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Back to the (Uncertain) Future. Politics, Business and the Media in Romania

Introduction

There is little doubt that Romania's media conglomerates, established with increasing élan since 2000, were not principally businesses at first but rather instruments of power and influence that were used to protect the interests of the owners and to attack their adversaries (Lasescu, 12-18 May 2006).¹ The appearance of these conglomerates, however, reversed to a degree the process of extreme atomization of the media system in the first post-communist decade. It also changed the nature of journalism, from one that was either for or against the ruling governments in 1990 – 1996, used as political artillery on behalf of the politician-owner in 1996-2000, seemingly gaining some professionalism in 2000-2004, and is since 2004, with few exceptions, beholden to the new media oligarchs.

For the news media, as Horia Roman Patapievici (25 October 2007) writes, the intrusive power of the government and that of the oligarchs illustrates the same type of negative: “the corruption of journalists with money made outside [of the media business] and that of the press with money that journalists do not know how [to earn] through their talents or [can earn] thanks to the importance of the news that the journalists make.”

The oligarchs who control much of Romania's economy, politics and media today are not so much the children of weak state institutions, as the products of a transition/transformation that had at its core the absence of democratic leadership, ethos and programs, and historical antecedents. They are, therefore, the products of a culture devoid of a democratic notion of social responsibility and ethics. Under these circumstances society is “condemned to experiments of the ‘directed democracy’ type” (Gosu, 9 -15 June 2006). And Romania's news media outlets can be said to have also

¹ All translations are the author's and so are any errata.

been condemned to experiments of “directed journalism” on the one hand and journalistic tabloidization and senzationalization on the other.

Since 2004, what may or may not turn out to be a lasting change in Romania’s media system is discernable: the conglomerates have become bona fide businesses and the lasagna-like layers of politics, business and media appear to have lost their cohesiveness. Romanian politics and the political system have also undergone minor and major modifications since 2004, with attendant impacts on the media and on their journalism. Furthermore, the evolution of the post-communist realities in the realms of politics, societal and individual freedoms, the market economy, and international influences are finally beginning to show small, tentative effects on Romanian culture and, thus, also on the media habits of the population.

Several questions merit examination, therefore, and are the central topic of this paper: given the changing relationship between media, business and politics, are Romania’s media still instruments of power and influence, wielded by their owners and, through them, by their friends and political allies? Does endemic corruption trump all changes? Do other factors that are outside the realm of politics and the political system affect the significance of the media and its performance in Romania? What is the impact of the new political game in Romania on the performance of the media in the evolution of democracy?

I. Changing ownership

The injection of foreign capital and foreign ownership in the Romanian media system in the late 1990s and early 2000s has had a significant impact on the media business by heightening competition, energizing the business and helping it separate itself from its post-communist status as a platform to be used primarily for political purposes by the owners (Coman and Gross, 2006, p. 65).² It also gave impetus to an acquisition trend that birthed the first media conglomerates and, consequently, the new media oligarchs.

² Some media owners made a great deal of money in until the mid- 1990s, mainly by relying on the size of audiences and subsidies from political parties and other sources that, thanks to a lack of transparency, are not clearly identified.

The majority of these media oligarchs are individuals who were to one degree or another implicated in the apparatus of the now defunct communist regime; many own media and other enterprises, and remain directly involved in the political system.³ Compared to circa 2000, in 2007 the dozens of politician/media owners who controlled one or more national, regional or local media outlets vanished from the media scene, leaving only a handful in control of several media platforms. The accretion of many roles in the person of the media owner after 1996, that of businessman, politician, publisher, broadcaster and more, “could not last,” according to Mircea Toma, the head of the Institute for Monitoring the Press.⁴ And so by 2007, Ioana Avadani, director of the Center for Independent Journalism in Bucharest, could authoritatively agree with Toma that the media simply “do not belong to the politicians as much as they did in 2004.”⁵

Nowhere is this truer than at the local and regional level where the politician-media owner-businessman model was emulated with alacrity by the end of the 1990s, bringing into focus a central and supportable explanation for the illiberal nature of Romanian press freedom and for the deficits in the media’s performance in the process of transition/democratization (Coman and Gross, 2006, p. 66). By 2004, the “little Berlusconi” in the countryside and in the small cities began to disappear, according to Mircea Toma. The media outlets they owned have either been incorporated by media conglomerates or are now in the hands of bona fide businessmen, who remain, however, hypersensitive to the political winds sweeping Romania and even more so to the various political powerbases whose fluctuating importance they closely monitor.

