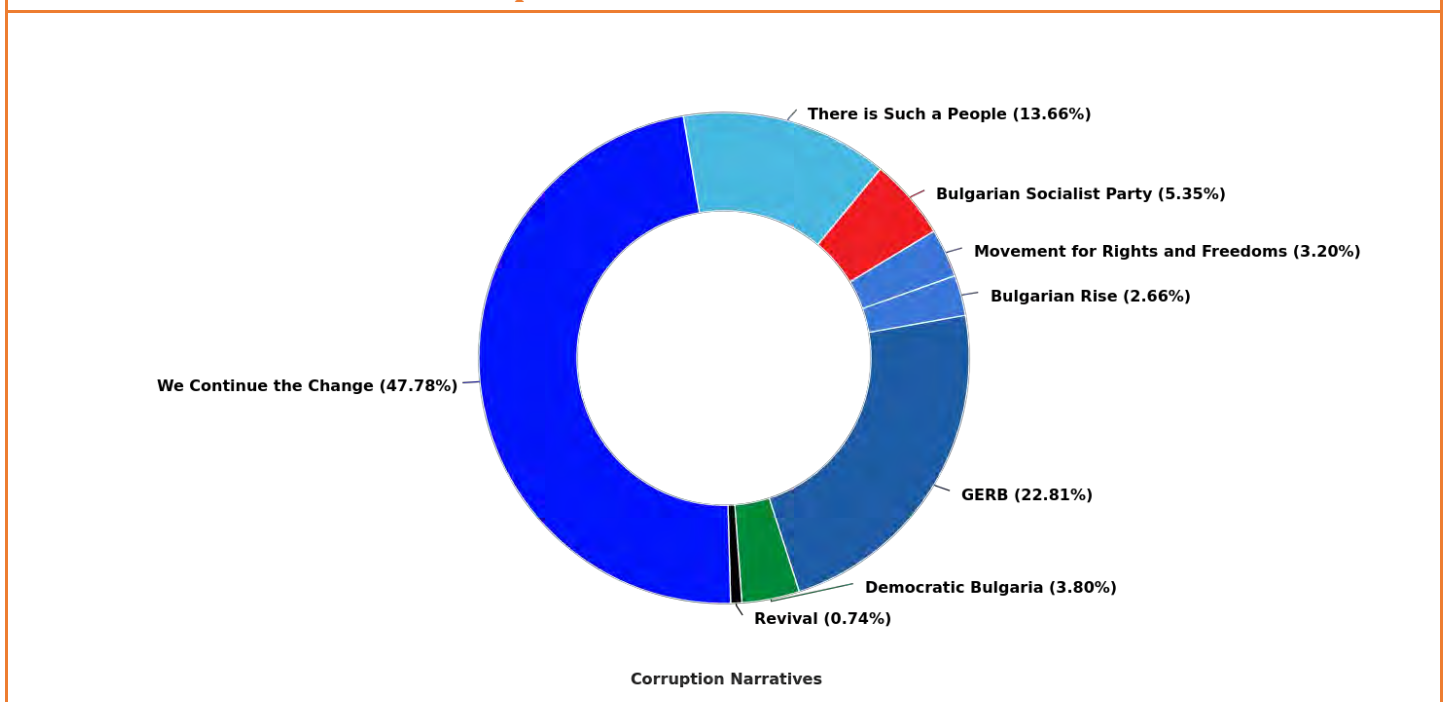
Top Mentioned Political Parties

The chart presents the most mentioned political parties in the context of the Kapitan Andreevo scandal. We Continue the Change (PP) dominates the content with almost 50% of all political party references. The party was mentioned as the driving force behind the fight against corruption at Kapitan Andreevo and has been featured prominently in reputable sources. For example, "BTA" reported that We Continuing the Change is demanding an investigation into the sanitary control at the Kapitan Andreevo border checkpoint over the past decade. GERB comes second in terms of mentions with nearly 24%, primarily

because of the corruption allegations against the party. For instance, "Dnevnik" shared a publication, that according to Hristanov, the mafia has taken over the Bulgarian border with the help of Borissov and GERB [332]. There Is Such a People reached nearly 14%, mainly due to now former member Plamen Abrovski's statement that the state is not controlling the Kapitan Andreevo border checkpoint properly.

5.4.3. Social Coverage (Facebook)

The Kapitan Andreevo border checkpoint scandal that sheds light on the media coverage related to the fight against corruption in Bulgaria revealed a consistent pattern with the overall trends in online media in 2022. The story gained momentum in June and peaked in August. Facebook users expressed their dissatisfaction in the comment sections and accused Boyko Borissov's government of corruption. The Top 10 social media authors on Facebook played a significant role in driving the conversation, with "Novini.bg" and "bTV" being the most active in both sharing content and receiving interactions from users. The word cloud reveals the most frequently used keywords and phrases, such as "Kapitan Andreev," "Bulgarian Food Safety Agency," "laboratory," and "control," which describe the events of the story. The political parties mentioned in relation to the scandal on Facebook are led by We Continue the Change (PP) in terms of volume. Meanwhile, GERB and the Movement of Rights and Freedoms (DPS) received mentions in association with corruption allegations.

Overall Volume (per month)
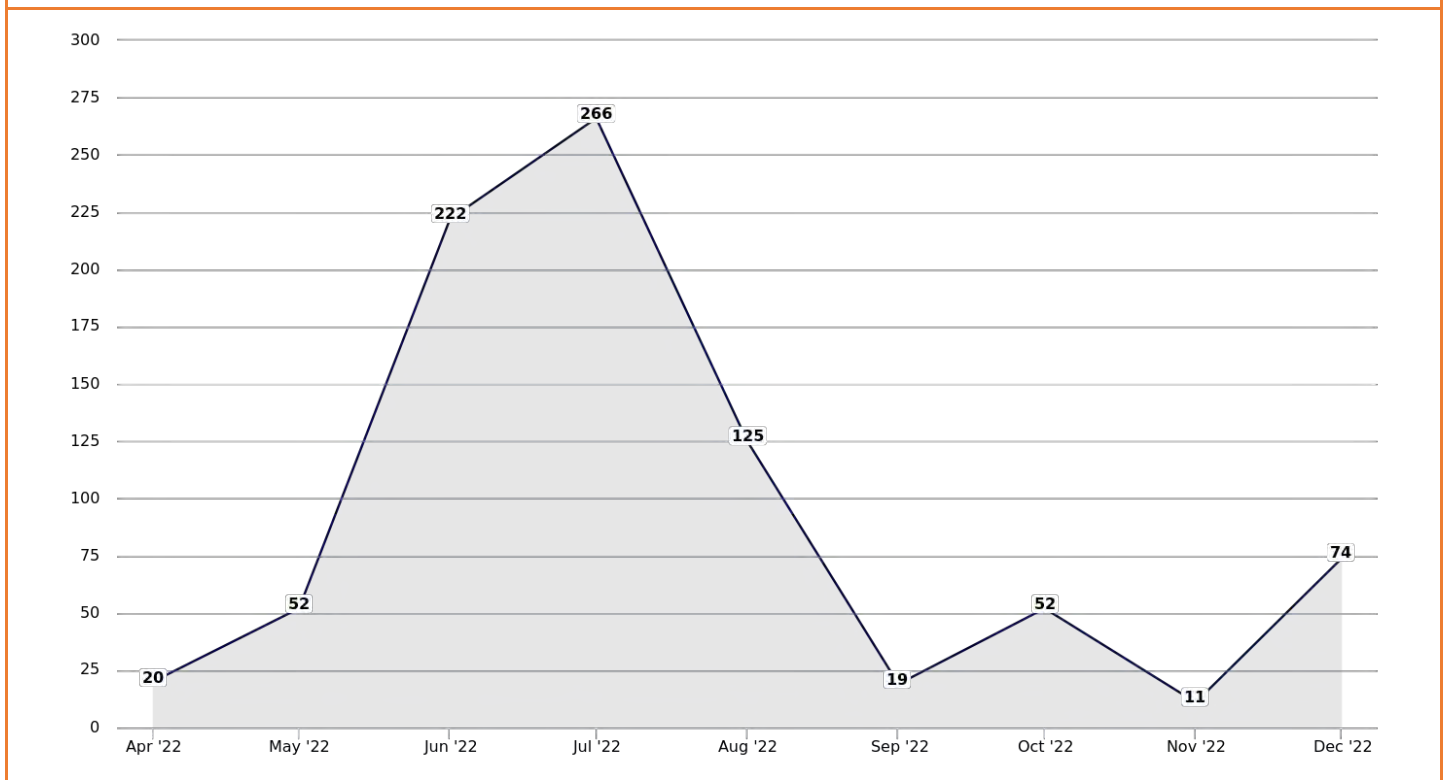
The story's peaks were consistent with the trends observed in online media in 2022. The most significant increase in content occurred between June and August 2022, starting when social media accounts shared a post about Plamen Abrovski, a former deputy from the political party There is Such a People and chairman of the Committee on Agriculture, Food, and Forestry in the National Assembly. Abrovski stated that Bulgaria has never lost its control function and activity at the Kapitan Andreevo border checkpoint. This provoked limited engagement. However, social media users started engaging more in July after social accounts shared the news that Bulgarian authorities had reported violations of phytosanitary and medical controls at the Kapitan Andreevo checkpoint. This sparked numerous discussions on social media, with many users reacting to the case and accusing Boyko Borissov's government of corruption.

Top 10 Social Authors (by volume)

Social Source Name	Number of Articles
Novini.bg	37
Новини от България и света	36
bTV Новините	36
"По света и у нас" - новините на БНТ	30
Инициатива "Правосъдие за всеки"	29
Дневник	28
www.actualno.com	28
Епицентър	19
Nbox.bg	19
DUNAVMOST.bg	16
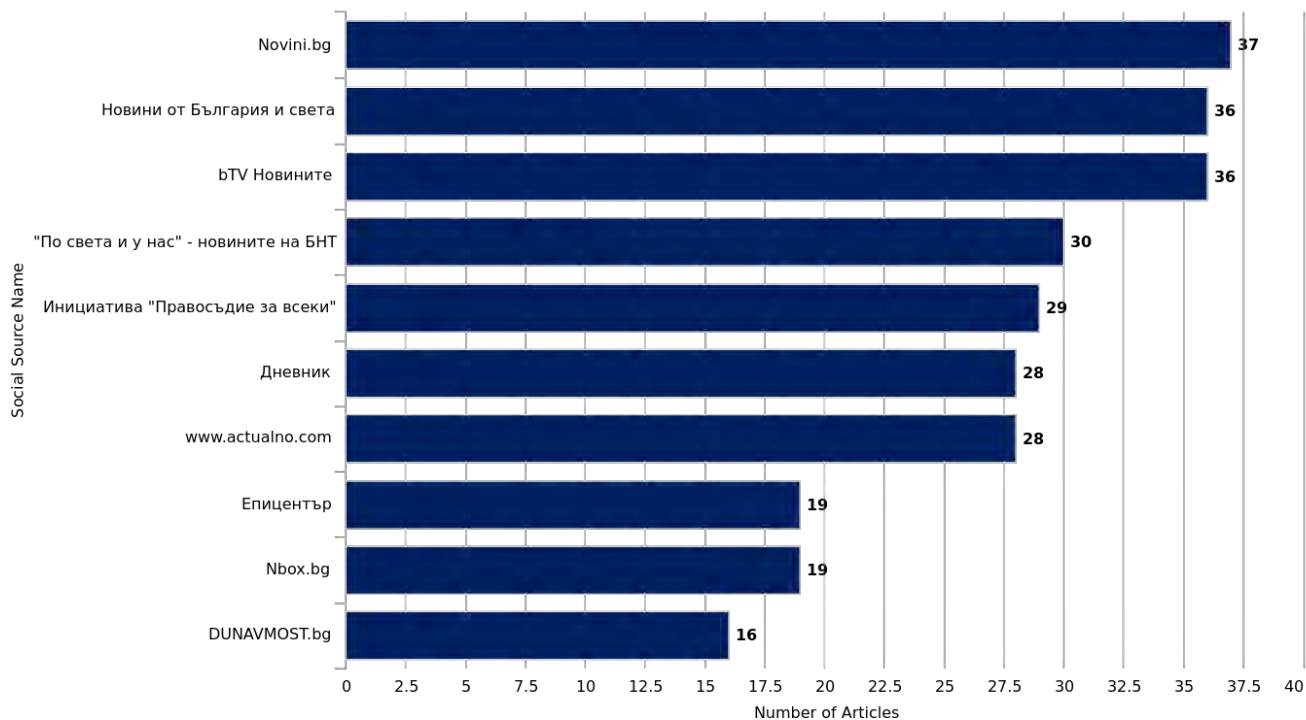
The chart displays the Top 10 social media authors on Facebook, ranked according to their combined number of posts and comments during the monitored period. Among them, "Novini.bg" and "bTV" posted the most, subsequently receiving the biggest amount of engagement. However, despite its high activity "Novini ot Bulgaria i Sveta" (News from Bulgaria and Around the World) did not receive any interactions. The "Justice for Everyone" initiative (Initsiativa Pravosadie za Vseki) also ranked at the top of the list of the most engaging Facebook authors.

Top Keywords (by volume)

The word cloud illustrates the most frequently used keywords or phrases in the context of the monitored story, highlighting words such as "Kapitan Andreevo," "Bulgarian Food Safety Agency," "laboratory," "border checkpoints of Bulgaria," and "control," which describe the events of the story. The names of former Prime Minister Boyko Borissov stands out as he is frequently mentioned in comments in association with corruption.

5.4.3.1 Social Coverage: Political Parties (by volume)

Top Mentioned Political Parties

Movement for Rights and Freedoms (5.56%)

Bulgarian Socialist Party (3.33%)

There is Such a People (20.00%)

GERB (25.56%)

We Continue the Change (42.78%)

Democratic Bulgaria (2.78%)
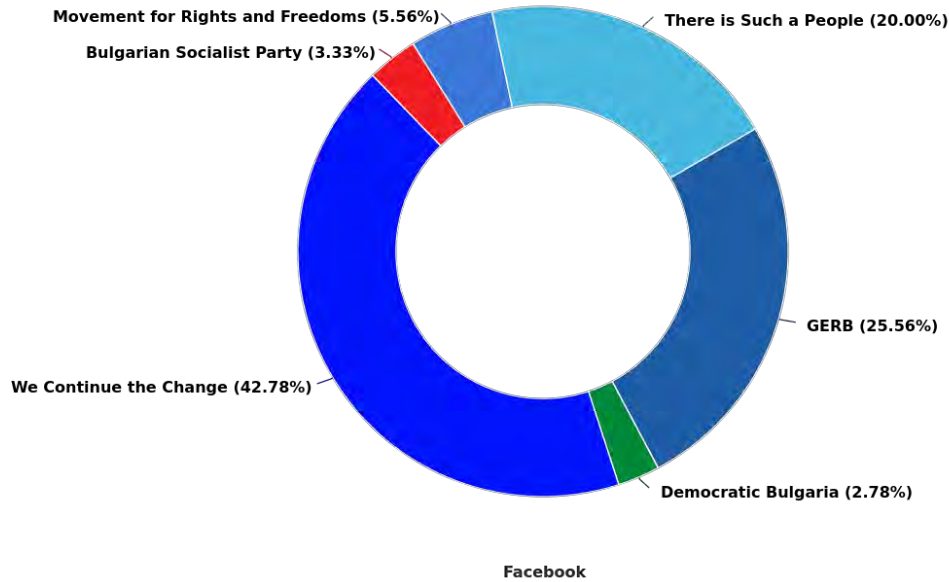
Facebook

The political parties mentioned in relation to the Kapitan Andreevo scandal on Facebook show that We Continue the Change (PP) dominates the content with 50% of the political party references. PP was discussed in the context of initiating the fight against corruption in Kapitan Andreevo. A noteworthy observation is that several media outlets, including "Frognews," "Novini ot Bulgaria I Sveta," "Nbox.bg," and "Pod Lupa," shared on their Facebook pages identical posts featuring articles from their respective websites that were critical of the We Continue the Change government [333]. GERB comes second in terms of mentions, primarily because of the corruption allegations against the party. Meanwhile, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS) ranked third, as it was frequently mentioned alongside GERB in relation to the corruption scandal.

5.5. Parliament Passes Two Anticorruption Bills

5.5.1. Background

At the end of August 2022, media outlets reported that, according to Minister of Justice Krum Zarkov, the caretaker cabinet was preparing a new law related to the work of the Commission for Anticorruption and Illegal Assets Forfeiture (CACIAF) that would ensure "political independence" [334]. Some authors even described the planned changes as an "overhaul" [335]. In this context, Atanas Pekanov, then Deputy Prime Minister for EU Funds Management, said that "the judicial reform and the anticorruption measures are among the most important steps Bulgaria must take in order to be a stronger and fairer state with more efficient economy. During a meeting with the European Commission, Minister of Justice Krum Zarkov presented the progress on the bills concerning the rule of law in the country" [336]. Soon after, it was revealed that Minister Zarkov's proposal envisions "a new way of selecting and appointing members of the new anticorruption commission." It was suggested that the members of the new commission be divided as follows: two elected by the Parliament, one elected by the President, and two elected by the General Assemblies of the two Supreme Courts. Consequently, each of the five appointees would serve as a Chairman for the period of one year and on a rotating basis. Zarkov also pointed out that "the new body will have investigative functions, as per the previous proposal" [337].

The former Ministers of Justice Nadezhda Yordanova from Democratic Bulgaria and Ekaterina Zaharieva from GERB also commented on the matter. Yordanova considered the CACIAF reform to be among the essential measures within the national plan for recovery and sustainability. On the other hand, Zaharieva expressed her astonishment that a caretaker cabinet had proposed a change of such a scale, explaining that, in her opinion, "before a new body is formed, CACIAF's work needs to be reevaluated," adding that "it is more important to ensure that the already existing bodies work well than to create new ones" [338]. For his part, Assistant Professor Orlin Kolev, an expert in the field of Constitutional Law, discussed the proposal's positive features, noting that "there are a number of technical issues that have yet to be clarified" [339].

About a month later, Yasen Todorov, the Deputy Director of the National Investigation Service, claimed that "the proposed anticorruption law, introduced by the previous heads of the National Assembly, is dangerous for Bulgaria's democratic foundations," highlighting that "not only is the document filled with many legal errors and inaccuracies, but its principles are totally wrong as well" [340].

On October 26, the Council of Ministers approved a draft law aimed at "combating corruption among persons holding high public positions." National websites reported that the anticorruption commission would be tasked with "prevention (by collecting and analyzing information and proposing anticorruption measures), detection, and investigation of corruption crimes" [341]. In this context, Minister Krum Zarkov clarified that "the new anticorruption body will not be used as a club or an umbrella" [342]. A separate piece quoted Zarkov's comment that "it is not enough to prosecute the Prosecutor General, his actions must be put in a broader frame. They raise the painfully familiar questions concerning the composition of the Supreme Justice Court and the ratio between the quotas. Our anticorruption bill resolves all non-constitutional issues" [343].

At the end of the month, GERB's representative and Chairman of the Parliamentary Legal Affairs Committee, Radomir Cholakov, said that he would support We Continue the Change's (PP) anticorruption law and called on his fellow MPs to do the same [344]. Two days later, on November 2, it was announced that the Committee had adopted, at first reading, the two bills for the creation of an anticorruption agency [345]. Immediately after, however, the Anticorruption Fund warned that CACIAF was "violating the law by declaring as an official secret all its decisions to initiate proceedings for the confiscation of illegally acquired property. The decision dates back to 2018. In no way does this type of information harm the interests of the state. However, it provides the public with the opportunity to form an opinion about the facts and conclusions, based on which CACIAF initiates proceedings for the confiscation of citizens' property" [346]. The Fond's "cautionary message" did not stop the Parliamentary Committee on Internal Security and Public Order to also vote in favor of the two bills for a new anticorruption law [347].

Following the different official approvals, in December, various outlets reported that the MPs

would be the next to formally discuss the proposal [348]. Both the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS) and GERB voiced their support for the bills, even though DPS's Yordan Tsonev underlined that "the creation of a new body is no guarantee that we will fight corruption, especially when it seems that said body bypasses other bodies. Especially when it appears that its very creation circumvents the constitutional principles, the separation of powers, and so on. And especially if it means that certain hands will receive a new club" [349]. In the meantime, the Revival party accused We Continue the Change of political plagiarism and manipulation, saying that "PP

has rewritten 77% of the 2018 GERB anticorruption law" [350]. Despite the criticism, the Parliament approved the anticorruption reform and the affiliated bills [351].

Towards the end of the monitored period, a number of websites cited Minister Zarkov who noted that "the new anticorruption legislation can be introduced next January 21, at the earliest. However, if there is no stable majority and if no government has been formed by then, the law adoption chances will decrease" [352].

