

OUR DAILY PRESS. A "SPECTRAL ANALYSIS" OF THE ROMANIAN PRESS AFTER 1989

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Abstract

In mid-February 2011, I attended by chance a very interesting debate as a special guest, the topic was *The Liberty of Media in Romania: common solutions for common problems*, which was part of a program started by a British civic organization called *European Alternatives* - www.euroalter.com - referring to the liberty of media in the entire Europe. Before exploring the space of our press, the British organization did the same thing in Italy, then in other few countries from the Eastern and Western parts of the continent. In Romania, the organization coordinated by Mrs. Anca Magyar already has "an antenna" in Cluj, composed of journalists, civic activists, students etc. Some of them accompanied the rest of the team in Iași.¹ Again by chance I was also asked for a text for the volume *Mass media și democrația în România post-comunistă (Mass media and Democracy in Post-communist Romania)*, coordinated by my nice former students, now friends and collaborators, Daniel Șandru and Sorin Bocancea. I thought about taking advantage of these two events in order to try at least to sketch an analysis of the evolution of post-December press, of its relation with the destiny of democracy in our country. It is not my first personal attempt to "spectrally analyse" indigenous press, but it is only the second one which surpasses the dimensions and ambitions of a newspaper article.²

Keywords: *press, history, public, education, tabloidization*

1. HISTORY

My starting point – and also my point of view! – has always been that it is impossible to take a radiography of the present state of our press without involving its short but tumultuous post-December history, having three distinctive stages: "heroic", "commercial" and that of "tabloid-hysterical". The first started on the night of 22 to 23 December 1989 and lasted until after the elections from 1996 which marked the first change of power in Romania. We should keep in mind the fact that the press was, in fact, the first Romanian institution set free from the claws of dictatorship. On 22 December, *Scântea* (*The Spark*),

the official newspaper of PCR (Partidul Comunist Român – Romanian Communist Party), condemned the "fascists of Timișoara", on the 23, it appeared having the name of *Scântea poporului* (*The Spark of People*) it was over the time when it was nobody's newspaper, for PCR with its 4,5 million members had instantly vanished) and greeted the Revolution, condemning Ceaușescu. On the 24th of December, the newspaper received the name of *Adevărul* (*The Truth*), unfortunately not preserved in the first years, while being ruled by Darie Novăceanu, the newspaper was a kind of "official paper" of FSN (*Frontul Salvării Naționale*-*The Front of National Salvation*). Among other things, the newspaper saluted the pitmen's invasion in June 1990, the pitmen that devastated the headquarters of *România Liberă* (*Free Romania*) and of other independent or opposition's publications. During the night of 22 to 23 December, all the newspapers of PCR at the level of county, just like the other central periods, were "on the people's side", some of them changing their names once they changed their skin!

In this period, the entire press was free, there were no legal or institutional constraints, the only syncopes being "small things" caused by printers who refused to print some publications, authors, texts – in Iași, there was a press strike on this particular occasion, I participated in it during the first hunger strike started after the 22nd of December 1989. Again in Iași, *Opinia studentescă* (*Students' Opinion*), transformed from a monthly newspaper into (almost!) a daily paper, had several editions in January 1990, having blank spaces instead of the text that the typographers did not want to pick. Another press blocking was before the elections from

1992 due to a weird "paper crisis", but then, salvation came from George Soros, that offered one million dollars to the press from Romania in order to buy paper from abroad.³ I was a member of the commission that distributed paper, under the leadership of Petre Mihai Băcanu, and I can say that he worked in a fair way – the necessary paper was received both by free newspapers and by those connected to the neo-communist power, this is the specific case of *Adevărul (The Truth)*, but also by publications from the periphery, including some cultural ones. It is interesting that, in this "heroic" phase, in his book dedicated to the appearance of free press (and) in Romania, Peter Gross uses the formula "the colossus with clay feet" that seems to me very expressive, but not very precise!⁴ It was the only period from the history of press when concrete results were obtained taking things pragmatically. The question "What have you done in the past five years, mister...?" caused chills to activists in lower ranks from PCR led by Mr. Iliescu and FSN, plenty of controversial characters were forced to resign or be dismissed from the new job. In the same period, beyond different managers and varied interests not always congruent, the press managed to take part in common campaigns, either against the intentions of the power to narrow the liberty of press, or against some abnormal situation, or against some questionable characters which are surprisingly promoted in high ranks. Let us think about General Chițac, the Minister of Interior during the miners' rebellion, he was banished by the hoarseness of demonstrators that shouted "Down Chițac!" and by the almost unanimous effort of the press.

