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The state of Romanian media in the 2024 super-electoral year

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“The state of Romanian media in the 2024 super-electoral year”

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INTRODUCTION

Around the world, over two billion people are expected to vote in 2024. Romania also has a busy electoral year, with four rounds of voting starting in June. This super-electoral year comes after the COVID-19 pandemic, followed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, a war that's still raging on our border after more than two years.

Traditionally, people have turned to journalists and media institutions to understand the world around them. We witnessed an increase in media consumption and information-seeking behaviour in both March 2020 and February 2022, as people attempted to alleviate their uncertainties. But now, both the media and the public are feeling the pinch after too many years of *breaking news*, some in burnout, others in an information overload that makes them avoid the news.

When crises are not acute, journalists and the traditional media are replaced by politicians and influencers on social media. Tired of the constant state of uncertainty of the last few years and the endless cycle of 'negative' news, the public is artificially fed with *content* on social media, which has perverted how we regard and consume information. The level of trust in Romanian media dropped to its lowest in six years, declining to 32%, according to the 2023 Digital News Report from Reuters Institute.

We started this analysis with a fundamental question: *How prepared is the Romanian media to fulfill its public mandate in one of the most important years for our democracy?*

Too little or not at all, say the people we talked to. The fatigue in the newsrooms; the lack of financial resources independent of political or economic constraints; the blocking of public interest information; the takeover of the mainstream media by political or commercial actors; the dependency on social media networks; the changes in how we consume information; the harassment, litigations, and the public contempt towards journalists - all of these paint a bleak picture of the state of the Romanian media.

With lower and lower income from commercial sources or the public, the Romanian media struggles between two opposing realities. A part of it thrives on public funds, coming from political parties or ad contracts with public institutions, central or local. Another part is struggling to function by attracting donations, grants, or the rare commercial ad contract that doesn't go to the big media trusts. In a fight for trust and relevance, this part of the media tries to discover how to survive. Success stories are rare and their models impossible to reproduce on a large scale.

The year 2024 has found the Romanian press in one of its most difficult periods. What began as an apparent form of support for media institutions in 2021 - the government's provision of public money for information campaigns on health measures in the pandemic - has turned, with the increase in non-transparent party funding, into a systemic vulnerability that is destroying the press from within.

In 2023, political parties spent €24.5 million (from the public subsidy to parliamentary parties) on press and propaganda, double the budget spent in 2021 on the same line. Where did this money go? We don't know exactly, because the parties refuse to make this expenditure public. The little information that does reach us comes from the investigations of a few journalists, and it paints a bleak picture. Millions of euros enter the media non-transparently for editorial content, i.e. news, interviews, and talk shows, which is not marked as advertising. Profoundly unethical, the practice is quietly accepted by the media institutions that receive these funds.

Currently, someone who gets their information from paid posts on Facebook, for example by politicians or political parties, is more transparently informed about what is advertising content than people who get their information from the biggest news websites or TV channels. On Facebook, all advertising posts must be marked as such, with a clear indication, in the case of political content or more sensitive topics, of the source that paid for their distribution. However, this rule does not apply to traditional media. So the public has no way of knowing whether what they are reading, listening to, or seeing is journalistic content or part of an unmarked advertising contract.

Although the practice has been criticized for years by civil society organizations and flagged as a vulnerability in international reports, it is highly effective, as state budget subsidies to parties have increased, giving parties more money to direct to media entities. And there is no public sanction. Politicians know they won't lose enough votes to make those critical voices count. What's more, the subject of non-transparent financing of the press with public money does not reach too many citizens, because we don't see it reported on TV, the main source of information for the Romanian public.

Beyond the toxicity of this phenomenon for the public, who are lied to daily - on their money - the effects are damaging for the entire media industry. The beneficiary media institutions are artificially supported by public

money to mislead their audiences, and they compete unfairly with those media organizations that do not accept this type of contract. Moreover, the whole democratic process suffers, because people come to believe that the whole media is bought by politicians, except for one or two alternative media organizations, which have a greater level of trust. And this is essentially the great evil. The press is no longer perceived as the “fourth estate”, but merely as a tool of the political class. Politicians are guilty of this hijacking of the way we inform ourselves, but the press is also to blame, having completely capitulated to those rich public budgets.

The public space abounds in press releases and Facebook statements delivered as news, and the vacuum of trust is filled by social media networks and those who communicate effectively there. Without strong journalism, in 2024 the information space will be dominated by junk, noise, and information delivered by politicians that cannot be easily verified or put into context by those who will be asked to vote. Emotions, fears, disempowerment, and lack of real information will be the deciding factors in the voting booth.

The year 2023 showed that even the commercial sector does not understand the role of a free press. The case of *Libertatea* newspaper shows that commercial pressures can sometimes sweep away even the strongest newsrooms.

The alternative press, as fragmented and vulnerable as it is, is doing its job, documenting important stories. However, these newsrooms are too few to counterbalance the propaganda and the non-combat of the mainstream press.

Completely absent from the discussion were the public television, the public radio, and the National

Broadcasting Council (CNA). Their absence from the conversation shows that people in the profession have come to regard them as completely irrelevant. In such a complicated context, however, we are too vulnerable to abandon institutions that, by statute and by law, have an obligation to inform in the public interest and to defend correct reporting. The fact that the rampage of propaganda, manipulation, and public lynching carried out by some news broadcasters has gone unsanctioned in a way that actually matters does not show that we do not need the institution of the CNA; on the contrary, it shows us, once again, how important it is to have ethical institutions that act within their mandate and do their duty to protect the public.

In almost all the interviews we conducted, fatigue, burnout, and sadness were evident. But we never saw signs of giving up. Despite the systemic fatigue, the lack of resources, and the feeling that maybe this time the small stump most likely is not going to overturn the big cart, the journalists we spoke to believe in the idea that 2024 is too important for them to stop right now.

There are still many good journalists in Romania, who do their job with respect for the people they inform and with a passion for journalism. They are harder to see, yes, mostly because the bad is always more visible than the good. And better organized. But by paying for content, by reacting when journalists are attacked and harassed, by sanctioning politicians who use the press as a tool for manipulation, we can ensure that there will continue to be islands of journalistic survival from which, hopefully, a media industry can then develop that operates with the mission (and arsenal) of the fourth estate in a democracy.

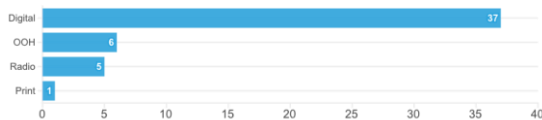
Both evil and goodness can be contagious. When Emilia Șercan received praise from the leader of the Spotlight investigations team, I felt inspired and thought to myself, "We also have many journalists to look up to as role models." Emilia is an admirable example, but she is not an isolated case.

We have journalists in Romania, including from local media, who could work for any great newspaper, anywhere in the world, at least based on their courage.

Cătălin Tolontan, editorial director of
Hotnews.ro

1. THE DRAINING OF HEALTHY INCOMES VS THE BOTTOMLESS COFFER OF PUBLIC FUNDS

The advertising market in Romania was estimated at **€700 million in 2023¹**, after reaching €659 million in 2022 (+9% vs. 2021), according to Media Fact Book². In 2023, TV advertising investments accounted for more than half (52%) of the local media market, with an estimated net value of €366 million. The rest of the budgets for 2023 were split as follows: digital - €256 million (37%); OOH - €40 million (6%); radio - €33 million (5%), with print being the only media industry on a downward trend, falling by 10% compared to 2022, to €5 million (just under 1% of the market).



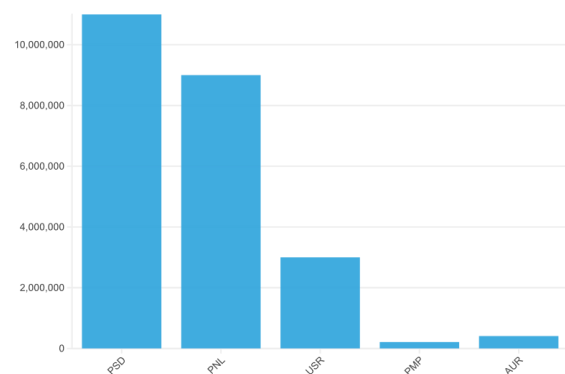
The estimate made by the Initiative agency refers only to commercial advertising, and does not take into account advertising contracts from political parties or public institutions.

There are several types of public money entering the media in Romania: money that parties receive from the state budget for their functioning, money that parties use generously for the budgetary category called ‘press and propaganda’; advertising money, coming from the budgets of public institutions; or promotion money from European projects, some of them also financed by the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR).

The discussion about public money in the press is not new. It has been opened up by journalists, both through the articles documented by the journalist Cristian Andrei and the *Recorder* newsroom, and by other journalists; it has been highlighted as a vulnerability in all the reports of civil society organizations, such as the Independent Journalism Centre and ActiveWatch³, or international organizations such as Reporters Without Borders⁴. However, budgets continue to grow rapidly.

In 2023, from the public subsidy granted to parliamentary parties for the press and propaganda category the value spent was around 24.5 million

euros⁵, as follows: 11.57 million euros - PSD, 9.35 million euros - PNL, 2.9 million euros - USR and 211,500 euros - PMP, 408,000 euros - AUR. **The budget represents a doubling compared to the budget for this expenditure in 2021** (12.7 million euros) and an increase of 20% compared to the 20.5 million euros spent in 2022.



Figures presented by journalist Cristian Andrei for *Hotnews*⁶ show that in 2024 things will get much worse. PDS reported to the Permanent Electoral Authority (AEP) spending more than 8.42 million lei, or about 1.7 million €, on press and propaganda. This amount represents almost all the subsidy received in January by the PSD political party (8.5 million lei). According to the *Hotnews* journalist, this is the largest amount spent by a political party in a month outside of election campaigns. PSD representatives refused to answer questions from Hotnews about how the money was spent, but they did give an "unofficial" answer, saying that in January they bought campaign propaganda products - vests, pens, caps, and other campaign materials.