Pasti (2006, p. 319) well describes the media’s economic evolution, even if exaggerating the salience of foreign capital; he is worth quoting in full, because he suggests not only economic but also political consequences at the domestic and international levels:

³ Dan Voiculescu, for instance is the President of the Conservative Party and a parliamentarian; Sorin Ovidiu Vantu, Valentin Paunescu, Viorel and Ioan Micula, Liviu Luca, Verestoy Attila, Sorin Marin and Adrian Sarbu are examples of major media owners, owners of other enterprises, politicians or members of party’s whose interests they often directly or indirectly serve.

⁴ The author interviewed Mircea Toma at the headquarters of the Institut Pentru Monitorizare a Presei in Bucharest, Oct. 16, 2007.

⁵ The author interviewed Ioana Avadani at the headquarters of the Center for Independent Journalism in Bucharest, Oct. 15, 2007.

Mass media's financial crisis burst open only many years after the revolution, that is, after 2000, ...taking on a political aspect. Its final outcome was, without a doubt, that the initial entrepreneurs gave way to international or international capital, first in regard to financing and then in regard to content, inclusive of ideological content. At present, "free" and "independent" [media] entrepreneurs were eliminated, either pushed to the margins of the local press or broadcast media. And the confrontation that is taking place, whose stakes are sufficiently large to have become a major theme in Romania's integration in the West, is between indigenous capital, which is significantly in decline, and the influence of foreign capital, which is in full ascendancy.

II. Changing reading, listening, viewing patterns and the issue of media credibility

The Romanian media are still considered to be the third most credible institution in the country, trailing only the Romanian Orthodox Church and the army. Ioana Avadani, points out that 65 – 70 percent of Romanians believe what the media publish and broadcast and that the media enjoy relatively high credibility thanks to the perception that they "can administer social justice." Yet, she also points out that audiences "do not react" to what is being disseminated by the news media, displaying a passivity that either speaks to their ineffectiveness or to the long-noted Romanian tendency toward fatalism (more on this issue in **IV. The Cultural Component**). Post-Communist audiences have been noted since the mid-1990s to not react to the news, information and opinions disseminated by the media (Gross, 1996).

The end of the 1990s recorded a vertiginous fall in newspaper circulation, despite the high credibility the media purportedly enjoy (Coman and Gross, 2006). This trend continued into the 21st century and is best illustrated by the losses incurred by the majority of the major national newspapers between July 2006 and July 2007: *Jurnalul National*, lost 32,000 readers, *Evenimentul Zilei*, 42,000, *Adevarul* maintained the same number of readers, *Romania Libera* lost 18,000, *Ziua*, 17,000, *Gandul*, 26,000 and *Libertatea*, 16,000, according to the 2007 National Audience Study carried out by The

Romanian Bureau for Auditing Circulation - Biroul Roman de Audit al Tirajelor (“Miscarea in jos...,” 2 November 2007).

An equally significant loss of television audiences was recorded after 2000 (Coman and Gross, 2006) and again more recently: between October 2006 and October 2007, the major television stations lost between 18 – 30 percent of their viewers (Chiruta, 20 October 2007). Blame for these losses is assigned by commentators to the excessive fragmentation in the broadcast field and to the higher living standards that allows Romanians to afford other forms of entertainment and information sources.⁶ That may be so but no reliable empirical data are available to pinpoint the causes for the loss of audiences or the losses in circulation. One thing is certain, Romanians are no longer the voracious media consumers they were in the early to mid-1990s and, therefore, the influence of the information and news disseminated via the traditional media outlets is questionable, first and foremost because far less of it now appears to be reaching media/news consumers.

The Internet and access to it is growing but it has yet to have a significant impact outside of the elite classes and Romania’s web media are facing the same problems with which their Western counterpart are wrestling: how to be profitable. The major news outlets are now also available in web formats and many of them have an English-language version (e.g. *Jurnalul National*, Pro-TV), suggesting attempts to gain prestige and foreign exposure. Advertising on Romania’s television channels is still far less costly than advertising on web media; 65 per cent of advertising budgets are still spent on television advertising in 2007, but this is a considerable decrease compared to 2006 when 90 per cent of advertising budgets were assigned to television advertising (Chiruta, 17 November 2007; “Peste zece posturi noi...,” 16 November 2007).

