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ROMANIA

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The Worst of Times, the Best of Times for Romanian Media: Part I

By Cristina Merrill

DECEMBER 1, 2004

BUCHAREST, Romania—One day this summer I spent a few hours with a well-known painter. Moody scenes of troubled waves breaking on Black Sea shores first drew my father to this artist some 25 years ago. Back during Communism Dragos Vitelaru was a struggling young man resigned to practice his craft under a system that above all valued proletarian workers. Creatives were mere “poets.” Now he is one of this country’s established artists. He has done well in transition. His images blossom with vivid colors of exotic international ports — a complete mood change from the melancholy of his older work. Paintings are sold at premium prices to various wealthy politicians and businessmen, who have also done well in transition. “I hope this country stays corrupt so I can keep making money,” he joked after a few shots of the traditional *tuica*, a strong Romanian plum brandy.

The rare opportunity to spend an afternoon with a prized artist would have been enough of a treat, albeit a surreal one. We sat watching “The Young and the Restless,” Mr. Vitelaru’s favorite show, when the door buzzer rang. I was about to meet “Micky,” a neighborhood homeless man who runs occasional errands for the painter in exchange for small sums. “Watch out, he can smell,” the painter said with a touch of Romanian dark humor. Micky was sent to buy white wine. Once back, between sips of wine and sparkling-water *spritz*, Micky regaled us with poems and jokes about happiness and destiny, all recited with remarkable clarity and power of diction despite a few missing teeth. But at some point, he frowned and excused himself: “I have to go, I have a busy schedule ahead.” He was leaving to run other errands.

I have often thought of Micky’s errand into the wilderness, to borrow the title of Perry Miller’s book about the settling of New England, as typical of the Romanian transition buzz: a constant movement to change something, anything, in order to make a difference in one’s lives, and fast. In the last few months, several friends have either changed jobs, careers or left the country, even on a few days’ notice; stores in my neighborhood have disappeared practically overnight, not to mention streets that have been dug up completely during the day, only to be covered again by next morning. The movement can be random, almost pointless, but it’s the reality here. Romania has no clear blueprint on how to live life in a modern democratic society.

Romanians have been slower than others in the other former Soviet bloc to make the most of freedom. They are still traumatized by four decades of the worst authoritarian regime in the region. The fog is lifting fast, however, especially since the country’s entrance into the European Union in 2007 looks imminent. The rush to get ahead is suddenly reaching epidemic proportions. People at the top busy themselves with large deals, while ordinary Romanians chase petty affairs, or “*bisnita*” (pronounced “bee-SHNIT-zuh”), as they did on the black market during Communism. My own hairdresser says hair cutting and coloring is just one of the ways he can support himself, his wife and a dashing sports convertible car. Not long ago he made very good money selling passports to

Arabs in Hungary. "I would have sold my own passport if I could have," he said. In the past Romanians were instructed to despise materialism and yet they all secretly dreamed of it. Now they covet it in the open. The chatter among friends, neighbors, and colleagues is about "who made what" and "how much." The pressure is bad enough when the media blast millionaire's names but it becomes worse when quickly built mansions or luxury buildings transform previously modest neighborhoods overnight. It sends people into a jealous panic. Everyone wants a slice of the pie before it's gone. "You either sink or swim in this situation," said a taxi driver, Gheorghe Pataca. "You keep feeling a huge wave that is about to suffocate you."

The mad race to personal enrichment is one legacy of a repressive regime that instilled a culture of fear, mistrust, lack of respect for individuality and civil society, and divisiveness. It doesn't help that some of the people in powerful positions are former communists who since the Revolution have used the public's money to become wealthy through dubious means. This atmosphere sets the unfortunate example that corruption goes unpunished and unleashes all sorts of negative elements, including greed and envy. Ironically, one of the sayings Romanians are fond of now was also popular during Communism: "If my goat is going to die, let the neighbor's goat die too."

Truth outside the media

Romania's media reflect this state of society in many ways. At first glance, it looks dynamic. The thirst for freedom spawned some 1,200 publications soon after the fall of Ceausescu's dictatorship. The market now offers about 1,500 newspapers and magazines, including 14 dailies in Bucharest alone. Newsstands overflow with everything from women's and men's glossies to magazines on pets, home improvement and psychology. Romanians are becoming bigger couch potatoes than even Americans. It is

estimated that 70 percent of Romanians watch TV on a daily basis. It's understandable, given how TV-deprived they were until 15 years ago. Besides the six main TV stations (two of which are state-owned), competing cable operators offer dozens of special-interest channels, mostly in urban areas. HBO is a popular option, as are CNN and Discovery Channel. About 400 radio stations fill the country's airwaves.