This lack of transparency on spending in January is the norm, not the exception. There is no public information about where the money is going and what it is being spent on. The parties refuse to make this data public and the little information only emerges as a result of press coverage. Journalist Cristian Andrei points out in an investigation for *Libertatea*⁷ that the digi24.ro

¹ <https://www.forbes.ro/initiative-romania-piata-locala-de-media-atinge-venituri-de-700-milioane-de-euro-in-2023-estimare-364334>

² <http://mediafactbook.ro/MFB2023.pdf>

³ https://activewatch.ro/documents/256/freex_digest_4.pdf

⁴ <https://rsf.org/en/country/romania>

⁵ <https://finantarepartide.ro/>

⁶ <https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-politic-26956938-psd-plateste-secret-8-4-milioane-lei-intr-luna-pentru-presa-propaganda-unde-sustine-partidul-ajuns-milion-euro-din-banii-publici.htm>

⁷ <https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/investigatie-un-milion-de-euro-de-la-pnl-pentru-site-ul-digi24-articolele-nu-au-fost->

website received around €1 million from the PNL alone in 2023. Digi24 is not the only news site that PNL has a contract with. Antena 3, Romania TV, and Realitatea Plus are also on the list. In addition to the news sites, PNL also had or has commercial links with *dcnews*, *evenimentulzilei*, *capital*, *psnews*, *alephnews* and *stiripesurse*. PSD applies the same method, but offers bigger advertising contracts to Antena 3 or Romania TV. <<"The amount given by PSD for digi24.ro is less than 75,000 euros, not like PNL. PSD has bigger contracts with Antena3.ro and RomaniaTV.net," a source in the PSD leadership told *Libertatea*.>>

Regarding the situation presented in the *Libertatea* article, Cătălin Tolontan makes a comparison with a bottle of water, for which those who buy it pay 1,000 times more than its real price. "In our case, it's not a bottle of water, it's advertising. Why would you pay €1,000 for a bottle of water instead of €1? Because it's not water, it's something else, there's poison there, it's a sedative. You put people to sleep with the content and you get what you want from them - their vote. If a mayor in Romania had paid 1,000 euros for a bottle of water, not only the Court of Auditors, but also institutions dealing with justice would have asked why a bottle of water costs 1,000 euros. In this case, however, although the revelations have been going on for years, no one in the state is asking why the parties are buying huge amounts of advertising with public money. There are huge budgets at the disposal of websites in Romania that do not provide news, but the poison that replaces that news."

All the contracts are handled through advertising agencies, and the funding mechanism is described in the same investigation: 'Once the article is published, even if it is not marked to the reader as advertising (P), it is sent to the agency for payment. The agency sends the *'deliverables'* - the texts published on behalf of the party, and the party makes the payment to the agency. Further, the money from the agency is transferred to the account of the company running the website.'

The data on the beneficiaries of these amounts are kept secret by all parties: the political parties, the Permanent Electoral Authority, and the Court of Auditors, each of the actors throwing the responsibility for transparency in the other's court. Journalist Cristian Andrei is one of the longest-running investigators of public money going to the press. In a series of articles published in *Europa Liberă*⁸ and *Libertatea*, he has shown how difficult it is to obtain information on such an important subject for Romanian democracy, because the amounts are often allocated in a non-transparent way. The Court of Accounts and the Permanent Electoral Authority say

marcate-cu-semnul-p-publicitate-dar-au-fost-trimise-pentru-plata-la-partid-4745569

⁸ <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/bani-partide-presa-secretizare/31791403.html>

that after the controls are completed, the documents are returned to the political parties, so they are not the ones who have to make the information public. PSD, for example, refuses to say what it is doing with them, illegally sealing the information, arguing that it is the job of the AEP.

In addition to the millions of euros from political parties, there are other types of advertising contracts with public institutions. These amounts are not quantified anywhere, apart from some rare press releases. For example, in January 2024, the City Hall of Sector 5 bought 200 annual subscriptions to the *Jurnalul National* newspaper worth €30,000. According to BRAT figures, *Jurnalul National* had a circulation of around 3,800 copies per daily edition in September 2023 (latest available data).

"What happened during the pandemic with the capture of the press by state money has now swept away what was left in the mainstream media," says journalist Biro Attila, founder of *Context*. Vlad Stoicescu, founder of *Dela0*, agrees: "Non-transparent funding is probably the darkest problem of the Romanian press right now, and it is the one that will affect us all in 2024, even if we don't realize it." Although we still have a few months to go before the actual start of the election campaigns, Stoicescu says that "in Romania, campaigning has not stopped for years, because there is this mechanism of financing the press from the subsidy that parties receive from the state. Basically, the campaign happens every day, every week, every month."

Răzvan Ionescu, publisher of *Hotnews*, says that "Everybody shouts, everyone (European commissioners, embassies) says they're going to go tell Iohannis, Ciolacu, everybody. They themselves say they will fix it, but nothing happens. Next, the money is going to the TV websites, but it's actually disguised payments to the TV stations, where they can't legally get in. It still seems to me that it's also a DNA issue." By law, political parties are not allowed to buy editorial space on TV outside election campaigns. But the ban does not apply to TV websites. "When someone gives money to the B1 TV website, more than all the money B1 TV takes from the rest of the market, it is clear that they are actually giving money for friendship with the TV station, because the B1 TV website is not representative. I gave the example of B1 TV not because it is the least respectable TV station, maybe it is among the most respectable, but because their website is so small that things are clear there. You could say that Romania TV has a big website, Realitatea the same, Digi also, but in fact they give money to TV channels", continues Ionescu.

Television remains the main source of information for the Romanian public. An Avangarde survey published

in August 2023 showed that 57% of respondents aged between 31 and 60 get their information from TV, and 86% of those aged 61 and over⁹. "Some of the strongest streams of propaganda and manipulation are seen on TV, especially in the prime-time segment. If we turn on the TV at midnight, we might see some decent news on most channels, untainted by the bias of prime-time. However, at 7, 8, 9 in the evening, when most Romanians who want to get their news are in front of the TVs, people are caught in the net of extreme bias, where opinions are often meant to cover the facts, not to discuss the facts", says journalist Vlad Stoicescu.

"There are dozens of news stories, editorial material not marked as part of an advertising contract - Ciolacu's statement, Ciucă's statement, I-don't-know-who's statement. They are, in themselves, stupid things that nobody reads, but the money that is being passed around under this pretext is very important for the relationship that the media has with that party.

”**The media no longer has fangs, the press can no longer do its job, because all these hidden and insidious friendships have changed the culture in many organizations, quite literally”, concludes Răzvan Ionescu.**

Mona Dirțu, *PressOne* editor and a journalist with more than 30 years of experience, also says that the mainstream media's dependence on these revenues allocated by politicians for 'press and propaganda' severely distorts editorial agendas - either through unmarked so-called 'positive news', whose purpose is to serve the agendas of political actors, not the public; or through journalistic non-combat on issues of public interest, but which could upset politicians in power. "Media's non-combat attitude, which is contrary to the very mission of the journalist, is bought with public money spent in a completely non-transparent way, outside election campaigns, on 'positive materials', that are in fact unmarked advertising. The interest of politics thus becomes perfectly aligned with the interest of media owners - a toxic, unnatural alignment."

Vlad Stoicescu says that this is compounded by the content masquerading as journalism - for example, an interview conducted in the party's labs, which actually deceives the audience. "There is, at best, a small mark at the end of the article, but it's usually formulated in a misleading way. It doesn't say 'political advertising' or 'paid content'. It uses vague formulas like 'content commissioned by...'. We have come through election years in Romania with fewer, if any, interviews by journalists. This trend was also fully supported by

President Klaus Iohannis, who refused independent interviews. This is a very dangerous phenomenon."

Cristian Pantazi, editor-in-chief of *G4Media*, also believes that most mainstream media outlets have abdicated their role of informing the public so that citizens can make their voting decision with all the information available. "The self-censorship practiced by the big newsrooms, in order to get money from the parties and public institutions, leads to the disappearance from the public sphere of information critical of PSD, PNL, and their leaders.

”**Never in the last 33 years has such a situation existed. There have been distortions in the media market before, but traditionally the big media trusts were divided: some supported the left, others the right, so that, at the end of the day, the citizen could have access to critical information about both political blocs”, says Cristian Pantazi.**

Now, the big trusts act the same way: complete silence and no criticism of the left-right bicephalous power. It's a critical vulnerability for democracy, because silence is the breeding ground for corruption and theft of public money."

Andreea Pavel, editor-in-chief of the local publication *Info Sud-Est*, says that "stories that we or our colleagues in other independent newsrooms publish don't exist on television. See the case of the security laws and, in general, any story about people in the intelligence services or investigations about people at the top. The recipe has worked, the TV stations all fall asleep when necessary in order to continue to receive tens of millions of euros from the state, political parties, etc. And if this happened outside the election campaign, in 2024 it will be rampant."

Until a few months ago, *Libertatea* was seen as the independent bastion of the mainstream press - a publication that had transformed itself in recent years from a tabloid, known for the "Page 5 Girl", to the audience leader of news websites, while maintaining its print edition. *Libertatea* published investigations and features on subjects little covered by other media outlets. From July 2023, things began to falter when Mihnea Vasiliu, CEO of the Ringier group, announced he was leaving, becoming acute in September, when, after the sudden ousting of the editor-in-chief of *Gazeta Sporturilor*, the newsroom publicly spoke of the editorial pressures to which it had been subjected¹⁰. On December 6th, Ringier Romania announced that 20%

⁹ <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/social/de-unde-isi-iau-romanii-informatiile-sondaj-avangarde-tv-presa-online-si-retelele-sociale-principalele-surse-de-informare-2475537>

¹⁰ <https://cji.ro/managementul-ringier-incalca-independenta-editoriala-a-gsp-si-libertatea/>

of *Libertatea's* journalists would be fired¹¹. First among them: Cătălin Tolontan, editorial director, Iulia Roșu, deputy editor-in-chief, and Camelia Stan, editor of *Libertatea's* print edition. Then came the announcement of the departure of editor-in-chief Dan Duca and of more than 20 journalists. As of March 2024, *Libertatea* has a new management and far fewer journalists.

Cătălin Tolontan, the former editorial director of *Libertatea*, says that one of the most serious problems for the press is the reduction in freedom in the mainstream media in the run-up to the 2024 election campaign, which "must be a manifestation of democracy at work, so even if you have to allow democracy to be at work, because you can't fake the elections at the ballot box (that would be too much), you need to change the inputs. Then, this mainstream media thing I think is part of the inputs."

Adrian Mihălțianu, editorial director of the online publication *PressOne*, believes that "the fact that the core team at *Libertatea* has been unceremoniously disembarked shows that the upcoming elections are designed for the total and long-term capture of the state. Unfortunately, communication has also changed - people are increasingly getting their political information from noisy influencers rather than newspapers. And the media currently has no antidote to this state of affairs." Biro Attila, an investigative journalist at *Context.ro*, believes that the problems at *Libertatea* are also affecting the alternative press. "It's tragic for us outsiders because we used to say that, yes, it's hard to make something from scratch, it's hard to make an independent newsroom; but, on the other hand, there's still the newsroom at *Libertatea*, you can join forces with them, at least you're not on your own."

"As a rule, in a functioning democracy, a newsroom is attacked by the government for writing something against a minister or the government - and is defended by its own company," says Cătălin Tolontan. "In the case of GSP, the opposite happened. A newsroom, because it said some things that, yes, its own company considers untrue, was attacked by its own company, more precisely the editor-in-chief Cătălin Țepelin was dismissed, and the prime minister defended him. This reversal, I think, shows that even the government has realized that the force sweeping through an editorial office is so great and so dangerous to the democratic balance that it has to react. They didn't react for our sake, by any means." He continues: "It seems to me that there is a growing distance between owners and journalists; there have always been different values, ownership values and journalistic values, and they have coexisted and it is normal that they should coexist

¹¹ <https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/redactia-libertatea-niciun-ziar-independent-nepedepsit-am-fost-anuntati-azi-ca-se-fac-restructurari-masive-20-dintre-jurnalisti-vor-fi-concediati-aspus-ceo-ringier-romania-dan-4740678>

because robust journalism is made with robust profit. But now something is not working in this division, which has become quite furious."