⁶ *The Business Standard* (Romania) reported on 16 November 2007 (“Peste zece posturi...”) that over ten new television stations are to be launched in Romania, among them The Hunting and Fishing Channel, the Da Vinci Learning Channel, Sport Klub 2, Universal Channel, Sci Fi Channel, Movies24, and Jim Jam Channel (for pre-schoolers).

III. The changing nature of the Romanian political system and politics

In the 1990s, Romania's politics and political system were relatively easy to categorize: there were two camps, the Iliescu one and the one opposed to it.⁷ By 2007, the number of political camps multiplied and the parties of the governing coalition embodied in the Justice and Truth Alliance are at odds with one another, almost as intensely as they are at odds with the array of opposition parties headed by the Social Democratic Party (PSD), which lost its hold on the presidency and government in 2004.⁸ Thus, there are now, in general terms, an anti-ruling coalition camp, two or more anti-partner camps within the coalition, an extreme right-wing camp embodied in the Greater Romania Party (GRP) and the New Right led by Tudor Ionescu, and several anti-President Basescu camps. There is also a fast rising nationalist populist camp, embodied in the New Generation Party (PNG), which is siphoning off some GRP and PSD adherents. The leader of the PNG is the owner of a premier Romanian soccer club, businessman, politician, multi-millionaire, devoutly Romanian Orthodox Gigi Becali, whose support from his Italian soul mate, Silvio Berlusconi and his Forza Italia party, is now well established.⁹

What has not changed much is that politicians and parliamentarians do not see themselves accountable to the people but only to the party to which they belong and on whose lists they aim to remain.¹⁰ They can “disappoint their constituency,” claims Ioana Avadani, but not the party. Indeed, since 1990, case after case has been recorded of political parties moving their parliamentarians to another district should they fall into

⁷ Ion Iliescu and what became the Social Democratic Party (PSD) were one of the main political forces in Romania, controversial for the leadership's roles during the communist period and for its illiberal and corrupt approaches to ruling the country. The opposition consisted of a rag-tag coalition that managed to elect Emil Constantinescu to the presidency in 1996, only to dissolve in 2000 amidst of recrimination and failures. The PSD returned to power in 2000 and continued in great measure its pre-1996 policies. In 2004, Traian Basescu was elected president and a coalition of politically more diverse parties (comparative to those in the Constantinescu government) ascended to the government.

⁸ The Alliance is made up of the National Liberal Party (PNL), the Democratic Party (PD), the Democratic Unions of Magyars in Romania (UDMR), the Conservative Party (PC).

⁹ For one of the best profiles of Gigi Becali see Lungescu, 16 March 2007.

¹⁰ Romanians vote for a party or a party's list of selected representatives and voters cast their ballots on the strength of their politico-ideological affinity with or trust in a particular party. Parliamentarians are not voted on by their constituency.

disfavor with their district's constituency they are supposedly representing, and thus continuing to retain them on their lists.

The Romanian political system and political class is best summed up by French historian and journalist, Gerard Delaloye,¹¹ who sees the members of the Romanian parliament, deputies and senators, having “exorbitant” power and being affected by the communist era. The electoral system based on the party lists and “inspired by the communist regime,” according to Delaloye, has established a “parliamentary autocracy...which serves its own interests when it is not obsequiously pandering to those of the oligarchs, its backers.”

For Mircea Toma, parliamentarians constitute a “clique that represents organized crime rather than the public.” He adds, however, that they are no longer distinctive in their voting patterns, partly because they are pragmatically pursuing non-ideological interests. In an even more sanguine and negative commentary about politicians and voters, former Romanian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Andrei Plesu, opines that, “One can say without exaggeration that in all the years of its fragile democracy our country has been led by faceless voting robots who wave their hands between naps while the demagogues keep talking” (“Romania’s political mess,” 24 April 2007).

