

Regime Change of Public Space in Hungarian-language Romanian Press of 1990

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Abstract

The communist regime in Romania created a centralized media, characterized by the interlocking of censorship and propaganda, as well as an extensive economic control. After the regime change in Romania, free publicity displaced guided socialist publicity with no transition period. However, neither the new actors of political life, nor the media possessed the basic knowledge, rules, and norms for operating a democratic press. The assertion is based on the analysis of the issues of the Hungarian daily paper *Romániai Magyar Szó* (*Hungarian Word of Romania*) in the first half of 1990.

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In the age of communism in Romania practically all publicity was controlled by the Party, which defined the space, subject, and character of public communication, and at the same time greatly limited the access to basic information. The communist state created a media system working on the basis of centralized directions, largely characterized by high degree political control and extensive economic defencelessness. As a result of interlocking censorship and propaganda, the press held on to its role of legitimizing and forming consciousness all the way until the fall of the socialist regime. The Romanian totalitarian regime did not make it possible for civil society initiatives to develop a second publicity following the Polish, Hungarian, and Czech pattern. Except for short periods of liberalization, Romania did not even witness the so-called system of tolerant oppression, which in the aforementioned countries slowed down to a certain extent the aggressive spreading of communist ideology, and consented to the permission of certain Western

intellectual products, as well as the moderation of censorship.¹ In this context it was even less possible for a democratic political opposition to come into being, the formation of which in those countries was prepared by the forums of artistic and scientific free thinking.

While at the end of the 1980s the single-party system of communist block states seemed to become weaker, leading to a certain degree of pluralization in the structure of publicity, the Romanian press suffered an ever stronger control. In addition to a prohibitive control, and in relation with personal cult, normative censorship was becoming more frequent, requiring that the texts meant for compulsory circulation would appear according to the methods of propaganda. Resulting from the crisis of the regime, the worldview transmitted by the propaganda was increasingly detached from reality. The discourse of the press was filled with completely uncontrollable concepts: the slogans of the “wooden language” were subordinated exclusively to economic and political success propaganda. By the transmission of ritual messages, the socialist press created a pseudo-reality which excluded all elements contrary to the official ideology, and eliminated liberal political culture.

Additionally, the increasing responsibility of editorial offices and publishing houses led to the intensification of inner censorship and the formation of self-censorship. Following the official abrogation of the institution of press control – the Direction of the Press – the censorship of fear deriving from responsibility proved even more efficient than the control based on precise directions, and at the same time it highly exceeded the severity of real expectations. Self-censorship – pondering before publication – practically became the primary restrictive factor, applying the expectation of the power without any external constraint, while it became a special ingredient of the creative process; it turned into an inner control which secured one’s survival, deriving from the fear of reprehension, from denied publication possibilities, and unpaid authorial honorariums. The “inner voice” controlling journalists primarily had an ideological and political controlling function, the effects of which can also be perceived after the regime change as reflexes.²

¹ For the classification of public spheres, see Miklós Sükösd, “From Propaganda to Öffentlichkeit: Four Models of the Public Sphere under State Socialism”, *Praxis International*, X, 1–2 (1990): 39–63.

² See Róbert Takács, “Sajtóirányítás és újságírói öncenzúra az 1980-as években” (Press control and journalists’ self-censorship in the 1980s), *Médiakutató*, Spring 2005.

After the regime change in Romania, free publicity displaced guided socialist publicity with no transition period. Totalitarian press was supposed to be replaced by the liberal model operating by democratic principles and values: access to information and free expression. The transition was not this easy however, since the coming into being of free media does not necessarily mean that the level of information corresponds to the requirements of democracy. The transformation process of press life would also presuppose the changing mentality of people operating the media system and the crystallization of requirements towards the media. Romanian press had a much shorter time at its disposal to cover the same path that Western democracies covered during a much longer time period in creating the tradition of democratic press.

In the same time, there was no economic mechanism active on the press market directly following the events of December 1989. Due to the thirst for information, any “free” product of the press was sold, and the market was only restricted by the ability of the publishing companies to continuously provide the respective circulation number. As production costs were low at this time, the press was able to generate quite a significant profit.¹

As a first consequence of freedom, several political parties came into being in a short period of time, asking for their part in political communication mediated by the media. The six months following the events of December 1989 witnessed the publication of almost one thousand new press publications. However, neither the new actors of political life, nor the media possessed the basic knowledge, rules, and norms necessary for operating a democratic publicity. The newly appearing press should have had to undertake the task of the readers’ political resocialization, but it proved unable to do so, as it was basically formed on the traditions of a power-oriented press system guided from above. The formation of a democratic publicity was also hindered by the fact that the notion of civil sphere and its regulating and mediating role between the political and the society was practically unknown in post-revolution Romania.

