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Fourth arm of the state. Romania's press becomes a willing partner in prejudice

Romania's media is a willing partner in the perpetuation of racism, prejudice and discrimination.

Despite its new-found enthusiasm for taking the leadership in the fight against corruption in high places — a useful card in its game plan for accession to the European Union — Romania's media plays a limited role in the fight against racism, violence and rampant discrimination. On the contrary, it plays to the prejudices of its consumers, more often promoting discrimination than fighting against it. Racism and domestic violence, for instance, are widespread in Romania but do not form any part of public discourse. Discussion of such things is seen as prejudicial to the country's efforts to join the EU and to be avoided at all costs; any attempt to raise these issues is met with hostility in the media. Discriminatory and offensive language is a daily phenomenon in the media, feeding the insensitivity of its consumers to the discrimination and violence that are endemic in Romanian society. Far from performing an educational role, the media forms part of the political and judicial structures that effectively ensure an almost complete ban on the exposure of racism, discrimination, inequality and violence. Efforts by human rights organisations in recent years to bring these things to light have had a certain amount of success. At the same time, however, hostility to such work has resulted in the emergence of a public discourse that defines a dangerous dichotomy between those 'activists' and 'true Romanians'.

Gender discrimination and domestic violence are so commonplace and accepted as part of daily life in Romania that they seldom make it into the news. The few women who dare to talk about the issues are often accused of trying to get easy publicity; many are also accused of being lesbians, crazy, manipulated or corrupted by the intellectual — often foreign — elites out to destroy 'Romanian tradition and culture'.

Since taking office in 2004, Romania's President Traian Basescu has made at least two public statements suggesting that blonde women have inferior intelligence. This is just one of the more public examples of the tendency of leading Romanian intellectuals and opinion makers to attack women. There are plenty of them, most of which are ignored by the public and media. On 5 May 2005, in an article in the national newspaper *Gandul* covering changes in the presidential team, Mircea Dinescu, a leading Romanian opinion-maker, multi-award winning poet and one of the leading personalities behind the birth of the Romanian Revolution and the fight against communism, wrote the following: '... to have the choice to keep in your palace garden a male unicorn

... or to prefer a Romanian cow with nail polish on its hooves and exposed udder — it is beyond belief.' He was criticising the departure of ex-foreign minister Andrei Plesu from the presidential team and the retention of Elena Udrea, a high profile presidential counsellor.

Dan Ciachir, another leading Romanian intellectual, in his article 'Frigidity and atheism,' published on 12 October in the same year in *Ziua* calls for a more 'feminine' approach within feminism — read sensual, mellow and submissive — rather than the existing 'ugly face of feminism'. Another leading Romanian opinion maker and philosopher, also involved in the underground fight against communism, Horia Roman Patapievici, is also known for declarations bordering on sexism. The fact that practically no significant male Romanian intellectuals or opinion makers speak up against sexism and domestic violence largely explains the absence of these issues in the media.

The Romanian Orthodox Church and rural traditions are still seen as the 'backbone' of the Romanian nation. The most trusted institution in Romania according to opinion polls, the Orthodox Church is highly patriarchal and strongly advocates the submissiveness of women to men; rural traditions are strongly sexist. Romanian newspapers are full of stories about abused celebrity wives and advertisements offering 'submissive women for company'. Popular bands such as BUG Mafia and Parazitii openly promote violence against women in their lyrics.

Since the regime change in Romania in 1990, there have been annual reports of a significant number of incidents suggesting that much of the anti-Gypsyism emanating from the media can be understood as responses to existing popular anti-Roma feeling in Romania. Polls from 2006 show that 75 per cent of Romanians do not want to live near Roma and over 50 per cent of Romanian villagers would support forced sterilisation against Roma women. Even in those rare instances of apparently sympathetic portrayals in the media, Roma seem to be perceived as not fully human, at best childlike. Coverage of the Roma in general are inadequate, fragmented and biased, if not blatantly racist.

Romania's media is largely commercially driven, and there is little appetite or will to produce programming that promotes tolerance and combats the social exclusion of Roma. Commercial television and tabloid newspapers overwhelmingly portray Roma in a negative light, reproducing the conventional racist stereotypes.

Programmes and articles are clearly the products of journalists' own subjective perspectives, which include both rational and emotional convictions. Given the often ingrained anti-Gypsyism in many journalist, it is not surprising that most news reports related to the Roma focus on Roma ghettos or neighbourhoods; anti-Gypsyism is often combined with other types of discriminatory practices such as xenophobia, sexism and homophobia.

