Romania: From Tele-Revolution to Public Service Broadcasting, National Images and International Image

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Abstract: Under the Ceausescu regime, Romanian Television was part of a powerful propaganda machine. The December 1989 uprising became known as a “Tele-Revolution” as some of its key moments were broadcast live. It also had negative effects on the image of the country. If reforms have been slow, enormous changes have taken place in the Romanian audiovisual landscape in the last 10 years: a regulatory Authority was set up in 1992 and audiences can now choose between the programs of public and/or private broadcasters; 40% of Romanian households are cabled, and satellite television and thematic channels are also gaining ground. In 1999, a Council of Europe report made several recommendations for Romania’s public service broadcasting to be an asset capable of promoting a high-quality audiovisual cultural policy, strengthening social cohesion and contributing to rehabilitate the image of Romania. The paper suggests that while Westerners may take some credit for helping Romanians on the road to achieve the former, they should also take some of the blame for the deadlock reached on the latter.

Résumé: Sous le régime de Ceaucescu, la télévision roumaine était au service d’un puissant appareil de propagande. On donna le nom de ‘ Télé-révolution ’ aux événements de décembre 1989 car ses moments les plus marquants furent retransmis en direct. Positive d’un côté, une telle retransmission eut des conséquences catastrophiques en ce qui concerne l’image de la Roumanie à l’étranger. Bien que les réformes aient été lentes, il y a eu des changements importants dans le paysage audiovisuel roumain depuis les dix dernières années : une autorité législative est en place depuis 1992 ; les téléspectateurs peuvent choisir entre radiodiffuseurs publics et privés ; 40% des domiciles roumains reçoivent le câble ; et la télévision par satellite et les chaînes spécialisées sont en train de gagner en importance. En 1999, un rapport du Conseil de l’Europe a fait plusieurs recommandations sur la radiodiffusion du service public en Roumanie, afin qu’elle puisse réaliser les objectifs d’une politique culturelle prônant la qualité, renforcer la solidarité sociale et réhabiliter l’image de la Roumanie. Cet article suggère que les Occidentaux, bien qu’ils puissent se féliciter d’avoir aidé à améliorer les médias roumains, ont une part de responsabilité dans le manque de progrès en ce qui a trait à l’image de la Roumanie à l’étranger.

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Before the “1989 Revolution”

In Romania, all broadcasting (radio and television) operations were under the administration of a single body (Romanian National Television) between 1957 and 1994. In the 1980s, Ceausescu’s controversial reconstruction plan of the country along with his decision to repay Romania’s foreign debt (more than $12 billion) before the end of the decade plunged the country into a deep economic crisis. Essential goods and services were restricted, including television. “Under the pretext of saving power, TVR, the only remaining channel, was reduced from 65 to 15 hours of transmission time per week. … Programs most affected were news, entertainment, and educational programs” (Campeanu, 1993, p. 110). In addition, several of the country’s regional broadcasting studios were closed. State television was essentially used as a political tool. Disseminating state ideology and legitimating state policy, TVR could hardly be considered a source of information on either domestic or international developments: broadcasts were essentially dedicated to Ceausescu, his family, and their achievements or consisted of naïve fiction, particularly that of Indian origin, the so-called opening to foreign programming (CSA, 1995). As a result, Romanians eager to know more about what was going on tried to catch television programs from neighbouring countries. It is certainly no coincidence that it was in Timisoara, where people were able to receive foreign (Hungarian and Yugoslav) television and radio, that the forces of change finally broke loose. However, broadcasts from Timisoara—and Bucharest—during and after the 1989 December events also account for much of the negative images that have been so damaging to Romania since.

The vital role of “the Revolution”: The December 1989 events

The December 1989 uprising became known as a “Tele-Revolution” as some of its key moments were broadcast live:

- Ceausescu’s fatal moment of hesitation when, on 21st December, the dictator addressed crowds gathered in the centre of Bucharest;
- the fierce fights which took place in and around TVR headquarters;
- the early public actions of a hard core of insurgents who later became the new political elite led by Ion Iliescu; and
- images of the corpses of the Conducator and his wife, Elena, after they had been speedily judged and executed on Christmas day.

