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EJC

Article

European Journal of Communication
1–15
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sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/0267323117750672
journals.sagepub.com/home/ejc

Constraints and limitations of investigative journalism in Hungary, Italy, Latvia and Romania

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Abstract
The article provides evidences about mechanisms and practices that undermine the effectiveness of investigative journalism through the analysis of selected case studies of corruptive phenomena in Italy, Hungary, Romania and Latvia. In particular, the article shows that the idea of watchdog journalism does not work actually in the observed countries. Indeed, investigative journalism requires certain socio-economic conditions, such as a low degree of influence of the political and economic spheres and a high level of journalistic professionalism, which are not (always) present in the aforementioned countries. More specifically, the article focuses on three aspects that may distort investigative journalists' work: a certain proximity (sometimes overlapping) of publishers (often rich oligarchs or prominent businessmen) and politicians, the 'blackmail' exercised through advertising investments and the interferences of secret services, which may dissuade newsrooms from performing their role as the watchdog.

Keywords
Corruption, instrumentalization, investigative journalism, media colonization, watchdog

Introduction

The article intends to analyse a specific genre of journalism, namely, investigative journalism, and how this practice is conducted in relation to cases of corruption in the news media systems of Italy, Hungary, Romania and Latvia. The selection of these countries is

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mainly due to the composition of the specific work package on media and corruption within the ANTICORRP project, which included universities and research institutes from Italy, Hungary, Romania and Latvia. These countries represent a good sample to study the investigative journalism in media systems that do not belong to the liberal Anglo-American tradition. Indeed, Italy belongs to the 'Mediterranean model', according to Hallin and Mancini (2004). As far as Central Eastern European (CEE) countries, it is not possible to speak of a singular model (Zielonka, 2015). Nevertheless, our sample includes countries belonging to three groups with different characteristics in terms of political culture and institutions, as proposed by Greskovits (2015); in fact, we analyse a Baltic country (Latvia), a country of the Visegràd group (Hungary) and a Southeast European country, culturally similar to Balkan countries (Romania). Besides that, this sample allows the comparison between 'new democracies', such as observed CEE countries, and a 'democracy in transition', such as Italy, as defined by Almagisti et al. (2014).

The first group of countries could be considered as 'new democracies' because they adopted a democratic regime at the end of the 1980s. They are young and emerging democracies characterized by fragile and unstable institutions, polarized civil society and transnational economic pressures, and, because of that, their media systems are particularly exposed to influences by political and corporate interests (Zielonka, 2015). While Italy, despite it has adopted a democratic regime since the end of the Second World War, could be considered a democracy in transition because it is still undergoing a process of institutional transition with the disappearing of all the political parties that featured the so-called 'First republic' after the 'bribery city' scandal of 1992–1993.

Starting from these elements, our article aims to highlight the main constrains and limitations that undermine the investigative journalism in selected countries characterized, as we will show, by strong interdependence between the political and economic power and the media.

Even if the concepts of investigative journalism and watchdog journalism do not completely overlap (Waisbord, 2000), they are often associated because of a specific objective assigned to both of them, that is to say, monitoring the power holders and exposing the deficiencies of democracy. Therefore, in this study, we will deal with a conceptualization of investigative journalism which is very close to the idea of watchdog journalism. It could be considered the main instrument of watchdog journalism because it acts as the 'highest expression' of the 'fourth estate' of democracy (Schultz, 1998).

This conceptualization of investigative journalism is generally supposed to be associated with a specific model of journalism, namely, the liberal one (Waisbord, 2000), according to the types proposed by Hallin and Mancini (2004). Indeed, for journalism, to act as the 'watchdog' of democracy, it requires certain socio-economic conditions, which are present mainly in the Anglo-American context, particularly (1) a low level of political parallelism, that is, a low degree of influence of the political and economic spheres in the representation of the news and (2) a high level of journalistic professionalism, that is, the capacity of journalists to apply shared criteria of news values regardless of their own political orientation.

In this study, we will not focus on investigative journalism in the Anglo-American countries per se; rather, we will take the notion of watchdog journalism as an ideal interpretative lens through which to frame and to compare journalistic practices in the observed countries. Our research questions are as follows:

1. Can the investigative journalism be found in media systems that do not belong to liberal Anglo-American tradition?
2. What are the main elements that affect the practice of investigative journalism in Italy, a country with a democracy in transition, and in the new democracies of Eastern Europe, which, in our study, are represented by Romania, Hungary and Latvia?