Vladimir Pasti (2006, p. 26) postulates that the political class is divided in two camps, one whose aim is to prolong the transition – a sort of “transition without end” – to attempt its “perfection” by those who are “displeased with the way the different problems were resolved,” and the other composed of individuals who have most benefited from the transition and whose intent is to “try to maintain the results.”

The most significant change in the last four years is that the political class has become dependent on the moneyed classes and the growing financial powers of companies/corporations. This dependence on financial power and its pursuit, explains in part the non-political and ideological positions of politicians serving in parliament.

In short, Ion Caragiale’s remark that in Romania everything is about politics no longer holds true; in present-day Romania everything is about gaining control over resources and the ability to pursue economic wealth and not necessarily chasing power

¹¹ See “Romania’s political mess...,” 24 April 2007.

for power's sake or for achieving an idea, a political or ideological vision.¹² In Pasti's (2006, p. 282-83) view, *Romanian* capitalism, not capitalism or the free market per se, has become the central problem of the political and ideological confrontation, and the various socio-cultural and politico-economic conceptions to which it has given birth; their fundamental premises and thesis are strengthened by and reflected through the media that have given them voice.¹³

If Pasti is correct, this central problem of the contemporary political and ideological confrontations may offer one explanation regarding the changes in media ownership and in the roles the media play in Romanian society (see **V. Political battles and media audiences**) and the nature of journalism.

Romania has in significant ways returned to the pre-communist era when financial oligarchs managed politics and when the norm was not commitment to the principles of democracy but to expediency in the service, first and foremost, of the oligarchs and their politician allies, as they chased after their economic interests.¹⁴ Chabal and Daloz (2006) have argued that politics and the political system of a nation can only be interpreted through the prism of culture. Nowhere is this truer than in Romania.

IV. The cultural component

Romania is once again traversing familiar territory. At the end of the 19th century when young Romanians returned from studying in Western European capitals, they made an effort to modernize the political, economic and social structures of the time. They succeeded in establishing new structures but failed to make them work properly. The new Western-like institutions and structures established could not function similarly to their

¹² Ion Caragiale was one of Romania's foremost literary figures of the early 20th century; some claim he was Romania's Moliere.

¹³ The conceptions about Romanian capitalism are formed by personal experience, the legitimate scientific discourse (i.e. the work of academics), the political discourse, and the modeling or molding of each in the mass media.

¹⁴ See the works of Livezeanu, 1995; Gilberg, 1992; Fischer-Galati, 1994; Tismaneanu, 1998, 1994.

Western counterparts, because there was no cultural support for them to do so, giving birth to the so-called theory of *forms without content*.¹⁵

The quasi-feudal, monarchic system that dominated Romania at the beginning of the 20th century, despite the brief and limited attempts at democratization in the 1920s, ended with the brief establishment of the fascist dictatorship of General Ion Antonescu in the second half of the 1930s and ultimately with the take-over of the Romanian Workers Party (later the Romanian Communist Party) in 1947. Romania's cultural compass was oriented to the model that had elites – based on sometime overlapping status of aristocratic blood, wealth, and intellectually prominence - leading the rest of the population whose fatalism, some will argue, was derived both from history and from the tenets of the Romanian Orthodox Religion. Both Romanian and foreign scholars have noted Romania's and the Romanians' cultural predilections, which have a heavy bearing on the nature of post-Communism and of the democratization process.¹⁶

The communist regime was erected upon the dominant Romanian culture and added new features, some which accentuated the extant culture's most negative aspects, such as corruption, intolerance and the tendency towards absolutist evaluations of success or failure. After all, the main strategies of survival under communist rule were expertly used in the pre-communist period as well; as Iliana Pop (2006, 25) well describes them, these included “*pile* (a ‘file,’ a tool that smoothens metals; a metaphor for smoothing the way for yourself, relatives, and friends), *cunostinte* (acquaintances), and *relatii* (connections).”

The communist regime built on a pre-existing mentality of “winner takes all” and the communist “all or nothing mentality” was instilled by way of the Marxist-Leninist regime's overblown and outright fallacious claims of societal and individual achievements and failures that were embodied in the “heroic model of action.” Learning and internalizing democratic notions of compromise, tolerance and so on is, therefore, not an easy task in the post-communist era.

¹⁵ For an explication of this theory, formulated by Titu Maiorescu, see Gabanyi, 1998.