5.5.2. Online Coverage

5.5.2.1 Overall Metrics and Volume Comparison

Around 2,200 articles related to the story were published during the monitored period. The Influence Networks published the biggest number (more than 1100), followed by Prominent Sources (550) and Media Aggregators (300). Less Prominent Sources published the least content. It must be noted that a week after the two anticorruption bills were adopted at first reading, a small story occurred, which, at a first glance, appeared unrelated. On December 16, 2022, the media outlet PIK published an article accusing then caretaker Minister of Justice Krum Zarkov of a number of indecent activities, as well as of strangling his neighbor's cat [353]. Two days later, PIK published another article on the same subject [354]. Both articles used offensive wording and vulgar slang, often associated with yellow journalism, to describe the events. The news were quickly picked up by mushroom websites, which republished the articles multiple times, increasing its potential reach drastically. Overall, the news was republished more than 500 times by online media outlets. A small fraction of those articles also mentioned the anticorruption bills.

The four types of sources monitored in this report all have a similar source audience in the context of this story, with people between the ages of 25 and 44 comprising the biggest percentage of the readership. In addition, the traffic was generated mostly from Bulgaria. The types of sources mostly differed in terms of the means of traffic gaining: Prominent Sources did so through direct clicks and search engines, Les Prominent Sources by way of direct clicks, and Media Aggregators via a search engine. The Influence Networks gained traffic directly, followed by clicks from social media platforms (Facebook and Twitter).

The majority of the articles published on the story referred to corruption or anticorruption directly, rather than using words associated with those terms. Due to the national interest in the matter, the involvement of the Ministry of Justice, and the discussions held by the country's major political parties, the story was covered in detail by sources categorized as National Media.

Top Keywords (by volume)

A tag-cloud representation of the most used keywords or phrases in the context of the monitored story. The words' size is a relative indicator of the term's popularity. In this case, among the most mentioned keywords are "serious threat," "Bulgaria received," "draft law," "CACIAF," "recovery plan," and the family name of then caretaker Minister of Justice Krum Zarkov. An interesting finding is that among the most mentioned keywords is the word "corruption," situated right at the center of the chart above. The fact that it was heavily used in an anticorruption narrative supports the theory that Bulgarian media avoids the direct use of the word and its derivatives, unless the context of the story indicates a positive development (e.g. the new ways to fight high-level corruption).

Volume Comparison – Corruption Keywords vs. Corruption-Associated Keywords
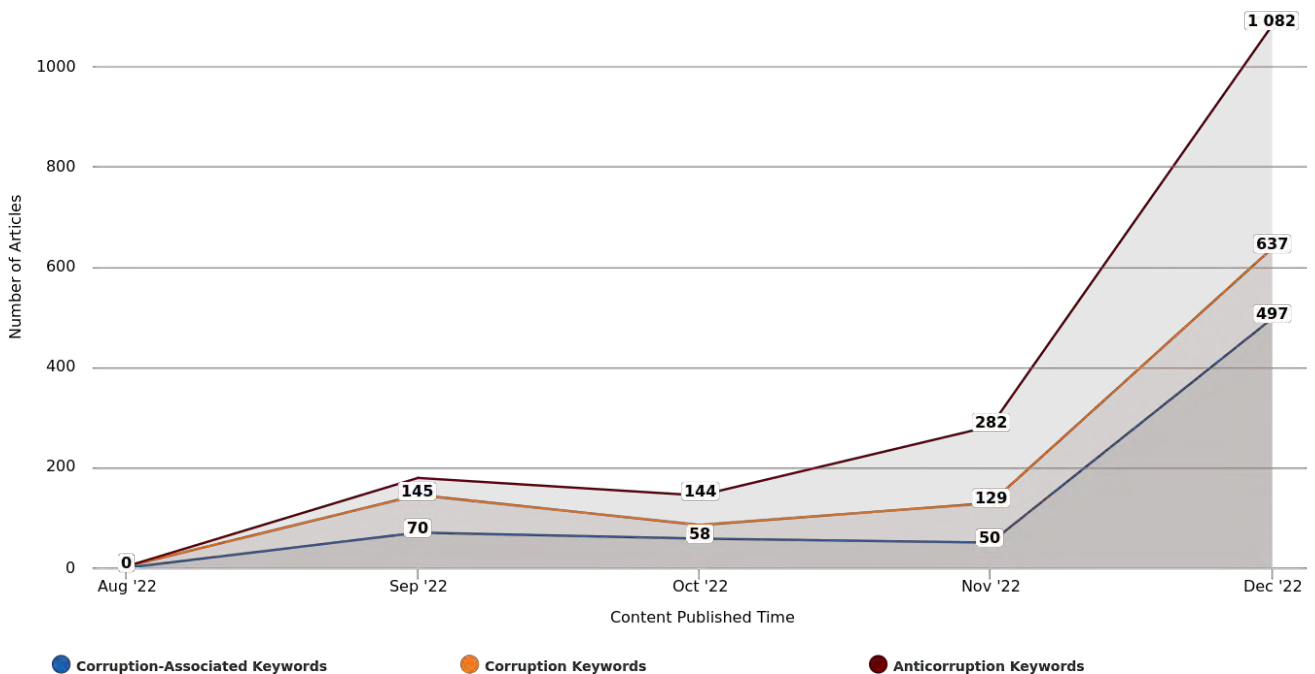
Volume distribution of the pieces of content, which reference corruption either directly or indirectly, and the pieces of content that mention anticorruption directly. The chart clearly shows that the majority of the content related to the story directly references anticorruption, followed by references to corruption and its derivatives, while the indirect references to corruption are the least used. This circumstance is exactly the opposite of what was observed with most corruption narratives.

Potential Reach Comparison – Corruption Keywords vs. Corruption-Associated Keywords
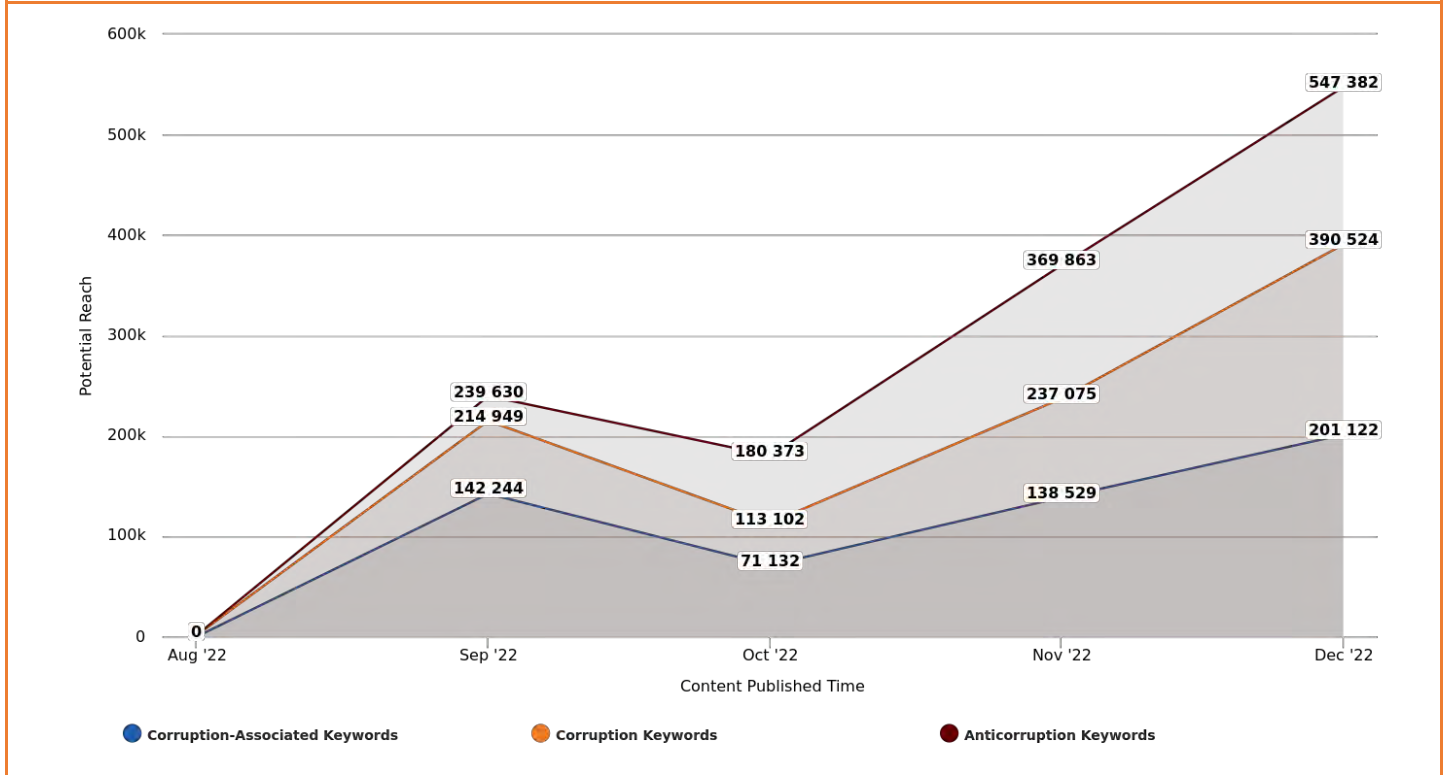
Potential reach distribution of the pieces of content, which reference corruption either directly or indirectly. The potential reach distribution mimics the volume distribution, as the content referencing anticorruption directly has the highest potential reach, followed by the content referencing corruption directly, and, finally, the content without direct mentions of corruption.

Stacked Volume Comparison (by source type)
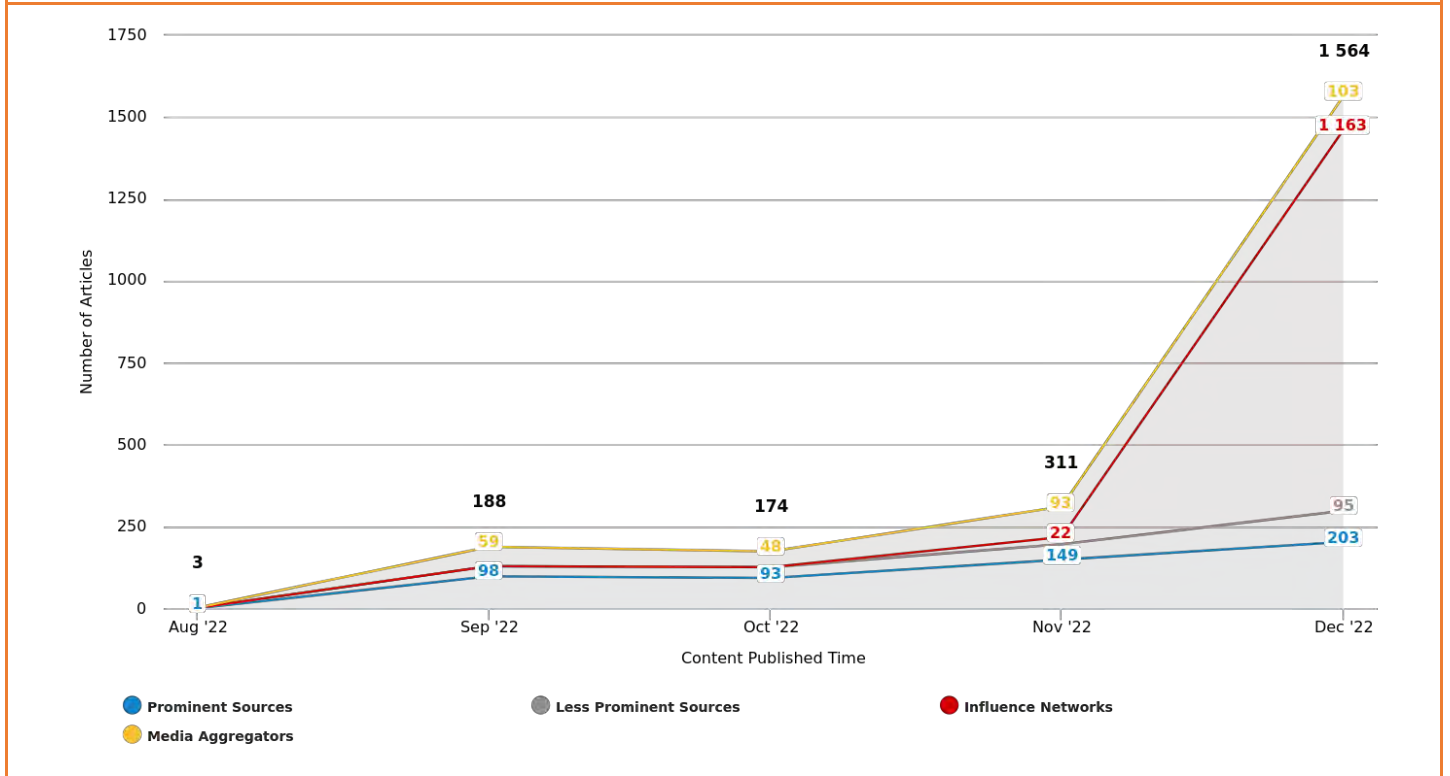
Stacked volume distribution of the story per type of sources. Prominent Sources, Less Prominent Sources, and Media Aggregators published consistently on the matter over the monitored period (August–December 2022). The Influence Networks were dormant at the beginning; however, they rapidly became active in December 2022, publishing more than 1100 articles for one month. This happened only two months after the parliamentary elections in October 2022. The peak was

Stacked Volume Comparison (by source type)

caused by three main headlines originally published by Prominent Sources and then picked up by the Influence Networks and republished numerous times. They are as follows: "Deputies Begin Discussion of the Anticorruption Bills" [355]; "Bad News: There is a Serious Chance that Bulgaria Will not Receive Money under the Recovery Plan" [356]; "Minister Zarkov Said When We Will Have the Anticorruption Law" [357].

Stacked Potential Reach Comparison (by source type)
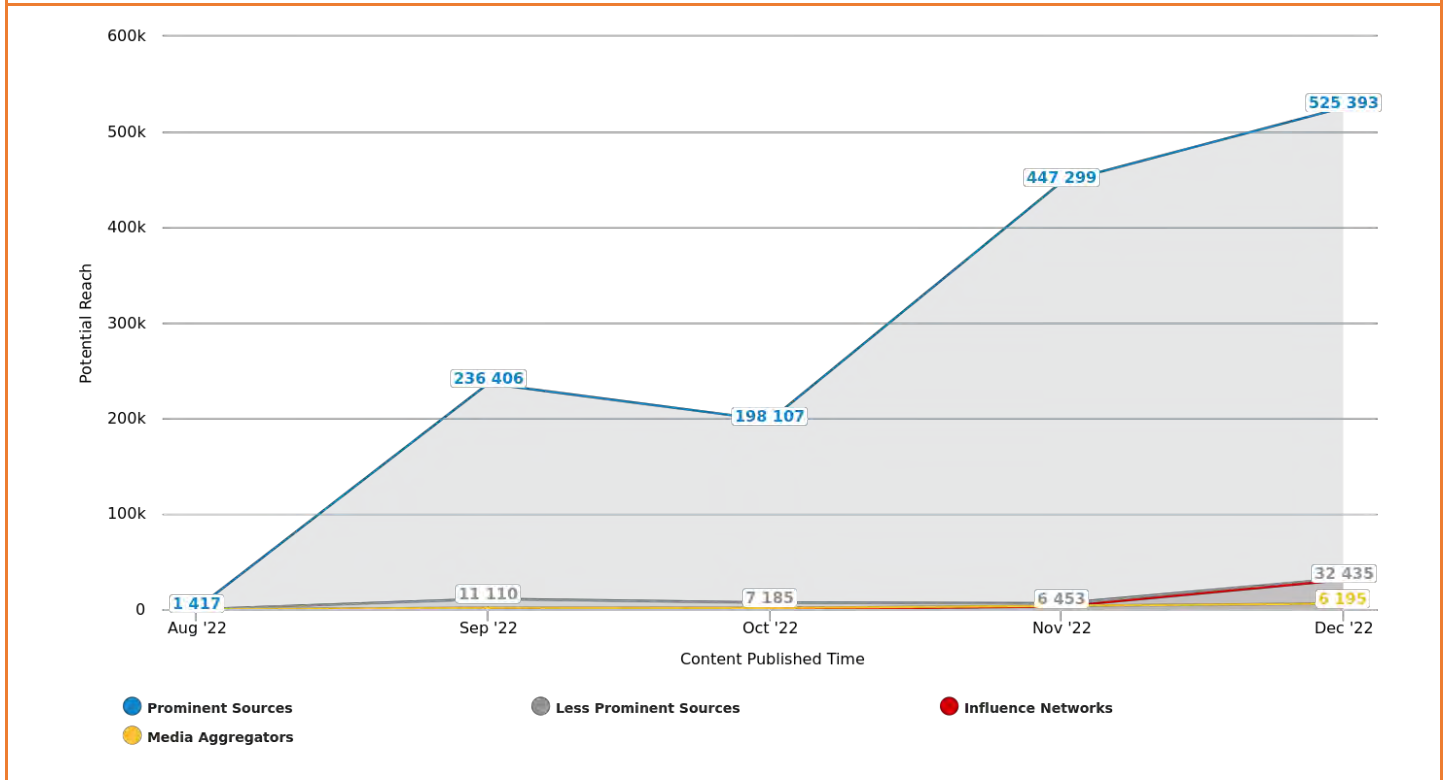
Stacked potential reach distribution of the story per type of sources. The chart shows that the Prominent Sources reached the biggest audience, followed by the Less Prominent Sources. The Influence Networks took the third place, leaving the Media Aggregators with the lowest potential reach. It is worth noting that the Influence Networks' main traffic comes via clicks from social media, Facebook in particular, and because their content is often distributed in closed groups, their influence might be much higher in reality.

Volume Comparison - Regional vs National Sources
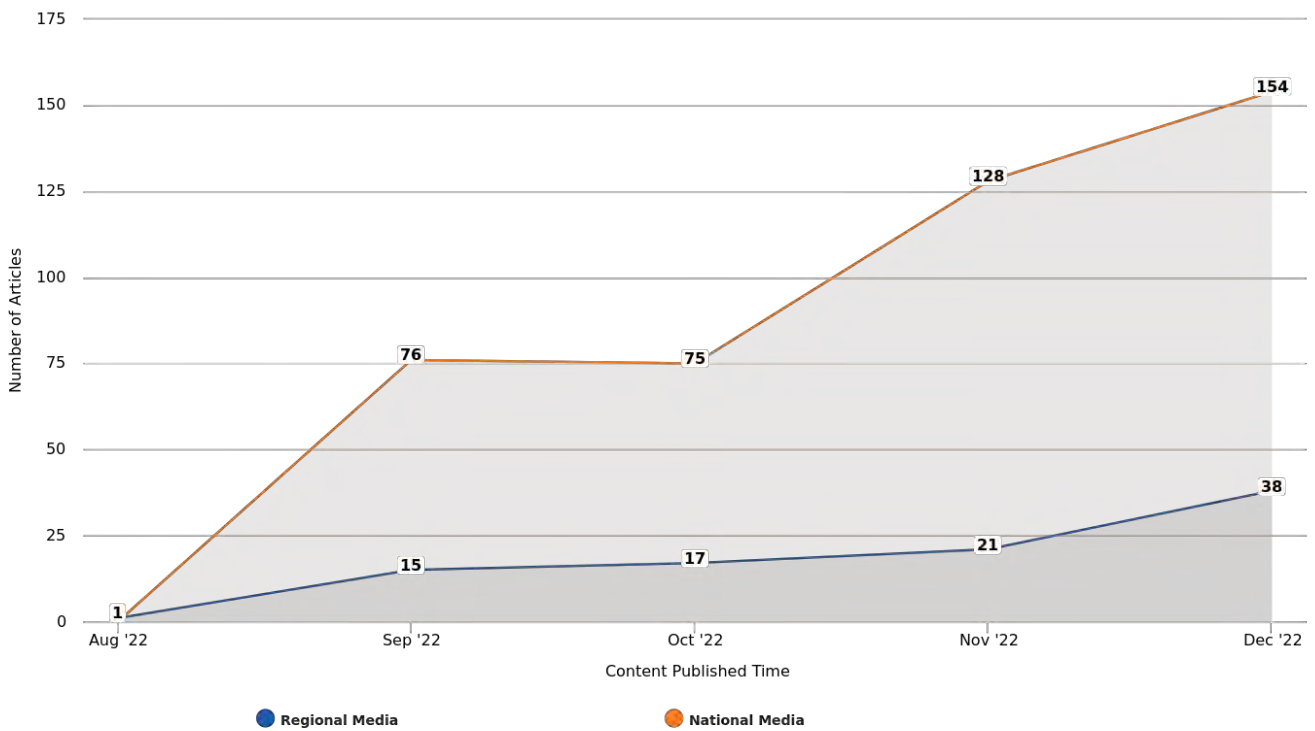
Volume distribution of the story in the National and Regional Media. National Media published more content related to the story compared to Regional Media.