As recent history has it, “broadcast information almost turned into a national neurosis” and this was particularly evident during the five days and five nights of “live spectacle brought into Romanian households by television” (Conseil de l’Europe, 1999, pp. 73-74). Recounting how, within a few hours of an appeal launched to Bucharest audiences “to rescue the television centre and its staff from counter-revolutionary forces,” the building was surrounded and protected by a huge crowd, Pavel Campeanu hailed this transformation of television viewers into active demonstrators as “evidence of the viewers community [assuming a] new social function”: that of “an active agent in social and political life, able to play, in certain circumstances, a substantial role” (Campeanu, 1993, p. 116). Yet some-
thing more sinister also took place on live television in the last days of 1989: the falsification of images, and this, as far as Romania’s image is concerned, had a far greater impact on viewers worldwide than the role played by television audiences in the December events. At his so-called trial, Ceausescu had been accused of ordering the killing of 60,000 people in Timisoara. Yet the Timisoara riots, a week before Christmas, had resulted in a few hundred or so people dead. (There is no exact figure.) The corpses of the alleged victims were shown on television all over the world in what is probably one of the first miscarriages of information on a global scale. (The corpses shown had been exhumed from a cemetery or/and taken from a hospital nearby by soldiers and Securitate agents who had decided to change sides.) Western media only learnt “the truth” two weeks later. The revelation about the falsified corpses stunned audiences worldwide. It also had long and deeply damaging effects on both the perception of audiences of themselves and of all images originating from Romania since.

**Changes since the Revolution: Decline and uphill struggle**

Within the first three months of the 1989 uprising and despite inadequate facilities, several private television stations sprang up in the major cities (Frandon, 1993). However, in the few weeks that followed the December events, “the leaders of the newly established National Salvation Front (FSN) used television so extensively to consolidate their power that their reign was dubbed a videocracy” (Ionescu, 1996-97, p. 31). Even though people’s enthusiasm for broadcasting continued after 1990, the legacy of the past (misinformation, manipulation, the absence of opposition, and—more arguably—of critical faculties) proved difficult to efface. Yet the period was not all bleak for public broadcasting. Under the Iliescu Government, TVR signed an agreement with Euronews. (It was the first public channel from a country in the former Communist bloc to be part of a European News channel.)

More importantly, the 1992 and 1994 Broadcast Laws established a legal framework for both public and private broadcasting in Romania. The National Audio-visual Council (NAC) was set up in 1992 to regulate all matters concerning radio, terrestrial, and cable television. Described as an “autonomous, public authority to guarantee the public interest in the audio-visual field,” Romania’s media watchdog is similar to certain Western European models in its appointment methods, its statute, and its role. Like France’s CSA (Conseil Supérieur de l’Audiovisuel), the NAC is responsible for granting broadcasting licences and supervising broadcasting activities throughout the country. Although the 1992 Broadcast Law (No. 48/1992) guaranteed freedom of expression and forbade censorship, reforms were slow and state control of television did not disappear. In the early 1990s, the close relationship between the government and the NAC may have been a helpful mechanism at a time of economic crisis but it was also prone to political misuse.

State Television was re-organized under the 1994 Laws on Radio and Television with two national channels to serve public interest and guarantee pluralism and freedom of information, but the government proved reluctant to make conces-
sessions to the opposition or to the liberal-minded intelligentsia in audiovisual matters. As they postponed plans to set up a national commercial television station that had first been made public in 1994, public television TVR remained the only broadcaster operating on a national scale. By the time of the fall of the Iliescu government in 1996, public television, with its two channels TVR1 and TVR2, had not found its independence from the state.

Yet despite the government’s use of bureaucracy and delaying tactics to retain its grip on the audiovisual media, private radio and television stations witnessed an unexpected growth and Romanian audiovisual media progressively moved towards a mixed system. This was no small achievement: in a country hit by low wages and, in 1993, 300% inflation, private channels found it difficult to secure the necessary investments in equipment and production and to provide adequate funding for training its workforce.

Foreign assistance played a part in changing the Romanian audiovisual landscape. It mainly consisted of: assisting the Romanian Authorities with harmonization (Romanian legislation embodies the quota rules and obligations of the European TWFD) and moving towards a market economy (Teodorescu, 1999); training professionals (half the workforce were recruited after 1990); and providing free programs and equipment.