¹⁶ Many have made the cultural argument for Romania's past and present realities, among them are Radulescu-Motru (1936 and 1976), Marino (1996), Seton-Watson (1945), Schopflin (Winter 1990), Fischer-Galati (1994).

In short, the old mentalities, forming a continuum from pre to post-communism) persist and are given expression in the organization, control, and nature of Romania's news media by media owners, editors/directors, journalists and commentators, and in the relationship between them. Furthermore, journalism and the media also reflect and emulate the "belittling and acrimonious conduct imposed ...by those voted into office" and by political parties and "their brio for political charades rather than public service" (Baran, June 28, 2007). All who are involved in Romanian politics "have done little more than to vitiate every element of society they come into contact with, making any semblance of institutional progress virtually impossible" (Baran, June 28, 2007).

Not even a revolution, such as the sudden, violent overthrow of Communism, will necessarily result in breaking with the past, because the informal rules of society or culture, have long lasting and pervasive influence (North, 1993). Robert Putnam (1993, 179), who believes in the powers of institutions to affect cultural change, admits that,¹⁷

History is not always efficient, in the sense of weeding out social practices that impede progress and encourage collective irrationality. Nor is this inertia somehow attributable to individual irrationality. On the contrary, individuals responding rationally to the social context bequeathed to them by history reinforce the social pathologies.

And so, the older generation has both a hatred of the past and fear of the future, and this attitude filtered into the polarization of the political system, which reached compromises "between those who hated the past and those who feared for their future" that were "very tenuous" (Pop, 2006, 34).

Other communist and pre-communist instilled attitudes and behaviors are also present in the post-communist era and exemplified in the nature of the media, relations within the media and between them and other societal institutions: lack of transparency in public and private institutions, including the media institutions, distrust and intolerance.

¹⁷ For more detailed studies of Romania's socio-cultural predicament in the post-Communist era see the works of Verdery, 1996; Kligman, 1998; Tismaneanu, 1998; Tismaneanu and Pavel, 1994.

Thus the socio-cultural supports for post-communist democratization are lacking or are ill developed, as is noted to be the case in Eastern Europe as a whole (Adam, et al., 2005).

The changes that may finally affect alterations in the culture are the social changes brought about by returning to an open society. As Vladimir Pasti (2006, 24-25) points out, “the social structure of Romanian society was centered on three socio-occupational groups: the industrial proletariat, peasants engaged in cooperative agricultural and a middle class made up of administrative functionaries and those in the economic and social institutions, intellectuals working for the state and a ‘thin layer’ of small entrepreneurs and self-employed that developed in the interstices of the planned socialist economy.” This social structure, “differentiated not only by occupation but also according to income, consumptions [habits], culture and education, ideology and political engagement, was radically transformed.”

After the disappearance of communist, new social groups quickly appeared; they included the landed and landless peasants, major and minor entrepreneurs and owners of capital, private managers, the unemployed, the salaried in the private sector, “servants” engaged by individuals, the “condotieri” of the new Romanian society that are either registered as self-employed or entrepreneurs, or “managers” and “politicians.” (Pasti, 2006, 25).

Culture being “path dependent,” as Inglehart (2000, 80) points out, and “Development is linked with a syndrome of predictable changes away from absolute social norms, toward increasingly rational, tolerant, trusting, and postmodern values.” And so Romania needs cultural change in order to make the systemic change meaningful and allow its real democratization to take place, because “democracy is not attained simply by making institutional changes or through elite-level maneuvering. Its survival also depends on the values and beliefs of ordinary citizens” (Inglehart, 2000, 96).

V. Political battles and media audiences

Between 1990 and 1996, Romanian politicians attempted and to some extent succeeded to directly control and manipulate the news media; in fact, until the mid-

1990s, political parties owned many newspapers and some newspapers presented the views of political parties without being directly owned by them. After 1996, the media and their journalists were perceived by the political elites and by audiences to have become powers in their own right, still acting on behalf of and being co-opted by politicians and political parties. The majority of journalists and their media also saw themselves to be powerful, in part because they thought they were the principal factors in the election of President Emil Constantinescu in 1996.¹⁸

One of the major consequences of the perceived growth in the power of media and of journalists in 1996-2000, according to Mircea Toma, was that “politicians confused the journalists’ power with the power of public opinion.” In fact, the expressed attitude of many a leading Romanian journalist is that journalists and journalism “are” Romania’s public opinion. It is no surprise that ordinary Romanians in 2007 talked cynically about having escaped the Securitate only to encounter newspaper people (*Am scapat de securisti si am dat pe ziaristi*).