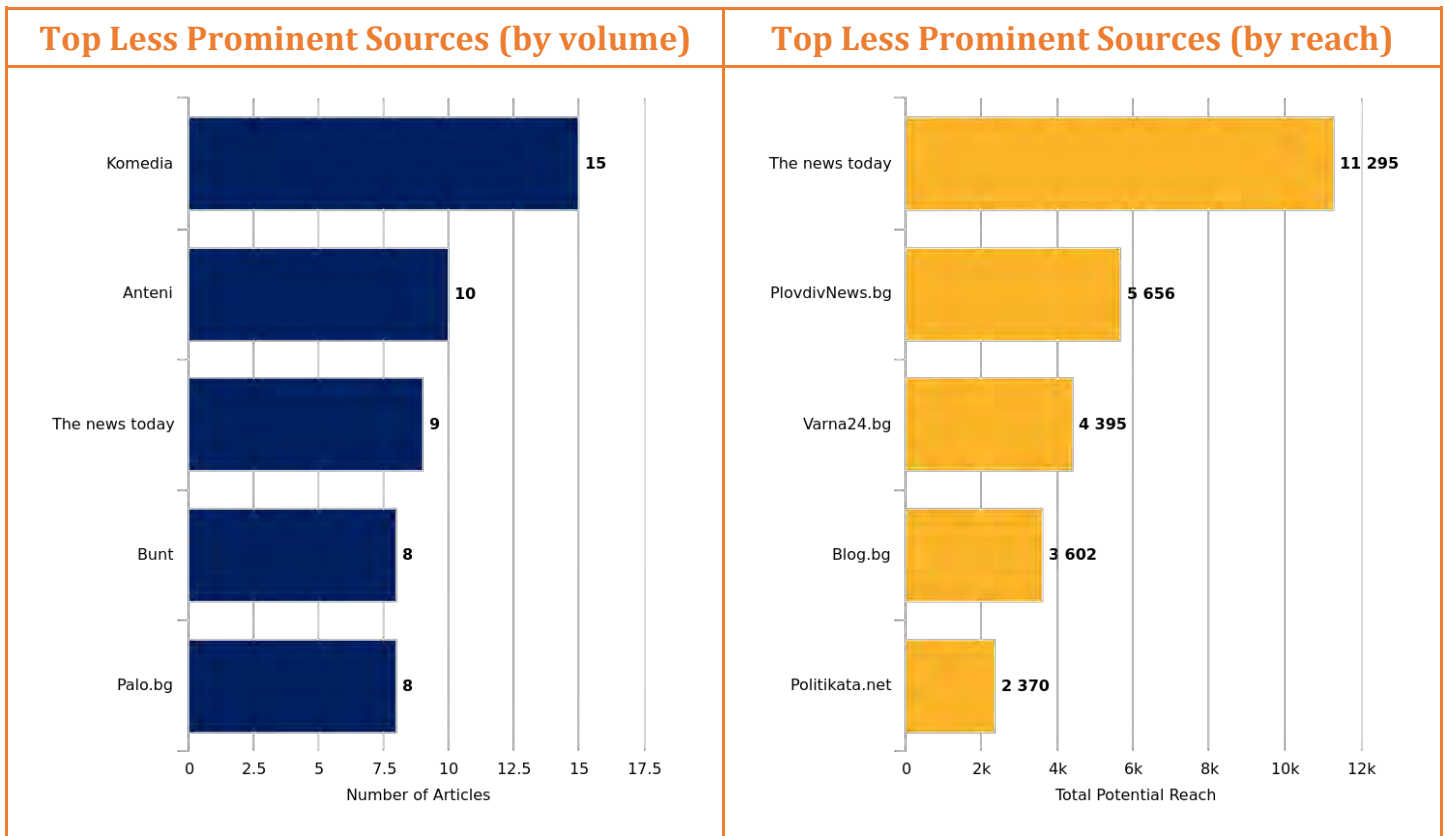## Potential reach Comparison - Regional vs National Sources
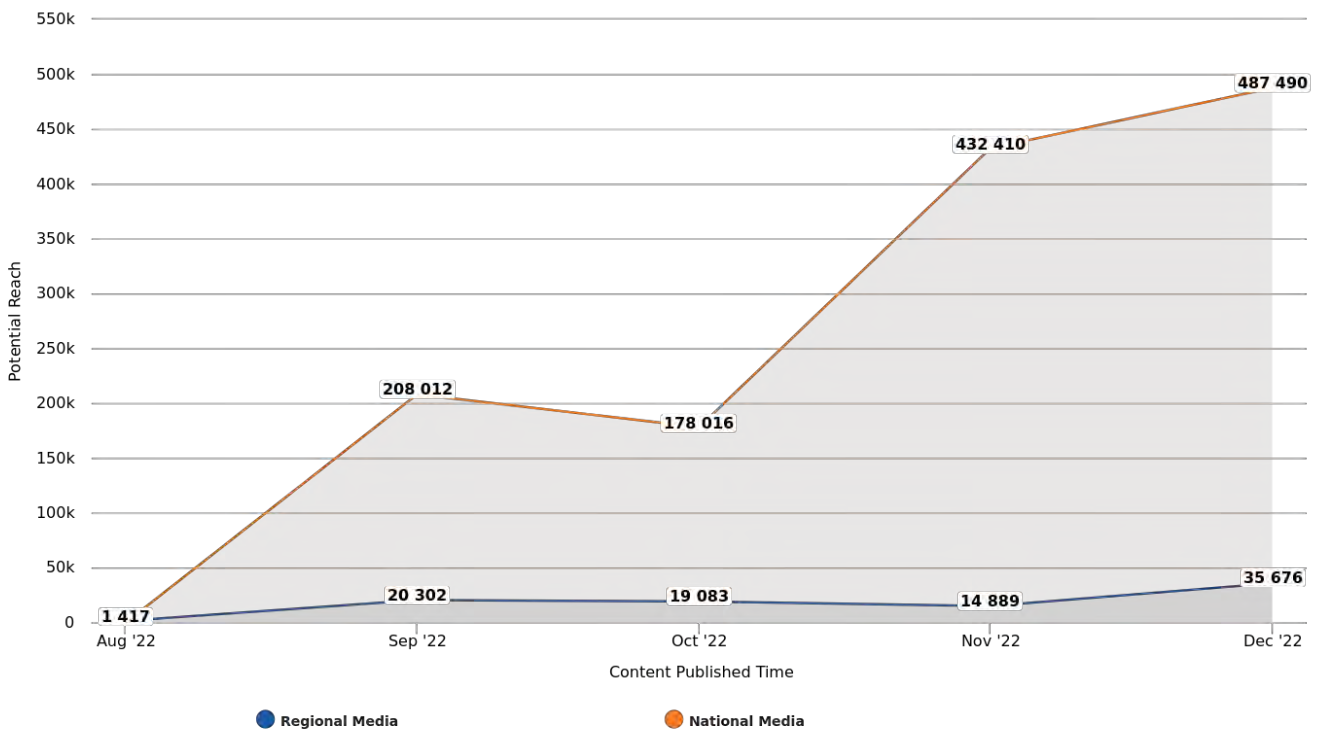
Potential reach distribution of the story in the National and Regional Media. The potential reach of National Media Sources far exceeds that of Regional Media, due not only to Regional Media's more limited audience, but also to the lower amount of published content.

5.5.2.2 Online Coverage by Source Type
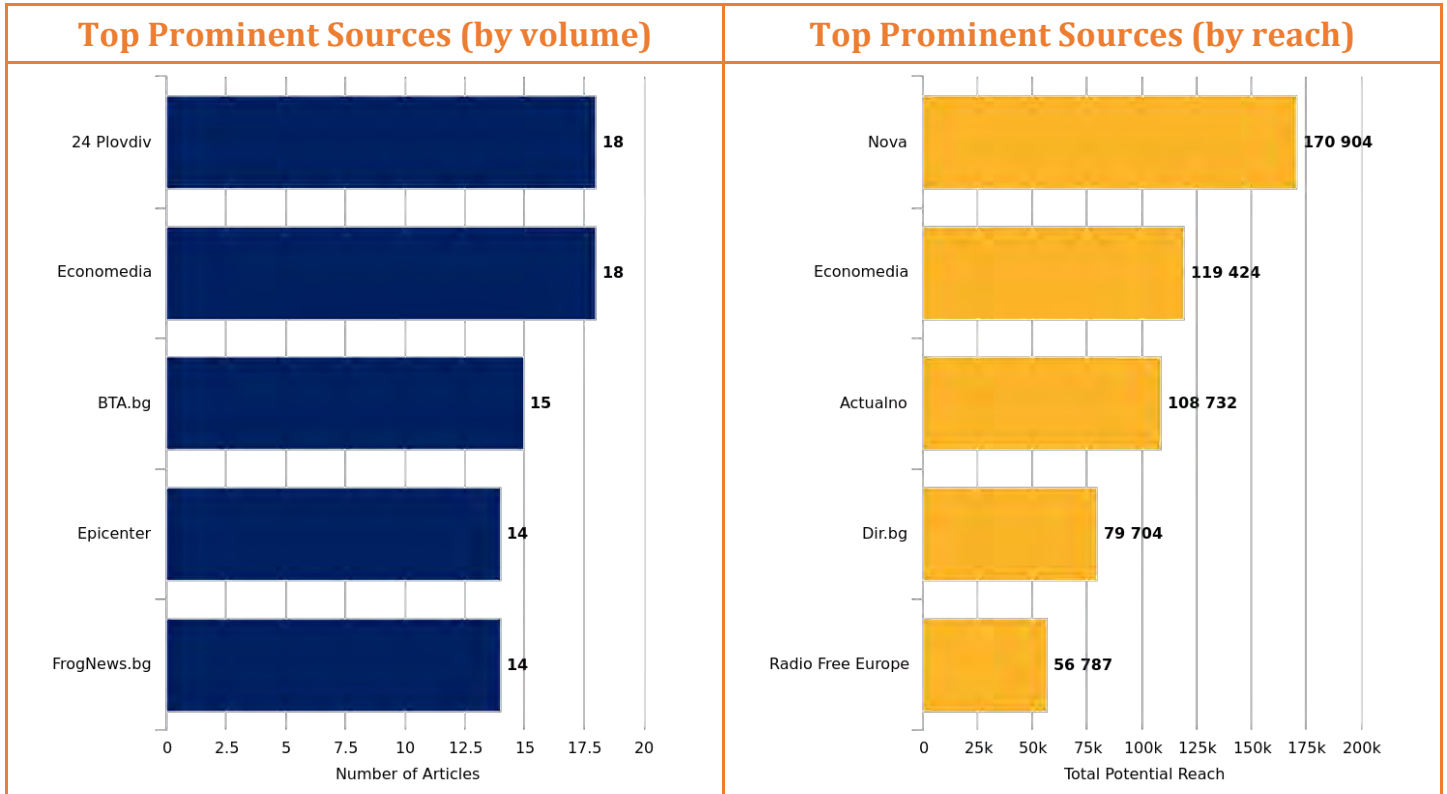
Top Prominent Sources (by volume)

Source	Number of Articles
24 Plovdiv	18
Economedia	18
BTA.bg	15
Epicenter	14
FrogNews.bg	14

Top Prominent Sources (by reach)

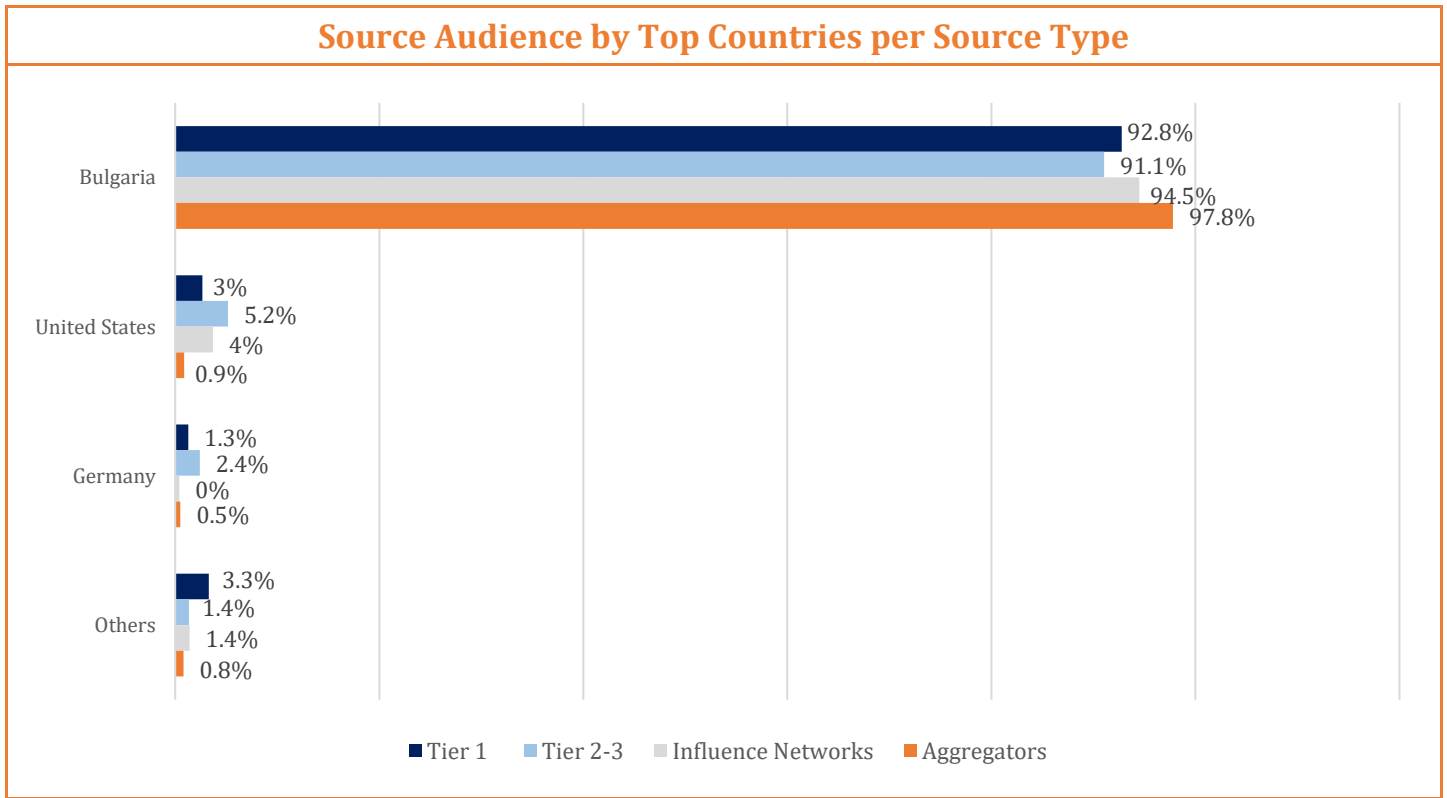| Source	Total Potential Reach
Nova	170 904
Economedia	119 424
Actualno	108 732
Dir.bg	79 704
Radio Free Europe	56 787

The chart on the left displays the Top Prominent Sources (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Prominent Sources (by potential reach). The numbers point to the conclusion that even though some sources publish less in terms of volume, they manage to reach a considerably wider audience.

Top Less Prominent Sources (by volume)

Source	Number of Articles
Komedia	15
Anteni	10
The news today	9
Bunt	8
Palo.bg	8

Top Less Prominent Sources (by reach)

Source	Total Potential Reach
The news today	11 295
PlovdivNews.bg	5 656
Varna24.bg	4 395
Blog.bg	3 602
Politikata.net	2 370

The chart on the left displays the Top Less Prominent Sources (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Less Prominent Sources (by potential reach). "Komedia" published the most content on the story, however, "The News Today," reached the widest audience.
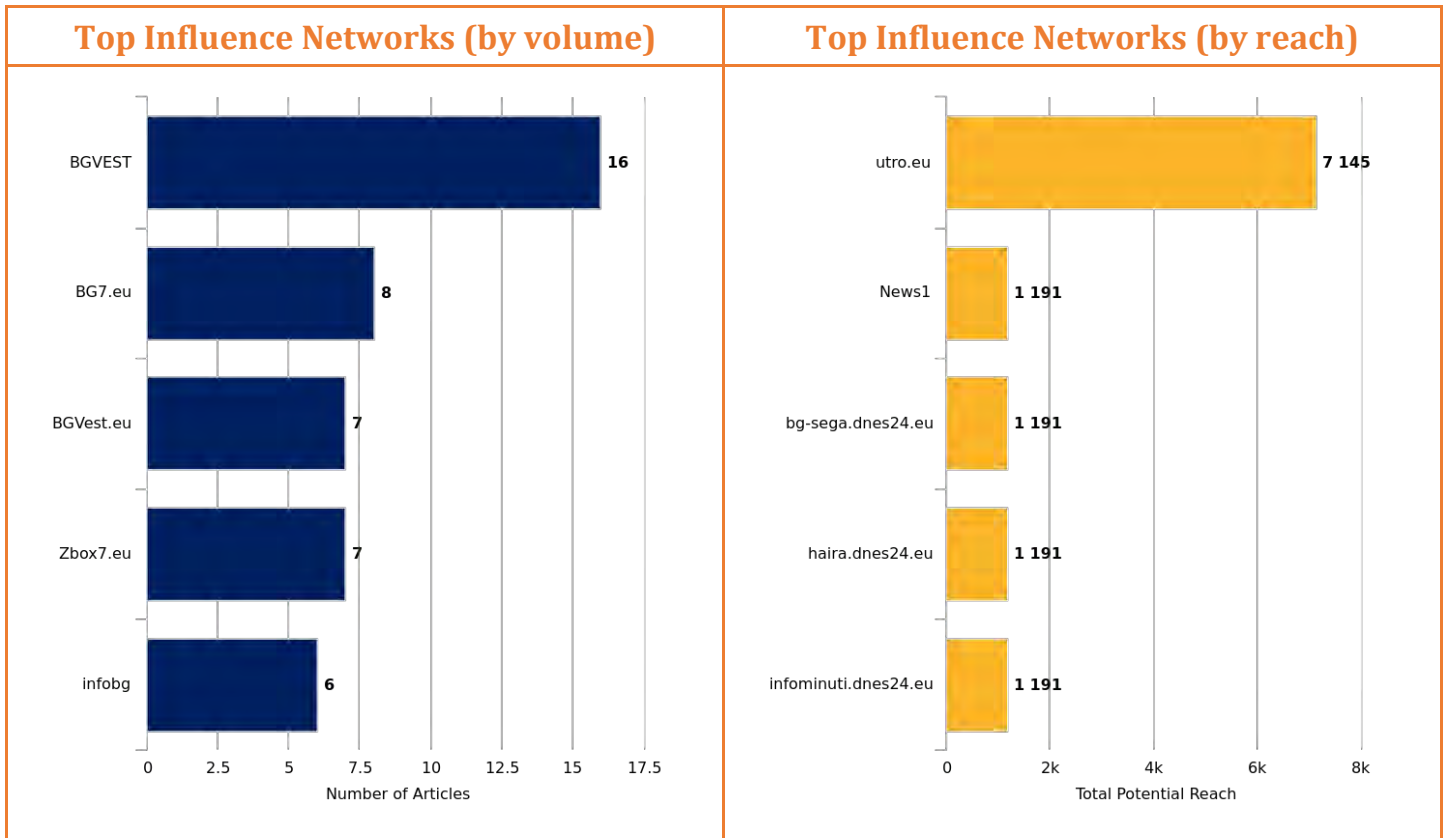
Top Influence Networks (by volume)

	Number of Articles
BGVEST	16
BG7.eu	8
BGVest.eu	7
Zbox7.eu	7
infobg	6

Top Influence Networks (by reach)

	Total Potential Reach
utro.eu	7 145
News1	1 191
bg-sega.dnes24.eu	1 191
haira.dnes24.eu	1 191
infominuti.dnes24.eu	1 191