Tragedy, humor, advice, entertainment — it seems that Romanian media have it all. The truth, however, is elusive: truth about the real issues facing the country, about those who own the news and the kinds of pressure they put on the media, about corrupt politicians and businessmen, about the fragile freedom of the press in Romania. "The tragedy in Romania is that it offers many promises but the moment you start digging you discover weird relationships," said Dan Turturica, editor in chief of *Evenimentul Zilei*, the best-quality daily newspaper here. "It's a typical period for the kind of savage capitalism we're in."

If in the beginning the press was fueled by a romantic desire to be free, in the last few years it has become an instrument to obtain political and economic influence, critics from nongovernmental and civil liberty agencies say. Advertising spending, while expected to keep growing, was only \$180 million last year. Compare that to the \$250 billion spent on advertising in the U.S. last year. This should mean that not all media in Romania are economically viable. According to experts, many outlets still survive because of questionable arrangements with government and special interests that impair editorial independence. The Media Monitoring Agency, the independent body that has acted as the voice of conscience for the Romanian media for ten years, lists a classic example of how a "triangle of interests" works: "Through the media property he owns, the businessman keeps on good terms with the authorities; in exchange, the authorities provide public contracts to the other companies owned by the businessman; profit made through these deals is directed toward the media institution, which survives on different criteria than the economic one."



Romanian newsstands are finally lively

The government seems to cherish holding the reins of media influence. The biggest private TV stations reportedly owe more than \$20 million in unpaid taxes to the government, a vulnerability that undermines objectivity in coverage. With \$8 million in liabilities rescheduled at the end of last year, Pro TV, the leading private-television channel that reaches 68 percent of the Romanian population, is also the biggest debtor to the state. TV news is practically mute when it comes to criticism of the ruling party, the PSD (Partidul Social Democrat). The Media

Monitoring Agency noted at one point last year that government representatives benefited from 71 percent of all appearances (mostly in a positive context) on the three main networks, as compared with 22 percent for the opposition.

The most recent figures are similar. “Practically speaking, we can say that Romania’s First Party is exclusively supported on TV, states a new Media Monitoring Agency report. Each one of the top three networks has a connection with the leadership, whether it is through debt or association. Alison Mutler, an AP reporter, is a vocal critic of what she described as strangling of TV news by officials. “This government doesn’t let me do my job properly.” She said she has been relegated to watching just one channel, *Realitatea TV* (as I do as well), an all-news-and-talk station launched three years ago that has yet to build a significant audience share. Public station TVR, watched by a third of the country, is openly pro-government. Media observers were outraged recently when the PSD ran a 12-minute political spot on TVR, when the law allows for only 30 seconds.

The biggest victims of this lack of fairness in news coverage are the Romanian public, whose right to know the truth has been shoved aside by special interests. People seem to have little choice in what they watch or read. Unfettered passion dominates media coverage in both print and broadcast. While newspapers find ways to print investigative stories about corruption in the government, the news on television avoids controversial political stories in favor of news about crime, sex and entertainment.

Newspapers are not above reaching for the lowest common denominator. Giant bold headlines shout daily about the latest adventures of Adrian Mutu, the Romanian-born Chelsea soccer star recently suspended for drug usage, or sex scandals involving personalities. Many print publications are said to have made editorial compromises with officials in exchange for being awarded government advertising. Cornel Nistorescu, the former director of the *Evenimentul Zilei*, recently quit the Romanian Press Club saying that many of its members, including some of Romania’s biggest dailies, negotiated contracts with the government. “How can you write about serious issues when you’re paid not to do it?” he said in an interview.

After *Evenimentul* printed in July a classified government document that showed that all ministries and state-owned companies need the prime minister’s approval before awarding advertising contracts, the Cen-



ter for Independent Journalism here filed a motion to have those media/government contracts made public. The main opposition party has also jumped on the bandwagon, citing the PM’s chief of staff, who on a recent show said that it would be “impossible” to give advertising to a critical newspaper. That statement alone, the opposition claims, proves the government’s preferential treatment in awarding ads.

The Berlusconi Effect

“We’re leaving Stalin and heading for Berlusconi,” said Media Monitorization Agency Director Mircea Toma. He was referring to the concentration of media ownership among a few politicians and businessmen, or “local barons” who use the press as a means to increase their influence. Silvio Berlusconi, of course, is Italy’s Prime Minister. He is a media owner and the country’s richest tycoon, lately accused of bribing justices to help one of his companies in a takeover battle.

The situation is much worse outside Bucharest, in places where groups controlling the press are either businessmen close to the government or local authorities who seek to repress criticism of their administration. Often they are one and the same. The most notorious local baron and member of the ruling party, Dumitru Sechelariu, was defeated in his bid for reelection as mayor of the city of Bacau in late spring local elections. With a fortune estimated at US\$10-12 million, Mr. Sechelariu is listed in *Capital*, Romania’s version of *Forbes*, as one of the richest people in the country. The editors who compiled the latest list of wealthy Romanians prefaced the issue with a discussion of difficulties in getting information: “Unfortunately, in Romania the secrecy behind some high-end affairs remains tied to the link of players in the world of business and those on the political scene.” Lack of trans-

parency in ownership makes it difficult to know who is behind media outlets as well.