The identity struggle Cătălin Tolontan talks about has been going on for many years in the Romanian press. In many places, it has been won by politicians or companies without much opposition. In others, very few of them, it is still going on, but journalists are increasingly under siege. We have become used to criticizing politicians or companies that censor the press, but sometimes we have not treated with the same vehemence the part of the media that has willingly entered into a subservient relationship with them, abdicating their role in the community. For some, the abdication came after a period of struggle, weary from years of wear and tear and deprivations; for others, it came naturally; and others seem professionally born for it.

The information space in Romania is still extremely varied, with multiple sources of information, which, unfortunately, most of the time are chasing press releases and gathering traffic with non-news. "This part of the press is also to blame, obviously, as politicians have not forced money into anyone's pocket," says Cătălin Moraru, editor-in-chief of *Monitorul de Botoșani*. "The Romanian newspaper industry is full of people who have found the easy way out, an easy way to live. That's what we're mainly talking about, not about force, not about them wringing our hands behind our backs", he continues, adding that "there is the idea that if we didn't take that money we would disappear, which may sometimes have been the case. But it's a competitive market. Some outlets disappear. I am living proof that you can live without that money and I have a much bigger institution than those who take bribes. I think it saturates the market unnecessarily, but it also distorts it, because Romanian advertising laws allow anything... Even staple buying has more restrictive conditions than media advertising."

The local press is the place where party money, public money, and sometimes corporate money, which is increasingly scarce, are intertwined. Adriana Barbu, investigative reporter at *Special Arad*, says that there is less and less money in the local press and that it is starting to come from only one direction, the political one - from the parties, the local authorities, or their companies. "Local companies have stopped advertising in the press here, either because they don't have the money, or because they no longer believe in the press and the benefits it can bring in terms of advertising, or because being mentioned, in that part of the media that is critical of the government can bring them too much trouble." There's less money, so fewer journalists, and salaries are often only a little higher than the minimum wage. "Because of this, and the fact that at the local level the press has even less credibility than at the

national level (here we all know each other, so it's hard to convince people that you're not playing into the hands of those you've known for years) there's also less and less shame among journalists or their sponsors. The purchases made by various public institutions are public on SICAP. They buy TV shows and podcasts, they give local funding to journalists, titles, and awards. Which journalists? Exactly the ones who are most vociferous for being independent, discrediting what's left of our already slim credibility," explains Barbu.

Traian Deleanu, editor-in-chief of *Turnul Sfatului* in Sibiu, believes that the money allocated from the state budget to parties represents a big problem because it greatly reduces the number of those willing to do journalism and shows other political actors how easily the press can be controlled. "PSD Sibiu has contracts with all media outlets, so go try to find a statement from the president of the county organization of PSD Sibiu. You'll see that, apart from *Turnul Sfatului* and the press releases they give out, it doesn't appear anywhere. This man is hiding, you can only reach him on WhatsApp," says Deleanu. "So more and more mayors in the Sibiu area, but also the County Council, have learned that if you buy the press, you have peace of mind."

The money that buys the press often provides more than just positive publicity. Cătălin Moraru says the most common way of manipulation is that the important information is nowhere to be found. "If we're the only ones who write that a guy fell with his car into a hole because of the water company and the others don't mention anything, people say we're talking nonsense, because nobody else wrote about it. We used to say to people, when they want to find out how things are, to look elsewhere, to other sources, to check if it's the same. In this case, what other sources? Yes, other sources may come up, but after two or three days, when people stop looking.

”You want to read the paper, not fight a battle for the truth. Me, being a regular reader on the other side of the screen, what do I do? Do I play Sherlock Holmes every day?”, says Cătălin Moraru.

Also, "once they solve the problem locally, they don't care if the issue appears in the national press. Their voters are here, at the local level", says Cătălin Moraru, who also gives an example: "After *Romania, Te Iubesc* TV show did a story about things that don't work in the county, the authorities spent 30,000 euros in a month on advertising¹², which was not marked as advertising, but which wrote how they made a mistake and how I don't love Botosani, because I appeared on that show. And

people believe them. It's not the fact that one fake news story appears that's the problem, it's the next 50 that say the same thing."

Cătălin Moraru says that the authorities don't even need to censor, to forbid these beneficiaries of funds from covering a certain subject. "It's not about censorship. We're past the censorship phase. It's about 'we want to do it'. 'We want to do this because we want to make money.' Nobody's rough censoring anybody, actually. Local journalists stand in line to be censored. That's how they learned to make a living. I have cases of people who left my newspaper and the next day opened their own website. They copy some articles from me, add some infotainment from the internet, and take their ads from the state, no problem. There are a lot of perverse effects here, besides not doing proper journalism anymore: people end up thinking this is journalism. There's also the influence of social media, obviously, there's no denying that, but there's also the bad influence of people employed in the media - because we can't call them journalists."

And there's another problem. If one media outlet says the opposite of the rest, the public rightly starts to wonder whether those journalists are looking for a scandal, says Moraru. "There's also this phenomenon where people say 'But what's your problem with them? You're haters. Whatever they do is wrong - when they do something it's wrong, when they don't do something it's wrong, make up your mind!' The pressure is also very high from this point of view, that you find yourself alone. And when you're performing alone, without an audience, without a staff, you end up wondering why you're doing this job."

The model of unbranded advertising at the central level is also found locally. Audiences watch TV, read newspapers, or look at websites and think they are consuming legitimate journalistic content. "Hardly any websites mark their advertising. As a journalist, being in this business, when you go to those websites and see the same text everywhere, you realize, 'this is from the County Council, this is from the other guys'," says Deleanu. This is reinforced by Cătălin Moraru: "In Botosani, advertising almost doesn't exist. In the old days, everything was marked as advertising. Now it's the other way around. 80-something percent of the press only marks advertising when the advertiser expressly asks for it, because it's a European project and they have to show that they paid for advertising. Otherwise, they don't mark it as advertising. It simply appears as an editorial story or, at best, it says 'press release'. But nowhere does it say that that press release is paid for, to show the reader who they are taking money from."

There is a lot of money, but how is it allocated? "There is no transparency whatsoever because if there were, I

¹² <https://miscareamoldova.ro/monitorul-de-botosani-sume-uriale-pentru-reclama-la-saracie>

would always ask them what is the basis on which they give the money," says Cătălin Moraru. He continues: "I do this even now when I find out about certain contracts. 'Why did you give €3,000 to a website that has 230 hits a day? How do you justify the money?' They don't. Off the record, they tell me that it came on orders from the party, so people are using the institutions' money, public money, to fix their image. It's also extremely difficult to trace. The County Council President is doing an interview on an online TV station. The next day, that TV station gets a 6,000 lei contract from the municipal garbage company, which has nothing to do with the president. I know for a fact that she gave the order to the PSD director there to make that contract, but how do you prove it?"

Traian Deleanu says that, in Sibiu, *Turnul Sfatului* is the only publication that does not have a contract with the County Council, because the requirements were unacceptable: "We would have had to publish everything, absolutely everything: Facebook posts, press releases, without limit, within a maximum of two hours. Under these conditions, you are no longer a journalist," he concludes.

Cătălin Moraru also explains the funding mechanism of these media institutions. "We have to understand that the advertising money from the party subsidy does not reach local media, they stay in the Bucharest press. At the local level, the money comes through various institutions, through various politically connected companies, because it is not expensive - 300 lei a month, 500 lei a month. So we're usually talking about small change, but those who are relatively important and have access, so they have influence, they bring in good money. We call them *one-steak journalists*, that's true, but when you cash in from 30 institutions, plus 20 town halls in the county, you get to something else. There's a commune near Botoșani that has twenty or so advertising contracts with various media vehicles. With that money, they could have sent SMS to everyone in the commune and it would have been cheaper."

The situation is the same everywhere, says Traian Deleanu: "You see some prosperity in the local press, 'prosperity' in quotes, local prosperity. There are about 10 sites, and even these small sites of one or two people are doing better because you meet them on the street and see what cars they drive."

Vlad Stoicescu believes that commercial media players who do this kind of thing earn their revenue very easily and don't necessarily want to go back to the model where the money is harder to earn. "There's no small amount of that money and you don't have to do much for it and you never risk anything. The only risky situation is not playing to your party's whistle. But there's no reason to do that. I mean as long as the

money tap is on, you'd rather dance to the party whistle."

Octav Ganea, photojournalist and managing partner of the Inquam Photos agency, has analysed how local newsrooms relate to press photography in a survey of Inquam photo users. And within photo materials, trends continue. The lack of original photo material (produced in-house for reporting or investigative purposes), or at least of material taken from objective press sources (news agencies) in local newsroom material, means that the majority of the country's audience is bombarded every day with non-journalistic illustrations from various sources: political and administrative (33.5%), social media (16.5%) and search engines (4.16%).

As is also clear from the experiences of local colleagues, this is because many of the media platforms are, even in the case of press photos, mere vehicles for promoting local institutions, be they fire brigades, ambulance services, county councils, prefectures, town halls, etc.; national politicians - MPs and senators through press releases, social media posts or companies. In many cases, the local press copy-pastes the entire article from the national press, with or without adapting the text, but almost always by appropriating the images originally published. What does this mean?

”More than half of the audience that opens a local newspaper or news website in a county or region is constantly exposed, even in the happy situation where the text contains journalistically correct information, to favourable pictures that local politicians and decision-makers deem worthy of publication," says Octav Ganea.

"I discovered this in the spring, at the start of Inquam Photos' campaign to popularise the concept of copyright and make newsrooms more responsible for the correct use of visual material. We found that more than two-thirds (66.7%) do not subscribe to a photo feed that serves them press images and only a quarter said they download 'piecemeal' photography on an ad hoc basis to illustrate press material from an agency. 84.4% of local newsrooms surveyed do not invest more than 500 lei in press photo licenses or salaries for photojournalists," he continues.

Mona Țițu sees the problem as a systemic one. "Why would you want to get rid of your addiction if it's so convenient to be addicted? The business model of mainstream media organizations that have succumbed to budget subsidies to political parties has become much simpler and more predictable. But this financial convenience takes the oxygen out of journalism's mission, it suffocates it. When you work in a newsroom where the editorial management makes trade-offs

between the interests of political advertisers and the interests of the citizens, when your goal becomes not to make a nuisance of yourself with some 'non-positive' news story in which you hold state institutions accountable on behalf of the taxpayer, who do you actually work for? Can you still say you serve the citizens? Or are you anesthetizing him with low-quality information, empty calories, propaganda, a flood of irrelevant information?"