The chart on the left displays the Top Influence Networks (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Influence Networks (by potential reach). Although "BG Vest" published the most content, "Utro" had the biggest potential reach.
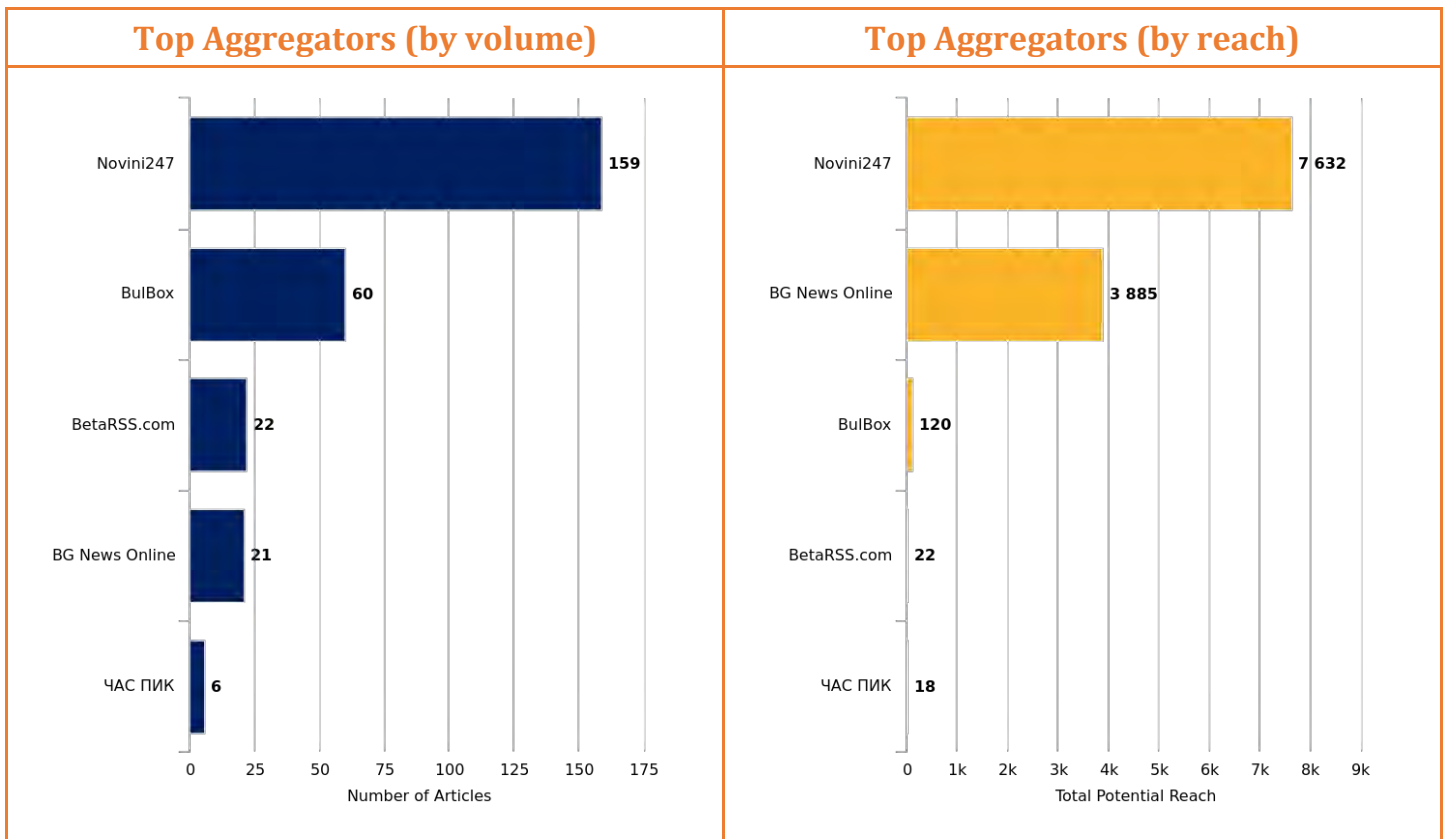
Top Aggregators (by volume)

	Number of Articles
Novini247	159
BulBox	60
BetaRSS.com	22
BG News Online	21
ЧАС ПИК	6

Top Aggregators (by reach)

	Total Potential Reach
Novini247	7 632
BG News Online	3 885
BulBox	120
BetaRSS.com	22
ЧАС ПИК	18

The chart on the left displays the Top Media Aggregators (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Media Aggregators (by potential reach). "Novini247" published the most content and had the biggest potential reach.

5.5.2.3 Online Coverage: Source Audience

Source Audience by Age per Source Type

The chart illustrates the different level of engagement with the four types of monitored sources (Prominent Sources, Less Prominent Sources, Media Aggregators, and Influence Networks) among six age groups. The result shows that the people most interested in the story are between the ages of 25 and 44. The people above 65 years of age comprised the lowest audience percentage and engaged mainly with Less Prominent Sources and Media Aggregators.

Source Audience by Top Countries per Source Type

The chart displays the geographical distribution of the websites visitors per source type. The traffic comes mostly from Bulgaria, with the United States taking the second place among all source types.

Source Audience by Traffic per Source Type

Direct
- Tier 1: 37.48%
- Tier 2-3: 84.64%
- Influence Networks: 67.63%
- Aggregators: 8.21%

Search
- Tier 1: 23.47%
- Tier 2-3: 2.07%
- Influence Networks: 0.0%
- Aggregators: 88.62%

Social
- Tier 1: 17.80%
- Tier 2-3: 4.44%
- Influence Networks: 32.34%
- Aggregators: 0.27%

Referral
- Tier 1: 10.06%
- Tier 2-3: 8.22%
- Influence Networks: 0.02%
- Aggregators: 2.33%

Email
- Tier 1: 11.15%
- Tier 2-3: 0.56%
- Influence Networks: 0%
- Aggregators: 0.57%

Others
- Tier 1: 6.6%
- Tier 2-3: 0.1%
- Influence Networks: 0%
- Aggregators: 0%

Legend: ■ Tier 1 ■ Tier 2-3 ■ Influence Networks ■ Aggregators

The chart compares the source of traffic and its volume generated by the four monitored source types. Prominent Sources gained most of their traffic directly or via a search engine. Less Prominent Sources received it directly, while Media Aggregators did so via a search engine. Influence Networks, on the other hand, were accessed mostly directly, followed closely by clicks from social media platforms.

Source Audience by Social Network per Source Type
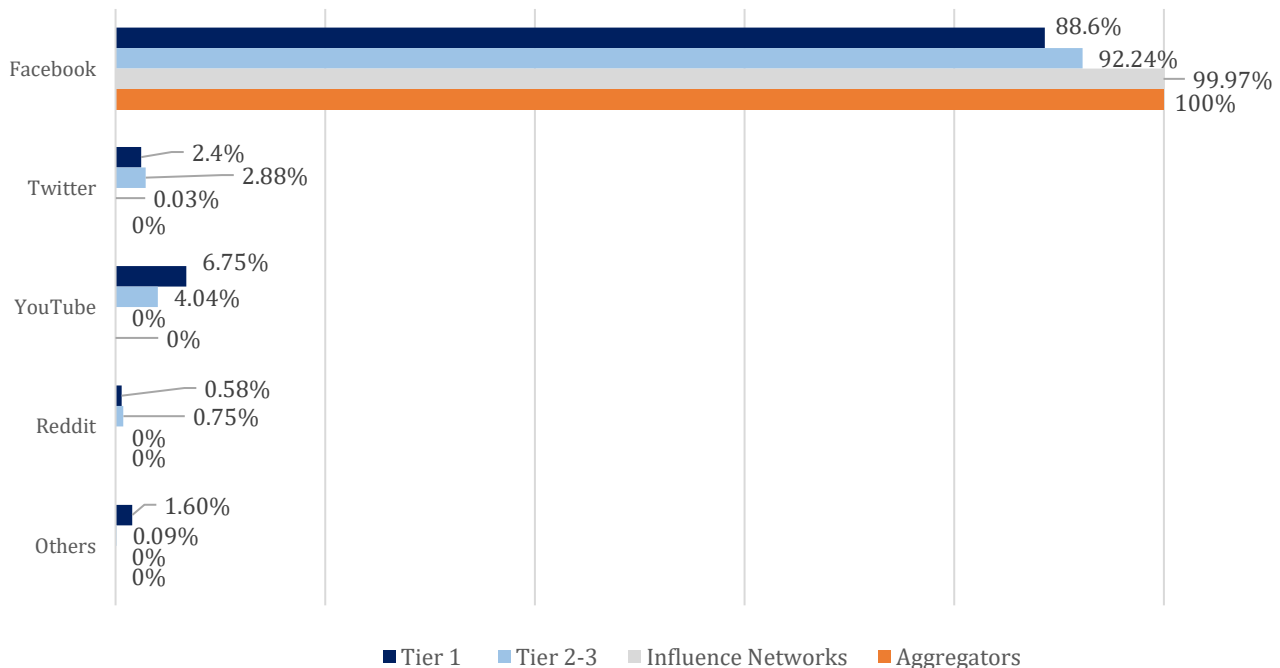
Facebook
- Tier 1: 88.6%
- Tier 2-3: 92.24%
- Influence Networks: 99.97%
- Aggregators: 100%

Twitter
- Tier 1: 2.4%
- Tier 2-3: 2.88%
- Influence Networks: 0.03%
- Aggregators: 0%

YouTube
- Tier 1: 6.75%
- Tier 2-3: 4.04%
- Influence Networks: 0%
- Aggregators: 0%

Reddit
- Tier 1: 0.58%
- Tier 2-3: 0.75%
- Influence Networks: 0%
- Aggregators: 0%

Others
- Tier 1: 1.60%
- Tier 2-3: 0.09%
- Influence Networks: 0%
- Aggregators: 0%

Legend: ■ Tier 1 ■ Tier 2-3 ■ Influence Networks ■ Aggregators

The chart illustrates the source audience distribution according to the traffic of the website gained via social network per source type. The findings highlight Facebook's dominance (in all four monitored types of sources), which can be explained by the fact that it is the most popular social network in Bulgaria. In fact, 100% of the traffic from social media in Media Aggregators was achieved through Facebook.

5.5.2.4 Online Coverage: Political Parties (by volume)

Top Mentioned Political Parties

Movement for Rights and Freedoms (28.24%)

Bulgarian Socialist Party (9.67%)

There is Such a People (3.16%)

Bulgarian Rise (2.95%)

We Continue the Change (21.48%)

GERB (15.78%)

Revival (9.31%)

Democratic Bulgaria (9.41%)

Corruption Narratives
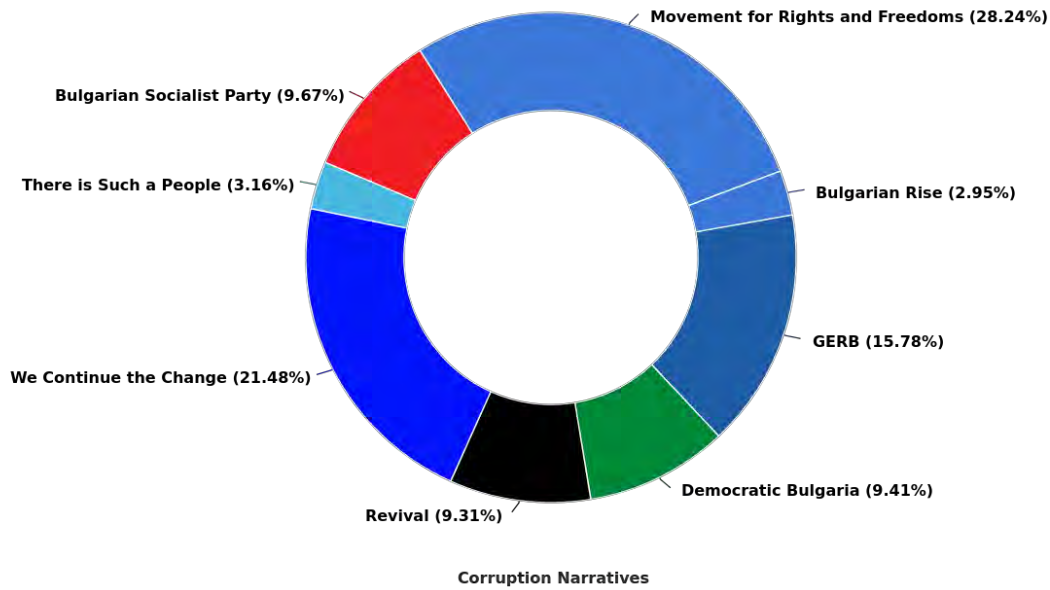
The chart presents the most mentioned political parties in the context of the story. The Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS) (27.8%) was mentioned the most, followed by We Continue the Change (22.7%), and GERB (15.5%). The Bulgarian Socialist Party, Democratic Bulgaria, and Revival received approximately the same amount of mentions (a little over 9%). The Movement for Rights and Freedoms received more mentions because, during the meeting of the National Assembly, when the first reading of the anticorruption bills took place, a separate discussion was held on a bill suggested by DPS concerning the control over the application of derogation for the purchase, import, or transfer of crude oil transported by sea and of petroleum products originating in or exported from Russia. This particular news was republished multiple times by Influence Networks as well.

5.5.3. Social Coverage (Facebook)

The Anticorruption Bills story received significant engagement on Facebook, with a peak in December 2022, right after the Parliament adopted them. The top three pages belong to media outlets, with PIK standing out for sharing posts critical of the decision. The Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) was actively promoting its stance against corruption, while its leader Korneliya Ninova was accused of voting against the two draft laws submitted in December. The page "Initiative for Justice for Everyone" was also active in providing updates on the progress of the bills. GERB was the most mentioned political party, followed by BSP and Democratic Bulgaria. While BSP and GERB were often mentioned together, the latter was referred to as both "a symbol of corruption" and "an anticorruption coalition." Identical comments posted under various Facebook pages made up 80% of BSP mentions. In contrast, Democratic Bulgaria received consistent interactions and was actively engaged in the related discussions.

Overall Volume (per month)
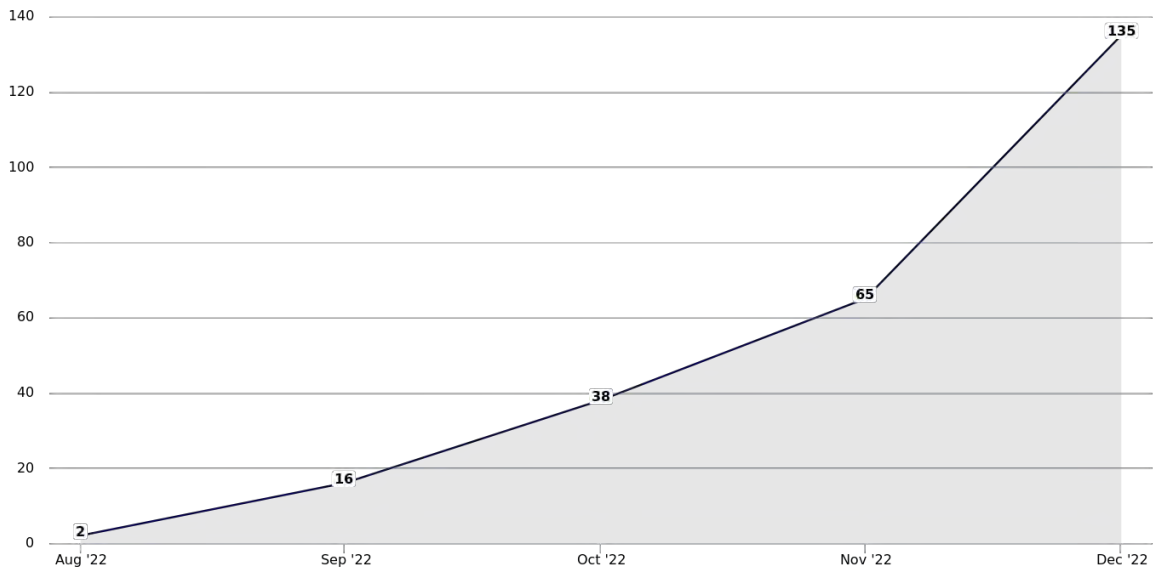
The story was marked by a low engagement level, but saw a peak at the beginning of December 2022 after both anticorruption bills were adopted in Parliament, at first reading. Social engagement spiked on December 14 as well, due to multiple users reposting the same comment under various posts. The comments highlighted that some BSP and GERB members had rejected both draft laws, which had resulted, according to a number of users, "in several billion leva worth of damage for the Bulgarian citizens and businesses, and once again, in failed reforms."

Top 10 Social Authors (by volume)
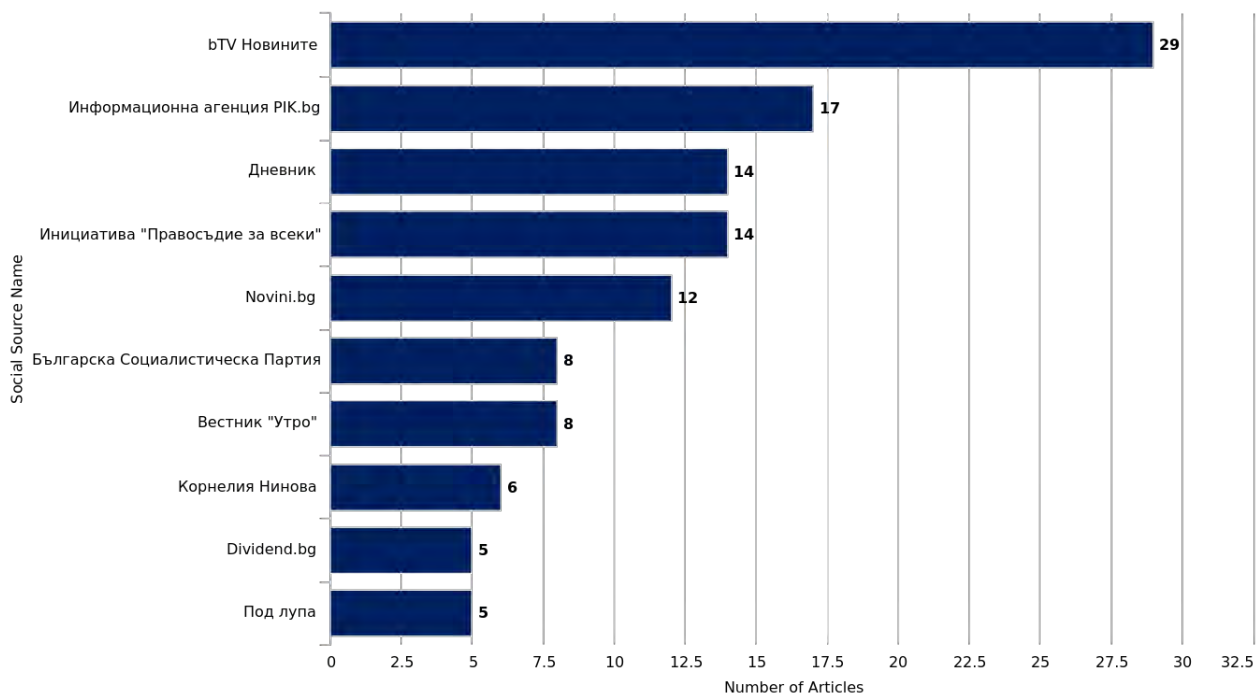
The story sparked a variety of responses on Facebook, with many different voices weighing in. The top three pages that generated the most interactions belong to media outlets. Of these, PIK stood out for sharing posts critical of We Continue the Change's government and the proposed bills. It could be noticed that the engagement received by these posts was synchronized, repetitive, and similar in nature, suggesting that multiple users were coordinating their responses. In addition to media outlets, the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP)'s official page took an active role in promoting its stance against corruption, while also proposing potential solutions. Meanwhile, its leader Korneliya Ninova was accused of voting against the two draft laws. The "Initiative for Justice for Everyone" page was also quite active during the monitored period, providing frequent updates regarding the progress of the anticorruption bills. The scandal surrounding Krum Zarkov allegedly strangling a cat was present on Facebook as well. PIK, along with other pages such as Narod.bg, Lupa.bg, and 7dnibulgaria.bg, reposted articles on the matter from December 16 to December 23.

Top Keywords (by volume)
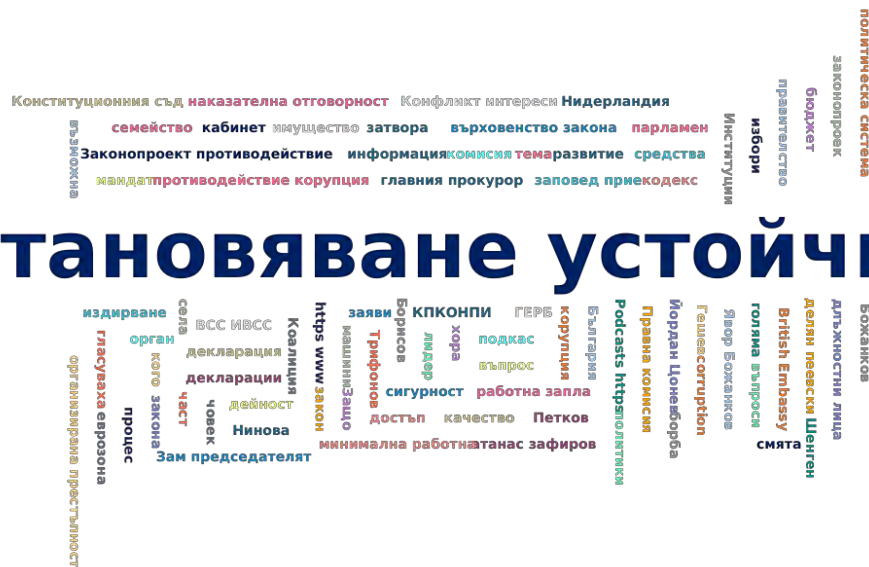
The term that appears most frequently in the tag cloud above is "Recovery and Sustainability." This is entirely due to the repetitive and identical comments made by numerous users across various posts. Several other noteworthy keywords include "Bulgaria," "GERB," "Corruption," and "Borissov." The prominent use of the term "corruption" highlights Bulgarian media's tendency to avoid direct use of the word unless it relates to positive developments, such as new ways for fighting high-level corruption.