Problems persist in districts such as Constanta and Vrancea, where officials in power exercise undue pressure on journalists. Last week, the former prefect of Vrancea threatened to “kill” critical journalists after parliamentary and presidential elections on November 28. Similar comments were made by Marian Oprisan, the wealthy president of the Vrancea County Council and local head of the ruling Social Democrat party, or PSD. Mr. Oprisan is notorious among media-freedom watchdogs for intimidation tactics used against *Ziarul de Vrancea*. The paper has accused him of using his position as an official to extort public funds to enrich himself and *Monitorul de Vrancea*, which he has turned into an unashamed partisan sheet for him and his party. It is said that Mr. Oprisan owns a large portion of *Monitorul*, which is also *Ziarul*’s fiercest competition.

Meanwhile, thanks to Mr. Oprisan’s virtual monopoly on public institutions in Vrancea, opposition paper *Ziarul* has received 208 citations for calumny in the last two years. Its journalists have been attacked, intimidated and threatened on a regular basis. The obvious aim is to bankrupt the only independent-yet-critical institution in his district. Calumny is regarded as a criminal offense under Romanian law. Cristina Guseth, the Bucharest director of U.S. sponsored Freedom House, is worried about how much longer *Ziarul de Vrancea*’s director general and publisher, Corneliu Condurache, will last. “The local press is the most disadvantaged,” she said. “It’s much more important for those struggling papers to be heard.” In an effort to help make the press self-sustainable in the countryside, Freedom House recently arranged for a media agency to select 18 local publications that would otherwise have difficulties in obtaining national advertising contracts and negotiate advertising for them. *Ziarul de Vrancea* did not make the cut, most likely because of political pressures. Oprisan’s newspaper did — not surprisingly, given the influence this press baron exerts in this northeastern province, three hours outside of Bucharest. Besides full-page ads from national and local chapters of the PSD and those won under threat from local businesses, *Monitorul* now has access to national marketers.

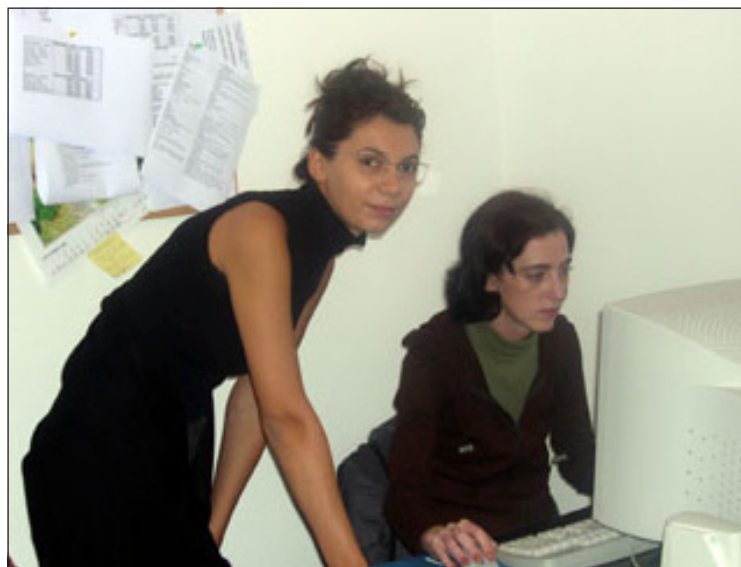
Freedom House considers Romania’s press “partially free,” a qualifier that makes Romania the only EU-aspirant without full recognition of free press. The condition has worsened this year, according to the monitoring agency. A recent survey shows that 60 percent of journalists questioned have been pressured by authorities to stop investigating or publishing the results of investigations. Also, 86 percent have been denied access to information at least once.

Of the 20 violent attacks on journalists in the last 18 months, only one has been solved by the

police. Freedom House states that “a large number of these attacks come from politicians, public officials or authorities.” An act of aggression that has gone unsolved is that of Timisoara investigative reporter Ino Ardelean for *Evenimentul*. Mr. Ardelean, who suffered a broken jaw and head wounds as a result of a beating last December, had written critical articles about illicit deals between the ruling party and business men. Timisoara police maintain that theft was the likely cause for the attack, even though the reporter’s money, cell phone and bag were not stolen.