Cătălin Moraru believes that the situation of the local press is likely to get a little better in 2024, thanks to the election campaigns, but the effect will be short-lived and will bring a heavy price in 2025. "The local press, the one that can still be called local press, has a chance to survive because of the elections. Politicians think like this: "30 websites can write about me and then I'll put it on Facebook to brag about those articles, but if I don't appear in the most respectable ones, then I don't exist". That's the campaign logic. They will give us money, maybe less, but they will still give us money. And there is the possibility of surviving on that money. But I don't see a way out of that paradigm. I don't see it, simply because, after the election, it will get worse. The 2020 election was the same way. 'Milk and honey' during the election campaign. After that it stopped, advertising stopped, subscriptions stopped. Absolutely everything. They didn't forgive us."

The disappearing case of commercial money

In this market flooded with public money, commercial money is very important because it can give stability and independence to media institutions. Dragoș Stanca, the initiator of the Media Ethical Alliance, believes that "the media and advertising industry must understand and act as such - given that monitoring shows as clearly as possible that, of the total of around 700 million euros invested annually in advertising campaigns, only a tiny percentage, which we estimate at less than 1%, ends up in editorial projects that also perform a public service (investigations, coverage of the political, social and economic agenda, etc.)". Stanca believes there is an urgent need for a new viable operational and commercial model that supports ethical journalism. Not just commercially 'efficient' or 'strategic', propagandistic content: "Private actors who provide public interest news urgently need financial, not just moral, support in order to continue this service necessary for a well-functioning free market in a democracy. And public donations alone are not enough - nor are they a sustainable model in the long term. Otherwise, without the intervention of responsible private actors, alternative sources of money (funding from parties, various economic interest circles, etc.) will serve entirely different purposes. In the 'best case' scenario, the goal will be just attention farming through

clickbait and fake news just to collect money from automated, algorithmic advertising."

But business often stays away from the press. Răzvan Chiruță, editor-in-chief of *PressHub*, believes that "all this talk lately about the huge funds given by parties to the press has also made those in the business world somewhat reluctant to work with the media. 'Why ask us for money when you're taking so much from parties?' Or they come and say 'Why should we give you money to manipulate us?' Or they generally simply avoid any association with the press. On the other hand, with dozens of sites, there is huge competition for resources, and then companies get enormous amounts of requests for funding. So they end up being very selective. We've had a response from a company that said they would give us money for advertising, but they didn't want to be mentioned because they didn't want to expose themselves - let others come and ask."

Oana Șlemco, a journalist with *Intermedia TV* in Suceava, says that in Suceava "we are somewhat dependent on money from the authorities, because the private sector is at a low ebb. It's very easy to say 'don't take money from the state', but if the private sector is very low and doesn't support the press, and we have some very big companies that don't understand why they have to support the press, what can you do?" "Okay, but the press is also very large," continues Oana Șlemco. "In Suceava county there are more than 60 websites, TV stations. Rădăuți has its own press, Vatra Dornei has its own press, Gura Humorului has its own press, Suceava has its own press. The local press is actually county press, municipal press, and then village press. We have villages where sites are set up that serve only those villages."

In Sibiu, Deleanu says things are better in terms of commercial advertising. "Our case is somehow fortunate because here only 20% of the newspaper's revenue comes from public advertising, 80% comes from private advertising. Fortunately, in Sibiu we have a big industrial area and there are some really strong companies, which don't necessarily invest because they need advertising, but because there is this fight for the workforce in Sibiu. And, solely out of this need for manpower, they invest to get a certain image."

But, as Cătălin Tolontan points out, although the curtailment of freedom of expression comes mainly from the parties, it also comes from corporations, from the commercial sector in general. In recent years, by looking mostly at the relationship between politics and the press, we have neglected an equally important dynamic, which can also hijack the workings of a newsroom.

”**SLAPPs have been practiced more from this area for a long time, and the major threats and**

disproportions, the asymmetries in society in relation to the press come mainly from the commercial part of the spectrum. They are very, very powerful and very, very impervious to argument. They have the most lawyers and the best paid ones, not governments or parties," Tolontan explains.

The editorial interference in the cases of *Gazeta Sporturilor* and *Libertatea*, coming from owners with business connections, may be a bad signal for the entire Romanian press. Further proof that if you are powerful enough, be you politician or company, you can directly influence the editorial content. At the same time, Cătălin Tolontan believes that the message can also work the other way around: "Some companies and some industries see that you're standing up and that you're publicly reaffirming some principles, even knowing that you're going to lose - and obviously we're going to lose the fight with our shareholders, it's natural to lose it, that's what it is¹³. Maybe other industries will say to the media 'Why are they privileged industries? Just because they give you money? Don't you want to respect us as well, without contributing so much?' We, naturally, only see what happens to us journalists. But, in fact, the economic environment will be very harmed if we give in, because whole industries will be blackmailed, because they will have to come with money to the TV stations, to the media in general, to the websites, so that they wouldn't be attacked. This commercial/editorial conflict has become so obvious that I think the profiteers and the winners of it at the moment, a part of the betting industry, which is not even all there, is not only doing itself a disservice, but has in fact antagonised and aroused a lot of reaction by this kind of power move. I don't know what will happen next. I think it will awaken some social springs. They may come too late to save current situations. But I hope they will not come too late to understand how important the free press is, first of all for the citizens, but also for the economic environment".

Still, the hopes of those looking at the state of journalism in Romania are linked to alternative newsrooms, but even here things are not always simple. "I don't think the alternative press is doing any better. The independent press is perennially affected by a lack of funding and undersized editorial offices," says journalist Vlad Stoicescu, one of the founders of the *Dela0* editorial project. Adrian Mihăltianu, editorial director of *PressOne*, believes that "the independent press is expected to cover an audience as large as the one reached by publications that receive millions of euros in non-transparent advertising; objectivity is required from the underfunded and transparent press, as a means of counteracting a subjective, non-

transparently funded press. This is almost impossible, and the public and society should recalibrate their expectations."

Răzvan Chiruță believes that "we, as small, independent press outlets, are to some extent an anomaly, perhaps, because we all, in fact, should have been sitting in big and powerful newsrooms, changing the world. The fact that we've retreated into these areas of independence that don't have much strength is in some ways a sign of defeat because it shows that those big publications that we were all supposed to be at don't actually work anymore."

Biro Attila, co-founder of *Context.ro*, believes that the volume of content produced by the independent press has increased, but is still very small compared to the mainstream: "We are not at the level where you can fight the mainstream on a daily basis. *Libertatea* and *G4Media* are the only ones that are reporting daily news and can still stand up to the massive amount of propaganda you see in the mainstream. And that seems like a small thing to me - that you have just two entities versus hundreds of websites and TV stations."

Looking at the money coming from the parties, compared to the budgets of alternative media institutions, Biro Attila makes a simple calculation: "Let's say it's 2 million euros a month from the parties, but after that other millions are coming through from the government, money from the institutions, money from advertising provided in European funds. If we look at the budgets in the Romania media, in the independent press, we know that *Recorder* has one million and a bit per year, so *Recorder* has less than half of the budget per month used for political propaganda. And *Recorder* is now the flagship of the independent press. We're fighting with unequal tools, because if you had two or three million in the independent press a month, then we could fight, because we could produce as much volume as the political propaganda."

Adding to this resource gap is the battle with social media algorithms that are anti-press, Biro believes.

”You're fighting with the amounts and money of political propaganda and, two, you're fighting with algorithms that are against you, so it's twice as hard to do your job", adds Biro Attila.

Vlad Stoicescu believes that Romanian society cannot function properly only with the information now coming from the perceived independent area. "It will be useless if it's just us. For me it is not a solution that we, with *Recorder*, *PressOne*, *Rise*, and with *Libertatea* in the mainstream, and with two other players in the market, are doing important and valuable things, because we're not going to save Romania with the few

¹³ The interview was conducted before December 6th, when Ringier announced Cătălin Tolontan's firing.

important and valuable things we do, inevitably too few for such a great gap. The great need is to write every day. The great need is to look for things of public interest every day, and we can't do it in 5, 7, 10 press organisations, because these press organisations mean just a few hundred people. No matter how strong those 150 to 200 people are, they can't cover the whole range of topics, let alone from the central level. There are a lot of issues of public interest in Romania that are local government issues that we don't see from Bucharest - and, frankly, we don't have the means to see. We should see them through the local press. It's just that the local press is also undersized, sometimes underfunded or, where it is funded, funded to do advertorials and friendly interviews, not real journalism. To me, the answer to the question <what would be the solution> would be a lie if I said we should get more funding.

”No matter how much funding we, the few entities in the independent press area, get, we will not be able to cure the sick patient without the mainstream press on our side”, adds Vlad Stoicescu.

This is also reinforced by Adrian Mihălțianu. "A network of quality independent journalism is currently being set up, there is funding, but all this together does not even reach 10% of the money sent by the parties to that big part of the press. We are simply talking about a huge gap in resources and in reach, which, in the long term, does not allow us to hope for much. Without a coherent system that allows first and foremost funding from the public and hundreds of small and medium-sized companies, our independent press remains underfunded and reaches extremely few people compared to the television and press subordinated to the parties."

Cătălin Tolontan also talked about the need to have a strong mainstream media whenever he was asked why they don't start a new media product. In an interview for *Pagina de Media*¹⁴, in which he discussed the announcement of the move of part of the former *Libertatea* team to *Hotnews*¹⁵, Cătălin Tolontan explained that "It would be good if the idea of an independent, public service press did not leave the mainstream. Because, realistically, if we look at the top 30 websites in Romania, in terms of reach and penetration in the villages and small towns of Romania, even in the big urban areas, we won't find any of the exceptional alternative press initiatives, we'll still find the big media companies." He adds that, if you are small, it is very hard to fight the huge machine of misinformation or anger that is constantly propagated

on the net, including social networks. "It's very hard to fight if you're small. You can't defend democracy in a country of 19 million people, with so many things happening, with only a few exceptional, but otherwise boutique media. (...) If we leave the mainstream, we leave 90% of this country with poor information."

Are there solutions?

Dragoș Stanca, founder of the Ethical Media Alliance (EMA) - which includes more than 20 journalistic projects (websites and newsletters), with more than 120 journalists - says that there are. "We believe that, at the moment, the main structural problem is the lack of resources to maintain the journalistic talent and human resources needed in this ecosystem. That's why the beginning of our solution starts with this. Because quality journalism costs money - unlike 'effective' online content. With EMA, we are primarily addressing the private sector and the advertising industry, which, if it still wants a free economy in a democratic society, needs to understand very quickly that it cannot just expect other actors, also from the private sector, to "sacrifice" themselves, on behalf of others, and financially support public interest information."