As in the case of gender discrimination, the most worrisome aspect is that leading intellectuals and opinion makers openly promote anti-Gypsyism. A good example is Andrei Cioroianu, one of the best known intellectuals and politicians in Romania, also a Euro-observer and future member of the European Parliament, who writes regularly for *Dilema*, a well-regarded intellectual magazine. In an article in February, Cioroianu implies that Roma in one of Bucharest's neighbourhoods, Chitila, smell bad and are criminals. His article defending the eviction of convicted Roma accuses Romani women of starting a fight that triggered police action as the police 'tried to protect the

children from their own irresponsible parents'. He also accuses the Romanian police of being too soft on the Roma. Cioroianu also uses the strong pejorative 'pirande' to refer to Romani women. Many Roma feel this word is similar to the term 'nigger'. It seems a far fetched fantasy to imagine hearing the phrase 'What's up nigger?' in the sophisticated and elegant European parliament; however, 'How are you, pirando' might easily slip off the tongue of the Romanian politicians in Brussels, when meeting one of the two current Romani women MEPs. Cioroianu also speaks out against the Hungarians, who, he implies, have a hidden interest in making visible the issues faced by Roma in Romania in an attempt to prevent Romania's accession to the EU. The same issue of Dilema published articles by several of the best-known Romanian intellectuals, including the former Romanian foreign minister, philosopher and 'unicorn' Andrei Plesu.

The 4–11 May issue of the weekly *Aspirina Saracului* includes, on its last page, an article signed by another opinion maker, Mircea Radu, who hosts a popular TV show *From Love*, broadcast by Antena 1. He writes: 'You find gypsies all over the place with their half unclothed children, with only their t-shirts on. On the pavement squats some old gypsy woman who looks absent minded to the world that passes in front of her, her black eyes glittering with sin.' The author carries on imagining: '...probably all her life she stood with a cheap plastic bag half-full of sunflower seeds in front of her. And with a cigarette in the corner of her now toothless mouth. This is a kind of 'elephants mother' who gave birth to many children, some of whom died early, others who are in prisons, who, I imagine, is some kind of a queen on her street. That is why the children draw their hopscotch away from the place where she is sitting.'

None of the authors quoted above would be considered by the majority of Romanians and the Romanian elite as promoting a discriminatory discourse, quite the opposite: they are seen as open-minded and tolerant personalities in Romania.

On 28 March 2006, the newspaper *Liberatea* published a short article describing the arrest of five Romani women caught stealing. The title, in bold letters, 'Gypsy women stealing' prepares the reader for an offensive article aimed at linking criminality with Roma. The online version of the newspaper offers readers the opportunity to express their views about the available articles. Thirty-eight postings refer to the article on the Roma women, and over 2,000 readers read the postings. The comments offer the following suggestions: 'Shoot them', 'Boil them', 'Cut their hands off' 'Forced sterilisation', 'Bullets the only solution,' 'Exterminate them', 'Drown them'. The least offensive postings are those referring to the culture of criminality within Roma communities that is destroying Romania. Given that most of the online newspaper readers are well educated people, it is remarkable that none of the thousands who read those postings had anything to say against them.

On 12 November 2005, the newspaper *Romania Libera* published 'Homeless killed by a gang of students'. The article portrays the students as 'coming from good families and with no police record' and from 'serious high-schools', while the victim is presented as an alcoholic and a vagabond. In a twisted way, the article manages to downplay the brutal killing. The racial aspect of the crime is completely ignored: the victim was of Roma origins.

Fortunately, some positive examples offer hope. This year a good part of the mass media joined in the fight against racism and violence in football stadiums. But the interventions of Mircea Dragomir, the president of the

Romanian Professional League and a predominant member of the extremist party Romania Mare, are frequently published by the Romanian newspapers and quoted in news bulletins. Suspected of owning an anti-Semitic publication, known for his extremist views and his suburban vocabulary, Dragomir has repeatedly called those who speak up against racism 'idiots' and 'liars', including the minister of state dealing with anti-discrimination. Willingly or not, the media provides Dragomir with a good outlet for his promotion of racism and xenophobia. On 3 May 2006, Romania Mare leader Corneliu Vadim Tudor said on DDTV, during the widely viewed Dan Diaconescu talk show: 'This great country was transformed by the gypsies into a gypsy camp.' He advocated the elimination of Roma during his electoral campaign in 2000 and currently has about 30 per cent of the popular vote in Romania.

In January 2006, the Romanian press reported widely on a series of articles published by the Romanian New York Magazin in September 2005. The articles were signed by Aurel Sergiu Marinescu, who is presented as a respectable writer and a political dissident, and who suffered persecution and imprisonment under the Communists. They focus on the former Prime Minister of Romania and former chair of the Chamber of MPs, Adrian Nastase.

