

THE POWERFUL DEFEATED MEDIA

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In a country due to join the European Union in 2007, the ruling party has been putting a lot of pressure on the media. In 2002, the Media Monitoring Agency, an NGO measuring media objectivity, a partner of Reporters sans Frontiers, revealed for the first time that no critical news had been broadcast by any major television regarding the leaders of the Social Democratic Party (PSD). In the following years, the monitoring conclusions remained the same; no critical item was broadcast about the head of government, Adrian Nastase. On 12 December, Nastase ran for Presidency and lost. The media, so much non-critical, should reflect on this failure.

The embodiment of the old-guard communists, PSD started a coherent strategy of controlling the media four years ago, as a transcript of PSD internal meetings recently revealed. Pressure was felt by the majority of outlets, from local papers to foreign groups.

Political interference through financial and ownership tools has ruined the credibility of the “partially free media”, believes Freedom House. Other reports pointed to the worsening media situation. “Many media organisations are not economically viable and their continued existence may depend on the support of political or business interests”, the country report of the European Commission pointed out in November 2004.

Analyzing the electoral campaign that ended on 26 October 2004, Freedom House came to the conclusion that media coverage was “strongly in favor of the Government”. “All three major televisions, TVR1 [the public broadcaster], Antena 1 and Pro TV, were either tightly connected to, or influenced by the ruling PSD”, according to the quoted source.

During 2000-2004, Pro TV, the leading commercial station, depended on the good will of the Romanian government due to million dollar tax liabilities. "Pro TV is heavily indebted to the Romanian state and has applied to the tax authorities for a rescheduling of its outstanding tax liabilities. This makes the channel's continued operation dependent on the good will of the Romanian authorities", the European Commission country report for the year 2002 observed. The American owner of Pro TV, Central Media Enterprises, for the year 2002 pointed out in its own annual report: "Should the Romanian tax authorities demand immediate payment of all potential tax liabilities, the Romanian operations would experience difficulties in continuing to operate".

The second large media group has as its main owner a politician, Dan Voiculescu, leader of a small party, the so-called "social liberal" Romanian Humanitarian Party (PUR). Voiculescu started his career as head of a company dealing with external trade in the communist regime; now he is among the 10 wealthiest local businessmen. His party joined the PSD government four years ago, broke the alliance in the meantime and came back to the PSD at the last minute, just before new elections, in 2004. Too small to reach the minimum percentage required for entering the Parliament (5%), PUR could hardly run alone in the elections, and the media group was an important backup: Voiculescu became a senator, while his party obtained 30 seats in the Parliament.

The third television player, Prima TV, faced a serious financial crisis, which made it extremely vulnerable. More than that, the television managed to find resources with the help of the Ministry of Transport, led at the time by PSD leader Miron Mitrea. Through a complicated financial mechanism via tax havens, Mitrea's ministry ordered several state companies to contribute 5.6 million dollars for a better image in the media. Prima TV was among the main beneficiaries, an investigative report revealed; since then Prima TV has been called, as a joke, Mitrea TV.

Reporters: “May We Broadcast This?”

The public broadcasters, Romanian Television (TVR), as well as the Romanian Radio Company (Radio Romania), were both accused of hard censorship by insiders. The journalist Alexandru Costache, from the TVR News Department, decided to speak about the pressures on reporters: “There is no limit in breaking professional ethics (...) Although the problem [of censorship within TVR] is not new, it has now become impossible to tolerate it”, Alexandru Costache said on 6 December 2004. Six reporters and producers supported Costache’s statements. “It became usual for reporters to ask producers: “Are we allowed to broadcast this?”, Raluca Stroe, producer with TVR, stated in a press conference.

In the television landscape, one player made a difference, at some point. Realitatea TV, with an all-day news program, was re-launched in autumn 2004. For a short period before elections, it broadcast balanced news, but its audience is still behind the main four TV players.

Except for *Realitatea TV*, *Evenimentul Zilei*, *Romania libera* and the online media, almost all dailies and broadcasters put the guns on the opposition. Allegations of fraud were covered by international media, and very little by local media, which rather reflected the PSD’s version on the issue. Moreover, several days before the run-off in presidential elections, all televisions abandoned the necessary electoral balance and broadcast the PSD candidate speaking for minutes about “the huge success of the government” in EU negotiations.

Of all media, television dominates in terms of audience. The majority of the population (80%) watches television, while only 8-18% read print media (not only newspapers, but all the various magazines). Television also takes a lion’s share of advertising expenditures, which remain, however, a weak resource against the necessary budgets. All advertising in the TV industry (90 million euros net in 2003) is less than the revenues of the only public television the same year (100 million euros).

To decrease costs, reach the audience and avoid political pressure, television stations switched to cheap humor and soap operas. Serious journalism was almost

abandoned. Instead of important issues, TV bulletins reported on car accidents, rapes, other types of crime and pseudo-events.

By comparison, print media covered rather serious topics, but political orientation could be observed by a neutral observer. Only a few publications maintained a critical attitude toward the government (*Evenimentul Zilei, Romania Libera*). Apparently critical toward PSD, other papers avoided criticizing some of the party leaders (*Adevarul*). The same daily sold two types of advertising: “one clearly marked with A (for advertising), the other, costing twice as much, without a distinguished mark for advertisement. One A category page costs 1400 euros, while an advertising story without A costs 3190 euros”, the Media Ownership Report of the South East European Network for the Professionalisation of the Media revealed. Another daily (*Jurnalul National*), owned by Voiculescu’s family, could not report independently of the owners’ interests.

Foreign groups, which had never been involved in media scandals in Romania before, were seen as weak in the instable climate. After it had taken over the critical *Evenimentul Zilei*, the Swiss group Ringier faced a major crisis when the majority of the journalists accused it of censorship and political interference. Apart from *Evenimentul Zilei*, Ringier is the publisher of two dailies (a general and a sport one), one business weekly and several magazines. Similarly, the German WAZ faced a serious crisis when it wanted to apply a tabloid format to *Romania libera* daily. All journalists accused the owner of political interest and the crisis lasted for months. WAZ ended up selling the major stake of shares in *Romania libera* to a local businessman. The decreasing credibility of the media had its price. One of the worst effects was that the population lost interest in following news. In a country with 18 million people eligible to vote, a general daily hardly reaches a circulation of 150,000 copies.

The newly elected president, the popular Traian Basescu, said in his first official speech that ensuring media freedom is one of the priorities of the reformist government. Although at the stage of official speech, for the first time in Romania, media freedom – instead of media goodwill – is on top of the officials’ agenda.