

Reporters Without Borders

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Europe/Ex-USSR - Romania

"Enemies of the people"

Will intelligence services be asked to identify "anti-Romanian" journalists?

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[în limba română](#)

Reporters Without Borders and its Romanian partner organization, the [Active Watch-Media Monitoring Agency](#) (AW-MMA), condemn the climate of intimidation that has developed in recent weeks towards journalists critical of the current political crisis and the government's actions.

The two organizations are particularly disturbed by interim President Crin Antonescu's announcement on 8 August that he intends to use the external intelligence service to "understand the mechanism by which the country's image has been demolished in two weeks as part of an organized, coordinated and funded action." The president added: " We need to know who did this."

At the same time, government officials and a sector of the press have in recent weeks been accusing certain journalists of undermining Romania's image abroad.

"We are alarmed by the increasingly perverse stance being taken by some Romanian politicians and media," Reporters Without Borders said. "Trying to scapegoat Romanian or foreign journalists for the current political turmoil is unacceptable. The renewed use of paranoid, hate-filled rhetoric towards many journalists should be taken very seriously by Romania's European partners. We fear that this sickening climate will deal a major setback to freedom of information.

Active Watch added: "Antonescu's announcement is a serious threat to freedom of expression and a clear act of intimidation towards the ruling coalition's critics. Such statements violate the principles of a democratic state and exacerbate the already extreme tension. Finding scapegoats, accusing 'enemies of the people' of sullyng the country's image and being 'conspirators' in the pay of foreigners, is sadly reminiscent of the practices of dictatorships, especially the communist regime that ruled Romania until 1989."



The two organizations call on the entire political class to respect diversity of opinion and the media's role in a democratic society.

Ruling coalition senator Dan Sova accused **Carmen Valica**, a journalist with the state-owned broadcaster *RRA*, in early July of being behind European commissioner for justice Viviane Reding's criticism of the Romanian government. Senator Sova insisted that she had influenced Reding by asking her about the imminent arrest of constitutional court judges.

Valica was questioned on 10 July by state radio's ethics committee, which said there were no grounds for the accusation. Sova has meanwhile been given a ministerial position in the government.

A few days before the attack on Valica, Spanish journalist **Raúl Sánchez Costa**, the Madrid-based *El País*' correspondent, was accused of being an "agent of influence" in the service of Traian Basescu – the president who was suspended after a dispute with the government – on

the grounds that he received a training grant six years ago from the Romanian Cultural Institute (ICR), an entity close to Basescu.

Launched by Norica Nicolai, a ruling coalition Member of the European Parliament, the campaign against Sánchez was enthusiastically [relayed by the Cotidianul news website](#) and other pro-government media, especially as Sánchez was well-known for subjecting Prime Minister Victor Ponta to a difficult interview.

Some media have made similar accusations against other journalists. *Le Monde* correspondent **Mirel Bran** and **Liliana Ciobanu**, a freelance who reports for *The Economist* and *CNN*, have been the targets of a violent [Cotidianul campaign](#). Ciobanu, who has written articles critical of the government, was branded as an "anti-Romanian agent" suspected of taking orders from Basescu. There have been similar attacks on other journalists working for foreign media such as [Keno Verseck](#) (*Der Spiegel* and *Deutsche Welle*), [Karl-Peter Schwarz](#), [Vlad Odobescu](#) (*ARA* and *USA Today*), [Ruby Russell](#), [Laura Boromir](#) (*Der Standard*) and [Kim Lane Scheppele](#).

"[Polarization of the Romanian media is not new](#)," Reporters Without Borders and Active Watch added. "But it is very worrying to see the governing fanning the flames, putting a conspiracy theory about and attacking critical views so violently. The accusations against journalists are part of the same political strategy that led the ruling coalition to bring criminal charges against certain opposition figures, accusing them of 'spreading false information endangering national security'."

The conflict between President Basescu and the ruling coalition led by the PSD and the PNL has caused a major political crisis since July. The coalition's attempts to crush its opponent have raised concern in the European Union about respect for the constitution and independent institutions.

Parliament voted to remove Basescu and had its decision ratified in a referendum on 29 July. But the turnout fell short of the required 50 per cent and the constitutional court must now decide whether the referendum was valid. Antonescu, a ruling coalition member, is meanwhile acting as interim president until a decision on Basescu's fate is taken.

The attitude of politicians towards the media is [a recurring source of concern](#) in Romania, which is ranked 47th out of 179 countries in the latest Reporters Without Borders [press freedom index](#).

In 2010, the media were [identified as a "national security vulnerability"](#) in a national defence strategy review that was commissioned by President Basescu and was ratified by the Supreme Council for National Defence.

Picture: Crin Antonescu (Credit: AFP / Andrei Pungovschi)

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