No wonder the European Union’s latest report on Romania’s progress toward admission into the EU warned that “certain structural problems may affect the practical realization of the freedom of expression.” Some people were peeved, but not surprised, when last month Reporters Without Borders ranked Romania 70th globally on its press-freedom list, between Congo and Nigeria. One easy way to insult Romanians, by the way, is to put them in the same category as people in Africa; you might as well call them all Gypsies. In any case, Bulgaria, the only other 2007 EU aspirant besides Romania, was listed at No. 36. Last year Romania was ranked 59 and the year before 45. During campaigning for November parliamentary and presidential elections, critics of the media’s lack of freedom jokingly threatened to head for Congo in case the ruling party and its candidate for president won.

“We’re living during the worst time for the press since the fall of Communism,” says Laura Lica, a former *Evenimentul* investigative reporter who is now editor of a new English language newspaper, *Bucharest Daily News*. “We’re back where we started, asking for basic rights: the right to know and the right to write about what we know. How can we evolve if we’re still fighting for bread and water?” She continued: “The government officials treat journalists with little respect. They forget that in



“We’re living during the worst time for the press since the fall of Communism,” said Laura Lica (left), editor of Bucharest Daily News.

speaking with newspaper writers they speak with the electorate. It shows their contempt for public opinion.”

Orwell on My Mind

Once a journalist always a trouble seeker, so I was curious to see how bad treatment of the press can get in the provinces. Bucharest isn't exactly a paradise for a free media but after a few days spent in the city of Focsani at *Ziarul de Vrancea* during first-round parliamentary and presidential elections at the end of November, I missed the relatively cosmopolitan atmosphere of the capital. In Vrancea I became outraged at the ill will with which Mr. Oprisan and his party machine have undermined the most basic human rights to free expression.

Frequently I am confronted with issues I took for granted back in the United States but that are still being tested in this budding democracy. Last spring, when news came that a U.S. Marine vehicle helped topple Saddam Hussein's statue in Baghdad's central square by tying a rope around the monument that Iraqis were already trying to take down, a friend called the act "Orwellian," inferring that the US had acted in an authoritarian manner. While we have the luxury of over-using the term in America — despite what my friend said, we are still safe from real abuse of our liberties — in Romania it's not brought up enough, even when it should be. Even though they live among the ruins of a totalitarian past, people here desperately want to leave it behind.

I suppose distance makes for better observation and sometimes for an idealized version of truth. George Orwell managed to capture well the ugly face of authoritarian regimes without ever stepping foot in truly Communist countries like Romania. Similarly, Bram Stoker pieced together a decent portrait of Transylvania from the comfy book stacks of the British Library. And then there is Alexis de Tocqueville giving us *Democracy in America* after a mere six months spent in the United States, not to mention that the ultimate symbol of our democracy, the Statue of Liberty, came from the French.

Finally, consider that Ian Fleming, who had some experience with Russia and spying but lots more imagination, retreated to his house in Jamaica to write James Bond's adventures. Hollywood is not just an American creation, it is the civilized world's collective desire to reconstruct history in order to avoid a certain amount of helplessness over monotony in daily life. Modern nations borrow exotic aspects from more downtrodden places such as Romania, add happy endings and produce epics that are anything but realistic — but fantasy, too, has a role in creating hope. Romanians still don't understand why Dracula put Romania on the Western map, but when they do they'll succeed in marketing their country to the outside world — a world thirsty for myth above anything else. Had Mr. Fleming faithfully documented the

poverty of Russian women in the 1950s and 60s, agent 007's Russian girlfriends would have worn cheap synthetic pantyhose, not furs or diamonds, and would have probably happily traded state secrets for a decent meal — but who would fancy that?

Orwell came to mind two days before my visit to Vrancea — and stayed with me through the first round of elections I witnessed there. Two days before my trip, I couldn't find anywhere a copy of my favorite weekly newspaper, a satire publication that serves up a biting version of Romanian society and politics. I soon learned that "Ministry of Truth" teams belonging to the ruling party bought up, in Bucharest and various districts throughout the country, all available copies of newspapers that dared to be critical during the electoral campaign. Journalists called it "The Newsstands Crusade." According to reports from the few newspapers that had the courage to tell the story, strapping young men would show up early mornings, sometimes flanked by police, and demand to buy all a news merchant's copies. A vendor I'm friendly with said that when she refused to sell, saying she had loyal clients like me who looked forward to the papers, the young men threateningly asked "Don't you want to eat?" The next morning she found piles of dog excrement in front of her stand. "It's not a coincidence; it's a warning," she said.

The three newspapers thus affected had run completely different anti-government stories. In what could have become Romania's Pentagon Papers, the investigative daily "*Evenimentul Zilei*," (Event of the Day) published eight pages of transcripts of secret meetings of the governing party that showed key officials acknowledging corruption at the highest levels as well as their own plans to control the media and the justice system. It also published an unofficial poll showing the opposition candidate with a slight lead in the presidential race.