5.5.3.1 Social Coverage: Political Parties (by volume)

Top Mentioned Political Parties

Bulgarian Socialist Party (22.82%)
Movement for Rights and Freedoms (7.81%)
There is Such a People (1.80%)
We Continue the Change (16.22%)
GERB (30.03%)
Democratic Bulgaria (21.32%)
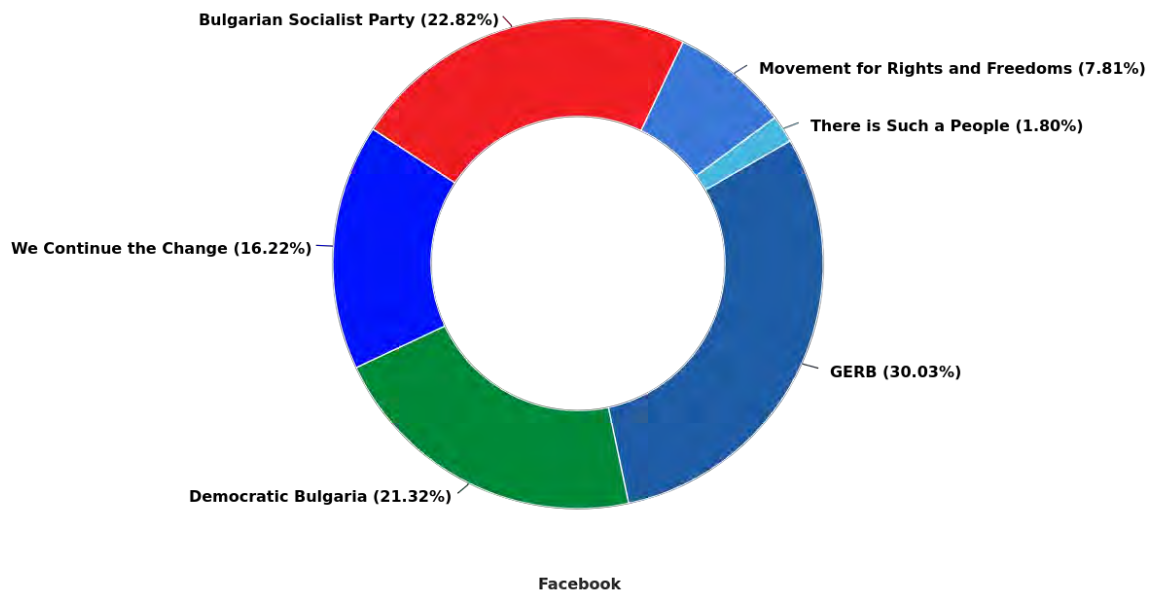
Facebook

In contrast to the online content results, GERB was the most mentioned political party (29%), followed by the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) (22%) and Democratic Bulgaria (20%). Facebook users referred to GERB both as "a symbol of corruption" and as "an anticorruption coalition." BSP was often mentioned together with GERB, as accounts accused the two parties of voting against the draft laws. Additionally, 80% of BSP's mentions can be attributed to identical comments under various posts on different Facebook pages. As far as Democratic Bulgaria is concerned, it received consistent interactions, as it was actively engaged in the relevant discussions related to the case.

5.6. Laura Kövesi's Visit

5.6.1. Background

On March 13, both national and regional media outlets quoted Nadezhda Yordanova, then Minister of Justice in Kiril Petkov's government, who announced that the European Chief Prosecutor Laura Kövesi would visit Bulgaria at the invitation of then Prime Minister Petkov. Yordanova also explained that the "discussions on how best to counter the high levels of corruption, especially in relation to European funds, continue. One of the important things we are working on is for the Anticorruption Commission to be able to communicate directly with the European prosecutors if any crimes concerning European funds are detected" [358]. For his part, Bulgaria's Chief Public Prosecutor Ivan Geshev stated that he was not worried by the visit as he was regularly in touch with Kövesi on work-related matters [359].

Three days later, on March 16, right after her meeting with Kiril Petkov, Kövesi disclosed that some EU institutions had received a record number of complaints from Bulgaria, based on which more than 120 inspections had been initiated. She also specified that "the signals are mostly related to public procurement, but there are also signals of abuse of agricultural subsidies, fraud in the construction field, and other fraudulent practices related to European funds allocated for the post-COVID recovery of the country" [360]. She was also quoted saying that "Kiril Petkov's idea is to create a special group tasked to work directly with the European Prosecutor's Office (EPP). Consequently, we should strive to guarantee its autonomy" [361]. Some newspapers, such as 24 Chasa, paid special attention to the COVID-19 investigation, highlighting that "the nature of the funds that might not have been used as intended was not specified. In 2020, Bulgaria received permission to redirect EUR 750 million from its operational programs to the fight against the pandemic. The money was used for the purchase of medicine and protective equipment, for the payment of bonuses to medical professionals, and for the provision of business subsidies under the 60/40 program" [362].

On March 17, it was reported that Ivan Geshev and Laura Kövesi had met to discuss the fight against corruption and organized crime [363]. A piece that appeared on the website Banker made fun of the visit and its announced conclusions, noting the following: "How many of these signals went through the Bulgarian Prosecutor's Office? Which prosecutors refused to initiate pre-trial proceedings? How many of the cases passed through the hands of Ivan Geshev and what was his reaction after they ended up in Luxembourg? If there are at least three such cases and if the Temida personnel once again refuse to fire Geshev, then you can safely disband the Supreme Judicial Council with whatever motive you wish. We will all support you" [364]. On the other hand some outlets shared a Facebook post by the journalist Viktor Dimchev, who asked: "Do we continue to claim that Ivan Geshev is an enemy of the people? Do you really believe Laura Kövesi would meet with the mafia leader? By the time you realize that the business interests of oligarchs are behind the attacks against the Prosecutor's Office, Hristo Ivanov will have retired with the "judicial reform" on his lips" [365]. In a similar context, it was reported that Kövesi had described her meeting with Geshev as a "formal courtesy visit" [366].

In addition to Ivan Geshev, the European Chief Prosecutor met with Nadezhda Yordanova and former Minister of Interior Boyko Rashkov with whom she discussed the Bulgarian side's efforts to create a local task force in charge of investigating EPP cases [367], as well as other key elements of the cooperation between the Bulgarian Ministry of Justice and the European Public Prosecutor's Office [368]. A number of websites even quoted the Deputy Chairman of the Permanent Parliamentary Committee on Constitutional and Legal Issues, Atanas Slavov, who said that "Kövesi's visit is aimed at creating such organizational, procedural, and administrative conditions that would guarantee the normal work of the delegated European prosecutors" [369].

It is worth noting that the end of Kövesi's visit coincided with the arrest of former Prime Minister and GERB leader Boyko Borissov. Many "mushroom" websites published provocative pieces titled "Laura Kövesi is behind Boyko Borissov's Arrest" [370]. The national media quoted the Romanian newspaper Evenimentul Zilei, according to which Kövesi had "hit the top of Bulgarian politics" [371]. In the meantime, other outlets, including regional ones, cited the political scientist Parvan Simeonov, who said that "the image that will be imprinted on people's minds is that these arrests come right after Kövesi's visit. I must say that, from a political standpoint, the timing is perfect" [372].

A day after the operation, GERB's Media Advisor Sevdalina Arnaudova, who had been arrested together with Borissov, revealed the following: "They held us for 24 hours without a charge. Not a single investigator came to speak with us. They even took my identity card. [...] The main instigator is the Acting Prime Minister, who called into his office Asen Vassilev and Boyko Rashkov. Afterwards, he was the one who witnessed the pre-trial proceeding. This is a precedent. [...] He even dared mention the name of Laura Kövesi. He claims that she had ordered the arrests. What a scandal!" [373].

Finally, Darik [374] covered an article by POLITICO's Christian Oliver, who was of the opinion that the arrests are "a sign that the country's new leader Kiril Petkov is serious about his pledge to combat the mafia that permeates public life across the Balkan nation," adding: "That's where European Public Prosecutor Laura Codruța Kövesi comes in. Bulgaria's quagmire of corruption presents the Romanian enforcer with her first major opportunity to show that her relatively newly created office can play an effective role in instituting the rule of law in a country where Brussels has long ignored rampant corruption, gangsterism and the abuse of EU funds" [375].

5.6.2. Online Coverage

5.6.2.1 Overall Metrics and Volume Comparison

The online coverage surrounding the visit of EU's Chief Prosecutor Laura Kövesi reached around 1,200 articles, making it the smallest of all anticorruption narratives included in this report. The majority of the content was published by Prominent Sources (around 600), followed by Media Aggregators (around 400). Less Prominent Sources and Influence Networks were the least active.

The sources monitored in the context of the story share a similar audience demographic, with people between the ages of 25 and 44 constituting the largest percentage of the readership. In addition, the traffic was generated primarily from Bulgaria. However, the sources differ in terms of how they gained the said traffic. Prominent Sources received most of it directly or via search engines, Less Prominent Sources—directly, and Media Aggregators by way of a search engine. Influence Networks gained their traffic mainly through social media and direct clicks.

The majority of the articles published on the story referred to corruption indirectly. Due to the national interest in the matter, the story was extensively covered by sources categorized as National Media.
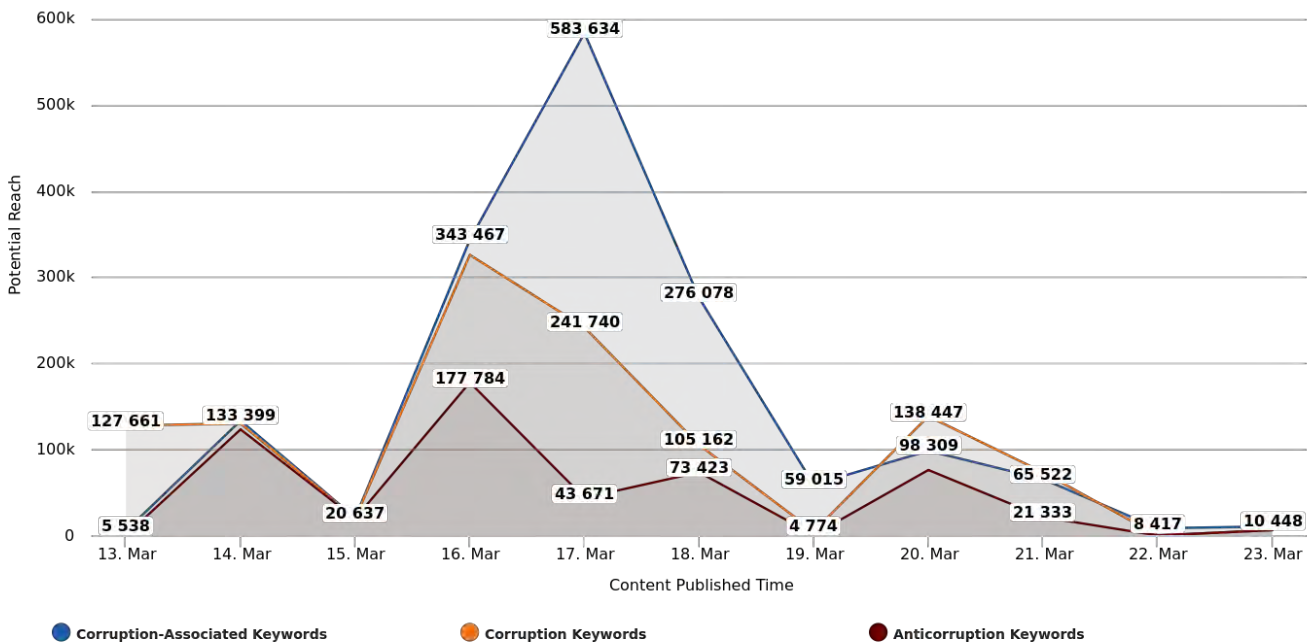

Top Keywords (by volume)
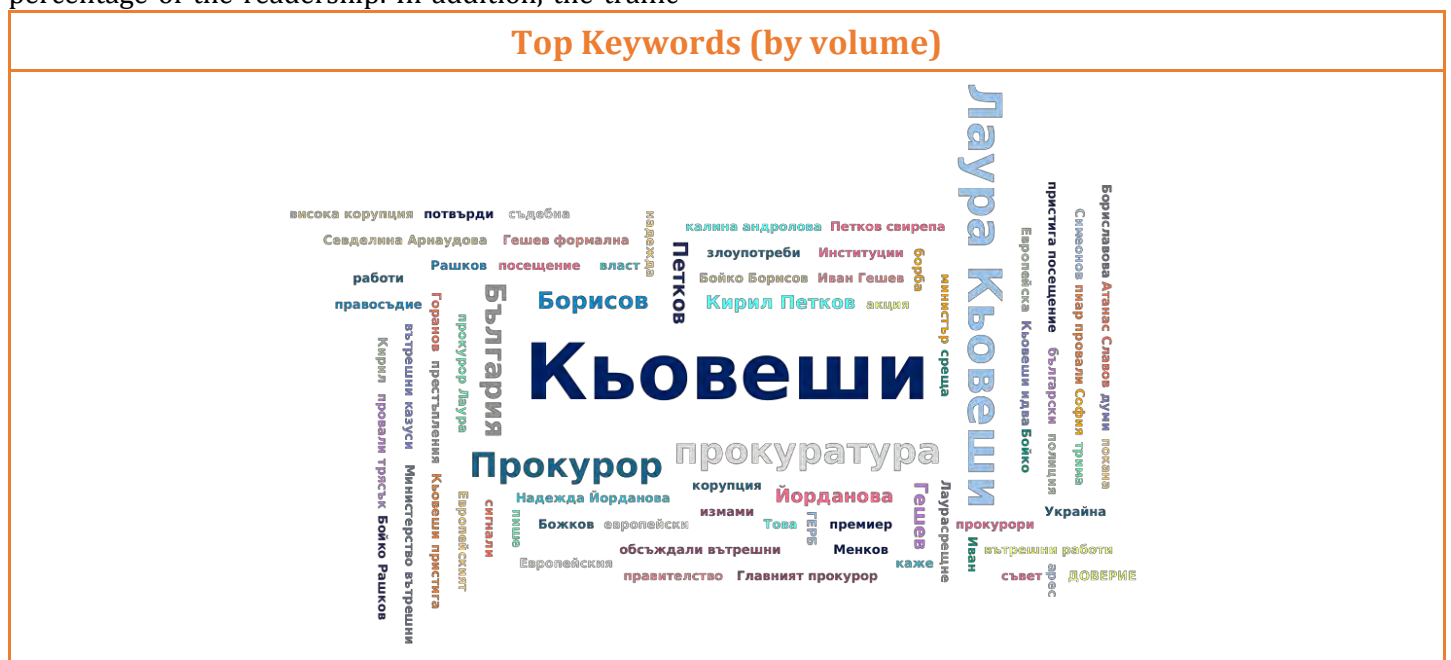
A tag-cloud representation of the most frequently used keywords or phrases within the monitored story. The size of each word in the cloud is a relative indicator of the term's popularity, thereby allowing for the discernment of the most prominent and widely discussed points of interest. In this particular case, the most frequently mentioned keywords include the names of Laura Kövesi, along with "prosecutor," "prosecutor's office," and "Bulgaria." Among other mentioned names are Kiril Petkov (then Prime Minister of Bulgaria), Boyko Borissov (former Prime Minister of Bulgaria, arrested at the time of the visit), and Ivan Geshev (Chief Prosecutor of Bulgaria).

Volume Comparison – Corruption Keywords vs. Corruption-Associated Keywords
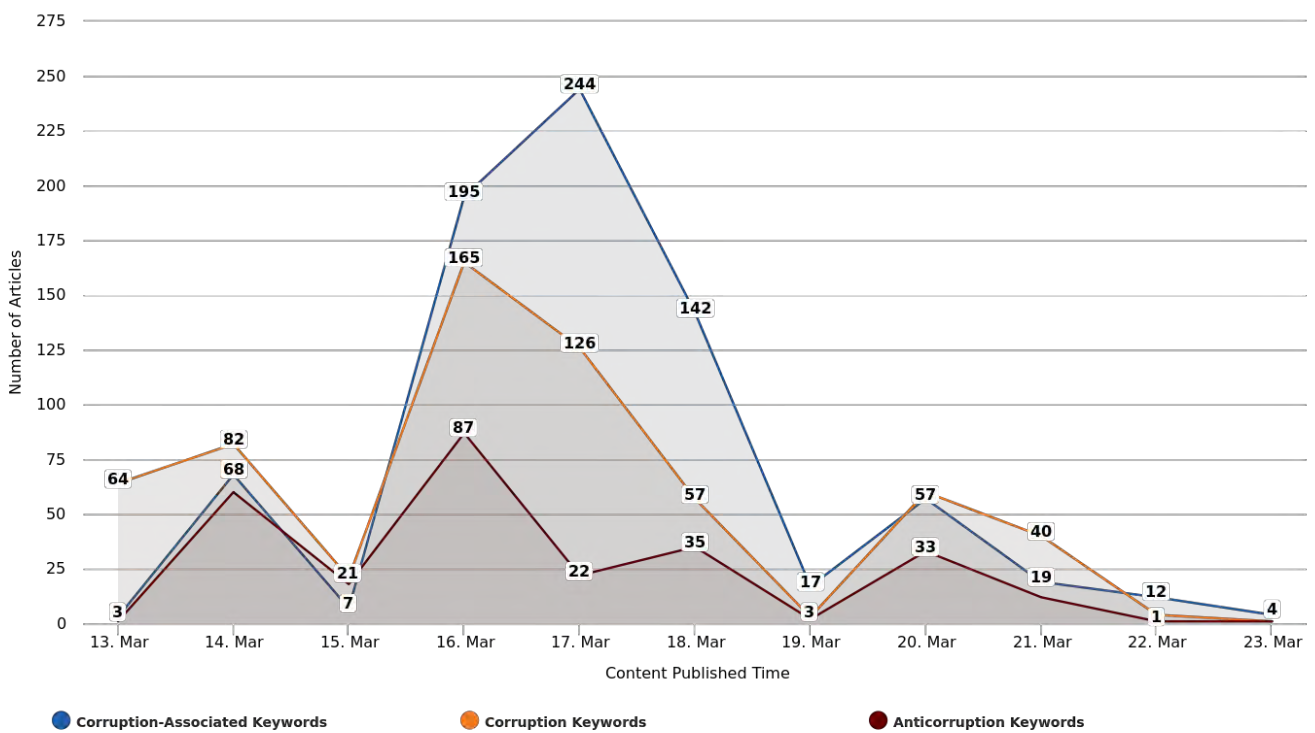
Legend:
- ● Corruption-Associated Keywords
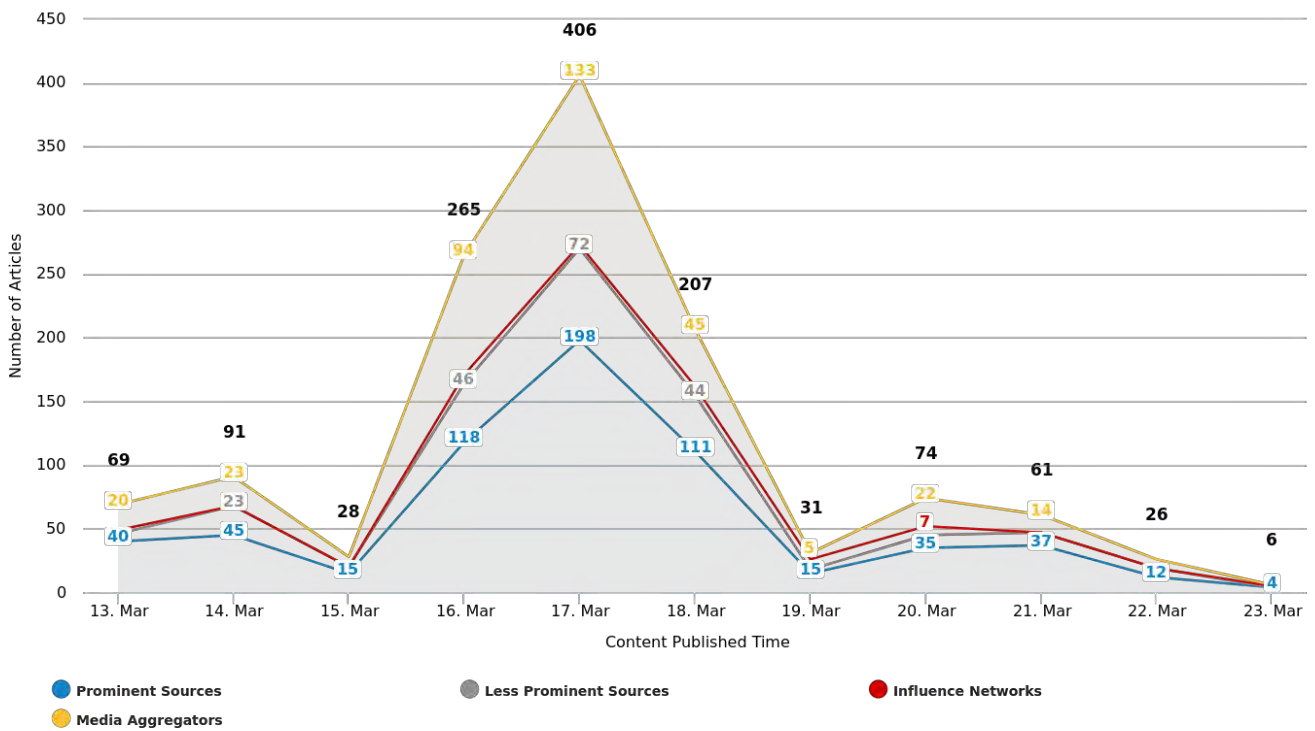- ● Corruption Keywords
- ● Anticorruption Keywords

An analysis of the volume distribution of the pieces of content that reference corruption, either directly or indirectly, and the pieces of content that reference anticorruption directly. The content in question was found to heavily feature words associated with corrupt practices, followed by direct references to corruption. The direct mentions of anticorruption were marked by the lowest volume in the context of this story.