After 2004, the evolution of the media business (see **I. Changing ownership**) and the new Traian Basescu regime, which “did not know how to control the media and did not want to,” according to Ioana Avadani, eliminated any politically centered control of the media. Furthermore, both the media and politics became dependent on economic power groups, large and small businesses, and the oligarchs.

But in the context of politics and political battles, the media became even more important for politicians after 2004, because “the media are the only communication tools they have,” according to Ioana Avadani. But there is no need for politicians or political parties to be in control of all or most media outlets. The media’s loyalties are affected by the fact that Romania has a coalition government, whose constituent parts are feuding with one another, and the existence of the other camps spelled out in Part III (**The Changing nature of the Romanian political system and politics**). And the mediatization of the political battles is achieved by a sort of chain reaction, says Ioana Avadani: “you don’t have to control everything but only inject something in the media

¹⁸ Emil Constantinescu embodied the hope of the (relatively) democratic opposition to Ion Iliescu’s presidency and party, the PSD. Constantinescu and his regime turned out to be a major disappointment and his and his coalition’s failure paved the way for Iliescu’s return to the presidency in 2000.

you control and the media owned, controlled or influenced by your partners and friends pick it up and run with it.”

Both Mircea Toma and Ioana Avadani see journalism having atrophied after 2004 and having only recently been rejuvenated or revived by the very public schoolyard brawl between President Basescu and Prime Minister Tariceanu. “They could once again choose camps,” says Ioana Avadani. “The media seem to need that sort of clear divisions or camps to choose from and they do not seem to function properly unless they have camps to take one side or another.”

These post-2004 developments support Patapievici’s (15 February 2007) contention that “the source of legitimacy for politics has come to be only the press, and the press’ [legitimacy] only politics, society having stopped being the objective of the press and the subject for politics.” And thus audiences or the public-at-large are only by-products of the media system, particularly in regard to the mediated political battles that continue to rage in the country. More significantly, audiences or the public-at-large have become spectators rather than participants in political life.

Lazescu (23 February-1 March 2007) argues that “the spectators that really participate in these truly mediate shows are relatively few [in numbers]; only a few hundred thousand. And some of them are actually participants in the [political] battle; they are political actors, from the business or administration, directly concerned with the results of the confrontation.”

The implication is that the power and influence of Romania’s media in politics, particularly when also factoring in our discussion of Romanian culture, those of its elements that bear on the media and journalism, and the changing media consumption patterns (see **II. Changing reading, listening, viewing patters...** and **IV. The Cultural Component**), may be considerably limited. The mediated political battles are, therefore, meaningful mostly to politicians and political parties and those other institutions that depend on the outcomes of the political struggles.

Conclusion

There is a great deal of reform fatigue in Romania and the country's entry membership in NATO and the European Union has also lessened the impetus to continue reforms across the spectrum of institutional values, attitudes and behaviors. For the media, Romania's inclusion in the EU "did more damage to press freedom" than any other recent developments, in the well informed view of Ioana Avadani.

Coupled with the growing power of and assertiveness of the oligarchs in editorial matters, Romanian journalism has not evolved. Journalism's recent re-invigoration by the leading coalitions internecine fights have brought it back to the era of highly politicized, biased reporting that was the norm in pre-communist, communist, and immediate post-communist periods.

The confusion and contradictions found among audiences is no surprise media: journalists are not trusted, because the public appears to sense that they have no do not have social responsibility as a guiding value; the media are trusted, because they are not longer controlled by the Communist Party, yet there is still the perception that the media are capable of righting wrongs.

Media play dubious roles in the evolution of Romanian democracy and whatever roles they wittingly or unwittingly play, the media's news reporting is of marginal importance in the process, whereas their advertisements and cultural fare may be their biggest contribution to the fundamental cultural alterations that are needed to affect the democratic evolution. This is the aspect of media that has been least studied and should henceforth receive the most serious scholarly attention.

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