The hypothesis that we will attempt to test through the analysis of case studies that we selected for the *ANTICORRP* research project is that the activity of investigative journalism is very difficult to replicate in professional models different from the liberal one. One possible answer to this question comes from Stetka and Örnebring (2013) and their definition of investigative journalism: 'sustained news coverage of moral and legal transgressions of persons in positions of power and that requires more time and resources than regular news reporting' (p. 415). This definition places the emphasis on two crucial preconditions required so that investigative journalism can perform its social function of controlling democracy: a strong professional autonomy and a sufficiently developed news market. One implies the other, insofar as a profitable news market usually guarantees journalists the autonomy from external pressure that is essential to performing their critical professional role (which, in this specific case, requires more time and many more resources than 'normal' news reporting activities). As we will see over the course of the analysis, the countries that we have taken into consideration do not always observe these conditions.

The article proposes the analysis of a specific field of application of investigative journalism: corruption. In fact, corruption is a highly sensitive field in the work of an investigative journalist, due to the secrecy underlying illicit exchanges (Della Porta, 1992). For this very reason, the role of dispute and deterrence carried out by news professionals takes on a crucially important role (Brunetti and Weder, 2003). Nevertheless, as we will see in the case studies, the press is not always able to act as 'watchdog' of misconduct. Journalistic practice in the countries that we will examine herein is often subject to various forms of coercion that jeopardize the operational conditions, the moral authority and even the legitimacy in the eyes of the readers, withdrawing from the 'watchdog model' to such an extent that journalism is no longer an effective tool in the face of corruption. In other words, what we are trying to say is that the efficiency and virtue of journalistic practices in general and of investigative journalism in particular need to be examined in light of the socio-cultural conditions that they occur in.

Investigative journalism: Some definitions

Before starting the analysis, it could be useful to define the object of our study, namely, the investigative journalism. There is not a great degree of scholarly consensus over definitions of investigative journalism, since it is easier to point to examples of its practice rather than to set down a definition (Stetka and Örnebring, 2013).

Waisbord (2000) proposes two approaches in order to recognize examples of investigative journalism. The first approach looks at the research methods, considering journalistic investigation as the type of activity that makes it possible to uncover issues of public

importance, thanks to the initiative and effort of a journalist. The second approach, on the contrary, assesses the effects of investigative journalism, focusing on the consequences that it produces, in other words, its capacity to arouse public indignation and attack the reputation of involved actors in the scandal.

According to the first approach, an investigative journalist is someone who, through his or her work, is committed to discovering the truth or identifying the lie, with whatever tool available (De Burgh, 2008): he or she does not simply narrate the events; rather, he or she endeavours to reveal the hidden facts, finding unknown information and turning it into stories (Richards and Josephi, 2013). The investigative journalist aims to uncover the so-called ‘hidden truth’, which essentially consists in a reconstruction of unknown events and their interpretation. It, therefore, differs from all other genres of journalism by the type of activity conducted by the reporter: the investigative journalist is expected to capture rumours, clues or tip-offs in society and check them through an actual investigation, which implies several tasks, such as analysing documents, interviewing people, evaluating the information that their sources are able to provide, as well as finding evidence and, finally, publishing the news.

But journalism can also be considered investigative when it covers behaviours or episodes that are so unexpected by the public as to generate scorn and outrage, regardless of how the information was revealed. The second approach refers to ‘*The Journalism of Outrage*’ (Protess et al., 1991), a type of journalism that stimulates society’s civil conscience, defining public morality by exposing misconduct. According to Stapenhurst (2000), investigative journalists can produce two types of effects in instances of misconduct, such as corruption: tangible and intangible. The former are those which produce direct and visible results, for example, when a journalistic investigation leads to concrete acts such as a charge or a judicial inquiry, or political forces issue legislative provisions, or they can even lead to impeachments and force political figures or public officials to resign. Intangible effects, on the contrary, are those that affect public opinion in a more general way. With their stories, the media can channel the public debate towards certain topics, thereby making the public opinion more aware of certain issues, raising the threshold of *accountability* that is asked of political representatives and/or public officials. It can spread the sense of a shared asset, and with that increase the risks connected to illegal conduct, promoting a culture of legality and a sentiment of disapproval of the corrupt among the readership (Ettema and Glasser, 1998).