Potential Reach Comparison – Corruption Keywords vs. Corruption-Associated Keywords

Legend:
- ● Corruption-Associated Keywords
- ● Corruption Keywords
- ● Anticorruption Keywords

Potential reach distribution of the pieces of content, which reference corruption either directly or indirectly, and the pieces of content, which reference anticorruption directly. The potential reach distribution pattern closely parallels the volume distribution of the content.

Stacked Volume Comparison (by source type)

Stacked volume distribution of the story per type of sources. Prominent Sources were the most prolific, followed by Less Prominent Sources and Media Aggregators. The Influence Networks were the least active.

Stacked Potential Reach Comparison (by source type)
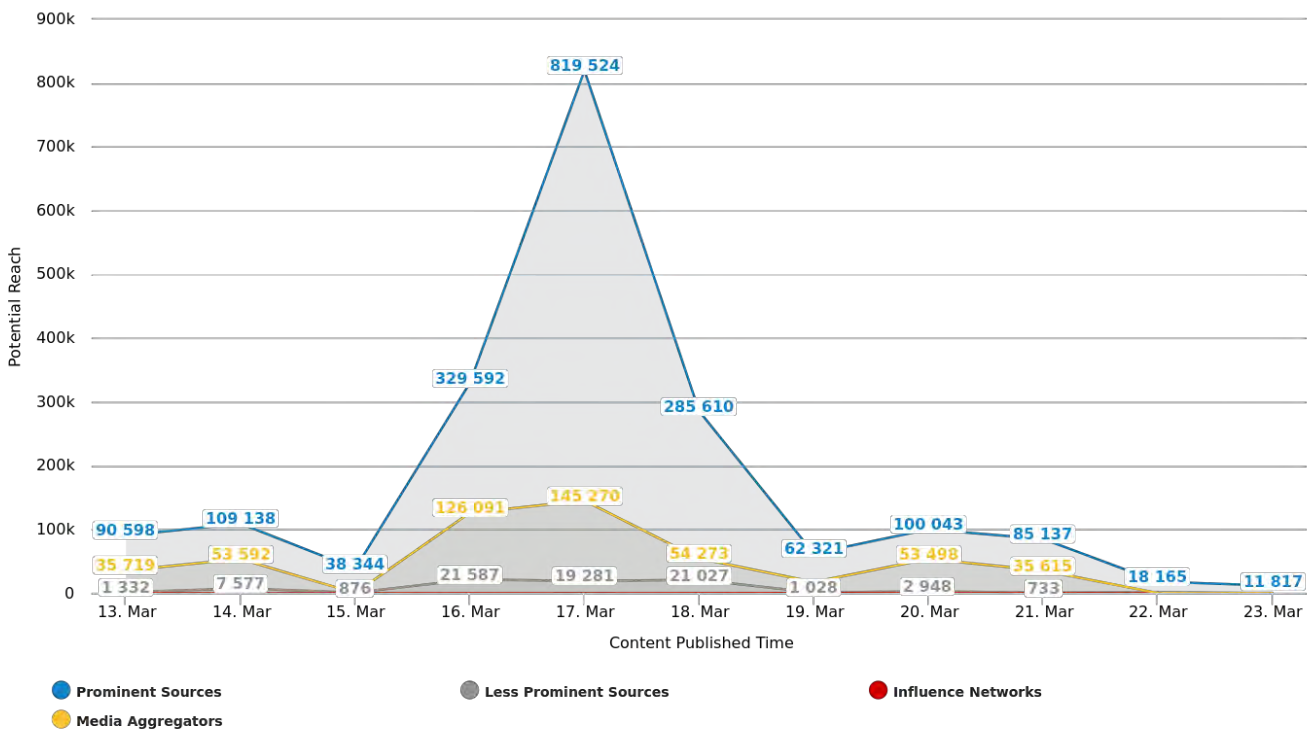
Stacked potential reach distribution of the story per type of sources. The Prominent Sources have the widest potential reach, followed by Media Aggregators and Less Prominent Sources. The Influence Networks have a potential reach so low that, when compared to the Prominent Sources, it is indistinguishable in the chart.

Volume Comparison - Regional vs National Sources

Volume distribution of the story in the National and Regional Media. National Media published more content compared to Regional Media.

Potential reach Comparison - Regional vs National Sources
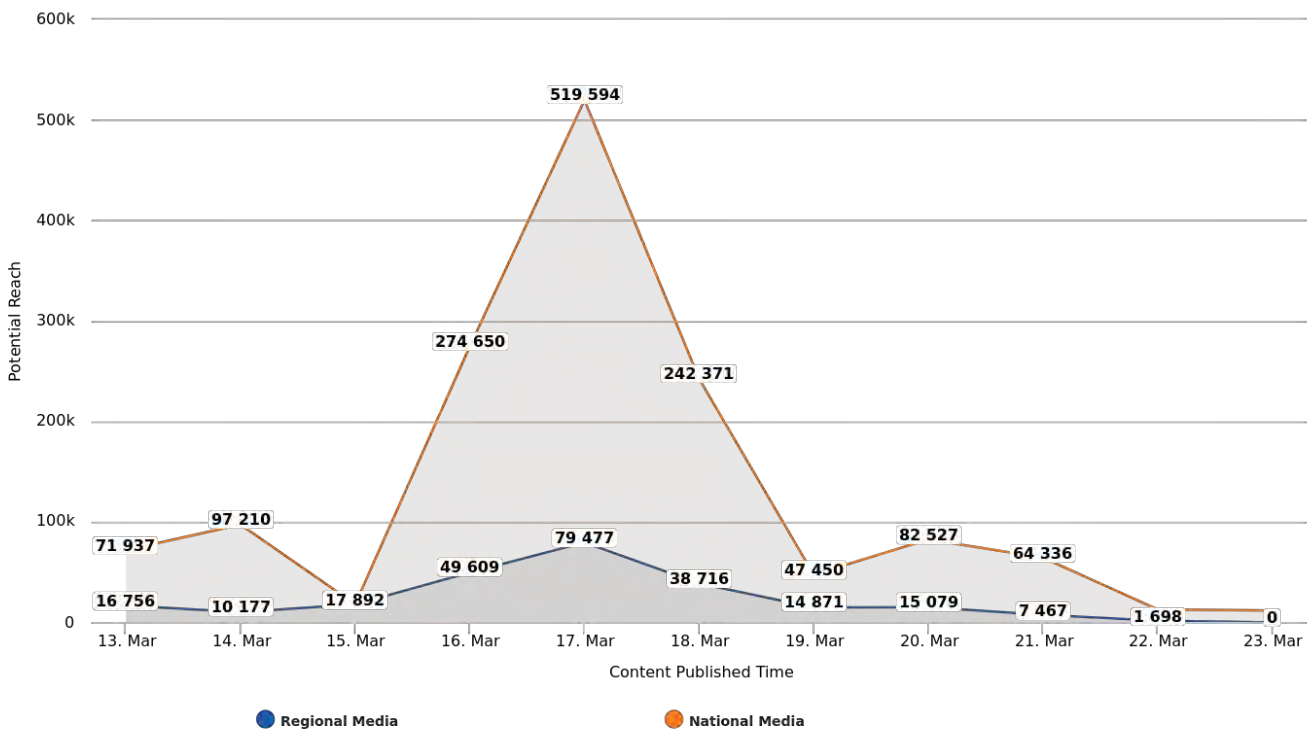
Potential reach distribution of the story in the National and Regional Media. The potential reach of National Media sources far exceeds that of Regional Media, due not only to Regional Media's more limited audience, but also to the lower amount of published content.

5.6.2.2 Online Coverage by Source Type
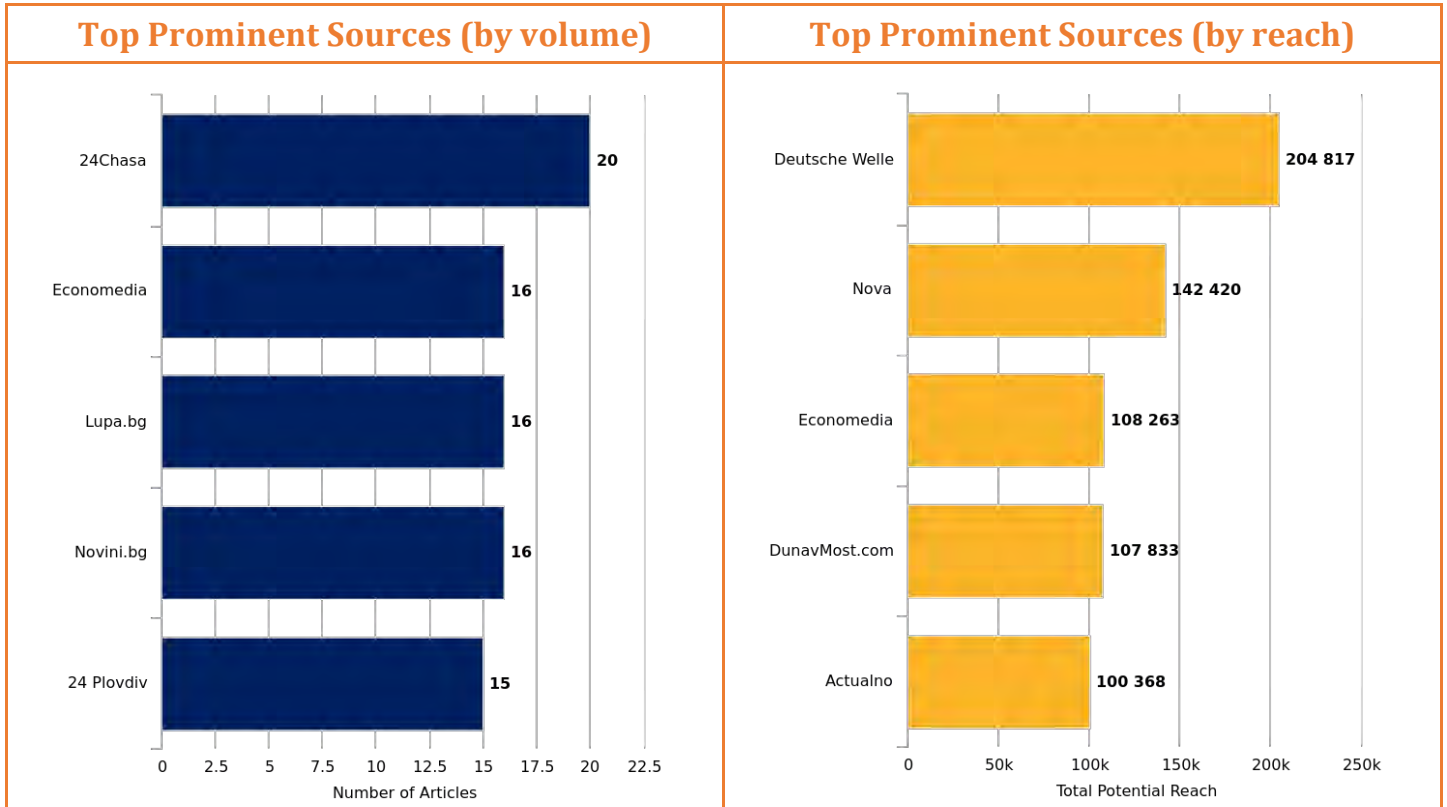
Top Prominent Sources (by volume)

Source	Number of Articles
24Chasa	20
Economedia	16
Lupa.bg	16
Novini.bg	16
24 Plovdiv	15

Top Prominent Sources (by reach)

Source	Total Potential Reach
Deutsche Welle	204 817
Nova	142 420
Economedia	108 263
DunavMost.com	107 833
Actualno	100 368

The chart on the left displays the Top Prominent Sources (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Prominent Sources (by potential reach). The numbers point to the conclusion that even though some sources publish less in terms of volume, they manage to reach a considerably wider audience.

Top Less Prominent Sources (by volume)

Source	Number of Articles
Telegraph	15
King of Net	10
Novinata.bg	9
BIG5.bg	7
Komedia	7

Top Less Prominent Sources (by reach)

Source	Total Potential Reach
Rodopi24 Blogspot	12 380
Telegraph	9 456
Varna24.bg	5 274
Nenovinite.com	4 524
Kliuki.bg	3 609
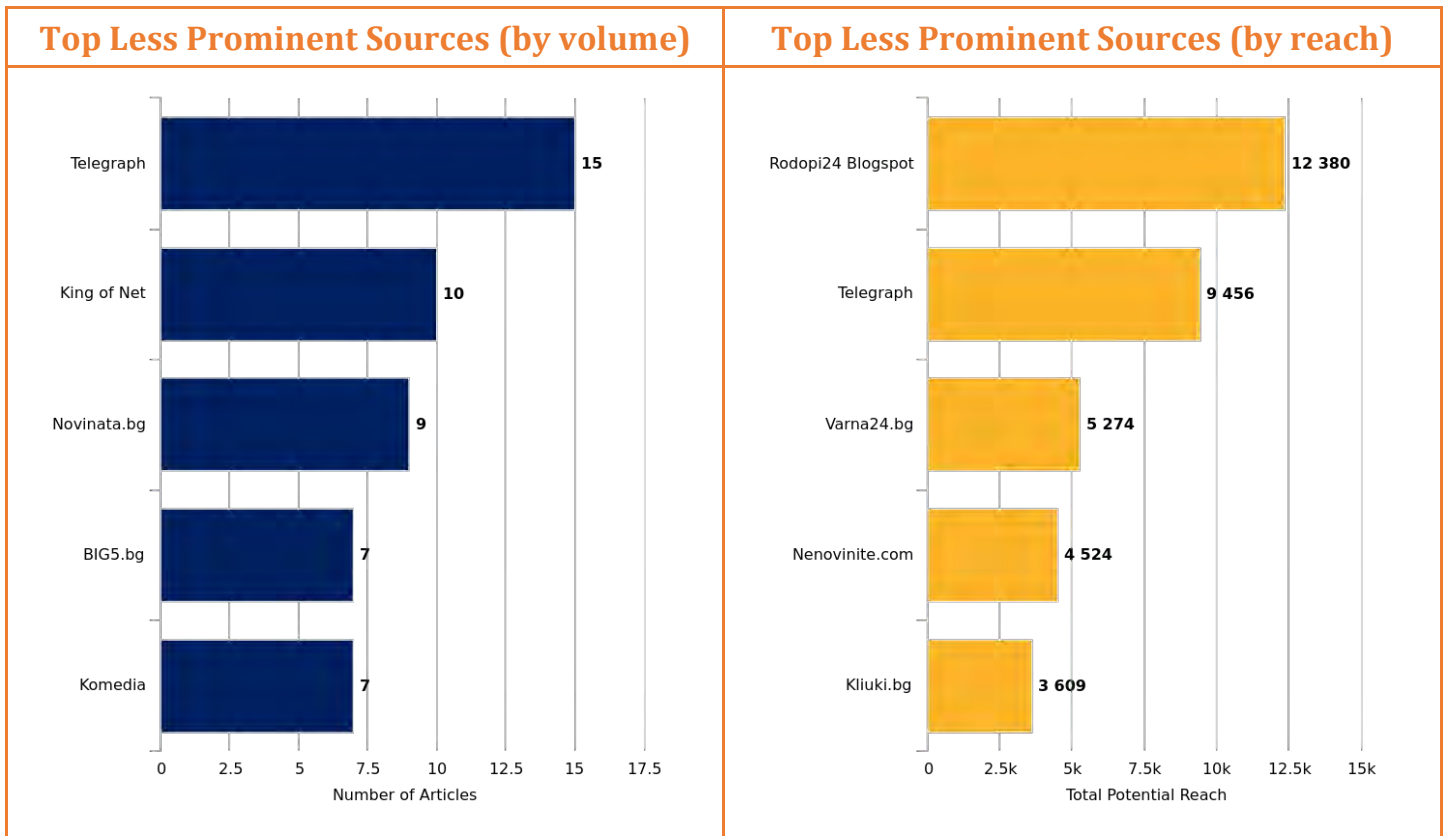
The chart on the left displays the Top Less Prominent Sources (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Less Prominent Sources (by potential reach). "Telegraph" published the most content, however, "Rodopi 24 Blogspot," which is not among the Top 10 Sources in terms of volume, reached the widest audience.
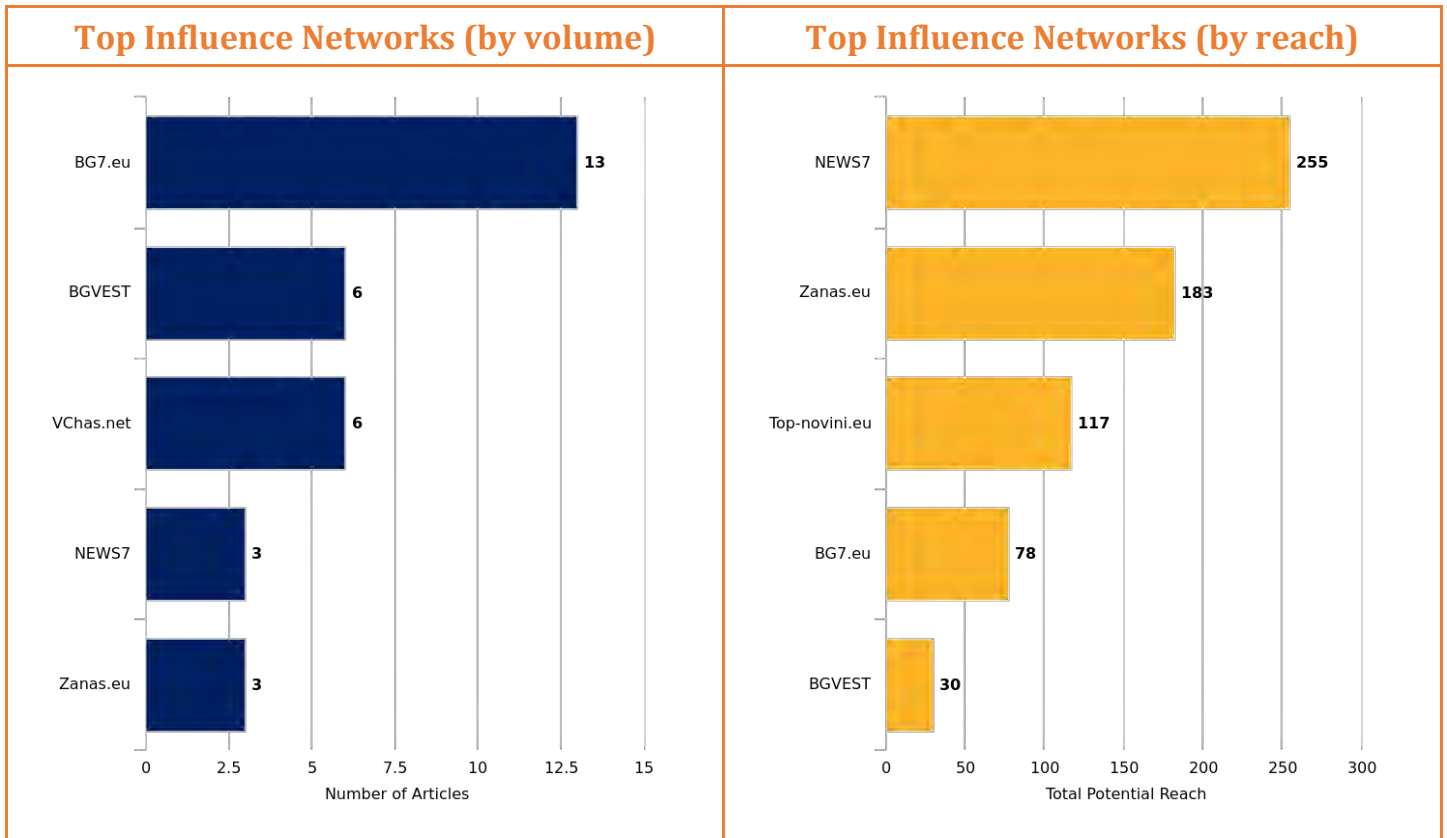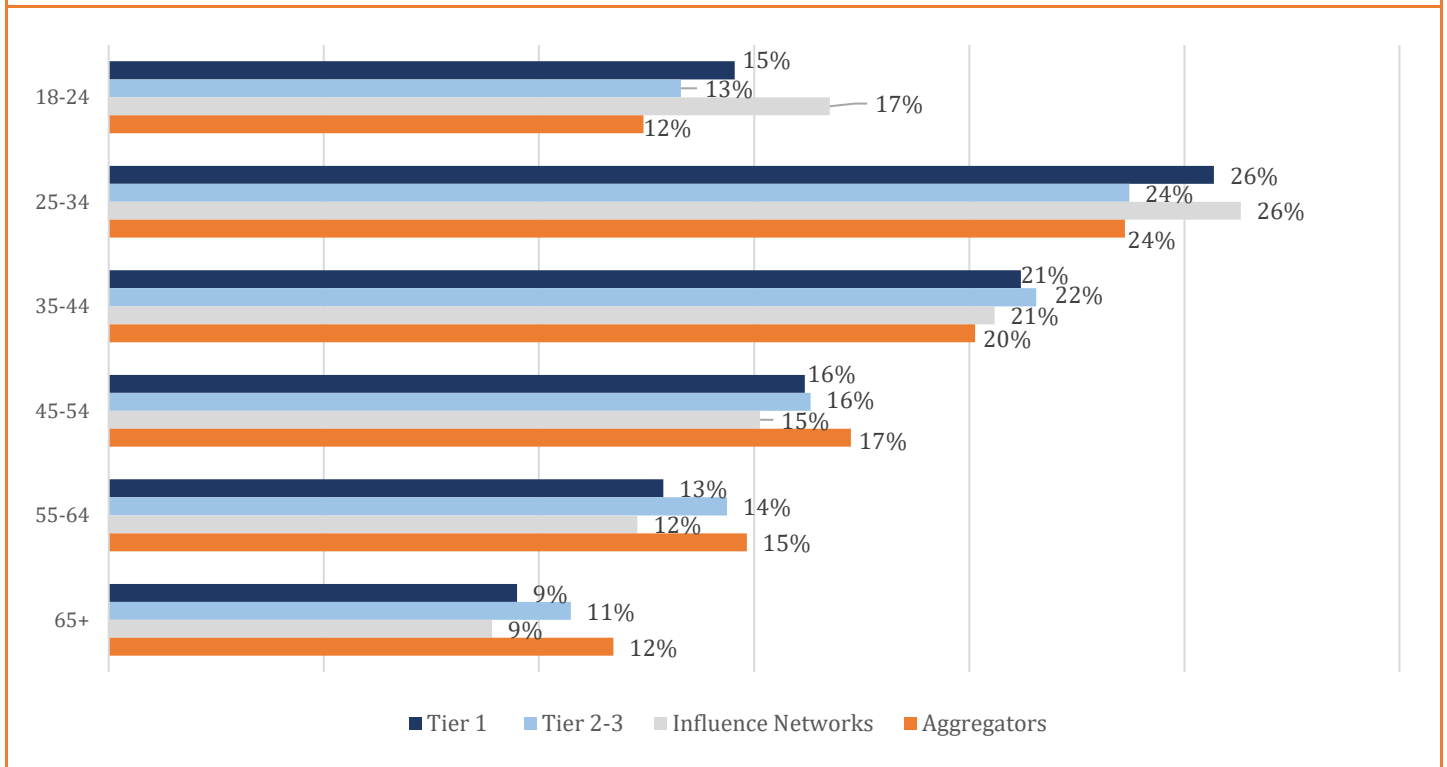
Top Influence Networks (by volume)