The Ethical Media Alliance concept proposes that 50% of every euro invested in legitimate advertising campaigns, which take into account specific KPIs, with metrics and technologies already known in the mainstream digital marketing market, should be allocated not only on a quantitative basis (i.e. based on the number of views and unique visitors) - but also based on the number of journalists employed by the projects that are part of the initiative. "So far, the two largest banks in Romania, BCR - part of the Erste Group - and Banca Transilvania are the main participants in the project", says Dragoș Stanca. However, he adds that, 6 months after the launch of the project, even with the contribution of the number one and two banks in Romania, the budgets attracted by the entire network are equal to the amount a single 'good' clickbait site makes in a month, i.e. less than €50,000. Stanca says he hopes to reach a monthly volume in the range of €50,000 to €100,000, which would still be just 0.25% of what is spent monthly on advertising on the digital slice alone. He adds that at the moment there is a lot of reluctance from the system, which is set up to look for immediate profit rather than positive social impact.

Răzvan Ionescu, publisher of *Hotnews*, also believes that journalism has the potential to make a profit, but mentions that publishers in the market do not trust this type of business and journalism. "Look at *Pro TV*, even Ringier. When I say I'm optimistic to a good extent regarding us, my optimism is based on the fact that we're in an emptying parking lot and so we're getting more and more space. Most of the opportunities come

¹⁴ <https://www.paginamedia.ro/stiri-media/catalin-tolontan-hotnews-interviu-idei-21525983>

¹⁵ <https://www.paginamedia.ro/stiri-media/comunicat-hotnews-catalin-tolontan-21525115>

from the fact that there's turmoil all around us and that we, for better or worse, with all the problems we have - the ones that are internal to us and the objective ones that are market-driven - we're still in a better position. *Hotnews* is a profitable and healthy business. This has enabled us to be able to co-opt several outstanding journalists who had recently left other publications."

As the most acute problem identified by those we spoke to for this report is the public funding from political party subsidies, we also looked at ways in which this can be addressed. Some journalists believe that the only way to clean up the market is simply to end the practice of public funding of the press. Not just increasing transparency on where the money is going or what kind of content is being bought, but completely eliminating this source of money for the press. "We are past the point where transparency could still be a solution" is the message they send.

Cătălin Moraru says that "this evil must disappear, this money must simply disappear. I don't see any other way out. Otherwise, we will continue to have news stations that don't make news, we will have places that don't explain anything to people and that follow to the letter the agenda of the government or a particular party."

Vlad Stoicescu points out that in order to eliminate the mechanism of funding the press from the party subsidy, political will is needed, which will not be there in such an election year. But, "in the medium and long term, this mechanism must be eliminated because if it stays like this or becomes even stronger than it is now, then no matter what we in the independent press do, we will not be able to solve things". The *Dela0* journalist continues: "I can't fight prime time TV news, as long as that TV news continues to exist in the market precisely because it receives this money directly from the parties. As long as that media entity continues to exist for that reason, things will go from bad to worse, they can't possibly get better."

Another, albeit ad hoc, solution is grant funding. Biro Attila, from *Context.ro*, says that for a small newsroom it is very complicated to access grant funding because, besides the journalistic work, you need to invest in project and financial management, in negotiations and discussions to convince people to give you the money: "But it's a good thing there is money. It's good that the European Union is providing more funding, because the EU grants are easier than the FDSC grants in Romania." But not everyone has access to EU funding either. *Presshub's* Răzvan Chiruță says the European Commission currently only offers cross-border funding, which is not helpful for Romanian publications that don't want to or don't have the capacity or expertise for transnational issues. "If you, as a Romanian publication, want to tackle a local topic, because not all

topics lend themselves to cross-border approaches, you don't have European funds available for that." He also adds that "yes, there are smaller grants, but those small amounts help you survive for a month, two or three, but you can't make a long-term plan based on them".

For the moment, due to the international context, the Romanian press is again a subject of interest for some international donors. Cristian Pantazi, editor-in-chief of *G4Media*, says that "unlike in the 1990-2000's, the focus of these organisations is now on providing expertise and know-how, rather than grants for a specific type of content". Andreea Pavel of *Info Sud-Est* also points out that the extra editorial work of recent years has translated into extra funding, with the circle closing positively this time, compared to previous years when the circle was a vicious one and seemed unbreakable: "You don't have funding, so you can't bring in people; you don't have people, so you can't work extra for funding." Adrian Mihălțianu, editorial director of *PressOne*, also talks about this kind of support. "Fortunately, there are now more resources for the independent press than ever before, especially internationally. But all of these require time, energy and people to access, as well as know-how that is not widely available in Romania."

Răzvan Chiruță considers the need to go beyond one-off grant funding. "You can't live on grants alone, society should somehow understand that it needs the press, but at the same time I can't blame people for not trusting the press, because even we journalists don't trust the press anymore either." To reach the public, however, you are dependent on algorithms, believes Biro Attila, whether it is to promote journalistic material or to ask for support from readers. "Crowdfunding is complex because it is driven by algorithms, which are based on emotion, not reason. But our content is more about this rather rational, research focused area. It's clear that we're going to move into crowdfunding as well, but it's not going to be easy."

Cătălin Tolontan says the same thing, pointing out that "if the public and society do not decide to keep some control mechanisms through the press, they will not have them". Because without the support of society, as simple media consumers or representatives of companies managing advertising budgets, journalism cannot exist. Tolontan adds that "we can work in some places and serve the public interest, because these places are pro-business, as it was almost 200 years ago, or they are non-profit, as it started to be in the last decade, that's another discussion, but either way they belong to the public, one way or another."

2. AUDIENCE FATIGUE, THE TYRANNY OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE HAMSTER WHEEL OF IRRELEVANT CONTENT

Journalist Răzvan Chiruță says that advertising agencies play a major negative role in pushing the press to chase traffic, because advertising agencies only pay according to this single quantitative criterion, traffic. "And, then, most publications said 'if you want traffic, we'll give you traffic'. They are no longer interested in quality, they are only interested in quantity and making money," continues Chiruță.

"The corresponding investment in online advertising (due to the fact that more than 85% of the amount now available in online advertising campaigns in Romania is absorbed by the big tech platforms) is much lower (as I said, below 1%), so even strictly mathematically there is a major imbalance on the axis of consumption/content - budget allocation, in a ratio of at least 1 to 4 (to the detriment of public interest content)", explains Dragoș Stanca. "There is an urgent need for a new viable operational and commercial model that supports ethical journalism. Not just 'efficient' commercial or 'strategic' propaganda content. Private actors who provide public interest information urgently need financial support, not just moral support, to continue this service necessary for the proper functioning of the free market in a democracy. And public donations alone are not enough - nor are they a sustainable model in the long term," continues Stanca.

The scramble for traffic is recognised by almost everyone who depends on money coming in from the commercial area or via social platforms. "A news story about how the road used by the Ottomans to come and plunder Romania is now made by "Ottomans", by a Turkish firm, got 200,000 hits. You write an investigation... and it doesn't get more than 6,000 hits," says Traian Deleanu from *Turnu Sfaturului*. "Anyway, it doesn't interest anyone, because people know that they are stealing anyway, they know that politicians are doing stupid things, they know that things don't work, and they don't want to know about it. You can sense from the reactions that people want to live their lives and don't care about that stuff anymore. Restaurant reviews are extremely popular, as are articles about leisure destinations, because people want to get out, to relax. OK, there are some articles that matter, let's say out of 10 investigations, maybe one goes viral," Deleanu continues.

However, Cătălin Tolontan says that it is very important to what extent the journalist becomes just a worker for the audience or continues to seek with his own mind the public interest and do his job by bothering the powers that be.

Cătălin Moraru gives the example that "a text with Irina Loghin who was taken off stage for some reason has a million views". This kind of content doesn't provide informational value or enhance the reputation of newsrooms, but it does something else equally important: it keeps them afloat for the time being. "If I decide not to publish this kind of text, the consequences are primarily financial for me. When you don't have the money from the state or from private advertising, you depend on online performance. And online performance is much easier to achieve with this kind of stories because that's how Google News works. That's the news that they promote. 'Nasty' stuff violates community standards. But it's absolutely abnormal that when I write about underage mothers, they say that violates community standards; when I write about teenagers doing drugs, it violates community standards; when I write about drunk drivers driving without a licence, and the police aren't doing anything, it violates community standards, because the word accident comes up. That's a huge hindrance to the press - another one. It adds up. It's a steep road for us," Moraru explains.

"Basically, without these tech giants, we're invisible. In addition, the visibility of publications also depends very much on purely technical issues. You can have a good team, you can have brilliant content, but if technically you're not SEO-friendly, you don't count," says Răzvan Chiruță.

One of the journalists we spoke to says that "whether you're a good journalist or an incompetent journalist depends on the views you gather. The national publications I've worked with have rated me solely on the number of clicks I've had on my stories. They didn't take into account any other criteria by which to evaluate our journalistic work, nor did they ever send us to courses to become better journalists. The only course we did take was an SEO course, which is still focused on making the content more visible online."

Oana Șlemco, journalist at Intermedia Suceava, adds: "We build houses on rented land, land that is not ours, and we have no control over the algorithms. If one day the platform doesn't want to display your work properly, it doesn't display it, and *that's all, folks!* That doesn't mean you haven't given it your all. It's something you can't control and it's not normal to be evaluated based on things you have no control over."

All the journalists we interviewed talk about this unequal struggle with social networks. Codruța Simina, author of the *Misreport* newsletter, feels that the fight to inform the public is a losing battle, won by far by social networks. "I find it so relevant that a year before elections in 40 countries, both Facebook and Google changed their algorithms without talking to anyone. They never talk to anyone anyway. And they've reduced the media audience in general to a level where we risk not counting anymore," says Simina. "This fundamental mission of informing the public has another component, which is 'we share the same story'. And that helps us to be consistent in understanding reality and making choices. And that's no longer the province of the media, it's the province of social media."

Biro Attila reinforces the point, adding: "We are clearly affected by the algorithm. When you try to come up with a rational, cold, fact-based perspective, the algorithm gets you down and you can even throw money at it that very little is going to help you because it's scaled in such a way that it doesn't matter. You can say the most heinous drivel, you can say the biggest stupidity possible, if it produces 'hate' and inflates servers, you become a 'credible' media institution or media influencer."

„ **„ It's an unequal fight. We try to reach the public through platforms that are anti-media. And they're not anti-media because we say so, they've proven they're anti-media and they say so themselves", adds Biro Attila.**

Journalists too, not just the public, are overwhelmed by the way disinformation and counterfeit content in general is evolving. Codruța Simina says that even journalists don't understand, from a point on, how harmful misinformation is, beyond the journalistic implications, "because I, as a journalist, in order to inform a public, that public should also be interested in the information. And it seems to me that it's more complicated than ever to find an audience that is genuinely interested in information, not just getting some confirmation to some expectation of it." Codruța

Simina also adds that social media has taught the public that they can choose their own truth.