American aid proved more forthcoming than European support. In Bucharest, for example, TV SOTI, an independent studio established as a non-profitable association in 1990, was equipped thanks to a $250,000 injection from the American company International Media Fund (Teodorescu, 1999). American millionaire George Soros gave five production studios to non-profitable organizations in the provinces. Other foreign investors include French, Hungarians, and Cypriots. TV Sigma, a Franco-Romanian channel, proposed 22 hours of daily re-broadcasts of Europe TV5 programs and two hours of Romanian-language programming. Hungarians have invested in Transylvania, a region with a large Hungarian-speaking population, and up to 90% of the capital of Antena 1, a television company that received its licence in 1993, belongs to a business company from Cyprus.

Between 1993 and 1996, the NAC granted well over 1,000 licences to private audiovisual operators (Conseil de l’Europe, 1999). In this respect, it did contribute to reducing the existing state monopoly on radio and television and to establishing a real Romanian audiovisual market. From 1993 onwards, the arrival of the more ambitious private television channels, Antena 1 (in 1993), Canal 31, Mediapro (now Pro-TV), and Televib (in 1994) progressively changed the audiovisual landscape. Satellite television also gained ground but the growth of cable television was even more astonishing: by the end of 1995, it had reached 38% of Romanian households (Teodorescu, 1999).

Private channels versus public television
The broadcaster that brought real competition to Romania’s two public channels for the first time was Pro-TV, a company which started in 1993 under the name of Canal 31 with local broadcasts in the Bucharest area but which rapidly expanded
after it was taken over by CME (the Central European Media Enterprises group) in December 1995. The American-controlled Bermuda-based media concern led by Ronald Lauder “invested $20m in order to research how the American model could be adopted in Romania. … Outfitted with the state-of-the-art equipment and Western mentality, Pro-TV climbed the charts quickly and reported satisfactory profits in 1997” (Folea, 1997-98, p. 16):

Within two years, its quiz and contest department emerged as a serious rival for the State lottery, pledging and giving out billions of lei in prizes. … In the area of politics, during the 1996 election campaign, Pro-TV offered the political parties free air time, and spent millions of dollars for satellite links to the main countries of the NATO as part of the campaign to join NATO. (Ionescu, 1996-97, p. 33)

However, Pro-TV, under the leadership of Adrian Sarbu (who is also the head of MediaPro, a real empire of mass communications), has been criticized for its aggressive business practices as well as for its pro-Western bias by the supporters of the former government and for bribing the nation into watching its programs—and buying its products—by staging daily game shows by liberal-minded intellectuals. The practices of Pro-TV seemed to confirm Miliband’s fear that foreign institutions would entice the post-Communist governments to deregulate and privatize and, where possible, take advantage of the inexperience of the (new and old) local political elites (Miliband, 1991). By 1996, Romanian media analysts had expressed concern about Romania’s changing audiovisual landscape: Valentina Marinescu (1996) pointed to “the appearance of greater inequalities among social and political groups as regard the possession of media” (p. 20), disproving McQuail’s hypothesis that “a greater access to media for all social and political actors meant a greater degree of democracy” (McQuail, 1992, p. 162). A survey conducted by Lucian Stanciu showed that public confidence in the information provided by the major television channels had plummeted from 60-65% in the early 1990s to less than 20% in 1997. Stanciu (1997-98) identified “opportunities for manipulation through television in two directions,” maintaining the stability of political powers and the consolidation of powerful financial interests (p. 14).

No theory can explain the complexities of the television restructuring process in Central and Eastern Europe but if one had to use Sparks & Reading’s (1995) conceptual framework, Romanian broadcast restructuring would probably best fit somewhere between Miliband’s theory of substantive change (1991) and Calinicos’ theory of limited change (1991).

In January 1997, when the new government of Emil Constantinescu took over, public television was not only inefficient but its sources of funding were greatly inadequate and its audiences falling. The newly elected Christian Democrat President seemed determined to reform the system under democratic principles. The old TVR management team was dismissed and replaced with a new team led by Stere Gulea, a Romanian filmmaker with considerable standing in the industry. Consultants from Western Europe were brought in to help and suggestions for cutting costs and improving standards were made. Several of these sug-
gestions have been taken up and the public broadcaster has since engaged in a modernization program to win back public confidence.