The limits of investigative journalism outside the liberal model

In the selected countries, investigative journalism did not establish itself because it did not find the same fertile ground that it did, for instance, in the United States, having developed in a profoundly different socio-cultural context and in a journalistic culture that differs considerably from Anglo-American model. First of all, it is undeniable that uncovering the ‘hidden truth’ and, therefore, impressing and outraging the audience requires a certain amount of human resources, time and money. Indeed, in journalistic contexts such as Italy, or the Eastern European countries, the news market is not particularly remunerative (see Wan-Ifra report, 2016), as the newspaper circulation is not so

high and profit margin is low. Second, the economic recession of the late 2000s caused the situation to decline in these countries, causing a drop in investments in advertising spaces and, therefore, lesser resource for newsrooms (Cornia, 2016; Stetka, 2012).

The issue of economic sustainability of investigative journalism raises an important question: ‘Why should a publisher allocate resources on investigative journalism?’ In reality, it is possible to find someone who is willing to invest in this field even in the selected countries. But in these cases, we have to relinquish the idea of watchdog journalism that we have presented in previous paragraphs. These publishers, who invest in investigative journalism without an economic earning, are not interested in the worthy intention of uncovering the ‘hidden truth’ or ‘promoting a culture of legality’, but they are only interested in pursuing private gains. Hence, they ‘feed’ what Stetka and Örnebring (2013) define as ‘pseudo-investigative journalism’, that is, a practice which, behind an apparent investigation, is actually working for publishers’ gains and the interests that they ‘represent’.

We identified two very specific functions that characterize pseudo-investigative journalism in our selected countries: on one hand, the media serve as a tool in the hands of the owners to attack their (political or economic) adversaries, while, on the other hand, media outlets support those economic and political groups close to the interests of the owners. In this context, corruption can become a perfect breeding ground for setting in motion what is commonly defined as ‘the mud machine’.

In these countries, therefore, corruption tends to be a common theme, not only because it is a widespread plague but also because it is a relevant topic for destroying the reputation of political opponents as discussed by Thompson (2000). To this regard, the literature refers to the notion of *kompromat* (Ledeneva, 2006; Örnebring, 2012) to basically indicate a very widespread practice in former communist countries which consists in spreading, often anonymously, compromising information about a specific individual, with the aim of damaging his or her reputation and his or her political career. In the next paragraphs, we will provide some examples about pseudo-investigative journalism. But, to better understand the reason why this practice is widespread in the examined countries, it is necessary to take a close look at their media systems and examine the connection that exists between media, politics and business.

Jan Zielonka (2015) stressed how the media in the emerging democracies of Eastern Europe are not without political and economic interference, especially because ownership is often in the hands of national powerful business actors (mainly oligarchs) with political ambitions. In this case, this phenomenon is referred to as media colonization. A similar situation can also be observed in Italy, although a different concept is used to illustrate it; it is, in fact, referred to as the ‘impure publisher’, meaning that the media owners earn their main profits from economic sectors outside of publishing and use the media for their own and political purposes. Furthermore, the Italian model is a media system that has always been considered as having a ‘high level of political/ideological parallelism’, since its media system has long reflected the major political divisions in society (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). However, following the secularization process of society, which led to the declining influence of political parties, the links between media outlets and political ideologies gradually gave way to forms of partisanship that are less ideological and more connected to contingent interests (political but also, and increasingly, economic) (Mancini, 2012), making it very similar to the new democracies.

In light of the above considerations, the strongly interconnected relationship between political, economic and media spheres is what characterizes the examined countries: Colin Sparks (2000) refers to this as ‘political capital’. To reach his or her goals, each player acting in any one of these spheres is extremely dependent on the support and resources of the other two, thereby favouring the spread of those informal practices which subsequently encourage patronage-like behaviour. Rather than political parallelism, therefore, we believe it is more fitting to refer to it as ‘media capture’ (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2008) or ‘partisan polyvalence’ (McCargo, 2012) to the extent that the mutual co-penetration between the three systems tends to be strategic and situational, changing according to the prevalent interests in the political battlefield. This basically means that the media are more inclined to establish connections with single individuals (politicians or businessmen) rather than with political factions, to obtain protection and other advantages.