The material is terrifying and grotesque Nazi-style propaganda against Adrian Nastase, revolving around his alleged Romani origins — Nastase may have had a Roma grandmother, but he never made this public. The coverage of this material in the Romanian mass media cannot be justified by the accusations of corruption against the Romanian politician. The extreme racism of the articles and the offensive declarations against Roma are illegal and should not have got past the editors of the newspapers. The similarities to the dehumanising of Jews prior to and during the Holocaust are haunting.

The birth of the Nastase's father is described as follows: '...at the margins of the village lived a gypsy woman sexier than the others ... and there lived also a poor and unhappy Romanian villager who liked her, and out of their illegitimate affair the sex-prone gypsy women give birth to Marin.' Nastase's Roma grandmother is described as a prostitute who took advantage of the 'poor and unhappy villager'. However, the fact that the father did not recognise his son suggests that this was, in fact, another of the numerous and widely accepted rapes of Romani women by Romanian villagers in rural pre- World War II Romania. This likelihood is strengthened by the next paragraph which reads: '...the gypsy Nastase had no land, she was a day worker for the others wealthier than her'.

The articles emphasise to saturation the fact that Adrian Nastase's grandmother was a Roma; there is no reference to her without a clear indication of her 'gypsyess'. The Romani roots of the mother are transferred in their entirety to her son (Nastase's father) as he is conveniently seen as Roma rather than half-Roma, half-Romanian. For example, the author writes of Marin Nastase/Titi, father of Adrian Nastase: 'Because 'puradelul' (a derogative name for Roma children) proved he was very good in school, smart and disciplined...'

Adrian Nastase is presented as genetically determined to thievery and cheating because of his Romani origin: '...while growing up Adrian started to show the obvious racial characteristics of his [gypsy] grandmother: cunning and thievery.' The articles also 'expose' his supposed and 'shameful' homosexuality and alleged contacts with Romanian Security. The racism and homophobia of

the materials gain a new dimension as innuendoes of homosexuality are linked to Africans: '[Adrian] would often invite home black male students and he would lock himself up with them in his room pretending he was studying.' This obsession with the imagined 'Gypsiness' of Adrian Nastase recurs throughout the texts: '...to satisfy his pathological hunger for money and power, Ady (Adrian) made up one of his biggest lies --- gypsies have a very inventive spirit...'. '...as the minister of foreign affairs, Adrian Nastase continued without shame a series of lies, an atavism—quality of Gypsies, inherited from his father...'

When he is not described as a Gypsy he is described ironically as 'well sun-tanned'. 'These racial "qualities" he preserved until today. Nastase lies a lot and he believes he is too intelligent and too superior, lies to the Romanian people and thinks of the Romanian nation as an easy to manipulate herd. There are so many lies in his declarations that one can't do much but wonder about his gypsy inventiveness.'

Surprisingly, this material can be accessed through the website of the Romanian Liberal Party, which currently leads the Romanian government with Liberal Prime Minister Tariceanu and the Romanian Popular Christian and Democrat Party. One of the best-known Romanian politicians, the 'father' of the Romanian Constitution, Iorgovan, has also publicly attacked Adrian Nastase for his 'homosexual, masonic and criminal clique'. This was also widely reported in the mass media.

Religiously motivated discrimination, racism against Africans, and the horrendous discrimination and neglect of people with disabilities and mental health problems are other subjects studiously avoided by the Romanian media, which not only influences perceptions of 'the Other' but, in the case of Roma and other disadvantaged groups, encourages rejection.

On 2 June 2005, the gay festival in Bucharest saw violent incidents and attacks by the extreme right and pro-religious groups on the participants. The overwhelming majority of Romanian intellectuals and opinion makers were again either silent, finding excuses for such incidents, or openly against any type of gay rights.

The results of opinion polls, often influenced by the media, provide a clear indication that a significant number of readers buy and watch media products promoting racism and discrimination. It is reasonable to assume that prejudices and preferences are boosted and reinforced by the media and that the constant, pervasive negative and stereotypical reporting stimulates discriminatory practices. Journalists seem unaware or unconcerned by the consequences of their cultivation of xenophobia and incitement to ethnic hatred. There appears to be a substantial consensus in much of the print and broadcast media, which manifests itself in dangerous representations of the vulnerable groups not just as pariahs who deserve what they get, but in the case of Roma, homosexuals and feminists, as the menacing enemy within. Not only does the media appear to accept and promote a dangerous Roma-citizen dichotomy, it extends this dichotomy to the separation of the 'true and good Romanians' from the human rights activists.

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