At the same time, competition between public and private channels has intensified. Public television has an advantage over the private channels: while the latter rely almost exclusively on advertising for financing, public television receives financing from various sources: the licence fee (approximately 58% of its resources), advertising (26%), state subsidy (14%), and sponsoring and other services (2.5%) (Conseil de l’Europe, 1999). However, with scarce resources devoted to the reconstruction of a dilapidated economy (OECD, 1998), Romania’s state subsidy can hardly be considered an important asset. As for the licence fee, Romanians are not renowned for dutifully paying their taxes on time … another legacy of the past in a country where, not too long ago, disobedience towards the Authorities was a sign of democratic society citizenry. Public broadcasting also faces other challenges. As TVR employees often move to the private channels, the public channel often acts as a training ground for Romanians working in the audiovisual industries, at a considerable loss to the public sector. Greatly affected by competition, Romanian public broadcasters have tried to win back ratings, often adopting the same formulae as their private counterparts. As a result, there has been a drop in the number of hours dedicated to cultural programming and a rise in the number of films and television series from the U.S. Many people feel that the increase in the number of channels available and the revamping of TVR have not meant that more channels of communication are placed at the service of the people. With a significant reduction of local production of fiction (film and television), of news magazines and documentaries, some even talked of “the replacement of political censorship by economic censorship” (Romanian filmmaker Lucian Pintilie, quoted in Jurgenson, 1992, p. 11).

The 1999 Council of Europe report recommendations

In 1999, the Council of Europe report on Romania’s culture industries warned that, with the application of free-market principles to the television sector, there was a real danger of creating an increasingly divided cultural landscape—i.e., on the one hand, the production and consumption of a standardized [audio-visual] mass culture, for the most part imported and intended for a large captive audience; and, on the other, reactions (whether deemed positive or otherwise) of national withdrawal or even religious revival—with, in the middle or on the fringe, a cultural administration seeking to perpetuate helpless institutions somehow or other and regarding the increasingly costly restoration of monuments its main concern. (Renard, 1999, pp. 19-20)

They recommended government action in order to “avoid the risk of dependency of the audio-visual media on one single source of funding (be it the State or private enterprise),” to “set out to rehabilitate public television by means of a far-reaching reform,” to “enlarge the scope of mass communication channels,” and to “adopt a flexible arrangement combining regularisation with deregulation by favouring the development of new communication technologies” (Conseil de
l’Europe, 1999, p. 94). To “avoid the media consumption model,” they suggested developing “a range of programs adapted to the socio-cultural agenda of the country” (p. 94).

Although the Romanian government has already taken steps in the direction indicated in the Council of Europe report, it is difficult to envisage how some of these goals can be achieved in a country where financial resources are scarce and people have become disillusioned with the democratic powers of television. In their report, the European experts noted that program “content and quality pos[ed] problems, because they [were] increasingly influenced by commercial pressures” (Renard, 1999, p. 21). The problem is not, of course, specific to the Romanian public service broadcaster. While, in the past, the contents of privately owned television stations diverged significantly from those of public corporations in terms of structure and values (Splichal, 1995), today this is no longer the case. Even the BBC, a highly respected and generously funded institution that has for so long embodied the concept of public service appears to be “trapped in an obsession with market share” and “is barely distinguishable from its British private counterpart” (Jenkins, 2000, p. 22). If offering “high-quality television” capable of informing, educating, and entertaining has become increasingly difficult for the BBC in today’s competitive global commercial environment, what are TVR’s chances of achieving the same goal?