Similarities and differences between the investigated countries need to be highlighted. Previous studies have shown how Italian and Romanian journalism is primarily a type characterized by a strong political basis that acts chiefly through connections in terms of ownership and publishing, namely, through the appointment of trusted people within governing groups. Second, there are Italian studies (Gambaro and Puglisi, 2009) and Romanian ones (Greskovits, 2015) illustrating how the newspapers in these two countries are also affected by business actors who invest in advertising (regardless of their political stances) in order to influence the journalistic activity of the newsrooms. This is a crucial aspect, also in Hungary. In fact, in this country, the political interference on the publishing market is not expressed through forms of actual political parallelism, as the collapse of the communist regime led to a privatization process of the editorial activities. In this case, pressure on journalistic newsrooms is applied by state investments in the advertising market. Accordingly, the government is able to interfere heavily on journalism by economically supporting the communication agencies that prove to be more accommodating and denying resources to the more hostile ones (Stetka, 2012). The same pattern applies to the Latvian context where, especially during pre-election periods, some politicians, even on a local level, attempt to achieve favourable coverage by encouraging public companies under their control to invest in advertising spaces. However, due to its strong cultural ties with Scandinavian countries, Latvia has also tried to build a media system that immediately made a clear attempt ‘to turn over a new leaf’, even if one of the main subsisting issues is a certain secrecy behind the ownership controlling the media which makes it difficult to map out the interests that are able to affect coverage (Balcytiene, 2015). It is also necessary to point out that in every country examined by our study, especially those in Eastern Europe, the journalist, as we will demonstrate through the selected case studies, can be affected by heavy pressure, either directly from the owner or through the interference of political or economic actors, often in the form of physical threats or other similar abuse (risk of losing their job, of demotion, etc.; Koltsova, 2006).

Finally, the role of the secret services in the former communist countries should not be underestimated. The close tie between journalists and the KGB (*Komitet gosudarstvennoj bezopasnosti*; English: Committee for State Security) was part of day-to-day business aimed at controlling the activity of the media. At the beginning of the 1990s, just as democratization began in the central-eastern European countries, another process also took shape, which Mocek (2015) defined as ‘de-KGB-ization’, which pushed many

Table 1. The selected case studies.

Case	Country	Type of influence
Villa in Montecarlo	Italy	Partisan ownership
Jurmalgate	Latvia	Partisan ownership
Bacteristan case	Romania	Partisan ownership
Tocsik scandal	Hungary	State and business
István Kocsis case	Hungary	State and business
RMGC – poisoned advertising	Romania	State and business
Too virulent secret service	Romania	Secret services
Agente Betulla	Italy	Secret services

Source: our elaboration based on *ANTICORRP* deliverables.
RMGC: Roșia Montană Gold Corporation.

countries to approve laws forbidding journalists who had collaborated with the secret services in the past from working in a newsroom. Most of these laws, especially in Romania and Hungary, have yet to be applied and many of those journalists, who would have been required to leave their jobs, have either kept their positions or have even become owners of newspapers or television broadcasting stations, also maintaining work habits centred on tip-offs, leaks and spying to support the activity of State agencies. Although Italy was not part of the communist bloc, it is not completely unfamiliar with this phenomenon. The history of national secret services was in fact marked by several cases of misuse (if not actual abuse) of power which, when combined, contributed to casting a shadow on their legitimate operation (De Lutiis, 2010). As we will see over the course of this study, like the Romanian and Hungarian journalistic communities, also the Italian one has been the victim of attempts of manipulation by domestic secret services.

A look into the practice of (pseudo)investigative journalism in Italy, Latvia, Romania and Hungary

The case studies that will be discussed in this section have been selected because they provide the opportunity to analyse the complex and multifaceted combination of political and economic influences.