Therefore, in this period, the Romanian press was free, but not necessarily independent! Most of the printed press chose to be on the side of political opposition, this seems to me a legitimate choice taking into account the political situation at that time. The results of the elections from May 1990, on The Sunday of the Blind, led to a hypertrophied power and an extremely fragile opposition. The intrinsic interest of the press was normally a balanced political field, most of it chose to support the opposition. On the other side, the power that was unhappy with the monopoly that television and public radio had

and benefiting from the support of *Adevărul (The Truth)* and of most former newspapers of county parties, started to create its own newspapers, such as *Azi (Today)* or *Dimineața (Morning)* whose dazzling militancy was exceeded only by the unhealthy language. But this would be quickly overcome by the appearance of *România Mare (Great Romania)*, the magazine of The Court from Butimanu. We should bear in mind the fact that this publication appeared after the statement sent by Eugen Barbu and Corneliu Vadim Tudor to Mr. Iliescu and Mr. Petre Roman, asking for support for a publication that "will knock out the opposition". They received the verbal agreement of Mr. Iliescu and the written one of Mr. Petre Roman, together with governmental financial support. Shortly afterwards, the publication will transform the two of them in targets, this is a kind of irony of history. The magazine would start a new trend – the appearance of a political party from a media institution. After a few years, even *Antena 1* would create a party, and now *OTV* has this responsibility.

The exit from the "heroic" phase and the entrance in the "commercial" phase was made during the previous period and after the elections from 1996, this was not a sudden phenomenon. I saluted the appearance of the first independent television, I refer to *Pro TV*, for the *SOTI* experience failed, then the same thing happened to the other private televisions that started to appear one after another, following the trend previously started by the explosion of broadcasting radio stations. I found interesting the fact that a part of domestic capital was directed towards this kind of business and also the intervention of foreign capital; I was also capable, like other observers, to loom all the consequences. In the first part of the period, the press moved quite freely, the pluralism of information was provided, while in 2000, in the context of economic recovery caused by Isărescu Government, the press started to show signs of mince prosperity. But, probably, a lot of money implies the desire for more money! Năstase Government, through the huge funds used for the "image", especially through the Ministry of Mr. Mitrea, but also by many other private companies, reduced a considerable part of the enthusiasm of press towards finding out the

truth. When you see pages after pages of advertisements even for the governors' sneezes, it is hard to have any critic tendency – and this refers to most media institutions. Even those having foreign capital. When the newsrooms of the newspapers *România Liberă* (*Free Romania*) and *Evenimentul Zilei* (*The Event of the Day*) wanted to preserve their editorial independence, they were forced to pack their luggage and leave in corpore. When Mr. Viorel Cataramă, potential independent candidate for București City Hall, received entire pages offered by *Ziua* (*The Day*), containing all the attacks directed towards him ever since the beginning, he had to pay; the pages full of insults were replaced by beautiful pages for advertisements and elections! For years, in *Adevărul* (*The Truth*), that had become a serious newspaper, there were entire pages about – or even written by – the gruesome rector of "Spiru Haret" University, sometimes accompanied by the sign "P", sometimes this did not happen! Even after serious irregularities came out about that "educational" institution, advertising on the front and hidden continued. I still fail to understand the point of advertising published by *CET Govora*, that had monopoly on its activity in the area, on the first page of the daily *Ziua* (*The Day*), besides buying silence. If we think about the costs of such advertising, we realize the truth of the ancestors' words – yes, "silence is golden"!⁵

In a nutshell, this would be the historical part. In the future episodes of this story, dedicated to "the situation" and eventually to "solutions", I will refer to its last sequence, started between 2004-2005, that I see as contemporary history.⁶