In an online landscape dominated by the consumption of information through social media, journalism is seen as a guerrilla war, says Biro. "You're in the jungle with all the predators and enemies. On the one hand, the jungle is trying to kill you, which let's say is the algorithm; and then you have the opposing army, which is propaganda and misinformation, propaganda that is fueled by money coming from the parties, money coming from different sources and with different intentions - Russia, China, and others who want to make a mess of democracy in our country. You're like a Rambo who has a small shovel in his hand and has to work and fight in this jungle."

A big problem in the fight against disinformation is also the lack of useful content, for the people, in the media. In the rush for online traffic, with few journalists having to cover diverse beats, the news is often simply a presentation of numbers or statements, without context, without an extra layer to explain to people, in their language, why it matters to them and how it affects their lives. Add to this the fact that where journalism fails, manipulation and misinformation do things very effectively. "Most of the time, journalism has removed the story, dumped it, and people need stories. But if you don't deliver it to them, they will look for it somewhere else," says journalist Codruța Simina. She adds that the space in which journalists operate has shrunk a lot and in the space that remains free "come different sources, like Simion, AUR, and others, who don't need to operate journalistically, they don't need all these rigours, they take out their phones and start raving. And people look at them because they are still able to communicate emotions, which they don't get elsewhere. When there was the scandal with those horrible conditions in retirement homes for elderly persons, there was a week in which the story was running on TV, and Ciolacu came out almost every day and had a coherent communication, going into the emotional component. During that week, AUR didn't count on social media. It was so dramatic that Simion did something he's almost never done before, he paid a couple of thousand euros and sponsored all the videos he posted."

When it comes to the content it produces, one of the big problems of the Romanian press is that, at the moment, with very few exceptions, it is only reactive, believes Răzvan Chiruță. "Three or four years ago, the press was still setting the public agenda. Now, the press only follows the agenda created by politicians. The only agenda-setting event was the story about those centers for old people. Otherwise, we look at what Ciolacu says

and sit for years to debate it. At best, if the press produces a reaction, it's just a little whirlpool in a small pond, which passes immediately. And that's a major problem, it's a hijacking of the role of the press," adds Chiruță.

This is also reinforced by Mona Dîrțu: "Do you need journalism as a citizen? Does journalism set the public agenda? If I were to think back to 2023, there are few examples where a press story has generated action and has had clear consequences that have captured public attention. The biggest impact has been that of the stories about what people have called 'horror asylums' - which, what do you know, were published by journalists from the alternative press. Why did it have such an impact and consequences? Not just because the reporting was exceptional and because a criminal investigation followed, but also because - being an understandable human interest case - it sparked public outrage. But it's hard to stir up such public outrage with stories about financial circuits - or how taxpayers' money is spent on political PR."

Codruța Simina believes that the fact that some media outlets do not take up the stories of others is also due to the large injection of public funds, but it is also the effect of 30 years of Romanian press tradition. "We still don't understand that it's pretty much over with the single author, who works alone, who finds out the story and doesn't tell anyone, doesn't collaborate with anyone. It's such a losing formula with today's audience. You have to decide if you want to stay with this ego you're combing at night or if you want to see your work be relevant. Because you're not relevant as a journalist if things end with you. The more we isolate, the more we lose," she continues.

Looking especially at the role of the mainstream media, Mona Dîrțu reinforces and expands on what Simina says. "When the press can't agree on issues that deserve to be on the public agenda, we don't have follow-ups - so relevant, well-researched topics die because the mainstream press is silent. It is silent because it is bought with poisoned money, it is silent because it has no resources (good people paid to do their job thoroughly), it is silent because it is trapped in survival mode and has no resources - time, energy, mental availability - to redefine its role starting from the basic question: What's the point of us, why do we want to survive, and how can we become indispensable to our audience again?"

Public trust in the press has plummeted from a comfortable 80% in the 1990s to 32% in 2023, the lowest level of trust ever. The reasons are varied - they

revolve around the de-professionalisation of journalists, public money controlling a chunk of the media, and critical discourse about the profession as a whole. More often than not, politicians and public actors who stand to gain from this polarization have lumped all journalists together - 'they're all dirty and bought', 'they're all stupid, or idiots' - and have thus managed, with sustained support from a large part of the profession, to dig at the foundations of journalism. "The public has completely lost confidence that journalists and journalism serve them, and this is essential because the idea of public interest also contains the public's confidence that journalists work for them in the public interest," says Vlad Stoicescu.

Adriana Barbu, from Arad, says that if at the national level journalistic independence is easy to simulate, at the local level nobody believes in it anymore.

"But it should be the other way around: in small communities, truths should come out faster and be more easily noticed and accepted by readers who live right next to them. But at the local level, nobody believes in justice any more", considers Adriana Barbu.

"I think it's extremely hard to regain the public's trust, although it's obvious to me that in small communities this battle would still be easier to fight. The elections will also come to further undermine trust in the media, which, even if it marks the election advertising, will not escape the public's harsh label," Adriana Barbu continues.

Mona Dîrțu also believes that this is now the relationship between the press and the public - one of distrust.

”Trust and credibility are what journalism is supposed to deliver to the public it serves. If I listen to you - on TV, online, on Facebook - but I don't believe you, we can't have a healthy relationship”, adds Mona Dîrțu.

"For a long time, the public in Romania has had the feeling that journalists work for the politician, for the corporation, or for the outlet's owner. Of course, there were some solid reasons to start believing these things, but this is not good for the idea of journalism, for the idea of democracy, and no matter how few of us are left, those of us who still try to work in the public interest, we will not last much longer if the public will still believe in the idea that we are not serving them, but serving other entities, interests, networks, people", says

Vlad Stoicescu. Also, "the public's refusal to pay for information is not just about a certain misunderstanding that this is what ends up killing the free and independent press, it's also about the public's distrust of buying a valuable product. After all, we all make that kind of economic calculation, whether it's the press or the sausage shop or whatever. If I can get the exact same thing for free elsewhere, why should I pay for it here? If I find broadly the same information, the same kind of processing of information, the same angle on that information on most sites, why pay for it somewhere else? We expect the public to be more open to buying press products, but I think that at the same time we must also ask ourselves the question of the quality of the press product for which we are asking the public for one form of support or another, whether it is a donation or simply a purely commercial act", explains Vlad Stoicescu.

"For local media, the challenge of gathering a critical mass of paying audiences is even harder, because people are fewer and poorer", says Cătălin Moraru, from *Monitorul de Botoșani*. "I have to offer something extra to a subscriber, and the subscriber has to appreciate that. Anyway, it will be a small mass of people. That's the problem with the local press, you don't get a critical mass to live with and the local press will probably disappear in a few years. Or it will mimic journalism. That's what we do sometimes, we have these texts that bring us traffic so we can publish our serious texts. But we've drawn a red line that we won't cross. Instead, those who don't publish the serious texts and just publish this kind of crap, get two to three times the hits we do."

"A major problem, which is Facebook's fault, is that the majority of the public only accepts black and white now. They no longer accept that there may be shades of grey. The audience wants you to publish angry hit pieces, one way or the other. There is a lot of anger, people have no more patience and this can be seen in the political area", says Răzvan Chiruță. This situation is also very clear at the local level, says Cătălin Moraru: "As long as there are social networks, this pressure from one part of the public or the other will also exist, because social networks work on this us-or-them system. No matter what I write, a fairly large group, which coagulates fairly quickly, will swear at me."

However, journalists know that without people to listen to them, to read their stories, their job does not exist. Beyond frustration and exasperation, journalists are aware that the people they are addressing are still out there watching them, even if they are not very active. "At the same time, there is still a public in Romanian society that wants more from the press. I think a lot of

journalists have surrendered out of laziness. It's easier to report what Ciolacu says than to investigate Ciolacu. It's easier to republish a press release than to make a new news story. It's easier to take what Ciucă said from Facebook than to do an interview with Ciucă. Some simply surrendered, out of laziness, and a false belief that people will not read their work. I strongly believe that there is a large mass of the public that is fed up with the way the Romanian press looks and is looking for quality articles", says Răzvan Chiruță.

Cătălin Moraru also believes that he still has an audience that appreciates deeply researched, interesting, and important stories: "They write to us *'Very good, bravo! You are the only ones who are writing about this. I didn't know that.'* And it kills me when I read that. We've been writing for years about that subject, in this case about how a road is four times more expensive than it should be, but the information doesn't reach the people because they only get it from time to time from what we post on Facebook. Journalism is dying because of that too. It doesn't mean people don't want to know. I'm used to fighting everybody, locally or nationally, I don't care, but I can't fight Google, I can't fight Facebook, I can't fight YouTube. There you have to do a kind of life or death dance and we do it, because we have no choice at the moment."

The audience that journalists talk about is not, however, an amorphous mass, a homogeneous block. It's important that the relationships built with readers, before the age of social media, become important again. *PressOne's* Adrian Mihălțianu talks about how over time they have built a relationship with their readers so that they become their supporters. "It's essential for any independent publication. In particular, we look to meet them where they are already - on social media and get them to use our products which we can then reach them with on a daily basis," he says.

The local press also has its very important place in this attempt to regain trust in the media, but, "far from the big media companies, the TV stations, which have remained the most important source of information in rural areas or small towns, but which do not talk about the problems of the people there, the local wrongdoings remain to be exposed by local journalists. But until we are willing to listen to local people and their needs, until we understand that these are the most important issues in the press, and until we communicate with them in their own language, I think that bringing the public back to the 'classic' press will be an impossible task," says Adriana Barbu.

"All this erosion of trust has no single cause, but let's not keep blaming the public and what we call its

superficiality and taste for the sensational, or just Facebook, or just the deviousness of party propagandists. Or on the fact that anyone who publishes something - a text, a video - or moderates a debate is casually sticking the title of journalist on their lapel, something that rightly confuses people and is to the disadvantage of professional journalists who respect the rules of the profession. Like relationships between people, the relationship between the press and the public has gone to hell mainly because the press, taken as a whole, has consistently made trade-offs that have undermined the contract with the public, the public service mission. Whoever serves more than one master can no longer claim to always serve the public. And the public sees that. It generalises, it's true - but that doesn't mean it doesn't have reasons to do so," says Mona Dîrțu.

International studies show that people are interested in finding out what's going on around them, just that sometimes, even if they click faster on something sensational or something that catches their attention through negativity, they get tired of and distrust journalism. They consume empty information and clicks, but their confidence in the need for journalism decreases, because what they consume is not journalism. Survey respondents say they feel the need for less depressing and more understandable information, as well as information that gives them context and explains the world to them.

"The complaint that the public is always to blame, that they don't value our work enough, reminds me of what

one of the trainers said in 2023 in a program run by the Center for Independent Journalism: 'Stop giving them shit.' 'Positive news' paid for with people's money, unmarked, serving political agendas, is such 'shit'. Stories that simply reproduce press releases without context and additional information are also 'shit'. When you swim, as a citizen, through so much informational 'shit', when you have to make an effort to find information that is relevant to you, well explained, contextualised, you have every right to stop paying attention to what is going on around you", adds Mona Dîrțu.