As we will see shortly, it is not always easy to distinguish between political and economic conditioning. We believe that this is mainly due to the recent history of these countries, namely, to the ‘proximity’ that political power and economic power are used to operating in. One must not forget that, with the exception of Italy, the other three countries (Hungary, Romania and Latvia) have a long history under a political regime that made economic planning and, more generally, state control the focal point of its existence and development, leaving the legacy of a political culture and modus operandi that is difficult to overcome in the short time that separates them from the collapse of communism (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2008). Nevertheless, the selected case studies have been organized to understand better and ‘contextualize’ the general characteristics outlined in the previous paragraph, thereby also illustrating possible similarities and differences

between the examined countries. In particular, we organized the case studies based on the (prevalent) type of influence affecting journalism: (1) influence by partisan publishers, (2) influence by the state and private individuals through advertising funding and (3) influence by secret services.

The influence of partisan publishers

The first form of influence that we will examine is the influence exercised by the media owners. In these circumstances, as we will see below, journalists only investigate a given event if it does not damage the interests of their own publisher, possibly with the purpose of attacking a competitor of the ownership. Otherwise, the journalists will engage in a negotiation aimed at neutralizing the scandal, attempting to inhibit the social consequences that it could produce. We have identified three cases that can be classified in this category: 'The Montecarlo Villa scandal' in Italy, 'Jurmalgate' in Latvia and the 'Bacteristan case' in Romania.[1]

The first one refers to the incident involving the former president of the Italian legislative assembly (Camera dei Deputati) Gianfranco Fini, in reference to real estate in Montecarlo. At the time when the scandal surfaced, Fini's alliance with the then Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi, was coming to an end. In the midst of this political battle, *Il Giornale*, a center-right newspaper owned by the Berlusconi family, reported a presumed crime of misappropriation and embezzlement, involving Fini who apparently fraudulently appropriated an apartment in Montecarlo owned by his political party, Alleanza Nazionale. Presented in these terms, it would appear to be a classic example of investigative journalism, as it observes all of the criteria set forth in the literature: a journalist who gathered information and conducted field research arousing the indignation of the public opinion. Nevertheless, it is clear that the newspaper used the journalistic investigation instrumentally, that is, as a form of pseudo-investigative journalism, since Fini's political career was heavily damaged as a result (but without suffering legal consequences). At the same time, the main center-left newspaper (*La Repubblica)*, which was known for its anti-Berlusconi stance, produced coverage aimed at defending Fini, thereby confirming the above, regarding the parallelism and instrumentation of Italian press. The right–left contraposition of Italian newspapers, accordingly, does not disappear from the scene, but its role is reassessed in light of the contingent interests (attack/defence of the single individuals) heating up the public debate between a center-left newspaper and a center-right one.

A very similar situation was analysed in the Latvian report with 'Jurmalgate', in reference to an exchange of bribes for the election of the mayor of the city of Jurmala. In this case, the member of the Jurmala city council, Ilmārs Ančāns, reported to the KNAB (*Korupcijas novēršanas un apkarošanas birojs*; English: Corruption Prevention and Combating Bureau) anti-corruption authority that he had been offered a bribe to vote for Juris Hlevickis (a member of the Latvia's First Party) as mayor. The anti-corruption authority began an investigation and, through tapping, the presumed involvement of a number of members of Latvia's national government was discovered. Through a journalistic investigation, a television show called *De Facto* revealed the scandal and numerous newspapers began looking into the case. As with the Montecarlo Villa, however, the Latvian newspapers offered completely opposing interpretations as well: the liberal newspaper *Diena* launched an investigation, publicly asking for political consequences

for the people involved, while other newspapers, particularly the conservative National Rifle Association (*NRA*), tried to 'neutralize' the scandal and de-legitimize the investigation by disputing the methods. In other words, *Diena* covered at length the case, denouncing the misconduct and stigmatizing the involved politicians (both from local and national government). By contrast, *NRA* questioned the competitors' work, asserting that the scandal broke out with the aim of damaging the government. As Mancini (2012) explains, 'The most intriguing aspect of instrumentalization is the absence of transparency concerning the ownership of mass media' (p. 272), and this situation seems to characterize the Latvian context. Indeed, the lack of clarity on the owners of Latvian newspapers undermines the possibility to understand what kind of external interests produced such differences on the reporting and, in particular, on the framing of the story.