2. THE SITUATION

The epoch of contemporary press, *stricto sensu*, started in 2004 and it is clearly linked to the change of power rapports, this fact is visible in the polls, just before those years' elections, it even seems linked to the ascension in the supreme position in state of a character as picturesque as it was controversial. Connected to these events, on the one hand, a political polarization occurred, not previously seen during the first shine of the '90s; on the other hand, there was a symmetrical polarization of the press. It is almost impossible

to find a newspaper, a television, a journalist that does not express one's point of view, as furiously as possible, in favour of one side or another. Therefore, the first feature of contemporary press is that of *polarization*, accompanied by an intense *radicalization*. Of course that the features of the actual president – the ambition to be a "player", the ease with which the Constitution is violated, the tempestuous temperament etc. – somehow oblige to taking such a position and having such passionate reactions, but I believe that the press was easily manipulated. Television news have turned into small shows "pro" or "against", the moderators seem to be prosecutors for some, guests and lawyers for the others, depending on whose side they chose to be. Analysis editorials transform themselves more and more into pamphlets, in most cases savoury whose only effect was to increase public hysteria. The press ran almost exclusively after sensational events, if it did not find what it was looking for, it invented them, while the appetite for "information" from "the source", for stenograms and images "escaped" from the penal investigation bodies seems endless. What is worse is the fact that the journalists and media bodies almost never ask themselves about the interest of the "sources" to provide such "information" which are meant to manipulate the press and intoxicate public opinion.⁷

At the level of journalistic discourse, the following aspects can be noticed, they are part of the pathology of communication: *tabloidization*, *telenovelization-manelization*, *hysterization*. I want to make myself clearly understood – I know that the first Romanian tabloids have appeared since the previous decade, but they did not dominate the market with so much authority like now. I may even say that the first "tabloid", *Evenimentul Zilei* (*The Event of the Day*) in Cristoiu's time, was a pioneer in the field. Therefore, a pioneer with specific timidity – for example in the now very exposed sexual area! –, which places him in the family of interwar boulevard press from our country and from nowhere. I also know that there are tabloids all over the world, from Germany and Great Britain, but there is also a clear distinction between tabloid and quality press, usually marked even commercially – for example, in Sweden and Poland, quality press

was sold at the newsagent's, while tabloids in supermarkets. Piles of newspapers are placed near cash registers and people put their shopping baskets, near cheese and fish, people see their favourite tabloid, or maybe all the exposed tabloids! We are not speaking about this, but about *quasi-general tabloidization*, about the incredible diminish of the importance of quality press in favour of tabloids. But the phenomenon is not limited to press *on paper*, but to all forms of manifestation of press – as a conclusion, from newspapers themselves to audio-video press and to that exclusively *online*. I want to make myself clearly understood, I know that the phenomenon is present in the entire world, but nowhere – and I know very well the press from a few countries, for I have to keep myself informed! –, did I give a diagnosis of this event on the verge of becoming a generalized phenomenon. I am not coyly either – I know that not everybody is eager for economic, cultural or political analysis and that very many people are not interested in the truth of news, but their show of presentation. Therefore, I do not mind that there are "17 o'clock News" or "the girl from page 5", but I would be happy if "19 o'clock News" – or 20, according to the situation! – were not written exactly as 17 o'clock news! Anyway, it is somehow weird to find out that there are news televisions in Romania, regarding news as small shows in which people yell to each other, while "the debates" resemble *catch* matches!