The first editorial published in the *Romániai Magyar Szó* daily paper (legal successor of *Előre* – central organ of the Communist Party) admitted that the editorial staff “is unable to cope with the flood of

¹ Marian Petcu, *Tipologia presei romanesti* (The typology of Romanian press) (Iași: Institutul European, 2000), 96.

events and news that regularly invaded the press”.¹ At the same time, the general atmosphere of enthusiasm regarding the mission and activity of the National Salvation Front was nurtured by numerous “solemn proclamations, touchy confessions, firm declarations, emotional statements, objective reports and dialogues assessing the difficult situation of the country”. The public opinion is “stirred, organized and mobilized by the large number of programs demanding solidarity and presenting the immediate tasks and the long-term duties, helping the Council of the National Salvation Front to liquidate the vacuum of power.”²

The analysis of the January issues of the daily paper leads to the conclusion that politics appears to be angled according to the interest of the newly arising political power. The articles containing statements, declarations of intent, communiqués, proclamations, bylaws and programmes, the detailed publication of the NSF sessions and meetings, as well as speeches of new leaders – like the new-year message of Ion Iliescu – resembles the press controlled by the sole party.

It is obvious that the paper aimed to reflect in detail the political events and to fill in the informational gap produced by the communist regime, but it was not prepared to demand and furnish explanations about the events. The *Romániai Magyar Szó* – like other papers in Romania – failed to publish analyses about the conflicts inside the NSF, to explain the decree of banning of the Communist Party or to present the real interpretation of the events of December 1989.

The Romanian press had to exclusively undertake all the tasks connected to political communication, and as a result it became completely politicized. Although journalists do have political functions in democratic societies, this function became totally distorted in Romania. Various press items were formed as institutions circulating political views and programmes, therefore they took part occasionally in the organization of political groups or acted as political opposition against the power.³ Politicization also appeared in the structure of the press system: in the years following the regime change almost half of the

¹ Gábor Cseke, “A nemzetmentés felelőssége” (The responsibility of national salvation), *Romániai Magyar Szó*, December 24, 1989.

² József Balogh, “Szerintem” (In my opinion), *Romániai Magyar Szó*, December 29, 1989.

³ See Petcu, *Tipologia presei romanesti*, and Attila Z. Papp, “A romániai magyar sajtó a poszt-szocializmus korszakában” (Hungarian press from Romania in the post-socialist age), *Székegyföld 2* (2005): 82–110.

Romanian daily and weekly newspapers were operated by political parties. However, the rest of the publications were also not quite independent, as they were indirectly related to one political party or another, on account of the political pertinence of their editors.¹ Therefore until as late as the end of the 1990s the media played a key role in the misinterpretations of the overlapping public sphere and the political.

The foundation of the representation organization of Hungarians was depicted from the beginning with enthusiasm in the Hungarian-language press, in an atmosphere of waiting a miracle that would promise the solving of all the past problems. Though the events of Marosvásárhely on 20th March broke for a while the optimism, the idea of the unity within the minority and the presentation of envisaged future prevailed in the press of the 90's.

At the same time, the opinions of the journalists were closely aligned to the voice of the Union leaders that appeared to be a normative one, ensuring the political unity within the minority. This peculiarity remained characteristic for the whole Hungarian press of the 90's, which was rather unable to exercise its function of political control as regards the party of the Hungarian minority. Despite the fact that Hungarian newspapers claimed their independence, in truth they were mouthpieces for the only political organization of the Hungarian minority in Romania.

The euphoric atmosphere of direct politizing persisted in press life all along the 1990s, while the privileged situation of those working in the press business was all the more strengthened with the sudden increase in the estimation of publicity. Journalists were prone to conceive of their roles in an elitist way, namely that they had a mission to fulfil.² Additionally, the press also acquired a kind of "popular feature" by trying to act in solidarity with the population worn by social and political changes. Partisanship and solidarity formed part of militant journalism, coupled in all probability with demagoguery as well.³ However, due to the underdevelopment of the socially regulating and controlling function of the press, these ambitions led to no concrete results, remaining exclusively in the sphere of discourse. As a result, the operation of media appeared as a mirror image of the Romanian society's operational deficiencies, including the readers' inability to critically relate to the press, forcing its professionalism.