A second newspaper, "*Romania Mare*" (Greater Romania), edited by far-right presidential candidate Corneliu Vadim Tudor, printed inflammatory information about the sexuality of the prime minister, also the ruling party's candidate for president. Until now large-circulation publications had shied away from printing rumors that had circulated for years about Mr. Adrian Nastase's alleged past homosexual relations. Finally, the satirical weekly "*Academia Catavencu*," which also threatened to do the same but decided at the last moment against publishing evidence of said affairs, had a special insert containing authentic pro-Communist writings that current top members of the ruling party had allegedly published during the old regime. At a press conference hastily convened the morning after, "*Academia*" representatives declared that almost half of their national run had been grabbed (pardon, paid for) by "the ruling powers," either at stands or on delivery trains. In some villages, a spokesman said, buyers were identified as being members, or even councilmen, of local chapters of the ruling party. The most terrifying bit for me was that whoever

mobilized these buyers must have had advance knowledge of the subject matter in the respective papers in order to send them out on a buying mission early on. It's common practice, apparently, for the ruling party to intercept phone calls of papers that are critical and sometimes even have informers inside newsrooms. Orwell anyone?

The Little Paper that Could

I arrived in Vrancea on a Friday, prepared to find more of the same. I did, and worse. Earlier, on the phone, Rodica Condurache, wife of the publisher of *Ziarul de Vrancea*, told me, "Get ready to enter medieval times". That morning the entire press run of their newspaper was bought out, apparently for having published a list of various ways fraud could be committed during the upcoming Sunday elections.

One of the media tragedies in this country is that most Romanians get their information from television, which tends to carry positive news about the government, or none at all. The result is that few people read newspapers, especially newspapers that seem to be in opposition to the government. Responding to political pressure, people in smaller towns such as Focsani (population 100,000), where *Ziarul de Vrancea* is based, are afraid to be seen buying independent or opposition papers. "Fear has been installed in our readers just as it was during Communism," said Mrs. Condurache. Most of *Ziarul's* 4,000 daily issues are delivered by a trusted driver. A hundred "clients" get hand-deliveries. "Only our man knows where subscribers live," Mrs. Condurache said.

Soon after I arrived at *Ziarul's* headquarters, in the first-floor residential space of a cold and sterile Communist-era building, Corneliu Condurache left to attend church services marking the 50th anniversary of the death of an uncle who has since been declared a martyr-priest for having been tortured by Communists. His wife stayed to talk with me, and over the next couple of hours told the story of their paper's struggle. As she spoke, Gelu, the plump tomcat that slept nonstop on his chair, came to be the only sign of normality. The Conduraches have no other life outside the newspaper. Even their polite teenage daughter does her homework in the office (they need to use her computer) and sometimes helps journalists with spot reporting. The notoriety makes it hard for the paper to attract journalists. Their eldest son, "fed up"

with their life, left for University in Bucharest and cannot be persuaded to come back to visit.

Engineers by profession, the Conduraches came to own the paper about eight years ago. Real troubles began once Marian Oprisan came to be the region's political boss, in 2000. He had always been a rising star in the PSD, but he came into his own once he was elected head of the local council; at the time his party also came into power nationally. Vrancea is known as "baron Oprisan's country," and when the paper criticized abuses of power, Oprisan revoked the Conduraches' rights to include the name of the county in the name of the paper (it had been called *Monitorul de Vrancea*). The former title was secretly awarded to what is now the competition paper, controlled by Mr. Oprisan through a woman friend. In addition, he helped cancel their distribution contract two weeks before renewal.

A nightmarish series of events then began. Acting with the approval of the mayor's office, men operating huge cranes showed up in April 2002 to lift 14 news kiosks the Conduraches used to distribute papers throughout Focsani. The *Ziarul* director managed to obtain a "presidential ordinance" forbidding the confiscation, but the cranes continued the removal anyway.

I saw part of the drama unfold on a video that Mrs.



Photo: Ziarul de Vrancea

Corneliu Condurache, director of Ziarul de Vrancea, and his wife Rodica have become media martyrs, apparently for publishing a paper critical of public abuses in their country. (Left) The dumping ground: Monitorul de Vrancea newspaper kiosks lay where they were dropped after being confiscated by crane in 2002

Condurache played for me. The couple is so affected by their trauma that they seem to relish watching painful tapes over and over and retelling their story. It gives them fuel to continue a battle others would have given up long before. "If we gave up it would mean we would commit treason in front of those we have been on our team through these times," said Mrs. Condurache. "I couldn't show my face in the square with the monument devoted to people who died in the [1989] revolution. *We* haven't died yet."

For six hours on that Saturday afternoon in 2002, the Conduraches and their staff implored crane operators and other helpers to leave their kiosks in place. Reporters chained themselves to the stands; some climbed onto the roofs. All the newsstands were taken away in the end, merchandise and all, and dumped in a public field that to this day is guarded by police. The Conduraches never received compensation for the kiosks or the goods they contained. They also lost employees, some of whom were recruited by Mr. Oprisan to work for the rival paper. The Conduraches' editor-in-chief, dejected, left to take an unskilled job in Italy and hasn't been heard from since.

