

# The Novelty of the Romanian Press

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## **ABSTRACT**

High level political corruption has been a constant problem of post-communist Romania, long indicated by international bodies. This continuing situation raises questions about the capacity of the Romanian institutions to reform and fulfill their duties. Among these institutions, the Romanian Press occupies a special place due to its nature and to its connection with politics. This paper will offer an image of the relationship between the post-communist Romanian press and the political world and will point towards a few elements that make it a unique case that deserves to be carefully researched.

## **KEYWORDS**

Mass-media, moguls, press, political corruption Romania.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In a general negative context, marked by reports from the European Commission (EC Reports on Romania, 2011 – 2004) and other international bodies, pointing to the severe high level political corruption problem, the role of the press as guaranty of democracy, transparency and state of law becomes more relevant than ever. The role the press plays in these kinds of troubled situations is the ultimate test to show the level and the quality of press in a particular country.

Studies of the Romanian post-communist press as well as studies concerning the post-communist press in other South-Eastern European countries have been trying to provide the public with a clearer image of the processes the written media has been passing through since 1989 and their consequences.

The proposed topic is large and the research involved considerable. This is why for the purpose of the present paper I shall start by examining if and how the

Romanian media moguls are different from other cases in the post-communist world. I will examine two different Romanian cases, Sorin Ovidiu Vantu and Dan Voiculescu and compare them to other two cases, Paval Rusko from Slovakia and Vladimir Zelenzy from the Czech Republic. The reason I have chosen these cases is to exemplify how tight the relationship between media and politics is in Romania. I shall continue with a trip through the history of the Romanian press to underline its main aspects and evolutions in order to underline the elements that make the Romanian case a unique one.

## **ROMANIAN PRESS–POLITICS, A COMPLICATED RELATIONSHIP**

In November 1999, the last Thursday before an election, the final confrontation between the two candidates, Traian Basescu, the Romanian President at the time, supported by the Liberal Democrat Party, and Mircea Geoana, Head of Senate and president of the Social Democrat Party, candidate supported also by the Liberal Party and Minorities parties, took place in the Parliament Palace.

Basescu had built his campaign on an anti-corruption discourse, pointing very loud and clearly towards the mass-media tycoons, their business and political implications. Due to this discourse his access to mass media was severely restricted and a dirty campaign against him started. A little more than a week before the final tour the TV stations presented a little movie recorded in 2004, during the electoral campaign for presidential elections. The election which consecrated Traian Basescu as Head of State in front of Adrian Nastase. The movie showed Basescu during an electoral meeting, hitting a boy in the crowd. The late and unconvincing reaction of President Basescu, put in front of this movie for the first time, directly, during a TV show, made him lose precious percents. Mass-media continually showed the movie for days, debates over debates took place, and many could foresee his sure defeat. He needed something which looked worse than the movie given to the press by one of his former co-operators. The saving solution came from his counter-candidate, Mircea Geoana. The paparazzi recorded him one day before the final confrontation paying a visit, at the middle of the night, to the private house of one of the media tycoons so much blamed by candidate Basescu. The hit was short and fatal: "Did you like it at Mr. Vantu's, last night, Mr. Geoana?" The lack of an inspired answer cost Geoana the Presidential Portfolio.

As we could see from this example, the candidate almost certain to win elections felt the need to make sure, at the last moment, that he would benefit by the support of media mogul Sorin Ovidiu Vantu. By chance, the visit is recorded by paparazzi and 2 days before the elections the entire country knew about Geoana's nocturnal visit to the most controversial media mogul in Romania.

A different example of the troubled relationship between politicians and mass-media is the manner in which Dan Voiculescu, businessman, politician and media mogul has been using his media empire in order to sort out political deals. The general elections in 2004 are just an

example. Wishing to make sure the political party he had set up would get into parliament, Dan Voiculescu headed towards an electoral alliance with the Social-Democrats who, after 4 years in power, marked by harsh economical crises and corruption accusations were almost sure to lose the power and not get enough seats in the Parliament in order to make a strong opposition. The alliance with a different political party was a solution for them too. Before September 2004, when the electoral agreement between the two parties was signed, Voiculescu's TV Station, Antena 1, had been criticising the Social-Democrat Government. The mood sweetened during their alliance with the Social Democrats but immediately after elections, Voiculescu's party broke the alliance and accepted the invitation to form the government with Liberals and Democrats. Antena 1 Tv station started criticising its boss' former allies ( Agentia de Monitorizare a Presei, 2004). As we can see from this example, mass-media is a platform to promote political parties, a instrument to win election, a link to get political alliances.