Nevertheless, things are a bit better now than 2-3 years ago, believes Cătălin Moraru. "It's better because the pandemic is over, or rather the manipulation linked to the pandemic, the division linked to the pandemic. Because back then there wasn't even a chance for dialogue. Now at least there is a chance for dialogue between parties who see things differently, like the war in Ukraine. People are still fighting, but it's not the same as it was then. The pandemic was like a litmus test for the Romanian people. It showed how unprepared we are, how much we don't know, how gullible and how easily manipulated we are, and how the Romanian government and authorities are unable to do anything about it. Now the squabbling exists at a lower level. Probably, if Facebook would not work for a couple of months in Romania, the country would recover, at least in terms of dialogue."

3. THE (IN) ACCESSIBLE INFORMATION – WHAT STARTED AS A STATE OF EMERGENCY, DURING THE PANDEMIC, BECAME THE NORM

It is almost 23 years since the law on free access to information of public interest came into force and it seems that it has never been so difficult to obtain information of public interest, whether it is journalists' requests or press conferences by the authorities, once mandatory, now almost non-existent. "Our authorities don't talk. Everyone held a press conference at the beginning of their mandate and that was it. They don't talk to citizens. So citizens go to listen to the people who talk to them and then those people become the leaders in their communities. They are people with all kinds of agendas," says Traian Deleanu, a journalist in Sibiu.

Access to information is seen by many of those we spoke to as a pressing issue for journalism, not just for big investigations or stories where journalists would need a quick response from the authorities, but for all stories where the authorities don't come out 100% as they would like them to. "Then we have to fight them," journalists say in unison.

Andreea Pavel, from *Info Sud-Est* in Constanta, says she is afraid to say that it can't get any worse, because every time the authorities have reinvented themselves and proved that, yes, it can always get worse. "We asked DIICOT to tell us what kind of crimes Ukrainian refugees who arrived in Romania after 24 February 2022 were exposed to. They replied that this does not fall within the 10-day deadline and that they need 30 days to send us the answer. They answered back in 40 days that they can't answer us, in fact, because the law doesn't force them to produce statistics. If that's not a mockery either, then I don't know what to call it," she says.

Mona Dîrțu also believes that "public institutions have learned that Law 544 on access to public information can be a shield: you make a written request, you wait for a written reply - and if you do not receive the requested information you sue the institution. Many non-answers invoke, totally wrongly, the GDPR - which has been completely hijacked from its purpose, becoming an anti-transparency tool." Andreea Pavel also talks about the role of data protection law in blocking access to public information: "The holy GDPR is invoked by institutions at

every opportunity when they don't want to pass on information. One of the stupidest situations occurs when the institution sends you the initials of an employee, whose CV and assets declaration are public, on the website. The authorities who do this hope that journalists will give up looking for the subject's name in dozens or hundreds of the institution's employees, give up, or in any case make their job much harder. That's right, the work is made terribly difficult, but I don't know any journalist in my circle who would give up because of that. On the contrary, it would attract even more attention, that's what the authorities don't understand."

Journalist Adriana Barbu also talks about the problems with access to information of public interest in Arad: "For any information that is outside the scope of what local public institutions in Arad want to officially communicate, you have to ask for answers based on Law 544/2001. In most cases, on the tenth day you are officially informed that the institution needs more time to give you an answer, and on the 29th or 30th day you receive another answer in which you are either informed that what you requested is not subject to the law on free access to public information, or you receive vague answers, only to certain questions. In order to get to the information you want, you are obliged to rephrase the questions, to elaborate on them, to formulate other questions, for which you wait again for the 10, and then 29, 30 days. In some cases, public interest in the subject has waned considerably by the time you can produce a balanced piece of material based on the answers you receive," explains Adriana Barbu.

However, Cătălin Moraru believes that the fault lies not only with the authorities, but also with journalists. "In Botosani, we are the only ones who still use '544' when we don't get answers through normal channels. Nobody asks questions using this law. This actually means that nobody asks the authorities something they don't want to say, because otherwise they would be told to make requests under the law, as they usually do. They answer us with difficulty, but they answer. They answer after we call, after threats of legal action. But they're so unaccustomed to 544 requests that they don't even follow the law anymore."

Traian Deleanu believes that we are talking about a regression of the democratic exercise in the relationship between authorities and the press. "In Sibiu, we have

reached the situation where you can only speak in the Sibiu City Council if you sign up on a list three days in advance and announce what you are going to say. Photography and filming were banned and, narrowly, the accredited press was allowed to film and photograph. But only the accredited press - once they've withdrawn your accreditation, you can't film," says Traian Deleanu. Why did it come to this? "Because elections are coming soon, and someone kept picking on our elected representatives in a local council meeting. Within a month, the local council regulations were changed. And this guy, who then got himself a journalist's badge, had his accreditation withdrawn by the institution. This proves how abrasive and blunt the authorities can be in their relations with the press and citizens," concludes Deleanu.

If a few years ago it was an exception not to organise press conferences, it has now become the norm. Starting with the President of Romania and continuing with larger or smaller local authorities, everyone seems to forget about this legal obligation. In fact, despite the large number of media outlets, there aren't many journalists either, and it serves the authorities to say that they don't hold conferences any more precisely because journalists are no longer interested in them, so they have started communicating directly with citizens via Facebook or, more recently, TikTok. "After many, many years, there was a very important press conference at the police station, because the chief changed. There were four people from the whole Covasna county press", says Iulia Drăghici from the *Observatorul de Covasna*.

The Romanian press abounds with press releases transcribed as news, without context, without questions from journalists, without answering the basic question in journalism - how does this information benefit my audience? Traian Deleanu talks about how things look like in Sibiu: "If you look at their websites, you see press releases, you see a lot of video, as this is easily done, short videos or live videos from events. And that's all the journalistic product you see. Anyway, even

if you go to the press conferences, after the event you see everywhere exactly those press releases and pictures you got from the communication department. Obviously, when politicians see this, they say that all the press is the same, 'as I bought that one, I can buy this one too, sooner or later, or at the right price'."

Oana Şlemco, from *Intermedia Suceava*, points out another reason why the press has to fight for information. "Most of the institutions say they can't give us information without permission from Bucharest. This bureaucratisation of information is delaying answers and blocking transparency - it's getting harder and harder to communicate with Romanian state institutions and the feeling I have in particular is that Romanian state institutions, instead of making information transparent, are working to block our access to information. We receive answers within the time stipulated by law, but these answers are sent within 10 days, 20 days, 30 days, when the information is no longer relevant and when people are no longer interested in it."

Another problem is one-sided communication, through closed groups, in which only administrators from public institutions can post information and journalists are merely passive receivers. They only receive, but not ask questions. "We are full of WhatsApp groups from the County Council, the Prefecture, the Inspectorate for Emergency Situations, where we are bombarded non-stop with some information that is not always of public interest, but which keeps us busy, lest we have time to poke around elsewhere," says one of the journalists we spoke to.

4. FEWER AND FEWER JOURNALISTS IN ROMANIAN NEWSROOMS

[In our 2021 report](#)¹⁶, we extensively mentioned the deprofessionalization of journalists as one of the causes affecting the Romanian media. Since then, deprofessionalisation has continued and accelerated in places. Newsrooms have closed, many experienced journalists have left the profession, specialisations by field are rare and young people rarely find their place in newsrooms. Editors-in-chief say young journalists are poorly trained, unwilling to put in the effort that journalism requires, and demanding salaries that are impossible to find in the press, at least at their level of experience. Younger journalists are saying yes, they want salaries that will allow them to survive, but above all, they want jobs that will give them the satisfaction of the profession, not the idea that they are human versions of ChatGPT.

"One consequence of the departure of many experienced journalists from the press is that good practices are not being passed on to new-entry journalists through professional contact. We have newsrooms with fewer seniors and more inexperienced people. The classic newsroom meeting - a place for learning and for coagulating an editorial staff with its own well-defined editorial policy - has been replaced to a large extent by video-calls or 1:1 messenger communication in the pandemic, and these have become the norm," explains Mona Dîrțu.

Cătălin Moraru says it is no longer attractive to be a journalist. "There are very, very few of us who try to keep doing our job without being bought by politicians, so people have too much to do, they have time pressure, they don't always get to the bottom of things and mistakes invariably happen. It's great to work at places like the *Recorder* or *PressOne*, where you write a story a month, but to me, journalism is reporting in the trenches every day, because that's how you tell people what's going on in the country everyday." He also says that it's not the people who work in the press who are lacking, but journalists. "People exist, but they want to do couch journalism. We published a job advert to which we received a hundred CVs from all over Romania, even though the newspaper is in Botoșani, in which they say what they can write, and how they can make content, all from home. I want my people to go out, to film, to photograph, to ask questions, to report. That's how journalism is done, or used to be done."

It is no longer tempting to be a journalist, at least in the local press, because here, in addition to hard work, without public recognition, coupled with threats and bullying, the money is scarce, especially compared to what people earn in the communication departments of local public institutions. "Salaries are at a standstill, and with a salary a little above the minimum wage it is almost impossible for local journalists to be independent. Those who try have a second job, but it supplements their income at the expense of quality journalism. In fact, I don't know too many journalists in Arad who don't have a second job, who don't do anything else besides journalism, either legally or on the black market, with all the disadvantages that this entails," says Adriana Barbu.

Things are the same in Sfântu Gheorghe, says Iulia Drăghici, editor-in-chief of *Observatorul de Covasna*. "The shortage of people in the press is acute, most people who work have two jobs to support themselves." The situation for journalists in Suceava is not much different. "Local salaries are very low. Of course we do what we do with a lot of love, but when you have to pay your bills you start to think about whether what you do matters or not and whether you can still do what you do. Some of us have the opportunity to become correspondents, but it means increasing the workload, it means going for quantity and not quality," says Oana Șlemco, from *Intermedia Suceava*.

With so many local newsrooms to choose from, journalism graduates have a lot of alternatives, and those who come leave pretty quickly, say older journalists in newsrooms. However, recent years have shown that there are newsrooms where young people can find their place, at least in Bucharest. "How can you not find people?" asks Biro Attila. "There are people who want to do journalism, who want to go and write a good story. Especially if you also explain to them why you're doing journalism, what's behind it and what the principles are. People are willing to offer more than you'd think," Biro adds. But you have to teach them more than just speed transcribing press releases and politicians' statements on Facebook. Andreea Pavel of *Info Sud-Est* also says that in 2023 they managed to get two students on board, who integrated very well. "This is an absolutely new element, which motivates us and makes us happy. We were able to discover them at a time when ISE was solid and mature enough to make commitments to expand, with all its implications, especially extra work."