¹ Peter Gross, *Mass-media și democrația în țările Europei de Est* (Mass-media and democracy in Eastern European countries) (Iași: Polirom, 2004), 61.

² Papp, *A romániai magyar sajtó a posztsozializmus korában*, 82–110.

³ Papp, *A romániai magyar sajtó a posztsozializmus korában*, 82–110.

Furthermore, the various social, economic, and political connections with the journalists led to the appearance of several taboo subjects. The close connection of taboo subjects and influence may lead to the phenomenon of structural self-censorship, which can be explained by the fact that the journalist's place occupied in professional hierarchy renders him unable in a way to publish subjects which would harm his position or his interests related to his position.¹ Thus, besides the process of taboo creation institutionally imposed from above – usually by the political and economic spheres – the journalists themselves also took part in taboo creation.

The interconnectedness of the press and the spheres of politics and economics further weakened the authenticity of journalism, also tested by the great number of corruption scandals.² Actually, the Romanian media control and manipulation between 1990-1996 may be regarded as a result of the critical period of transition from communism to democracy, since the freedom of the press does not only mean the elimination of government influence, but also the decrease of the effects of partisan politizing and commercial interests.

The polarization of Romanian political life created a committed type of journalism. The Romanian-language media followed the polarization of the political, which resulted in a double structure in the first years after the regime change. On the one hand there was the press which supported the leading party, the National Salvation Front, proclaiming the lawfulness of the status quo formed after the fall of communism. On the other hand, there was the press of the opposition, which questioned the legitimacy and anti-communism of the governing party, urging for radical reforms, and proclaiming itself democratic.

However, this polarization did not create an effective democratic publicity, and was not able to form an objectively informed public opinion. Instead, it regenerated the structures of the old system, and only changed the sign of the discourse, while its character remained the same. The opposition press accepted an anti-communist discourse, which asked for the radical rupture with the old system without being able to offer, however, alternatives rooted in an actually democratic political culture. In opposition to this, the press supporting the

¹ Attila Z. Papp: *A romániai magyar újságíró-társadalom*, Médiakutató, Winter 2004.

² Papp, *A romániai magyar sajtó a poszt szocializmus korában*, 82–110.

government served the legitimation of the governing political forces exactly as the socialist press did before the regime change.¹

As for the Hungarian-language *Romániai Magyar Szó*, the first signs indicating a specific political polarization appeared at the end of January, when the organization representing the Hungarians from Romania (Hungarian Democratic Union of Romania) demanded immediate measures for restoring the educational system in Hungarian. Besides the critical articles towards the NSF, the paper published a large number of statements and communiqués made by the Union, which seemed to monopolize the public sphere of the Hungarian minority.

Following the fall of the communist regime, the young generation of journalists began learning the profession of journalism in the editorial offices, at those organs of free press which mixed the old reflexes inherited from socialist press with the requirements of the new reality.² Under the changed circumstances, the task was not only to transform the institutions that operated publicity, but it also meant a serious challenge for public actors to use a language which constructed reality. However, there are several contradictions in the relation of political rhetoric and social reality. The press in the first years – at least on a structural level – could not get rid of the logocracy created by the wooden language of politics, or of the tendencies of mobilization, proselytism, and persuasion.³

An expressive example for the spirit of mobilization inherited from the communist press is the appeal published in the *Romániai Magyar Szó* on 1st February by the Harghita county branch of HDUR regarding the participation of the population in a rally for supporting mother-tongue education, appeal listing also the slogans to be shouted at the rally.

In the same time, the paper made several attempts to define and clarify the political notions that came up in the public sphere in the first months after the regime change – for example that of separatism and autonomy. The notion of separatism was introduced for the first time by Ion Iliescu, leader of the NSF, in his television interview broadcasted on 25th January: “alarming news have been spread recently from certain

¹ Petcu, *Tipologia presei romanesti*, 45.

² Mihai Coman, *Mass-media în România postcomunistă* (Mass-media in postcommunist Romania) (Iași: Polirom, 2003), 75.