Sorin Ovidiu Vantu and Dan Voiculescu are just two examples. One is a businessman, the other one is a politician and a businessman. Lets see now a little more of their background.

Sorin Ovidiu Vantu. Considered to be the 5<sup>th</sup> richest man in Romania in 2008, with a fortune ranging between 800 and 850 million Euros ( Apetrei A, 2008), Sorin Ovidiu Vantu is the owner of Realitatea-Catavencu media trust that, before the economic crisis started in 2008 comprised 4 radio stations, 8 magazines, 2 newspapers, 4 TV stations and a news agency. Mass media is not the only business he has had but information about the rest of his economical encounters is unclear as he prefers to develop his businesses through intermediaries and to use off shore vehicles. Among the businesses developed by him was the National Investment Fund, a pyramidal structure that swallowed the saving of about 300.000 Romanians before crashing, in 2000. He sold the company that administrated the Fund to Ioana Maria Vlas who afterwards was made

responsible for the Fund crash. Sorin Ovidiu Vantu has never been sent to jail. Ioana Maria Vlas spent about 7 years in jail, being released in December 2010. Sorin Ovidiu Vantu is suspected of having had connections to the former Communist Security as an informer, under the conspirational name, Nus ( Tapalaga D and Prisacariu C, 2010).

Dan Voiculescu is a politician and a business man. As a politician, Voiculescu set up the Humanist Party of Romania in 1991 and changed its name to the Conservative Party in 2005. He has been an MP between 2004 – 2007 and then starting in 2008 until the present day. He is also Vice-president of the Romanian Senate. In April 2007, the Parliamentary Commission lead, Dan Voiculescu managed to suspend the acting Head of State. The report written by the Commission was adopted by the Romanian Parliament, President Basescu being suspended from his function. The national referendum that followed reconfirmed President Basescu.

As mass-media owner, Dan Voiculescu built an empire comprising: 6 TV stations, 5 newspapers, 6 magazines, 2 radio stations and another 7 businesses in printing and producing entertainment. As with Sorin Ovidiu Vantu, Dan Voiculescu is suspected of secret police involvement too. The National Council for the Study of the Secret Police Archives ( CNSAS) revealed that Dan Voiculescu acted as an informer for the Secret Police of the Ceausescu`s regime (Craig S and Comptom, J 2006). Dan Voiculescu denied the findings and blamed President Basescu for launching a campaign to undermine him.

In order to get rid of this verdict, Dan Voiculescu challenged the law for CNSAS and the Constitutional Court in Romania decided in 2008 that the law was unconstitutional (Vintila C & al, 2008). In 2010, the Court of Appeal decided that Dan Voiculescu was indeed an informer for the Secret Police. On 10<sup>th</sup> of March 2011, the final decision of the Court said that indeed he had connections to the secret Police. Similar to Sorin Ovidiu Vantu, the corruption and money laundry scandals

didn't avoid Voiculescu either (Popescu A L, 2009).

These are just 2 examples out of the 5 cases of moguls that dominate the Romanian media. Lets go now and see the stories of two moguls in other post-communist countries.

The Slovak Pavol Rusko was minister of Economy, set up a political party (Alliance of the New Citizens) and set up Markiza, the biggest commercial TV channel in Slovakia. In the parliamentary elections in 2006, his party didn't manage to get into parliament. Markiza is now part of Central European Media Enterprises.

The Czech Republic has its own local media mogul, Vladimir Zelezny. MP in the Czech Parliament between 2002 – 2004 and member of the European Parliament between 2004 – 2009, Selezny was the first CEO of TV Nova, a popular Czech television station. His influence as media mogul over Czech public affairs was so big that he was referred to as "central Europe's Rupert Murdoch". In 2001 he was publicly arrested and charged with tax evasion and defrauding creditors in connection with the Nova company and in 2009 the Prague High Court upheld a two-year suspended sentence with a four-year probation for Mr. Železný. He was found guilty of tax evasion.

It is easy to see now the differences between the Romanian media moguls and the other two. First and the most important difference is the size of their media empires.

The second big difference lies in their different pasts. The Romanian ones seem to have a history that starts early, during Communist times. Between the rumours concerning Zelezny`s connections to the Communist political police and the verdict given by the Romanian Courts is a difference in degree.

Let's go now and see what are the elements in the political and in the mass

media evolution that differentiate Romania from the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

The literature about Romania's evolution after the 1989 Revolution is rich and plenty of material tries to portray the evolution of the Romanian press too. A few aspects should retain our attention due to their impact.