Network	Number of Articles
BG7.eu	13
BGVEST	6
VChas.net	6
NEWS7	3
Zanas.eu	3

Top Influence Networks (by reach)

Network	Total Potential Reach
NEWS7	255
Zanas.eu	183
Top-novini.eu	117
BG7.eu	78
BGVEST	30

The chart on the left displays the Top Influence Networks (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Influence Networks (by potential reach). Although "BG7" published the most content, "Za nas" had the biggest potential reach.

Top Aggregators (by volume)

Aggregator	Number of Articles
Novini247	223
BulBox	79
BetaRSS.com	22
ЧАС ПИК	11
Bulnews.com	8

Top Aggregators (by reach)

Aggregator	Total Potential Reach
Novini247	10 704
BulBox	79
ЧАС ПИК	33
BetaRSS.com	22
Bulnews.com	16
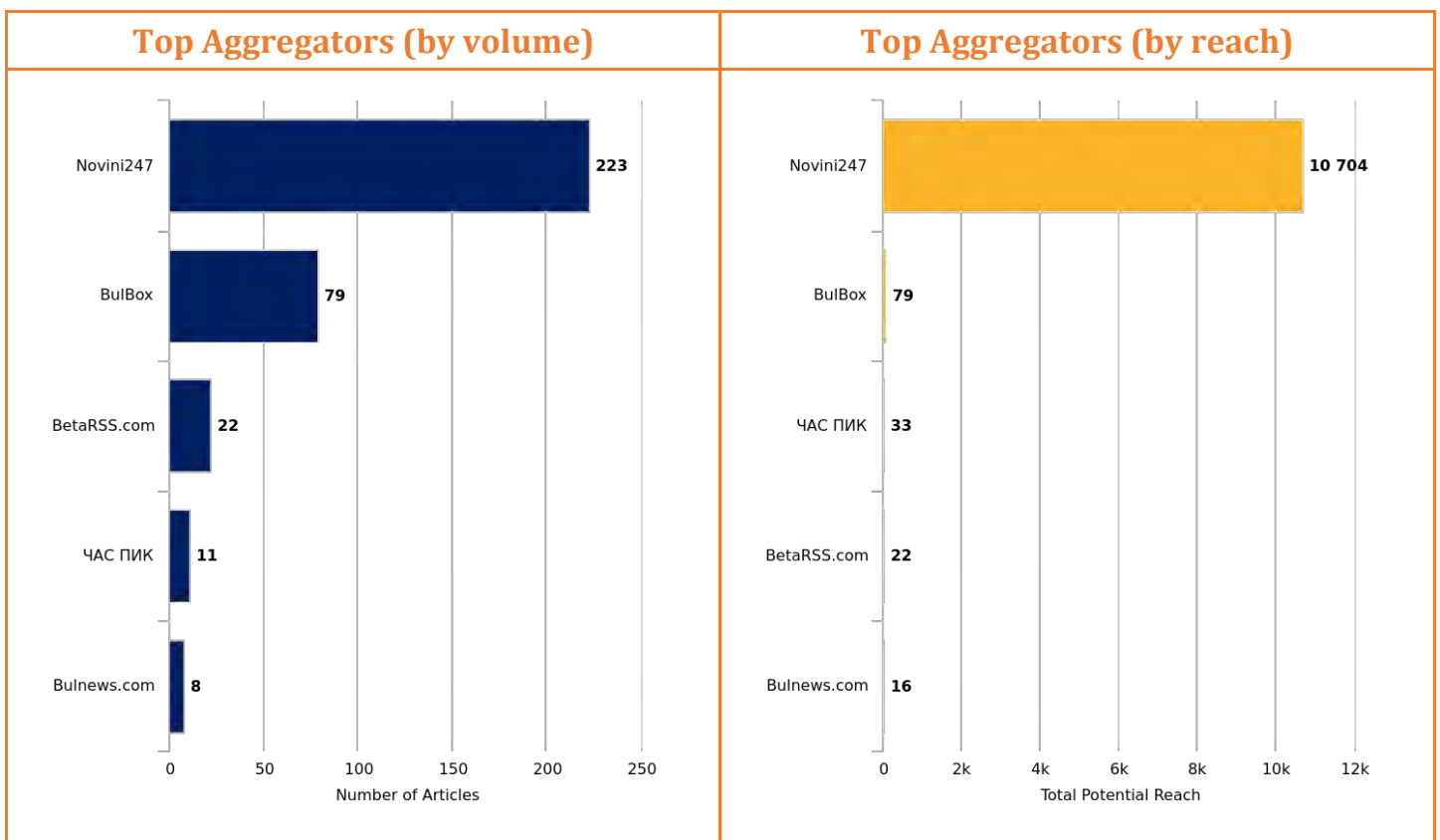
The chart on the left displays the Top Media Aggregators (by volume), while the chart on the right shows the Top Media Aggregators (by potential reach). "Novini247" published the most content and had the biggest potential reach.

5.6.2.3 Online Coverage: Source Audience

Source Audience by Age per Source Type

Legend: ■ Tier 1 ■ Tier 2-3 ■ Influence Networks ■ Aggregators

Age group	Tier 1	Tier 2-3	Influence Networks	Aggregators
18-24	15%	13%	17%	12%
25-34	26%	24%	26%	24%
35-44	21%	22%	21%	20%
45-54	16%	16%	15%	17%
55-64	13%	14%	12%	15%
65+	9%	11%	9%	12%

The chart illustrates the different level of engagement with the four types of monitored sources (Prominent Sources, Less Prominent Sources, Media Aggregators, and Influence Networks) among six age groups. The result shows that the people most interested in the story are between the ages of 25 and 44. The people above 65 years of age comprised the lowest audience percentage and engaged mostly with Less Prominent Sources and Media Aggregators.

Source Audience by Top Countries per Source Type

Legend: ■ Tier 1 ■ Tier 2-3 ■ Influence Networks ■ Aggregators

Country	Tier 1	Tier 2-3	Influence Networks	Aggregators
Bulgaria	87.9%	92.3%	93.3%	97.2%
United States	4.3%	4.5%	3.2%	1.1%
Germany	3.2%	2.1%	0.0%	0.6%
Others	5%	1.2%	3.5%	1.1%

The chart displays the geographical distribution of the websites visitors per source type. The traffic comes mostly from Bulgaria, with the United States taking the second place among all source types.

Source Audience by Traffic per Source Type

Direct
- Tier 1: 41.86%
- Tier 2-3: 80.91%
- Influence Networks: 36.43%
- Aggregators: 8.21%

Search
- Tier 1: 29.76%
- Tier 2-3: 7.22%
- Influence Networks: 0.00%
- Aggregators: 88.63%

Social
- Tier 1: 14.36%
- Tier 2-3: 4.10%
- Influence Networks: 63.57%
- Aggregators: 0.27%

Referral
- Tier 1: 6.94%
- Tier 2-3: 7.28%
- Influence Networks: 0.00%
- Aggregators: 2.33%

Email
- Tier 1: 7.00%
- Tier 2-3: 0.44%
- Influence Networks: 0%
- Aggregators: 0.56%

Others
- Tier 1: 0.1%
- Tier 2-3: 0%
- Influence Networks: 0.0%
- Aggregators: 0%

■ Tier 1 ■ Tier 2-3 ■ Influence Networks ■ Aggregators

The chart compares the source of traffic and its volume generated by the four monitored source types. Prominent Sources gained most of theirs directly or via a search engine. Less Prominent Sources and Media Aggregators gained most of their traffic directly. Influence Networks gained traffic through social media and, to a lesser degree, via direct clicks.

Source Audience by Social Network per Source Type

Facebook
- Tier 1: 81.34%
- Tier 2-3: 93.41%
- Influence Networks: 100.00%
- Aggregators: 100.00%

Twitter
- Tier 1: 4.88%
- Tier 2-3: 2.39%
- Influence Networks: 0.00%
- Aggregators: 0%

YouTube
- Tier 1: 8.64%
- Tier 2-3: 3.42%
- Influence Networks: 0%
- Aggregators: 0%

Reddit
- Tier 1: 2.08%
- Tier 2-3: 0.73%
- Influence Networks: 0%
- Aggregators: 0%

Others
- Tier 1: 3.06%
- Tier 2-3: 0.05%
- Influence Networks: 0%
- Aggregators: 0.00%

■ Tier 1 ■ Tier 2-3 ■ Influence Networks ■ Aggregators

The chart illustrates the source audience distribution according to the traffic of the website gained via social network per source type. The findings highlight Facebook's dominance in all monitored types of sources.

5.6.2.4 Online Coverage: Political Parties (by volume)

Top Mentioned Political Parties

Democratic Bulgaria (10.39%)

Revival (1.62%)

We Continue the Change (8.77%)

There is Such a People (0.97%)

Bulgarian Socialist Party (3.25%)

Movement for Rights and Freedoms (7.14%)

GERB (67.86%)

Corruption Narratives
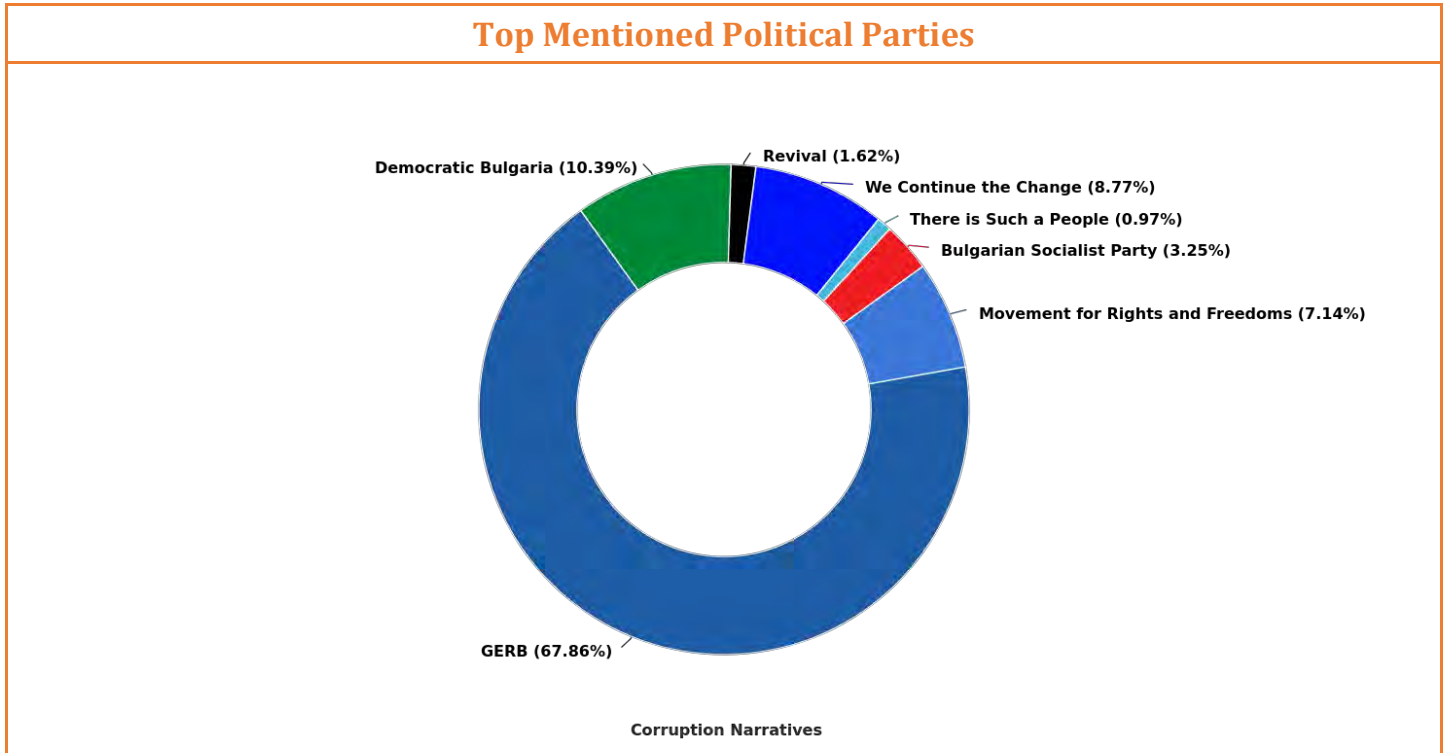
The chart presents the most mentioned political parties in the context of the visit of European Prosecutor Laura Kövesi. A significant proportion of these, comprising approximately 70%, are directed towards GERB. The majority of the GERB-related articles were published by Prominent Sources or Media Aggregators, with a notable emphasis on the party's leader and former Prime Minister Boyko Borissov, who was arrested alongside several of his associates at the time of the European Prosecutor's visit.

5.6.3. Social Coverage (Facebook)

The analysis of the data collected during this period revealed a significant number of Facebook interactions, with the majority of the content spiking on March 16 to 17. The most frequently used keywords within the monitored story relate directly to the goals behind Kövesi's meetings with Bulgarian officials. The results also revealed that the arrest of Boyko Borissov, GERB's leader, was among the most prominent discussion subjects. Overall, despite the high volume of content on Facebook during the monitored period, there was a generally low user engagement, indicating a lack of significant interest in the story.

Overall Volume (per month)
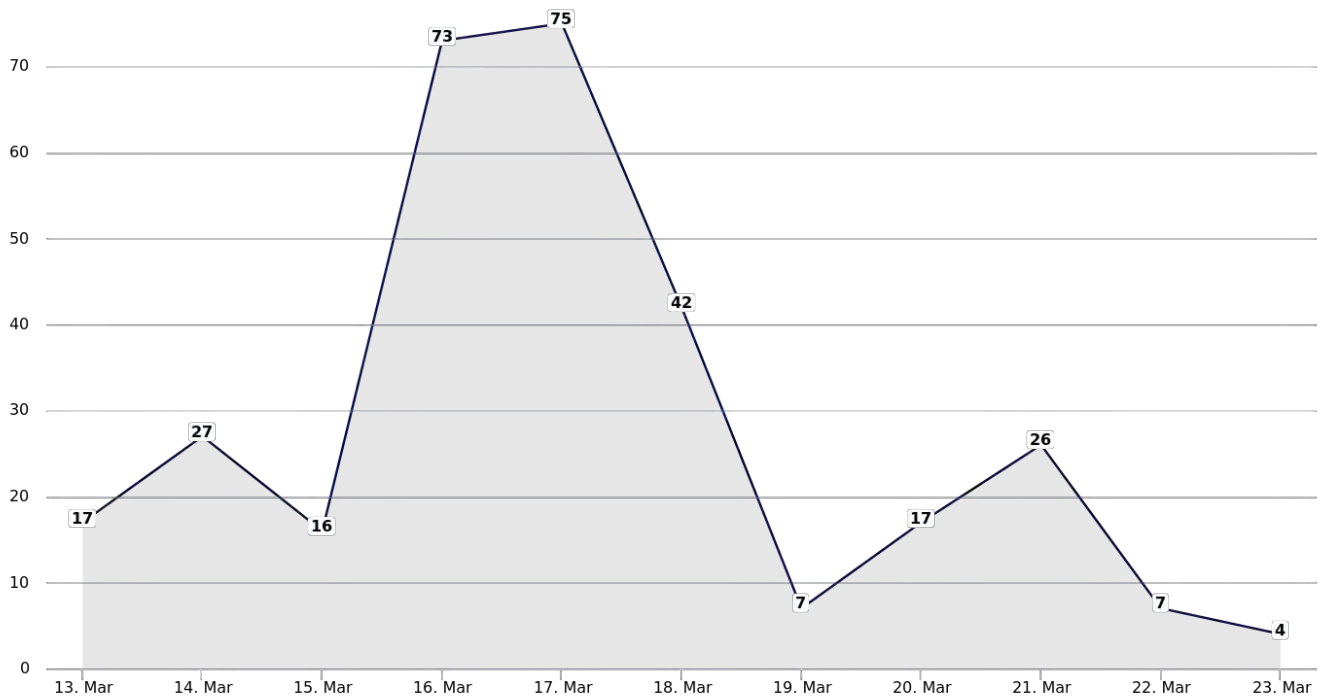
As the visit of European Chief Prosecutor Laura Kövesi to Bulgaria took place in March 2022, the Facebook content mostly dates back to this period, which witnessed a significant number of social interactions. The volume peaked on March 16 to 17. On March 16, there was a surge in social media content due to Laura Kövesi's meeting with former Minister Kiril Petkov. While many Facebook pages shared the news, users barely engaged with it. After Kövesi's meeting with Ivan Geshev, Bulgaria's Chief Prosecutor, on March 17, news about the event continued to be shared, but the engagement remained low.