The scandal made headlines in some Romanian national newspapers and was mentioned in a 2003 United States Department of State report. Yet the notoriety didn't seem to stop Mr. Oprisan, who seems practically untouchable, thanks to the strong ties he enjoys as a reliable fundraiser for the governing PSD. Mr. Condurache says that in a phone call, Mr. Oprisan warned him directly to pack his bags and take the first train out of Vrancea if he wanted to stay alive.

Mr. Oprisan calls *Ziarul* "the poisoned rag sheet." Staffers have received death threats while some sellers have been beaten or chased away with attack dogs. *Ziarul's* current editor-in-chief, Silvia Vranceanu, a former investigative reporter who's been with the paper for most of the last seven years, was publicly humiliated in August 2002. Thanks to Mr. Oprisan, a TV station obtained and played a compromising tape of her dancing, scantily dressed, when she was a teenager ten years ago. "She was a child," Mrs. Condurache said.

Mr. Oprisan's tactics are a legacy of the lessons Communists in Romania learned from their former Soviet commandos. This kind of dirty fighting, or *santaj*, unfortunately can still be found in today's Romanian politics; adversaries are kept at bay with threats of making public damaging information collected in old dossiers, or more recently. Gathering information through phone intercepts or taped testimony from informers became an obsession during Communism — and is still a favorite pastime in some circles. The Prime Minister himself has fallen victim to threats from critics to release tapes of alleged homosexual affairs or alleged orgies in which this married father of two participated as a younger man.

One aspect of this kind of nasty war of deterrence is
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that those who pay bribes also document the payouts to keep records in case the time comes to blackmail beneficiaries, either to obtain favors or escape punishment. Mr. and Mrs. Condurache's long letters to Prime Minister Nastase and President Ion Iliescu, in which the couple described the wrongs committed against the papers as well as Mr. Oprisan's unfavorable image, have gone unanswered. "We feel abandoned, and at the mercy of criminals," Mrs. Condurache said.

Because of pressure from Vrancea officialdom, *Ziarul's* reporters are routinely barred from press conferences or taking photos of officials. "Elections are our only chance to catch these people and their families in public," said a *Ziarul* reporter. Spokespeople regularly refuse to provide information, ironically advising journalists to look up laws or file requests to obtain needed information. Requests for interviews are answered only some of the time.

Ziarul has been showered with lawsuits from Mr. Oprisan alleging calumny. One memorable day they received 64. The accumulated cost of fighting them — more than half a million dollars — has brought *Ziarul's* publishers to the brink of bankruptcy. "There have been days when we have had little to eat, preferring to pay the staff or invest in editorial equipment instead," said Mrs. Condurache. A few days before my arrival, the Conduraches received yet another citation, asking for over \$3,000 in damages. Ignoring complaints would result in an uncontested win for the plaintiff. "We begin our day after we come back from the tribunal," said Mrs. Condurache. Her diary is filled with reminders about upcoming court appearances — and carefully scribbled notes about the status of each case. "It's worse than during Communism," she said. "Before, you were not allowed to speak up. Now you can — and look what happens. In Vrancea, to write the truth is worse than to kill. If we killed Oprisan we'd have one trial. In our case, we have hundreds. These people are so sly they won't kill you, they'll make you kill yourself. It's something out of Kafka."

The Calm before the Storm

The Saturday before elections I took a morning walk through Focsani. I had free lodging thanks to a barter deal Mr. Condurache had with a hotel owner, a *Ziarul* supporter. (Personal connections and friendships are everything in Romania, even among the principled, which is why it's so difficult to define corruption.) The place was within walking distance of a market square dominated by the town hall and other official symbols of power that have come to control, more than merely administer, life here. I would have liked to think that the chill I felt came from winter winds blowing from the nearby Eastern Carpathian mountain range; maybe it's just fear of earthquakes; much of Romania's seismic activity is centered in this district.

But I shuddered for other reasons. Everywhere I



Photo: Ziarul de Vrancea

Campaign posters for the ruling party dominated Vrancea when I visited.

went, campaign posters for the PSD dominated the streets. Stores, even cultural centers, displayed ads inside their buildings, which meant that patrons had agreed to post them. *Ziarul* staffers told me that store-owners were sometimes paid — but more often coerced — to affix these signs. Refusal could result in an unexpected visit from the city, to discover tax or billing irregularities. I found only one billboard in support of the opposition party, known as the Alliance of Justice and Truth (or DA, which stands for *Dreptate si Adevar*). That one was ripped in half.