### **A SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT POLITICAL EVOLUTION**

The nature of the Communist regime in Romania is the first aspect that makes the relationship between the Romanian press and politics different from similar cases as the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

Low living standards and mass deprivation, low educational standards, disintegration, even destruction of indigenous cultural tradition and identity, non-existence of any of any organized dissident movement, harsh persecution of dissidents and discouraging of any thought of further opposition to the Communist system, isolated intellectual dissidents, party "liberals" non-existent, no earlier attempts to top-down reform (Karol Jakubowicz, 2005, p.3) were the ingredients of Romanian communism.

In terms of the mass-media, the powerful Romanian Communist Party was the sole owner, having a monopoly over all the media materials, finances and resources, and control over transportation, telecommunication and means of production. The Communist Party benefited this way by a rapid broadcasting of their own mass media product and the elimination of undesired products (Coman, 2010; p587). In these conditions, the Romanian press couldn't be but mere docile instruments for control and propaganda.

The manner in which regime change happened in Romanian in 1989 is the second element that differentiates Romania from countries like Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic. The lack of an organized dissidence with which to negotiate regime change determined the bloody and violent revolution that ended

up with thousands of dead people, compared to the negotiated and relatively calm manner the change of regime happened elsewhere (Ciobanu M, 2007, p.1433).

Romania's political transition towards democracy was marked by strong instability and amplified by the significant economic turmoil, specific to the shift from a strictly controlled economy to a free market one. Things started calming down in Romania in 2004, when Romania joined NATO and embarked on its new, achieved objective, the EU.

### **WHAT HAPPENED TO MASS MEDIA**

This is the context of the Romanian press after the 1989 Revolution was born.

The Romanian mass media bursted with new media enterprises, new publications, new private radio stations and the control of ownership switched from state to the private media companies. Issues such as financing resources, production costs, tax payment, unverifiable circulation and an underdeveloped advertising market were not considered insignificant notions at the time ( Coman, 2010; p.588 - 589).

The entire moment was marked by lack of instruments to regulate behaviours, lack of vision and lack of values.

Despite the explosion of new, free media, specific to all the former communist countries, the moment immediately after the revolution brought a sluggish start to development, with foreign capital being slow to enter the Romanian media compared to Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland. Such development was also marginal, being most visible in the financial and economic press, women and entertainment press ( Coman, 2010).

Very soon, the euphoria of the beginning was cut by the economic problems that became more visible and constituted major topics of public debate. The advertising expenditure started rising and the development of private ownership and the richness of the funds coming to Romanian media facilitated the birth of so called media moguls. (Coman, 2010, p.

588). The literature in the area identifies three types of media moguls: the new owners of the new post-communist media, the journalists-managers, considered to be reminiscent of the communist times and who own shares in media enterprise and thirdly, the star journalists that benefit from hidden sources (Coman, 2010, p.594).

In the world of the new Romanian media, pecuniary rewards and influence are the main objective. The media moguls have the tool, the media they own, and the methods: they assert themselves as "specialists in everything" and are ready and willing to promote different economic and political interests. They become filters through which any political initiative, politician, party or societal group has to pass in order to become known or recognized. They get a lot of power and money by proceeding like this but at the same time they contribute to the lack of real media freedom. They also take from politicians 'thank-you-for-not-bothering-me money' and rewards for not investigating other things. (Coman, 2000, p.591). As the Report provided by the Agentia de Monitorizare a Presei underlines, most media institutions work only as instruments of their owners for getting influence, for blackmailing and for attacking their political and economic opponents (Agentia de Monitorizare a Presei Report, 2004, p. 11).

In a tumultuous political and economic situation, these ingredients have facilitated the Romanian press to have the coordinates it has today. In respect of this mix between money and politics two declarations made by two of these media moguls are emblematic. In an interview given a few years ago to the National Television station Sorin Ovidiu Vantu declared that in Romania, politics is the most profitable business. Earlier, Adrian Sarbum Romania's main media mogul after the Revolution told the BBC that nobody can compel him to abide by a bad tax law (AM Pippidi, 2000).

## CONCLUSIONS

The media moguls in present day Romania seem to be the element that makes the Romanian case unique. They are many,

compared to other countries, and they control the entire Romanian media landscape. They have a controversial past and they are powerful. So powerful that they can suspend an acting Head of State as in case of President Basescu in May 2007 and determine that the favourite candidate loses presidential elections, as in case of Mircea Geoana in 2009.

They are the product of the much troubled political and economic evolution Romania has been passing through since the 1989 Revolution and one can't explain their appearance without digging deep in the Romanian economic and political post-communist evolution.

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