

## Romanian Media Faces Increased Political Pressure

Daniela Tuchel

*Daniela Tuchel is journalist from Romania.*

*With only one year to go before the elections in Romania, international organisations are becoming increasingly concerned about the country's poor press freedom record.*

International organisations, such as Amnesty International and Reporters Without Borders have drafted several reports this year which draw attention to the increasing political pressure on the Romanian media.

According to a report on press freedom prepared by Reporters Without Borders in September, Romania occupies the 45th place out of the 139 reviewed. [\[1\]](#)

The report, covering the period September 2001-October 2002, looked at issues such as the murder or arrest of journalists, censorship, the existence of state or corporate-based monopolies, the active persecution of press law offences, and the implementation of repressive regulation directed against the media.

Pressure on the Romanian media takes place in different forms:

- Local businessmen or politicians take control over the local newspapers, radio and TV stations. In small towns, the media are usually in a poor financial situation and entirely dependent on direct sales, making them vulnerable to political pressure.
- There were reported cases of local politicians and businessmen threatening to withdraw advertisements in newspapers. [\[2\]](#)
- The media can be easily controlled through the distribution network of newspapers and magazines. The national press distribution company is owned by the State, and is thus controlled by the party in power.
- There were many reported cases of intimidation and death threats used against journalists in the past few years.

When journalist Silvia Vranceanu wrote some articles for a Focsani-based independent newspaper last year, she had little idea that they would provoke such a storm.

The pieces, published in the *Ziarul de Vrancea* daily newspaper in early 2002, [\[3\]](#) raised questions about the ruling Social Democratic Party's regional leaders. It sparked a campaign of intimidation - which included death threats and culminated in a local television station broadcasting a video showing the journalist dancing scantily-clad at a private New Year's party eight years before.

"When the authorities don't like what is written about them, they can turn a journalist's life upside down - make up stories about you, trample on your feelings and [do their best to] drive you insane," she says. [\[4\]](#)

"They tried to destroy my reputation, my career and my marriage. I lived a nightmare but I had my family, friends and the newspaper I was working for. They all supported me, and luckily my story has a happy ending.

"When [the authorities] realised that they couldn't silence me, they placed an advert in another paper offering a reward of 500 US dollars for any 'compromising material' against me. But I refused to be shut up in this dirty way." [\[5\]](#)

Vranceanu is just one of many Romanian journalists who have been harassed by politicians in recent times – tactics that are drawing increasing criticism from the West.

Several important international organisations condemned the campaign against Vranceanu, including the International Press Institute (IPI), the South East Europe Media Organisation (SEEMO), and Reporters Without Borders. [\[6\]](#)

Robert Ménard, the secretary-general of Reporters Without Borders, wrote a letter to Romanian prime minister Adrian Nastase, saying that "it is intolerable that an position journalist is personally targeted because of what her newspaper publishes, especially when her private life is affected." [\[7\]](#)

In its latest report, Amnesty International condemned the excessive pressure and intimidation the authorities levelled against the media in the past year. [\[8\]](#)

While Bucharest responded to international criticism on the poor freedom of expression by amending its penal code, these changes fell short of international standards, according to Amnesty. It said that excessive restrictions on freedom of expression remained, noting "The revision of the Penal Code failed to amend article 168 - communication of false news - or article 236, defined as defamation of a state or nation." [\[9\]](#)

However, there is one more reason for which this country has had to draft a new Penal Code. Romania hopes to join the EU in 2007 and among other law changes, the authorities have had to bring the media legislation to the Union's standards.

The Media Monitoring Agency, a Romanian association which deals with the protection and promotion of the freedom of expression, has recently stated that the new Penal Code represents a step forward, but it does not indicate a strong commitment of the Romanian political class to comply with the freedom of expression related to international standards. [\[10\]](#)

Journalist Silvia Vranceanu says that "the changes of the law can only lead to trouble for reporters trying to cover stories which criticise the authorities." [\[11\]](#) She adds that at I, the newspaper she works for, there are currently more than 140 lawsuits pending against staff members and management.

There were more than 400 criminal cases brought against the media in Romania last year, the vast majority concerning defamation. Most prosecutions resulted in financial penalties or suspended prison sentences.

Information technology writer Ovidiu Cristian Iane was arrested at the beginning of 2002 on suspicion of creating the so-called Armageddon II file - an e-mail report accusing Nastase of corruption - and was charged with disseminating false information. [\[12\]](#)

While under arrest, Iane admitted he had sent the e-mail upon the request of his friend, Mugur Ciuvica, former chief of cabinet of the ex-president Emil Constantinescu. Ciuvica was then investigated on similar charges. A few days later, following vocal protests from several international human rights organisations, the charges were dropped and the two men released.

In spite of such high-profile interventions from the international community, intimidation of journalists continues.

For example, Sergiu Poliopol, director of a regional radio network in the town of Petrosani, was live on air discussing a government sponsored anti-corruption campaign when his car was set ablaze by unknown persons. [\[13\]](#)

Incidents such as these have created an oppressive atmosphere which not only affects journalists.

"At the moment, there are managers working for State institutions who are afraid to talk to the media because they may be politically persecuted afterwards," journalist Silvia Vranceanu says. [\[14\]](#)

"Some people don't want to talk to journalists on the phone, because they're afraid that it might be intercepted. They would rather send us short messages on our mobiles." [\[15\]](#)

## Footnotes

[\[1\]](#) The report covers the period September 2001-October 2002 and was published by the French NGO in September 2003

[\[2\]](#) The most recent cases occurred in counties including Bacau, Gorj, and Vrancea. In a report presented at the SEEMO conference in Salzburg, in September 2003, the phenomenon has been called by the Media Monitoring Agency the "Berlusconisation" of the Romanian press.

[\[3\]](#) *Ziarul de Vrancea*, series of articles published in the first half of 2002.

[\[4\]](#) Interview conducted for this article in September 2003.

[\[5\]](#) Id.

[\[6\]](#) International Press Institute, *World Press Freedom Review 2002*; Reporters Without Borders, "Intimidation of an opposition journalist," 9 August 2002.

[\[7\]](#) Letter publicly released on [www.ifex.org](http://www.ifex.org).

[\[8\]](#) Amnesty International, *Annual Report 2003*, 28 May 2003.

[\[9\]](#) Id.

[\[10\]](#) The report was presented by Media Monitoring Agency at the SEEMO conference in Salzburg, September 2003.

[\[11\]](#) Interview conducted for this article in September 2003.

[\[12\]](#) The report proved to be only a collection of allegations printed in various newspapers.

[\[13\]](#) 9 January 2002. Poliopol was hosting, at the time of the incident, a talk show on corruption in local political and business circles.

[\[14\]](#) Interview conducted for this article in September 2003.

[\[15\]](#) Id.