Finally, another recent corruption scandal also belongs to this category, involving, albeit at different levels of responsibility, Romanian entrepreneurs, politicians and public officers. The story, 'Bacteristan', regarding 13 Romanian citizens who contracted hospital infections (all deceased for this reason), surfaced between 2015 and 2016, thanks to the sole initiative of a sports newspaper, *Gazeta Sporturilor*, which informed the readership of the existence of a patronage network between *Hexi Pharma*, the main supplier of disinfectants (biocides) in Romania and the Romanian health care service. It is rather unusual for a sports newspaper to cover these types of journalistic investigations. But the behaviour of the Romanian newspaper can be explained simply remembering who the owner of *Gazeta Sporturilor* is: Dan Voiculescu, a controversial businessman who was elected three times as Senator for the conservative party, as well as creator of one of the largest Romanian media groups, known for his attacks against his political adversaries (particularly former President Traian Băsescu) through the media under his ownership.

These three cases, therefore, provide an initial result: in a context characterized by a low level of professional autonomy, investigative journalism can be used by publishers as a tool to pursue their own interests. At least under the watchdog concept, journalistic investigation should be the tool used by the media to perform its role as the monitor of misconduct. The media outlet reports the misconduct through journalistic investigation and stimulates a reaction from public opinion, thereby stigmatizing episodes of misconduct. The three case studies, on the contrary, prove that the investigation can be conducted (or avoided) instrumentally to attack an enemy, regardless of ethical-professional considerations and ideological-cultural justifications (what counts seems to be the final result of the action rather than loyalty to certain values/political objectives). Journalists are not the 'custodians of public conscience' that Ettema and Glasser (1998) discuss; they do not stimulate the practice of social control over public opinion through a detached narration of the facts, rather they are biased journalists, who conduct investigations only if there is the possibility of damaging an adversary of their own publisher or an unpopular political figure. They are pseudo-investigative journalists, acting 'on behalf of their owners' political or economic interests' (Stetka and Örnebring, 2013: 420).

The State, advertising investments and journalists

A partisan publisher who uses investigative journalism to pursue private interests is not the sole form of influence that jeopardizes the principles of watchdog journalism. In this

paragraph, we will illustrate how journalism can also be affected by actors outside of the newsrooms, such as the State or economic businesses, through the act of buying advertising spaces. The strong influence that the State, with all of its agencies, continues to have overwhelmingly on journalism (and not only on civil life) of the countries being observed, is demonstrated by two Hungarian scandals and a Romanian scandal.

The two Hungarian scandals occurred in Hungary, respectively, between the mid-1990s and the end of the first decade of the 21st century, proving that certain characteristics tend to last over time and, especially, regardless of pressure applied by the European Union: the ‘Tocsik scandal’ and the ‘Kocsis case’, based on the names of the main protagonists of two shady cases of fraud and powerful political covers.

The Tocsik scandal is considered the first important case of corruption to be revealed in Hungary shortly after the collapse of the communist regime. Marta Tocsik was a mediator for the National Privatization and Asset Management Corporation (NPAM) during the postcommunist privatization process. In particular, she worked as a mediator when the NPAM was transferring the value of the lands of public companies to the local governments, receiving a very large sum of money that, to a large extent, she transferred to various private-owned companies close to the government’s parties. In short, the government’s parties, together with NPAM’s managers, embezzled money from the privatization, concealing it through Tocsik’s mediation. The case was discovered and reported by *Figyelő* weekly, which triggered an actual judicial investigation. *Figyelő* was the only media outlet to cover the case at the onset of the scandal, even though it was later proven that other news outlets were aware of it. This led us to believe there was a certain unwillingness by Hungarian media to look into cases of corruption concerning agencies close to the government. At the beginning of the case, in fact, other newspapers, including, for instance, the liberal *Magyar Hírlap*, left-wing *Népszabadság* and economic *Világgazdaság*, took a much more accommodating stance on NPAM and started treating the case ‘more closely’ only when the judicial investigation began. This reservation is understandable in light of the ‘treatment’ that the government addresses to opponent journalists. As a matter of fact, several journalists declared to be threatened in connection with the Tocsik case. In particular, Tibor Krecz and Zoltán Siposs, who worked for *Figyelő*, were threatened and tapped by the *Minister of Civilian Intelligence Services*, and Krecz’s wife was removed from her position at NPAM, thus demonstrating how in these countries the State is able to create a hostile environment for investigative journalism.