In the town square, city workers were filling the center with Christmas lights. The same square had been taken over the day before my arrival by a pro-PSD demonstration in the shape of a mock homosexual wedding. The opposition's presidential candidate, Traian Basescu, had made statements that shook up this profoundly conservative country. In an interview with MTV Romania, Mr. Basescu said that while he didn't condone the lifestyle, he wouldn't interfere in same-sex relationships. To another reporter he later estimated that about a fifth of Romania's population is homosexual, a comment he later retracted. PSD supporters nationwide leaped at the opportunity to paste all sorts of labels on Mr. Basescu.

Romanians can react strongly, especially when it comes to same-sex relationships. I have been told many

times to be careful when running in parks and to watch out for homosexuals; I get strange looks when I answer that I never heard of a woman being attacked by a gay man. Mr. Oprisan helped organize the gay-bashing in Focsani, with "wedded" men in heavy makeup parading the. Signs read: "Long live godfather Nini, and let the wedded love each other." Nini is a nickname for Mr. Basescu.

After my exploration of the city, the Conduraches came by at noon to give me an election-eve look at the newspaper. Mr. Condurache said opposition strong-armed men had bought up all his papers again. Defiant, *he* ordered another run of the same issue to distribute on election day. Half a dozen papers, which Mr. Condurache had already read that morning, were on his desk. The TV set was tuned to my favorite station, Realitatea TV. Because the law prohibits news coverage that can influence voters 48 hours prior to elections, the news shows were not political. Mrs. Condurache had brought lots of fresh apples and homemade cakes for everybody.

Given its "big bad wolf" status, or *bau-bau*, as the editor-in-chief likes to call it, *Ziarul* has plenty of supporters. Some stopped in for a chat that Saturday. One was a math teacher at the local high school who entertained us with his views on the poor state of affairs. "Yes, I have hope during elections, and just not for Vrancea." He said he was not afraid to make public his critical view of Mr. Oprisan, who he said has turned the district into Romania's Sicily. "The only thing they can get me in trouble for is the private tutoring I do." To boost salaries without paying taxes, many Romanian teachers tutor on



Photo: Ziarul de Vrancea

Mr. Oprisan helped organize a gay-bashing event following comments made by the opposition's presidential candidate in favor of same-sex lifestyle.

the side, without reporting the additional income. The teacher talked about intimidation that took place after an end-of-school event this summer. Mr. Oprisan complained about the event loudly; the headmistress resigned. The issue: One student skit mocked the unfinished gym that is on the list of more than several hundred gyms that the ruling party bragged about having finished before the November elections. The contract was awarded to a PSD contractor who took the money without doing the work. "The most profitable deals here have been with public money," said editor-in-chief Vranceanu.

Ms. Vranceanu — Silvia — took me out to dinner at the prodding of the Conduraches, who insisted on being good hosts to the end. She chose one of the few restaurants in town she liked, a sparsely peopled pizzeria. Dinner became tense when a "crooked contractor" and his family entered. *Ziarul*, of course, had criticized him. The man kept giving us angry looks. Briefly, even I was afraid. The 27-year-old editor talked to me about hard it was to work for the only paper in town that dared to condemn corruption. Besides the professional hardship — long hours, threats, obstacles, difficulty in hiring and keeping journalists, uncertainty about the paper's future — the job affected her personally as well. She is married and wishes she had more time to spend at home and on herself. She said she had gained lots of weight because of the stress. She feared that her position indirectly jeopardized her relatives since everyone knew her in this small city. Her brother, a police desk officer, had been sanctioned five times in the past year alone - she thinks as retribution.

During dinner, a member of the opposition called her cell phone to say he feared that votes would be tinkered with in one particular district. "Can you bring strong journalists to guard the station tomorrow?" he asked.

"No, but we can bring strong pens," she answered without missing a beat.

First-Round Election Day

Election-day morning was bright, crisp and sunny — they say that revolutions happen on beautiful days. I accompanied Silvia as she went to vote. This was my first experience witnessing elections in "free" Romania. We could barely see the station behind a large PSD billboard posted right in front of the house — law forbids putting campaign material less than about a third of a mile from a voting station. There was already a line by noon. Fifteen years after the Revolution, Romanians take the act of voting seriously. Participation has dropped from the

80 percent levels right after the fall of Communism, but people still show up to vote at a national average of about 60 percent.

Silvia exchanged a few tense words with a suspect figure, dressed in Sunday best, pointy shoes and all, who kept hovering about the station. A mafia-type, she whispered. As we approached the entrance, I looked through my bag for my journalist's accreditation. By mistake I dropped an opposition flyer that mimicked PSD propaganda. This particular "fake" had Mr. Nastase's picture next to the tagline: "I have doubled the wealth of my PSD colleagues." Silvia bent quickly to pick it up. "We could get arrested for this," she laughed nervously.