¹⁶ <https://cji.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Journalism-in-2021.-An-obstacle-race-with-fewer-and-fewer-winners.-Romania.pdf>

"People don't want to be journalists anymore. They want to be Micutz, Dorian Popa; those are the new voices who present reality to you. We journalists have kind of lost it," says Codruța Simina. "I think one of the solutions could be these Bellingcat-type initiatives, where people who know how to find and gather large data sets also know how to explain reality based on them. Yes, that's a mindset change that you have to

prepare for, so you have to be flexible," Simina continues. She adds that "we have to start training young people because they are out there, they want to do these things. They can't stand going to newsrooms that say 'write a story from this press release'. They don't learn anything from it, it doesn't give them any satisfaction. With our last breath, at least we can pass on some values."

5. THE NOT AT ALL SELECT CLUB OF COUNTRIES THAT DON'T PROTECT THEIR JOURNALISTS

In addition to all the problems outlined above, journalists in Romania also face public attacks, public harassment, denigration and a long string of lawsuits, which consume their time, money and add extra pressure on already weakened newsrooms. Adriana Barbu from *Special Arad* says that on top of the financial risk comes the legal risk, because journalists are continually threatened with lawsuits, but at the local level the press cannot afford to pay lawyers whenever they need to.

The most visible case of harassment of a journalist in Romania is that of Emilia Șercan, who has been investigating for years how important people in Romania have done their doctoral work. In February 2022, the journalist reported that she had been subjected to threats and harassment after publishing an article showing that Prime Minister Nicolae Ciucă had plagiarised his PhD thesis. Moreover, five of her personal photos appeared on several websites, including adult websites. She filed a complaint with the police about the photos, and a few hours later a piece of evidence she provided to the police was leaked from the police station and posted on dozens of sites. Emilia's case has been pursued by both national and international organisations. However, in November 2023, the prosecutor in her case ruled that disclosing criminal evidence held by the police and publishing stolen private photos did not constitute crimes, sparking outrage around the world.¹⁷

Emilia Șercan believes that the decision to close the kompromat case is an extremely worrying message for the entire press because it signals that the state offers impunity to those who attack or orchestrate actions to discredit or compromise a journalist.

”**By not closing a criminal case that has had a very high domestic and international profile, the Public Prosecutor's Office shows that it can find mechanisms to protect those involved in actions targeting a journalist, all the more so if those people represent state authorities, as it happened in my case”, says Emilia Șercan.**

The journalist continues, "The solidarity of my fellow journalists and those who came to support me on one of the 16 days I protested in front of the General Prosecutor's Office, after my case was closed, reinforced my confidence that my fight for justice was and is a legitimate one, and on the other hand it was a strong message to the authorities and the public that we, journalists, will not give in to pressure when doing our job."

For Andreea Pavel, the worst signal for journalists in 2023 was the case of Emilia Șercan and the way the authorities understood that the scandal of a harassed, publicly exposed and humiliated journalist should be closed.

”**"Azerbaijan. Russia. Serbia. In such countries we have heard of journalists whose private lives have been publicly exposed because of the investigations they published, and the authorities have not reacted, have buried the files or have helped to discredit the journalists", says Andreea Pavel.**

She adds that she felt the decision was a defiant mockery of the authorities in the face of Emilia Șercan and the entire guild that stood in solidarity with her. "Indirectly, they told us that this is what will happen to all of us if we end up in Emilia's situation and those who do this will not get hurt", concludes the *Info Sud-Est* journalist.

The editorial director of *PressOne*, the media institution that publishes the journalist's investigations, also talked about the situation of Emilia Șercan. "Emilia has had to launch several lawsuits to obtain information or to defend her public image in the face of the campaign of compromise launched against her. She is put in an even tougher position because while there is international financial support for SLAPPs, there is no support at all for lawsuits that you start on your own to defend your dignity. I expect these smear campaigns to continue, both against journalists and against independent publications and those who run them," says Adrian Mihălțianu.

The *Libertatea* newsroom was one of the most sued editorial offices in Romania, being the subject of a classic SLAPP case, and the editorial director at the

¹⁷ <https://cji.ro/reactii-in-toata-lumea-dupa-decizia-in-dosarul-emiliei-sercan/>

time, Cătălin Tolontan, was summoned to the DIICOT on charges of setting up an organized criminal group¹⁸. However, Tolontan remains optimistic when he talks about how judges relate to press freedom. "Emilia's case would say it has changed for the worse. I think, however, that the exercise that was done by the non-governmental environment all over Europe against SLAPP, the awareness raising that took place, including from the European institutions, the permanent debates, even if they seemed to have no effect, I think they actually had an effect. Although there is the counterexample of Emilia Șercan, looking at the systemic problem, my feeling is that, nevertheless, from the decisions in the dozens of lawsuits that we have had in recent years, the judiciary shows that it knows what it has to guard when it comes to freedom of expression."

But *Libertatea* had at its disposal something that not many newsrooms in Romania have: the financial capacity to pay lawyers during numerous lawsuits that lasted for years and the willingness of the editorial leadership to support its journalists during trials.

OCCRP member *Context.ro* is currently involved in one of the largest SLAPP cases in Romania, says the publication's co-founder Biro Attila. On 29 February 2024, *Context* was sued by Faff Jurgen Andreas, a local businessman seeking moral and financial damages of €3.4 million. Faff Jurgen claims he lost a contract because of a journalistic investigation published by *Context* journalists. "The Romanian state paid €2 million, from European funds and the national budget, to develop a golf course that never existed," Biro Attila explains the subject of the investigation. "Following the publication of the investigation, the National Anticorruption Directorate opened a criminal case to investigate the case, and the Romanian state recently won a lawsuit demanding the recovery of the money paid for the construction of the golf course," he continues. Regarding the lawsuit, Biro believes that 'it is a classic case of SLAPP, designed to intimidate and prevent journalists from watching how public funds are spent. However, we will continue to work for the benefit of citizens and ensure that taxes are spent properly and not defrauded.'

Traian Deleanu, from the online publication *Turnul Sfatului* in Sibiu, says that most of the requests he receives demand that he delete articles. "The potentates of the day have tried this - there are about five or six important people in Sibiu who have done this, but I haven't acted on any of their notifications. If they want to, let them sue us. It doesn't scare us, but it makes us uncomfortable."

¹⁸ https://cji.ro/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/RO-RomaniaCaseStudy_SLAPP.pdf.pdf

In addition to these threats, newsrooms also face another type of aggression, such as the cyber attack on the *G4Media* website in September 2022. "Basically, they tried with all their might to take down the site. *G4Media* is the publication that has kept the subject of security laws high on the agenda," says Andreea Pavel. A few months earlier, in June 2022, Romania's president had veiledly threatened *G4Media*'s sources on the subject of national security laws. 45 civil society organisations reacted, condemning both the president's statements and the non-transparent way in which the state authorities were trying to pass a bill so important for Romanian democracy.

At the end of February 2024, the father of one of the Ploiesti mayor's cabinet councillors threatened, insulted and tried to assault two journalists, Victor Preda from *Actualitatea Prahoveană* and Harry Stefan from *NecenzuratPh*, present at the local council meeting, being stopped by the local councillors and the police and subsequently fined 200 lei by the police¹⁹. Mayor Andrei Volosevici did not intervene to stop the incidents, hinting that journalists "deserve it" because they "write/speak the wrong thing sometimes" and that "journalists also distort reality". Colleagues in the local press have started a solidarity movement, announcing that they are boycotting the mayor's press conferences until he apologises and makes some information public. Also in Craiova, in March 2024, there was an incident in which Digi24 journalist Anamaria Ianc was assaulted by former Gorj prefect Dan Ilie Morega in his office²⁰. The journalist was due to attend a press conference. The former prefect caused a road accident and was caught for the sixth time without a licence. The National Audiovisual Council reacted to the case, asking the police "to investigate the physical and verbal assault".

In such a busy election year, with the risk of increasing attacks on 'inconvenient' journalists, it is important that society reacts strongly and asks politicians to respect the role of journalists. And in cases where there are such deviations, the leaders of political parties have an obligation to react strongly and to send a clear signal that such behaviour is not tolerated or encouraged.

The situation of journalists is complicated in many places, says Biro Attila: "In Azerbaijan, they have arrested a contingent of journalists again, colleagues in Hungary seem defeated, in Slovakia, after a revival due to the murder of Jan Kuciak, now the same man who

¹⁹ <https://cji.ro/scrisoare-deschisa/>

²⁰ <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/video-reactie-violenta-a-fostului-prefect-de-gorj-dan-morega-a-impins-si-lovit-o-jurnalista-digi24-si-a-dat-o-afara-din-birou-2731925>

patronised the system that facilitated the murder of a journalist is back in power. In Bulgaria, I need only remind you that I was accused of trying to assassinate the Bulgarian Attorney General. Looking back at us things look extremely bad, yes, but we are still two

steps behind. We are following the script, but we are two episodes behind these countries. But next year, if extremist parties come to power, we'll probably end up in these scenarios where journalists will be chased in the streets."

6. ASSOCIATIONS, PUBLIC MEDIA, AND NATIONAL AUDIOVISUAL COUNCIL

Press associations, public television and public radio, and the National Audiovisual Council should be vital topics for the Romanian press. However, the people we spoke to mentioned them only tangentially or not at all.

There has been talk about partnership in the press, between journalists rather than publishers, in recent years, but almost nothing has been done. In the context of the systemic problems facing the Romanian press, the idea of ‘working together’ sounds good, but seems almost impossible to implement. Fatigue, the struggle for survival, the atomisation of newsrooms, the fear of joining forces with someone who may later prove unsavoury, and the high egos make the road a complicated one. "Who can be in solidarity with whom?" asks Adriana Barbu from Arad, although she herself says how important and necessary it would be for journalists to stand together.

Cătălin Moraru, editor-in-chief of *Monitorul de Botoșani*, has over 30 years of experience in the press. Over the years, he has been part of professional and employers' associations that have helped, he says. "If we don't fight for this profession, the profession won't survive. I think a form of press organisation that is different from that of Roșca Stănescu et comp. would be useful. At least in local news, if you're alone, they

eat you alive, there's nothing you can do. But when we were a network, like the *Monitorul* network, we were much stronger." He adds that "I don't believe that the press should just sit back, quietly cataloguing problems, and waiting for politicians to react correctly. They must, within the limits of the law and within the limits of their profession and professional ethics, fight back. Because all this buying of journalists, by the pound, is happening and because the political class, almost entirely, is afraid of the press."

Biro Attila also talks about the need for professional associations: "It's obvious to everyone what needs to be done, the problem is that no one has the energy to do it.

To get something going, you have to go to the office almost every day, you have to do paperwork, and it's going to be frustratingly tedious sometimes. It's not going to be glorious." But as Codruța Simina and Biro Attila say, it's going to be crucial, because without it the media cannot overcome its problems. The pressures from big companies like Meta or Google, deciding what people see and read and hear, and the power of AI that will change the way newsrooms work, all this is impossible for small newsrooms or individual journalists to take on by themselves.

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"The state of Romanian media in the 2024 super-electoral year"

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