I believe that it is not the case to insist very much on *telenovelization/manelization*, for these are phenomena which can easily be noticed, but hurt one's eyes. The entire entertainment area is affected by this phenomenon, not only telenovelas or manele concerts themselves. The only gain, which is somehow also economic is that, in the past few years, we have started to create our own telenovelas, sometimes we export them, too, anyway we do not live anymore from exclusive "imports" from America having a very Latin soul. This phenomenon replaced, in the past ten years, another one which was frequently met in the '90s, at that time called *anesthetic effect*, characterized by the abundance of pastel shows at the public television, which was also the only one!, all based on "la vie en rose" or having a happy ending, no matter the

event: a religious ceremony, birth, Christening or wedding, they did not count death or unemployment!⁸

Regarding *hysterization*, which is present almost everywhere, from yelled news to shows with VIPs & "VIP foxes", this phenomenon has reached so high peaks as if we have been living in a country which is a country permanently under siege; in fact, if we have a look at the shows of Dan Negru, Capatos, the distinguished Mrs. Tatu and Măruță, surrounded by hysterical manifestations and their assistants showing too much of their body parts, you realize that indeed, we are living in a country under siege of bad taste. Seeing such "shows", you somehow nostalgically remember the shows not very long ago made by Andreea Marin or Mihaela Rădulescu; in comparison to what we have now, those shows appear not only decent, but peaks of common sense.

If you ask a few questions to these people, they will reply that "this is what the public wants". It is an embarrassing alibi. The public wants what you offer, in fact, you offer what you really are, what you are capable of offering. In my opinion, this is the peak of what our producers and entertainers are able to offer – this fact can be noticed in the shows having a pattern bought from abroad, they are infinitely weaker than in their countries of origin!⁹ At the beginning of the post-revolutionary period, there was a saying – we have more newspapers than journalists. Unfortunately, this has become truer than it was at that time!

3. BIG ISSUES

Beyond the above-mentioned aspects regarding the content and style of our nowadays press, therefore their terrible quality, sometimes at the borderline, sometimes very rare and almost unexplainable high!, there are a few problems connected to the financial field, to its transparency, to the concentration of *media* ownership, to a word which is very dear to our beloved president, that is *Mogulization*. Of course that *Mogulization* is neither a recent phenomenon nor one invented by us. But, in normal countries, these things have been established by laws and self-regulation.

Therefore, the phenomenon was neither invented by us nor discovered by Mr. President! Furthermore, he lead us to a dead end, for he makes the distinction between "bad Moguls", those that turn their guns against him and "good Moguls", that fight against their competitors. But this distinction has the great disadvantage that it has a very volatile borderline – some "good Moguls", the most recent example is provided by Mr. "Dan Diaconescu live", became members of the opposite camp. Therefore, there is a single type of Mogul, but the phenomenon of Mogulization is a dangerous one to the extent to which the field of press business, of the other types of business of the employer and of the political field are so well mixed that they can no longer be separated. Press becomes a pressure instrument for the political stage – no matter if the patronage is politically enrolled or not – in order to gain advantages for the entire business market. The only positive aspect, for the time being, is that the interests of Moguls are still sufficiently different, sometimes divergent, thus it has not been made the step towards a complete "syndicalization", thus maintaining a kind of pluralism, even if, like the political one, it does not run smoothly enough. It seems obvious to me that *Mogulization* has known a process of becoming more intense once the economic crisis has started and the "hunger" for money has increased. What is sad is the fact that, once the financial resources for the press were reduced, once some press organisms disappeared, with the reduction of staff and journalists' income, the pressure put on them by employers and advertising providers raised up to a level unknown by the press in the country up to this moment. Thus, the press that has effectively supported the process of democratization, at least around the year 2000, that has reached a certain level of professionalism and objectivity until the year 2004, has become a sort of "responsible for all entity and the target of all attacks", being accused, not always and not unjustified in all cases, of "having sold itself", that it is "taking sides" in one way or another, that it "manipulates" – and it lets itself conveniently manipulated – "without borders".

4. WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

The question is – can *media* become free of this ugly image that is more energetically linked to its face? It is hard to give a clear answer, without a set of minimal measures that refer to all those involved in the process, it is difficult to see any improvement. It goes without saying that, without economic revival, it is difficult to imagine a relative honest prosperity of press and a rehabilitation of its material conditions. I believe that at *the level of press patronage*, it is absolutely necessary to make the budgets and financing sources transparent – taking into account the amount of legal publicity offered now in Romania, it is clear that our press is hypertrophied, therefore a large amount of black money is envisaged.¹⁰ Moreover, it is also necessary that the patronage and the leaders of press organisms declare their conflicts of interests. An anti trust law should be introduced, for, if it is not real yet, the danger of excessive Romanian media concentration cannot be avoided. It is somehow an "exchange", the state could offer the press a reduction of VTA and other tax advantages. There are countries where VTA is zero for press and cultural products. In Poland, the VTA for press is of only 6%, and for cultural products of any kind, 0% - this is what it is written, it does not say that it is without VTA!