Back at the office, journalists were shuffling around, debating which complaints of voting irregularities they should investigate personally. Vrancea is a sprawling electoral district with hundreds of voting stations. One odd phenomenon that took place in the first-round of voting was "electoral tourism," or unofficially organized bus- s- ing to take people to vote. Because the sticker indicating that a person had voted could easily be peeled off, it was possible for some of these "tourists" to act civically more than once, especially if transportation were provided. A running joke on the radio was "How many times did you vote today?" Before election authorities came under pressure to restrict voting areas in the second round of voting, fraud could be committed because people were allowed to vote in areas outside their residential sections. If they wanted to vote away from home, people put their names (or others' names, as was also the case) on "supplemental" lists. Vrancea scored one of the highest rates of "electoral tourism." This meant that 25,000 people, or 13



Photo: *Ziarul de Vrancea*

Multiple voting done with the help of organized transport was a big story in the first round of the Romanian elections.

percent of voters, crossed into the district from other municipalities.

Casting votes in the name of Romanians working abroad was another way to inflate vote totals. About 60,000 people from Vrancea work outside Romania. *Ziarul* was able to contact several unknowing people whose names appeared on lists as having voted in Romania. In an interview she later gave *Ziarul* from her home in Paris, one woman declared: "Why is it that our votes are doubled in the country and the people in power want to win elections through lies and cheap compromises?"

Before going home that evening, I rode to a few voting stations outside Focsani with a reporter for *Ziarul*. I didn't see fraud but I could the desperation of marginalized people. Well-dressed PSD organizers or their relatives oversaw many voting sections; some were aggressively negative to *Ziarul* reporters. One woman whose relative was a highly placed PSD partisan threat-

ened to sue if it the newspaper printed anything beyond what she had said (she didn't want the reporter to talk to observers from the opposition). She also refused to be photographed.

Some polling stations were in remote village schools, some still heated with antique tile ovens — though not very well, because in one I could see my breath. We had trouble finding some places and were held up by bad roads, horse-drawn-carriage traffic jams, nonexistent street lights. I thought of poor kids growing up in these remote parts of Romania and of their parents, many of whom subsist on much less than the average monthly mean of \$180. I understood why people here sometimes accept bribe money to vote. "Only God knows how much hardship man can take," Mrs. Condurache had said earlier that day. And only God knew how they voted in that first round. I kept hoping that when the final voting day came, it would be in their power, not God's or anyone else's, to ask for more from politicians. □

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Fellows and their Activities

Alexander Brenner (June 2003 - 2005) • **CHINA**

With a B.A. in History from Yale in 1998 and a Master's degree in China Studies and International Economics from the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, Alex in China, focused on the impact of a new government and a new membership in the World Trade Organization on Chinese citizens, institutions and regions both inside and far from the capital.

Richard D. Connerney (January 2005-2007) • **INDIA**

A lecturer in Philosophy, Asian Religions and Philosophy at Rutgers, Iona College and the University of Hawaii at Manoa, Rick Connerney will spend two years as a Phillips Talbot Fellow studying and writing about the intertwining of religion, culture and politics in India, once described by former U.S. Ambassador John Kenneth Galbraith as "a functioning anarchy." Rick has a B.A. and an M.A. in religion from Wheaton College and the University of Hawaii, respectively.

Cristina Merrill (May 2004 - 2006) • **ROMANIA**

Born in Bucharest, Cristina moved from Romania to the United States with her mother and father when she was 14. Learning English (but retaining her Romanian), she majored in American History at Harvard College and there became captain of the women's tennis team. She received a Master's degree in Journalism from New York University in 1994, worked for several U.S. publications from *Adweek* to the *New York Times*, and will now spend two years in Romania watching it emerge from the darkness of the Ceausescu regime into the presumed light of membership in the European Union and NATO.

Matthew Rudolph (January 2004-2006) • **INDIA**

Having completed a Cornell Ph.D. in International Relations, Matt is spending two years as a Phillips Talbot South Asia Fellow looking into the securitization and development of the Indian economy.

Matthew Z. Wheeler (October 2002-2004) • **SOUTHEAST ASIA**

A former research assistant for the Rand Corporation, Matt is spending two years looking into proposals, plans and realities of regional integration (and disintegration) along the Mekong River, from China to the sea at Vietnam. With a B.A. in liberal arts from Sarah Lawrence and an M.A. from Harvard in East Asian studies (as well as a year-long Blakemore Fellowship in Thai language studies) Matt is also examining long- and short-term conflicts in Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia.

Jill Winder (July 2004 - 2006) • **GERMANY**

With a B.A. in politics from Whitman College in Walla Walla, WA and a Master's degree in Art Curating from Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, Jill is an ICWA Donors' Fellow looking at Germany through the work, ideas and viewpoints of its contemporary artists. Before six months of intensive study of the German language in Berlin, she was a Thomas J. Watson Fellow looking at post-communist art practice and the cultural politics of transition in the former Soviet bloc (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Croatia, Hungary, Latvia, Romania, Slovenia and Ukraine).

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