Finally, the Council of Europe report asserted that “public audio-visual service could also be an asset capable of strengthening social cohesion” (Renard, 1999, p. 21). This may be wishful thinking on their part but it does not take into account the delicate situation in which Romania finds itself. The country is reconstructing itself socially as well as politically and economically and, as the report acknowledges, the issue of national identity is now “re-emerging together with that of recognition of the country’s multicultural nature” (Renard, 1999, p. 4). Alongside the Romanian majority (89.1% according to official figures), the population of Romania includes 18 officially recorded minorities, among them Hungarians (8.9%), Germans (0.4%), Ukrainians, Serbs, Croats, Russians, and Turks as well as Roma (or Gypsies) (Renard, 1999). Not all minorities enjoy the same status and discrimination is particularly rife against Gypsies (10% of the Romanian population). In this context, “social cohesion” is an extremely complex issue and the role of the public broadcaster in “strengthening social cohesion” a particularly difficult task. National minorities—particularly Hungarians and Germans—have access to TVR1 and TVR2 (with programs in both languages, 3% and 5% of all programming for each channel respectively). Special programs for other minorities (including Gypsies) are also broadcast (Conseil de l’Europe, 1999). However, in recent years, the equilibrium between communities has changed to such an extent in some regions that the emergence of “enclaves” and “confine-
Roman, and the liberals and the representatives of the Hungarian minorities seemed to spend more time arguing rather than working together on economic and social reforms. All this makes public service and a “socio-cultural agenda” increasingly difficult to define, let alone to implement.

The Council of Europe report on cultural policy ends with the recommendation that “Romania must acquire a new international image, as its current one is still too often negative or indecisive owing to past and present political, economic and social vicissitudes” (Renard, 1999, p. 26). It stresses that “culture can be a fundamental element capable of suggesting the emergence of ‘another point of view’ and facilitating the drawing up of a new strategy vis-à-vis the outside world” and suggests the setting up for this purpose of “a think-tank” made up of “leading figures from the economic, cultural and tourist sectors” (p. 26).

All this is very well, but internal divisions notwithstanding, what the experts seem to overlook is that the current “point of view” and the negative image of Romania are largely conveyed—and constructed—by Western media. Watching countless reports on Romanian orphanages, the mistreatment of children by “illegal immigrants of Romanian origin” in the capital cities of Europe, or on the pollution of rivers—inflicted by foreign concerns—in deprived rural areas, one forms a totally negative image of Romania in the year 2000. Yet Romania is a country which not only claims a rich history but has also managed to retain a large cultural wealth and diversity. Reflecting on the absence of positive images of Romania today, one is reminded of Cahiers du Cinéma’s remarks in 1992 when the Cannes Film Festival “forgot to mention” the screening of Lucian Pintilie’s The Oak in its program:

That this Romanian film has been forgotten … reveals the damage caused by all the “false” images broadcast since the fall of the Ceausescu regime. [It also informs on] the extent to which we have been manipulated by those images and how much they have prevented other images from circulating. It is as if, still ashamed and dismayed at “having seen nothing” of the macabre mise en scène of the Timisoara massacres, and finding [in the East] people better than us in the practice of “reality show”, we had decreed “lost images” all images originating from Romania since then. (Nevers, 1992, p. 28)

Widely disseminated in the West, the negative point of view on Romania has now entered the national psyche. On the tenth anniversary of the “Revolution,” a Bucharest newspaper compared Romanians to coma patients in a hospital and wrote: “we are as ashamed of being Romanians today as we were in December 1989” (Adevarul, quoted in “Roumanie: un si bruyant anniversaire,” 1999, p. 27). Its editor did not reflect on the responsibility Western powers and media might have in the pessimism felt by Romanians on the dawn of the new millennium. A grossly insufficient reconstruction aid, promises of entry into the European Union or NATO’s decision to increase co-operation at the time of the Kosovo conflict were not mentioned either. Sadly, the view of Adevarul’s editor was that Romania was better off leaving Europeans sort out its problem rather than letting Romanians deal with them.
Conclusion
There is little doubt that foreign influences have been and can be significant in the restructuring of Romanian television. As the case study shows, the drafting of the 1992 Law and its subsequent amendments was influenced by existing European legislation as well as by proposals made by a number of Western consultants. Yet foreign influences can also have debilitating effects. Viewers in the West are now familiar with the new trend of English-language messages from Romania, and other countries of Central and Eastern Europe: increasingly, demonstrators seem to direct their messages not at the local politicians but towards the world media. In the early and mid-1990s, political circles that were losing power accused “Western organisations and foundations” of “staging such demonstrations” (Milev, 1997, p. 1; Milev & Lazarova, 1999, p. 30). Their accusations were dismissed as mere propaganda and today the question of who is financing such campaigns is rarely addressed. That “the people of Romania, having shed the burden of ideological repression and finding themselves facing a battery of material problems” are “disorientated and vulnerable” (Renard, 1999, p. 4) is understandable. The fact that foreign economic—and political—interests take advantage of other peoples’ vulnerability and/or inexperience (Miliband, 1991) is nothing new but it does not make it less acceptable. That Western powers with a long democratic tradition may advise on the best ways of achieving the restoration of democratic principles is one thing. It is quite another for foreign investors to dictate media contents (including television news contents) and totally another again for the international media—including foreign public broadcasters—to influence the way a nation sees itself.