Top 10 Social Authors (by volume)
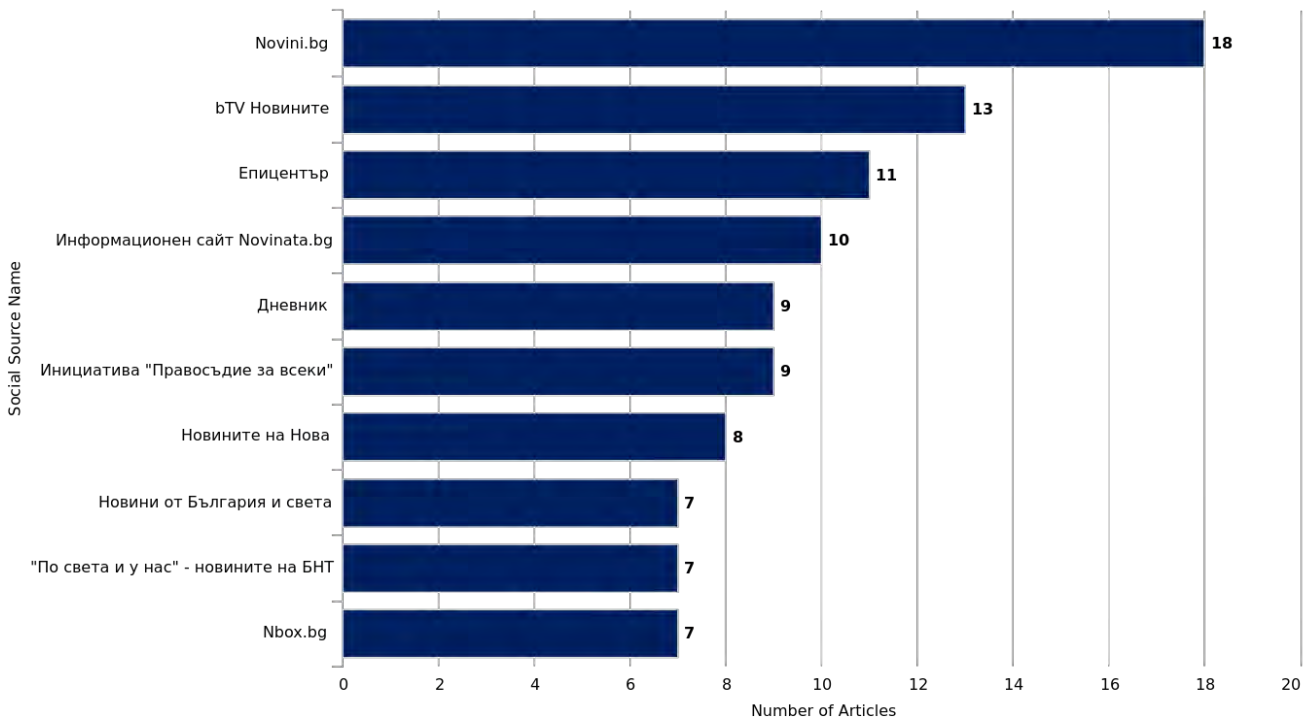
Although the official media outlets pages are the primary social sources, their relatively low engagement volume indicates that users did not find the story as interesting as other narratives that are part of the current report.

Top Keywords (by volume)
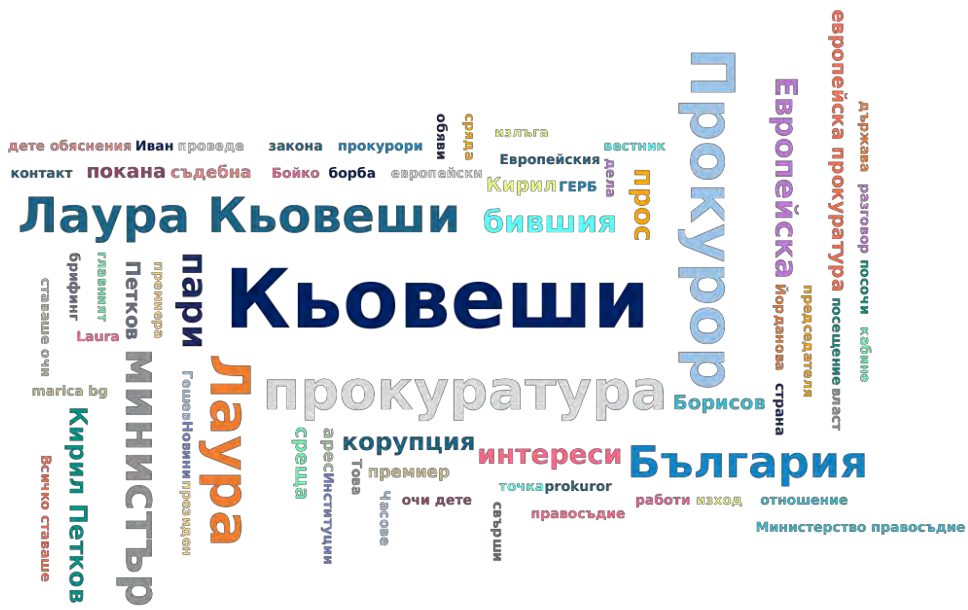
The tag cloud above highlights some of the most frequently used words, such as "Kövesi," "prosecutor's office," "corruption," "Borissov," and "interest." The term "corruption" is frequently mentioned in the context of visit's purpose.

5.6.3.1 Social Coverage: Political Parties (by volume)

Top Mentioned Political Parties

Democratic Bulgaria (4.17%)
We Continue the Change (4.17%)
Bulgarian Socialist Party (4.17%)
Movement for Rights and Freedoms (4.17%)
GERB (83.33%)

Facebook
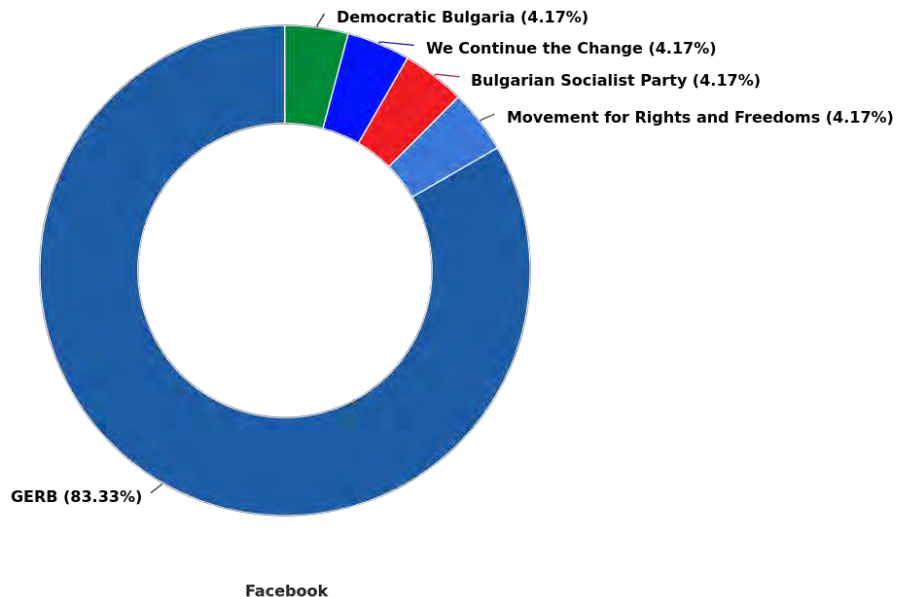
A prominent discussion subject was the arrest of Boyko Borissov, GERB's leader. A number of accounts suggested that the operation was carried out in response to signals from Laura Kövesi regarding crimes in Bulgaria. The remaining political parties were mentioned only briefly.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

6.1. Conclusions

The analysis of top corruption and anticorruption narratives in Bulgarian online and social media has provided several key observations:

- There is a significant disparity in the coverage of corruption and anticorruption cases, particularly in terms of media attention volume and duration. Throughout the analyzed period, the coverage of corruption remained consistently high, with notable prolonged peaks of interest. On the other hand, anticorruption stories experienced temporary spikes in relevance, typically lasting for a maximum of two to three weeks before fading away. This divergence suggests a need for further examination of the factors influencing media attention and the potential implications on public awareness and discourse surrounding corruption and anticorruption efforts.

- Among the chosen narratives, "mushroom" websites gained the majority of their traffic through social media platforms like Facebook, while search engines generated most of the traffic for media aggregators.

- Overall, coordinated disinformation campaigns were observed in both online media outlets and Facebook, with "mushroom" websites playing a significant role. These websites published sensationalist content aimed at implicating notable individuals in seemingly unrelated matters. Suspicious Facebook users, potentially trolls, posted similar comments under different posts within a limited time frame, even on unrelated topics. These activities suggest attempts to spread fake news and malicious opinions beyond the known interested circles.

- Bulgarian media outlets exhibited a tendency to avoid direct use of the word "corruption" and its derivatives. Instead, they employed vocabulary associated with corrupt practices, often using slang or informal phrases to evoke emotional reactions and sensationalize the news. "Mushroom" websites took this tendency to extreme proportions, resorting to offensive wording and vulgar slang reminiscent of yellow journalism.

- The analysis also revealed a division between national and regional media. Both categories extensively covered corruption and anticorruption narratives, with national media publishing a larger portion of the content due to the national interest of the stories. Regional media focused more on local and regional matters, such as local political and cultural events and traffic, resulting in the neglect of municipal and local corruption cases.

- The corruption cases covered by the media were diverse, addressing sectors such as health and infrastructure. Scandals and news stories involving specific perpetrators of corruption, such as the Magnitsky sanctions, were more widely known among the general public.However, anticorruption stories received comparatively less attention, particularly from "mushroom" websites.

- The Gemcorp scandal, an artificially created scandal, ranked third in terms of volume and potential reach, following the Rejection of Schengen Bid and Magnitsky Sanctions. This highlights the power of "mushroom" websites, as they contributed the most content to this particular narrative. Other stories with significant actual repercussions, such as TurkStream and Bulgargaz-Gazprom Supply Issues Controversy, received considerably less coverage from these sources.

- Facebook emerged as the primary social media platform through which news reached the audience, reflecting its popularity in Bulgaria. The term "corruption" was more frequently used by Facebook users compared to online media outlets. Social media users frequently made connections between Boyko Borissov and his party GERB and allegations related to corrupt practices.

- Both the media and the audience preferred stories that were easy to assimilate and relate to. For example, the uncovered corruption scheme at Kapitan Andreevo border checkpoint, involving houses and apartments, garnered significant attention.

- Among different demographic groups, individuals aged between 25 and 34 exhibit the highest level of engagement as news consumers across all narratives. Facebook emerges as the predominant social media platform for news dissemination due to its popularity in Bulgaria.

- Overall, anti-corruption stories gained relatively lower interest from the media, especially when the narrative involved complex matters like policy initiatives or legislative changes, as opposed to immediate results from specific actions.

6.2. Recommendations

Understanding the dynamics of disinformation and corruption narratives in Bulgaria sheds light on the challenges faced in combating corruption and promoting accurate information. Addressing these issues requires continued vigilance, media responsibility, and public awareness to mitigate the spread of fake news and uphold transparency in public discourse. To address these challenges, several key recommendations are put forth:

Media Ownership Transparency

- It is recommended that legislative initiatives be undertaken at the EU level, taking into careful consideration the delicate balance between transparency and freedom of speech. These initiatives should aim to reveal the true owners of media outlets, promoting accountability and reducing the potential for hidden agendas.
- Additionally, revisions to the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) or negotiations with ICANN and domain registrars should be pursued to address the issue of anonymous web domain registration by default since the introduction of GDPR in 2017.

Media Funding Transparency

- Strict and consistent application of existing tax codes, legislation, and consumer protection regulations is necessary to prevent anonymous media outlets from relying on revenue generated by ad networks that serve ads in violation of certain regulations.
- Furthermore, establishing a public register of all public sector entities, along with making media contracts with these entities public, will contribute to greater transparency in media funding.

Smart Support for Civil Society

- To support civil society in navigating the disinformation landscape, a multi-pronged approach is recommended. Media literacy programs should be implemented, targeting journalists, media professionals, and citizens alike. These programs will equip them with the necessary skills to critically evaluate information sources and detect manipulated pictures and videos.

- Simultaneously, user-friendly and sustainable tools should be developed for journalists and media professionals to verify the trustworthiness of sources and identify manipulated content.
- To foster collaboration and knowledge-sharing, partnerships between government bodies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and technology experts should be established.

Specific Measures to amplify the impact of Fact Checking organizations

- A public media outlet registry should be created, cataloging debunked stories and attributing them to the respective outlets. This registry will enhance accountability and enable the public to make informed decisions about the credibility of media sources.
- Leveraging the power of social media, the implementation of Twitter Community Notes, which facilitate crowdsourcing of context and debunking of disinformation and propaganda stories within the Twitter community, should be considered.
- Additionally, the establishment of a Fact Check Federation, supported by AI-assisted multilingual tools, will foster collaboration among fact-checking organizations and enable efficient verification across different languages.

Proactive Informational Campaigns

- Proactive informational campaigns are crucial in combating disinformation. These campaigns should employ accessible language and concise messaging to engage a wider audience, moving away from the typical lengthy and complex institutional jargon.
- Embracing accessible formats such as short posts and videos on mobile platforms, which align with prevailing media consumption patterns, will enhance the reach and impact of these campaigns.
- Collaboration with citizen-journalists and social media influencers should be sought, allowing them to contribute without compromising their creative freedom, and leveraging their wide reach to disseminate accurate information.

7. Glossary and Definitions

7.1. Glossary

Category	Term	Definition
Types of Narratives	Story	Stories are contained within the general narrative of a Topic. They appear, develop, and "die out" over a limited period (e.g. days, weeks). A story could reappear in the future, usually triggered by a sudden development.
	Topic	A broad or general theme or topic of interest pre-defined by the customer. Topics remain permanent for a long period. (e.g. Corruption, Anticorruption).
Technical Terminology	Boolean Operators	Boolean Operators are simple words (AND, OR, NOT, or AND NOT) used as conjunctions to combine or exclude keywords in a search, leading to more focused and productive results. Corpuses of keywords linked to each other with different operator combinations enable a complex query syntax and a high level of precision.
	Query	A "query" refers to the action of retrieving data from the database. The Boolean query is a type of search that makes possible the combination of keywords or phrases with operators such as AND, AND NOT, and OR.
	Dimension	A component of the Sensika platform that contains all inherent attributes of a regular query. The dimension can be attached to an existing feed or a variety of charts visualizing or summarizing the content metadata.
	Sensika Operators	Custom operators (content_language, source_country, and others) designed to filter result sets based on the metadata collected for each media item.
	Stacked Line Chart	A stacked line chart is a line chart in which lines do not intersect because they are cumulative at each point. In a stacked 100% line chart, the lines reach a total of 100% of the axis range at each point.
	Top Mentioned Political Parties Chart	The chart provides a percentage distribution of the mentions of a political party based on the content that references all political parties. The number of compared parties may vary from story to story.
Metrics	Global Rank	The source rank on a global level. It is calculated monthly and is based on purchased statistical data for the source audience and page views for the month, utilizing a percentile rank calculation formula across all sources globally.
	Domestic Rank	The source rank on a nationwide level. It is calculated monthly and is based on purchased statistical data for the source audience and page views for the month, utilizing a percentile rank calculation formula across sources in a given country part of the Sensika catalog.
	Sensika Tiering	Hierarchical source classification from the most influential to the least influential, accordingly Tier 1 (Domestic Rank and Global Rank from 1 to 3), Tier 2 (Domestic Rank and Global Rank from 4 to 6), and Tier 3 (Domestic Rank and Global Rank from 7 to 10).
	Potential Reach	Estimation of the potential reach of a piece of content, based on the total number of views generated by the source for the last 30 days and divided by the number of content items published by the source for the same period.

Category	Term	Definition
Source Types	Prominent Sources	The most influential sources on the domestic or global level (Domestic Rank 1-3 or Global Rank 1-3; Tier 1).
	Less Prominent Sources	Less and/or the least essential sources on the domestic or global level (Domestic Rank 4-10 or Global Rank 4-10; Tier 2 and 3 respectively) with unclear or hidden ownership and lack of transparent editorial policy.
	Media Aggregators	News aggregators automatically consolidate web content that has been published by online newspapers, blogs, and podcasts in one location for easy viewing.
	"Mushroom Websites" (Influence Networks)	Websites that share similar design and structure and publish news in a seemingly coordinated manner. They usually disseminate disinformation, propaganda, and fake news.
	National Media Sources	Websites that tend to cover news of national interest and, respectively, attract readers from all over the country. This type of outlets does not focus explicitly on regional news stories or issues. National media contains only Tier 1 type of sources, without aggregators and influence networks.
	Regional Media Sources	Regional-based media outlets focused on local/regional news stories or issues, among other national or global news. Regional media contains only Tier 1 type of sources, without aggregators and influence networks.
	Disclaimer:	*International media outlets that publish articles in Bulgarian, such as DW.com/bg, do not fall in either the National or Regional media sources category.*

7.2. Political Parties Mentioned in the Report

Name	Description
Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP)	A center-left, social democratic political party founded in 1990. It is a member of the Socialist International, the Party of European Socialists, and the Progressive Alliance. Its current chairperson is Korneliya Ninova.
Bulgarian Rise (BV)	A national conservative political party established in 2022 by Stefan Yanev, former caretaker Prime Minister and Defense Minister.
Bulgarian Summer (GPBL)	A political party founded in January 2021 by Vassil Bozhkov, a Bulgarian businessman and former owner of National Lottery. Bozhkov is a fugitive from Bulgarian justice and faces charges of leading an organized crime group, extortion, and tax evasion.
Democratic Bulgaria (DB)	An electoral alliance formed in 2018 by three political parties: Yes, Bulgaria!, Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria, and The Greens. It is often associated with Yes, Bulgaria! leader Hristo Ivanov.
Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria (DSB)	A center-right political party, founded in 2004 by Ivan Kostov. They advocate for liberal economic policies, European integration, and the rule of law. DSB has been a member of the European People's Party (EPP) since 2007 and has been part of several Bulgarian governments.
Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB)	A conservative, populist political party with a center-right orientation. It was the ruling party of the country between 2009 and 2021. It is strongly associated with its chairman, former Prime Minister Boyko Borissov.
Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS)	A centrist political party established in 1990 and known to represent the interests of the country's Muslim minority communities. Its MP Delyan Peevski was placed under US sanctions through the Magnitsky Act mechanism in May 2021.
Republicans for Bulgaria (RB)	A center-rights positioned political party formed as a split from GERB by Tsvetan Tsvetanov, formerly the second most senior official in the ruling GERB party, after he was demoted from his positions by GERB leader and Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borissov.

Name	Description
Revival	An ultranationalist political party, founded in 2014. Its chairman is Kostadin Kostadinov. The party is commonly portrayed as anti-EU, anti-American, and pro-Russian.
Spasi Sofia	Spasi Sofia is a Bulgarian non-governmental watchdog organization, which monitors the work of the Sofia Municipality administration. In January 2023, the organization registered as a party and Spasi Sofia founder Boris Bonev was elected as Chairman.
Stand Up.BG! We are coming! (IBG-NI)	A Bulgarian non-governmental organization and political party founded by Maya Manolova in 2019. Later on, the entity was joined by the so-called "Poisonous Trio" (lawyer Nikolay Hadzhigenov, sculptor Velislav Minekov, and PR expert Arman Babikyan).
There is Such a People (ITN)	A populist political party established in 2020 by Bulgarian singer, TV host, and politician Slavi Trifonov.
We Continue the Change (PP)	A centrist, anticorruption political party and an electoral alliance led by Kiril Petkov and Asen Vassilev. The party was founded ahead of the November 2021 Bulgarian National Assembly election.
Yes, Bulgaria! (DB)	A center-right political party in Bulgaria, founded in 2016 by Hristo Ivanov. The party advocates for judicial and political reforms, increased transparency and accountability in government, and the protection of civil liberties.

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