The Kocsis case surfaced in June of 2009, when the on-line newspaper *hindex.hu* discovered that István Kosics, CEO of the public company *Hungarian Electricity Private Limited Company* (MVM) until 2008, had transferred the considerable sum of 3.5 million EUR to an offshore company owned by him, *Jadran Investments Limited*, in the form of a ‘false’ investment. Also in this circumstance, a legal process began, in which Kosics was found not guilty and his wife and one of his main collaborators were sentenced to jail time, sentences that were appealed and suspended in 2013. Tomás Bodoky, from the on-line newspaper *hindex.hu*, is the journalist who published the first reports on suspicious transactions relative to the state company MVM, based on a document issued by the international auditing company *Ernst & Young*. In all of this, the central aspect is that numerous Hungarian news outlets had been aware of this document for a long time,

but none of them, unlike the on-line newspaper *hindex.hu*, took the responsibility of making the facts known to the public or start a close investigation (at least until the legal proceedings began against the accused). The reason why most Hungarian newspapers did not take interest in the case can be explained by the fact that, at the time, MVM was one of the major investors in the advertising market. In other words, the passive attitude towards this case can be explained as a direct consequence of the risk of losing the advertising support of MVM.

All of this illustrates the heavy limitations that the Hungarian journalists are subject to. When pressure is not applied directly by the publisher, the government may discourage practicing independent journalism, either through threats and blackmail against whoever tries to investigate cases of misconduct. This is an actual form of censure that only lifts when other subjects, such as the courts, for example, break the wall of silence around a case of corruption, thereby effectively authorizing the media to talk about it. Hence, in the eyes of journalists, the beginning of a legal proceeding seems to represent a sort of 'guarantee' against the danger of blackmail and revenge by those who, in a fully democratic system, should otherwise appreciate the independence of the media system. Basically, it is as though having a case dealt with by the courtrooms erases every type of respect for the establishment. The two Hungarian cases have shown how the State exercised its influence on the media system. In particular, as illustrated in the pages above, political power and economic power seem to come together in a strategic 'alliance' that is more capable of influencing the role of the media than ideological loyalty to and consensus of government parties.

The Romanian case of '*RMGC – Poisoned Advertising*', on the contrary, tends more towards a private type of influence on journalism. The event in question occurred between 2000 and 2014, when the mining company *Roșia Montană Gold Corporation* (RMGC), the owner of a highly disputed license for the exploitation of the area surrounding Roșia Montană, began to give considerable sums of money in the form of advertising contracts, ensuring positive coverage from all the major national media outlets, with the exception of some on-line media. In brief, RMGC is a company whose majority shareholder is Australian company *Gabriel Resources* and whose minority shareholder is the Romanian government. In 2000, the company decided to invest in an area classified by Romanian Law as 'nationally relevant cultural heritage', sparking a controversy between the mining company and a number of stakeholders (residents of the surrounding area, environmentalists, etc.) who wanted to stop the project that would last approximately one decade. In this case, no newspaper engaged in investigation activities and the journalistic coverage was generally generous towards the private company. These data are particularly relevant when one considers that between 2007 and 2010, RMGC spent more than 12 million EUR in advertising, ranking as the eighth largest Romanian advertiser in 2011. In other words, through a copious activity of advertising investments, RMGC succeeded in influencing both the publishing agenda, as well as the content channelled by the Romanian media for the entire period of time taken into examination, all regardless of any form of journalistic autonomy. The case is, therefore, indicative of the level of subordination that the main Romanian news agencies operate in. The advertising investors buy advertising spaces not so much to promote their economic enterprise as to influence journalistic coverage.

The contaminations of the secret services

The last form of influence arises from shady relationships between journalists and secret services. Effectively, the various national security agencies often represent the source from where the news covered by the news agencies originates. This is what emerged from some of the cases that we discussed in the previous paragraphs. For example, the Hungarian Tocsik and Kocsis cases involved the secret services covering the role of sources for journalists, providing some of the documents that the investigations were then based on.