If press employees want to regain their popularity, they must selfregulate themselves, starting with *The Code of Conduct* of their profession. If they did act like this, they could obtain increased protection both from the pressure of patronages and from those of psychic factors that have the habit of periodically shaking the whip of regulations from outside, we speak either about a law of press or the rhythmic movement of the so-called "offenses in the press" – slander, insult – from civil right and penal right and the other way round! In some countries, selfregulation is also part of press organisms that are subjected to certification from an independent instance, but unanimously respected.¹¹

Finally, we should also refer to the aspects concerning *the education of the public*. In very many countries, one of the "new education"

types, that appeared in 1980, *the education for information and communication*, became a compulsory educational subject. Maybe in our country, considering the multiple problems of our educational system in general, such a measure would be premature. But at least the elements that refer to the formation of the critic and evaluation spirit, to the increase of the discrimination power and that of checking, they could still be introduced in the corpus of disciplines that existed. At least until it is reached the level of bringing the little educated citizen in the situation to understand that the remote control, mouse and the hand that gives the money to a newspaper are in his own power, not of the one who "sells" the media product! After all, if it is not moral for a journalist or a means of communication to manipulate, to orient one's opinions, options and behaviour in an interested way, it is no brilliant proof of intelligence to simply sit with your arms crossed, letting such phenomena take place without even having a gesture of rejection. If we swallow without previous chewing everything that the press "sells" to us, we cannot fully blame it on the press!

5. CONCLUSIONS

I arrived at these conclusions based on this brief diagnosis of the Romanian press "set free" by the Revolution from December 1989. But, I believe that there can still be created some more general conclusions. What catches the attention in the first place is the way in which the degradation of press from the last decade was accompanied by the similar degradation of our political class. I could not establish a rapport of determination between the two, but one of co-evolution. Moreover, in the same period, our politicians transformed themselves in a kind of media stars, that spend most of their time in television studios or in front of photo and video cameras and microphones, not at the desk or "on the field". We cannot speak of this as a great Romanian discovery, again, we follow the "world's trend" in this matter, but we do it in an original way, meaning in a Romanian style, abusive and having a certain quality which is

more than questionable. I wonder if there is any point in making "free and correct" choices. We could save large amounts of money if our politicians did not appear so often on T.V., we could select them based on rating numbers and leave their payment to media, where they seem to be most of their "work" time, thus using large amounts of money for truly important expenses. Secondly, this low-quality symbiosis between "the political instructors" and "the press guys" has led to an unseen degradation of public life in Romania, that has now so low standards that it has become terrifying. Arguments have been replaced by offences, logics has become a subject discussed using interjections, what in any civilised country is called communication is now useless, pointless chatter. I would like to say that it is not possible to be lower than this, but I am afraid to show such brazen optimism. Unfortunately, it is possible, we have not reached our lowest level!