In a deregulated global environment in which nationalized broadcasting institutions are in danger of losing their status and, arguably their nation, this does not apply solely to Romanians. Big private players in the electronic media have become extremely powerful (Collins & Murroni, 1996). Identities like images are constantly reconstructed, adapted, and sometimes mythified from the perspective of the present day, of present interests and ideologies. In today’s context in which identities and cultures—or is it a common culture?—are rapidly delivered via television and computer screens, local public broadcasters seem all the more necessary. Discussing the definition of public service broadcasting that Roger Graef gave at an Oxford lecture in January 2000, Simon Jenkins (2000) rightly argued that the case for subsidizing public service broadcasting is only evident if it is rooted in cultural distinctiveness and pluralism, not commercial populism. It would be another step forward if public service broadcasters all over the world, and particularly those operating in the more wealthy nations of the Western world, would be more sensitive to the representations of less privileged nations.

Notes
1. During the notorious “Ceausescu winters” of the 1980s, broadcasts were reduced to two hours for each of the six working days and three hours on Sundays.
2. Of its 11 members, 2 were nominated by the President of Romania, 3 by the government, 3 by Parliament, and 3 by the Senate.
3. An example of government interference can be found in the launch of Romania International. Transmitted via satellite and aimed at people of Romanian origin who have emigrated, the channel seems to have been partly initiated to restore the image of Romania abroad since, at the inauguration ceremony on December 1st, 1995 (Romania’s National Day), “Ilieșcu spoke of a breach of the information blockade allegedly set up against Romania by forces interested in distorting the country’s image abroad” (Ionescu, 1996-97, p. 31).

4. For more information on the use of bureaucracy to block the appointment of philosopher Gabriel Liceanu to the managerial Council of TVR, see Ionescu (1996-97). The Broadcast bill forbade any “defamation of the country and the nation” as well as “the dissemination of classified information.”

5. In order to rank among the winners, one has to watch the broadcasts of Pro-TV regularly, buy the publications of the holding, and use the services of its phone company (Ionescu, 1996-97).

6. In 1995, Slavko Splichal (1995) noted that after decades of non-market economy and state-controlled media and economy, it was “largely believed [in East and Central Europe] that freedom of ownership and particularly private ownership [was] the guarantor of democracy” (p. 53). There is substantial evidence that Romanian media analysts did not share this view.

7. TVR1 saw its ratings share fall from 60% in 1996 to 45% in 1997 (EMBF, 1997).

8. A BBC team suggested to split public television in four entities: TVR1, TVR2, TVR International, and a fourth company responsible for video production (Teodorescu, 1999).

9. “The transformation of structures and management methods” and the “drawing up of a business plan” have been taken up by Stere Gulea and his team. The recommendation to establish a system for taxing the advertising receipts of the private channels has also been adopted. As far as new technologies developments are concerned, by 1998, Rom Telecom had joint ventures with French (Alcatel), Scandinavian (Ericsson and Nortel), and Korean equipment and communication companies while other (German, Greek, American) operators were showing interest.

10. The author agrees with Simon Jenkins (2000) that public broadcasting “must be separate from commercial broadcasting or it has no point” (p. 22). It must offer “public service of rare distinction” and should broadcast, in prime time, good dramas, documentaries, and discussions (p. 22).

11. Miliband’s conceptualization of nationalist dynamics in post-Communist European societies led to similar concerns.

References