

AEJ AUSTRIA CONGRESS ROMANIA MEDIA FREEDOM REPORT, OCTOBER 2014

By Stelian Negrea

The defining event of 2014 for the media in Romania has been the sentencing of one of the country's biggest media moguls, Dan Voiculescu, to 10 years imprisonment for money laundering. Dan Voiculescu is a powerful businessman and politician who owns a major chain of newspapers and radio and television channels, which he has used to promote his political and economic interests. Intact Media Group is the second largest media group in Romania.

Antena 3, a CNN-affiliated news channel owned by Dan Voiculescu, together with his entire media empire, were mobilized in a concerted and fierce media campaign to denigrate the prosecutors and judges working on his case, both before and after his conviction. Dan Voiculescu and his media empire are also currently being prosecuted on two charges of blackmail using his own media trust. Ironically, the Voiculescu Family Foundation recently announced plans for a "Courage in the name of press freedom" award. I have entered the competition for that award, with my exposure in 2011 of evidence in the blackmail case involving Dan Voiculescu towards his political opponents and companies that refused to sign advertising contracts with his media outlets.

Meanwhile, the number one player on the Romanian media market, Pro TV, is involved in a 5 million Euros tax evasion case that threatens the future of that huge media empire. Pro TV is now controlled by American businessman Ronald Lauder, who is the majority owner of CME (Central European Media Enterprises), and the TV channel was previously owned by Adrian Sarbu, a local media mogul. Overall, the Romanian media landscape is afflicted by an extreme and growing partisanship, driven by all too obvious political influence and interference, which leaves independent voices almost entirely marginalized and unheard.

The underlying source of the danger to Romanian media independence is the massive use of political funds to win influence with the voting public, especially in the current campaign for the presidency; as well as the unhealthy influence of multinationals on the news media. The government often displays open hostility to critical and inquiring media; and in this climate there is a desperate shortage of sources of funding for independent and impartial media that can properly serve the public interest.

In 2014 government pressures on the media have taken various forms: officials who bully or seriously harass journalists have not been stopped; public money is liberally channeled to support particular publications that report favourably on the government, while the resources of state institutions, including those of local government, are used to undermine and weaken those media outlets that have managed to avoid falling under the influence of any of the rival camps engaged in the political and media battle.

Sometimes the government has acted arbitrarily to deny access to certain media in an effort to control the coverage. For example, journalists of the Epoch Times -- who are members of AEJ Romania -- were refused any access to cover the recent visit of a Chinese delegation, even though they had obtained official accreditation to a number of events. Clearly, they were excluded because the newspaper is

aligned with the Falun Gong movement, which is in opposition to the Chinese government. Public television and radio continue to be under political control, and their editorial policies are subject to influence by the political party in power.

In the light of all these pressures, threats and harsh realities, after the presidential elections in November 2014 the Romanian media risks suffering a similar fate to that of the media in Hungary, where prime minister Victor Orban has already shown how it is possible to gag the free press, even in Europe in the 21st century.