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Endnotes

1. Representing European Alternatives, Mr. Nicolo Milanese (England) and Mr. Alessandro Valera (Italy) were present at Iași, the last was the coordinator of consulting activities regarding press at an international level. I underline that the analysis of the situation of the European press is only one of the dimensions of the organization interested in catching the radiography of civic "counter-powers" in general.
2. The first major test is the study Puterea politică și „crimele televiziunii” (Political Power and “The Crimes of Television”), in *Press Monitor*, Agenția de Monitorizare a Presei (Media Monitoring Agency), 2-3, 1995, pp. 9-13, where the functioning of TVR is analysed, taking into account the conditions of the monopoly held at the beginning of the '90s, underlining three manipulation techniques: misinforming, discreet manipulation (sometimes, subliminal) and the anesthetic effect.
3. He was neither the first, nor the last support that the American philanthropist gave to free press from Romania, this was probably one of the main concerns of the Foundation for an Open Society ever since it started its activity in Romania. There were, probably, tens, maybe thousands of publications of all types – national and local newspapers, periodicals of attitude, cultural magazines etc. – those that benefitted from the endowment with informatic technique from the Foundation. Moreover, it was the one that offered the first textbook for journalists and public from Eastern Europe, firstly in English, afterwards in Romanian, this textbook is available even now!, and it offered hundreds of specialization scholarships in well-known universities and near important Western media organizations.
4. Peter Gross, *Colosul cu picioare de lut: aspecte ale presei românești post-comuniste (The Colossus with Clay Legs: aspects of post-communist Romanian press)*, Polirom, Iași, 1999. Moreover, the analysis of the American author is exceptional, Gross is one of the few western authors that focused carefully and systematically on the evolution of press in this part of the world after the downfall of communis. It is also exceptional the comparative analysis of of Eastern press in Mass-media și democrația în țările Europei de Est (Mass-media and Democracy in the countries of Eastern Europe), Polirom, Iași, 2004. As far as the Romanian perspective is concerned, I would underline the disappointed analysis of Alina Mungiu-Pippidi from the chapter Marea deziluzie. Relația dintre mass-media și cultura politică (The Great Disappointment. The relationship between media and political culture) from her volume *Politica după comunism. Structură, cultură și psihologie politică (Politics after Communis. Structure, Culture and Political Psychology)*, Humanitas, București, 2002.
5. Advertising legal market was in 2007 between 485 and 520 million euros, half of it was used for televisions, increasing over 600 million in 2008. It is clear that the numbers significantly decreased in the first two years of crisis, this fact is underlined by the disappearance of some press organisms, of staff reduction, of the phenomenon of constant increase of the number of films, shows etc. resumed. I do not know any estimation of the amounts on the "black market" of publicity. See also *Televiziunea în Europa: Ediția 2008. România (Television in Europe: 2008. Romania)*, Open Society Institute, EU Monitoring and Advocacy Program, Network Media Program,

- Budapesta, 2008, bilingual edition – Romanian and English.
6. Regarding specific cases of violation of press liberty and of harassment of journalists, starting with 1999, we benefit from the annually FreeEx Rapports, created by The Agency of Press Monitorization. The rapports can be downloaded from <http://www.activewatch.ro/stiri/FreeEx/Rapoarte-anuale-FreeEx-79.html>. For the previous period, we only have as proofs the summary monitoring of The State Department of USA from the annual rapports dedicated to press liberty in the world, some UE rapports and some specific positions of Helsinki Watch and of The Agency of Press Monitorization.
 7. And if there had not already been a rich literature dedicated to intoxication, manipulation, misinforming! We must say that the classic volume of Eldon Taylor, *Subliminal communication*, Las Vegas, 1990, has not been translated in Romanian, but from *The Art of War* of Sun Tze to the books of Vladimir Volkoff – *Disinforming as an Art of War* and *Treaty of Disinformation* – there are dozens of translated books, but there has even been created a Romanian bibliography – Doina Ruști, *Mesajul subliminal în comunicarea actuală* (Subliminal Message in Actual Communication), Tritonic, București, 2005.
 8. It is the study quoted in the note from page 2.
 9. One of the few attempts to investigate the competence of media personnel, but also of the public, in *Evaluarea nivelului de competență în mass media* (The Evaluation of the Level of Competence in Media), Active Watch, Agenția de Monitorizare a Presei (Agency of Press Monitorization) , IMAS, București, June, 2008
 10. According to the Constitution of Romania, "...the law can impose means of mass communication provided that the financial source is made public". Constitution of Romania, article 30, paragraph (5).
 11. A very good set of ways of selfregulation has been elaborated by The Convention of Media Organizations (The Unique Code of Conduct, the organization of The Group of Good Journalistic Practice, Certificate of Good Journalistic Practice), since October 2009. Unfortunately, these means have not yet come to be used, partially because of the reluctance of the patronages, mostly due to the journalists' lack of flexibility. I would like to believe that this was not also interested!