³ See Mihai Zamfir, *Discursul anilor 90* (The discourse of the 1990s) (București: Editura Fundației Culturale Române, 1997); Peter Gross, *Colosul cu picioare de lut* (The clay-legged colossus) (Iași: Polirom, 1999).

counties of Transylvania, about separatist processes, which generate tension and conflicts between Romanians and the Hungarian minority.”

The editorial published on 30th January in the *Romániai Magyar Szó* daily paper focused on the mentioned interview, trying to reject the accusations of separatism and the discourse resembling that of communist propaganda: “Separatism? Again? What exactly does this term mean, which was constantly used by the dictatorship to stigmatize the Hungarian from Romania?”¹ Because of the homogenizing policy of the former regime there were mightily unified things that did not belong to each other by their nature, hence separatism means – in the opinion of the editorial of 2nd February – the returning to the natural condition of things.²

The editorial of 10th February tries to explain the concept of cultural autonomy, arguing that its enforcement does not mean separatism. However, it is symptomatic for the Romanian public sphere, that notions as separatism and autonomy were often confused in the 90`s, and they have not yet been thoroughly clarified.³

Though the press signalled the possibility for the outburst of an ethnic conflict, nobody could predict the bloody events of 20th March from Marosvásárhely. After the unprecedented solidarity in the days after 22nd December, neither the politicians, nor the press was aware of the depth of the artificially created antagonism. The statement of the HDUR published on 20th March was merely a finding of the facts, written according to the heritage of communist press: “The Hungarian Democratic Union of Romania has noticed with consternation the provocations that intend to disturb the calm and the peaceful activity of the citizens of our country, to impair the relation between the Romanian and Hungarian minority. [...] We advise our organization and whole membership to preserve their human and national dignity, to resist the provocations.”

After the events, the Hungarian-language press tried to find out the explanations and causes of the conflict, but the journalist had no means and strategies to investigate in depth the events. Though the subject was maintained for months in the papers, generating a large

¹ János Szász, “Szeparatizmus?” (Separatism?), *Romániai Magyar Szó*, January 30th, 1990.

² Sándor Szilágyi N., “Szeparatizmus. Miért ne?” (Separatism? Why not?), *Romániai Magyar Szó*, February 2nd, 1990.

³ János Szász, “Szeparatizmus? Nem. Autonómia” (Separatism? No. Autonomy), *Romániai Magyar Szó*, February 10th, 1990.

number of unchecked information, the only conclusions were published in a new statement of the HDUR on 27th July, as well as in the Helsinki Watch report appearing in August.

There was a kind of fear towards the acquisition of information, owed to the cult of secrecy of the previous system.¹ The method of the circulation of rumours and uncontrolled information was taken over as a result of this, working as a reviving of information acquiring mechanisms of the communist period, and is still decisive for the structure of publicity to this day. In the structures of publicity thus formed, the value of uncontrolled, concealed, accidentally revealed, or allegedly secret information was higher and considered more authentic than openly proclaimed and accepted information.

The press was overwhelmed also by the Bucharest events between 13th and 15th June, when the miners came from Jiu Valley, and brutally repressed the rally of students and intellectuals in the Universităţii Square. The *Romániai Magyar Szó* published mainly the reports of Rompres news agency about the events, as well as the official statements of the HDUR and that of President Ion Iliescu.

On the other hand, the Romanian press was strongly concerned about the international, mainly western judgement of the country, publishing the reports of foreign news agencies on the action of miners. It was the same pattern as the one applied after the elections of May 20th, when the heading “Romanian elections with foreign eyes” was published in the daily paper.

After the regime change, the discourse of political struggle appearing in the press continued to be determined by the political culture created by the socialist press, although this discourse was supposed to be representing a radically transformed reality. From one day to another, the editorial offices had to face events which were completely new to them, while the norms of an objective and balanced way of information, as well as the rules of how to fulfil their duty towards the society were utterly missing.

The interest in political life, which was induced by the euphoria of freedom after the regime change, essentially decreased following the 1992 elections. This phenomenon was also assisted by the fact that media consumers became distrustful towards newspapers and journalists, who

¹ Maxim Danciu, “Mass-media și jurnalismul românesc în perioada de tranziție”, in: Ruxandra Cesereanu, ed. *Curenți și tendințe în jurnalismul contemporan* (Currents and trends in contemporary journalism) (Cluj-Napoca: Limes, 2003), 90.

were unable to present new political and social matters in a persuasive and authentic manner.

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