

ROMANIA: Media no longer play positive political role

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SUBJECT: The influence of media trusts on the struggle for power.

SIGNIFICANCE: President Traian Basescu is under fire in the media as he faces re-election later in the year. His previously high poll ratings have been slipping in the face of mounting public disillusionment with all politicians as the economic crisis bites. [Go to conclusion](#)

ANALYSIS: The low prestige enjoyed by most parties contending for office after 1989 gave the media in Romania a visibility and importance they lacked in other transition states. The press in particular played a key role in ensuring the transfer of power from the former Communists, now called the Social Democrats (PSD), to their opponents in 1996 and 2004.

Media scene. The character of the media has since changed:

- In the years after 1989, a clutch of daily newspapers with high circulations played a role in strengthening political pluralism, investigating abuses of power past and present, and raising political expectations. However, since 2005, there has been a concentration of ownership.
- The national media are starting to resemble the local media. In most provincial cities, local and regional leaders active in business and politics control the press and television. They have sought to exercise a local media monopoly in order to boost their economic interests and political careers, attack their chief opponents and drive any independent outlets out of business. Control of advertising revenue and distribution outlets has put them in a very strong position.

The 2000-04 government of Adrian Nastase, the then-PSD leader, tried to muzzle the central media, but the PSD lost power and Traian Basescu was elected president in December 2004. The EU was confident that a competitive press would emerge, funded by expanding advertising revenue looking for good-quality media outlets. Therefore, it did not pay special attention to the media in its strategy for preparing Romania for full membership in 2007. Similarly, Radio Free Europe and the BBC, two foreign radio stations with very high listening figures, closed down their Romanian services with little warning in 2008, so that the number of outlets for independent news and commentary suddenly fell sharply.

Media moguls. Sorin Ovidiu Vintu owns Realitatea, the most-watched rolling news channel. This year, his outlet joined the two other main media trusts in regularly attacking Basescu, whose supporters have not been given air time:

- Vintu has had two well-publicised meetings with Basescu's chief rival, Mircea Geoana, and is thought likely to swing his media outlets behind the PSD leader.
- Dan Voiculescu, a politician with a background in foreign trade in the communist era, who has been allied to the PSD for over a decade, owns the most-watched television channel, Antena.
- Dinu Patriciu, the third media mogul, is Romania's wealthiest businessman and a former National Liberal Party (PNL) deputy. He became the leading figure in the energy sector ([see ROMANIA/KAZAKHSTAN: Astana buys into EU oil market - August 31, 2007](#)), when much of it was hurriedly privatised after 2001.

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Basescu has accused these media of conducting a concentrated attack on him and members of his family in order to ruin his reputation and even foil his re-election bid. Since 2006, he has complained that much of the media is in collusion with forces combining enormous wealth and political power. The barrage of hostile coverage may be behind his decision to delay until the autumn announcing whether he will stand for a second term.

The National Audiovisual Council tries to maintain acceptable media standards, but is divided along political lines and the powers it deploys are fairly limited. Having been a force that raised expectations and strengthened civic awareness, much of the media now seems merely to be an extension of business interests, with channels and programmes being restructured or broken up in order to defend these interests. It is no longer an arena where policy options for the future can be seriously discussed, and it looks set to envenom what is likely to be a hard-fought presidential contest this autumn.

Sensationalist programming. A bruising confrontation between Basescu and long-standing rivals and former allies, principally the PNL during the previous government of Prime Minister Calin Popescu-Tariceanu, over the nature of the reform process and the dimensions of presidential authority, erupted just as the character of the media altered.

Concentrated ownership in the hands of a few wealthy figures quickly led to dramatic changes. Investigative reporting was curtailed. Many independent-minded journalists were dismissed or forced to toe the new editorial line. Trivial or sensationalist content drove out more serious reporting.

Since the dictatorship ended in 1989, more than 80% of Romanians have obtained most of their information about politics from television. The strategy of the Voiculescu- and Vintu-controlled television stations appears to be centred around reducing interest in politics. The strategy met with success in November 2008, when turnout at the parliamentary elections fell below 40% ([see ROMANIA: Mass unrest is unlikely despite downturn - April 8, 2009](#)).

Stalled reform. The PSD and Basescu's Democratic Liberals (PL-D) are now in a tense coalition ([see ROMANIA: Economy may keep unlikely partners together - December 16, 2008](#)) that has been unable to agree on rules to regulate the media. Control of state broadcaster TVR is bitterly contested. An anti-trust law that would prevent concentrated ownership enjoys insufficient political support.

The PD-L proclaims the need for reform, but at least two of its ministers have been embroiled in accusations that they directed state revenue through advertising to publications where they might have a personal interest.

Outlook. Romania is likely to experience a fall in GDP of at least 8% this year, which may make it harder for the main media outlets to continue portraying political struggles in 'soap-opera' terms. Advertising revenue for the print media collapsed by up to 50% in the first half of 2009, drastically reducing the income of many newspapers and several major television stations. Much of the industry is heavily in debt to the state. Only a few foreign-owned newspapers and internet news providers are trying to provide impartial coverage of the news and some in-depth analysis of major issues.

CONCLUSION: Owing to the failure of reform in many areas of national life, the effort to consolidate the independent media as a 'progressive' force in a fragile young democracy has failed. Instead, most of the media has been captured by moguls who seem determined to use it to influence policy in their own interests.

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