The relationship between secret services and journalists in the analysed countries is not only seen in the form of 'leaks' (usually motivated by the need to strike an unpopular figure) but can take on a much more harmful configuration for the quality of the public debate. In more serious cases, this relationship can even lead to the complete collapse of the journalists' freedom and having him or her be recruited by the services. Confirming this pernicious trend, it is possible to provide a few episodes by way of example, treated in the Romanian case study referred to as '*Too virulent secret service*' and the Italian case, '*Agente Betulla*'.

The first case deals with attempts (not always successful) by the national secret services to infiltrate into the Romanian media system. Specifically, it refers to four personal stories of journalists, who experienced pressure by the secret services, sometimes accepting to be recruited as undercover agents with the task of collecting information through journalistic activity, essentially publishing news in the interest of intelligence agencies. In September 2014, Robert Turcescu, a well-known journalist in Romania, publicly declared in television that he was actually an undercover 'lieutenant-colonel'. Similarly, Valentin Zaschevici, the managing editor of *Jurnalul Național*, was fired in 2012 with the accusation of being a spy for the *Romanian Intelligence Service* (SRI), while Daniel Befu and Radu Moraru revealed that they had refused the offer to work for said agency.

In these situations, it is easy to imagine how looking for the journalistic truth – a circumstance which is essentially rare in the socio-political contexts that we have discussed – risks being absorbed by interests outside any standard of transparency. An Italian case also provides us with direct confirmation, a case involving Renato Farina, a journalist from the newspaper *Il Giornale*, with strong ties with the centre-right political environment, who worked for several years as an undercover agent for the *Servizio Informazioni e Sicurezza Militare* (SISMI). Specifically, his task was to gather information through newsroom activity and, especially, publishing news based on 'tips' from the heads of SISMI, regardless of any ethical-professional principle. The 'Betulla case' came out following a legal investigation linked to a controversial case of international security, in which Farina himself, through his articles, had tried to throw mud on the former Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi.

Conclusion

We began this article with two main questions that framed our analysis: the first one pertains to the possibility that investigative journalism may occur in media system of the observed countries and the second one, instead, refers to the possible elements that may

affect the practice of investigative journalism in the same group of countries. The case studies that we have analysed proves that it is difficult to associate the ideal type of watchdog journalism with Italy, Hungary, Latvia and Romania, highlighting the various characteristics that affect the media systems of these countries and limit the possibility of conducting journalistic investigations. Furthermore, despite the different historical backgrounds, the results confirm strong similarities between new democracies and a democracy in transition, such as Italy.

More in detail, we identified three main threats to watchdog journalism which together characterize the observed news media systems: the instrumentalization of the media outlets by 'external' actors, the weakness of the print press market and the low level of professionalism (here mainly understood as the self-censorship of journalists).

In these conditions, the majority of entrepreneurs approaching the news market (many of which are tycoons or oligarchs with political and economic interests) have the main objective of influencing the debate, of influencing the decision-making process, or of supporting or damaging a political figure, as we have seen in the 'Bacteristan' case. In other situations, on the contrary, the political figures themselves use investigative journalism to eliminate adversaries, as shown by the 'Montecarlo Villa' case. Besides, the 'István Kocsis' and 'RMGC' cases have highlighted how advertising investments seem to be another efficient way for using media outlets to attack an enemy or, by contrast, to obtain favourable coverage or silence the media on inconvenient issues. In other circumstances, it is the national secret services who exploit the 'fragility' of the respective media systems and get into the newsrooms, setting up an information short circuit that is potentially very damaging to the right to information and be informed correctly. These forms of influence can lead to strongly partisan investigative journalism often depending on strictly personal interests. More than investigative journalism, we can refer to 'pseudo-investigative journalism' (Stetka and Örnebring, 2013): with journalists who, behind a job of illusory investigation, effectively publish compromising news through the practice of *kompromat*. In conclusion, it is a form of instrumentalization based on the needs of a small number of 'strong' individuals with a vast availability of resources, both financial and political, who can exploit the media to pursue temporary and particularistic objectives.

Acknowledgements

The authors are listed alphabetically and have contributed equally to this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The ANTICORRP project which this publication is based on was funded by the European Commission's Seventh Framework Programme, Grant Agreement No. 290529

Note

1. For details on the cases discussed in this article, see WP6 deliverables: http://anticorrp.eu/publication_type/deliverable/.

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