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Who are you and what work do you do as a journalist?

My name is Alexandru Costache, I am a journalist and covered the area of justice for more than 20 years at Televiziunea Română [the Romanian public broadcaster, TVR]. I specialise in the area of justice, anti-corruption, prosecutors, lawyers, judges. And in recent years, since 2018, I have been working with G4Media.ro, an online newspaper.

What consequences did your journalistic work have for you?

Not only for me, there are several journalists like me who specialise in justice and who support this fight against corruption and this has caused us quite a few problems. One of them was the fact that a former Romanian Intelligence Service colonel, who was tried and convicted for corruption, Daniel Dragomir is his name, accused me of being an agent... of being a Romanian Intelligence Service agent. Not only me, but also Eugen Stoica and other such journalists. We decided to sue him. Initially we lost in court. "There is nothing defamatory in telling a journalist that he is a Romanian Intelligence Service agent" - that was the conclusion of the court judge.

But at the Bucharest Court of Appeal we managed to win, in the sense that they turned the decision around 180 degrees, proved that I was right and repudiated what he did.

This Romanian Intelligence Service colonel was on trial for corruption, he was sentenced to 13 years and 11 months in prison and fled to Italy. He is now in

Italy. He was fighting against the prosecutors, against the judges, and he got on to journalists who he thought supported anti-corruption moves, justice and so on. And as he had nothing to accuse us of, he accused us of being undercover agents, all that kind of nonsense.

What did it mean for you as a journalist to be accused by a former Romanian Intelligence Service colonel of being a secret service agent yourself?

It was obviously not pleasant when I heard him say publicly that I was a double agent, paid both by National Romanian Television and the Romanian Intelligence Service. It's a blatant lie.

The trial lasted for three years. Obviously I had to pay the lawyer with my own money. In the end, I won and I have to get the money back.

What other abuses have you suffered due to your journalistic work? It's known that you were put under surveillance.

The most notorious case, so to speak, in which we were involved, was in 2020. On February 20, 2020.

We are friends - simply friends, me and Cosmin, Cosmin Savu from ProTV - with a prosecutor called Horațiu Radu. At that time, he was the deputy prosecutor general, and he was running for the position of general prosecutor.

On February 13, it was his birthday. He wanted us to have a beer together for his birthday. In the meantime, the result had been announced, meaning that he had lost. So he was not selected for this role.

I was sitting at this table, the prosecutor was sitting here, me here and Cosmin Savu, the other journalist, here. And later a judge, a friend of the prosecutor, came and sat next to him... He was a judge from the Ilfov [county] court. We stayed until midnight, I think. Then we each went home and had a big surprise the next day.

I remember it was Friday, the 21st... A friend called me: "Turn on the TV, turn on RTV [România TV], look what's on RTV."

It was us.

RTV is the television station of a defendant, a defendant in multiple cases, Sebastian Ghiță, a euro multi-millionaire. He is a former secretary-general of the Romanian Intelligence Service control commission who's been tried in several corruption cases and who fled to Serbia. And on this defendant's television station, they were playing images from our meeting here, from the night before, including some audio fragments... audio-video.

Obviously they were taken out of context, and I could be heard saying the word "bribe". Obviously I was talking to them about the bribes that indicted politicians received. But by singling out just this word, they insinuated that we were talking about bribery, that we were plotting... that we were plotting bribery...

The main accusation was that we were plotting for our friend to get the position of general prosecutor.

What did you do after you found out that you and your fellow journalists were under surveillance?

We filed a complaint, and a criminal case was opened at the Bucharest Military Prosecutor's Office. And there, the military prosecutor Bogdan Pîrllog managed

to quickly conduct an investigation. And he discovered that several people were involved in this surveillance, that took place mainly in this room, but also on the hallway, towards the toilet, we even were filmed and photographed inside the toilet, as well as outside, in the yard, on the street. They followed me until I got home, because I live nearby.

Who were the people involved in the surveillance?

The investigation established that 11 people were involved in the surveillance, and that they were paparazzi, or they presented themselves as such... they were journalists, they said, journalists at Gândul [online newspaper]. A good cover for them, for presenting themselves as journalists, they could not be asked who sent them there, or who gave them the information that we are meeting there. They obviously invoked the confidentiality of the source, and could not be questioned on this matter.

Two characters are interesting among these paparazzi: one of them is a former Romanian Intelligence Service officer, and another, a former border police officer.

What was the court's decision in the case?

In April [2023], I think, the case was closed.

What were the effects of the physical surveillance on you and your work?

We are journalists and we work with sources, and for a while it seemed that people and sources were a bit reluctant to interact with me, they were probably afraid of being monitored, watched, listened to.

What makes you keep going despite the pressure?

I believe in what we are doing and I believe we are doing it well.

These cases of harassment, basically they are cases of harassment and intimidation, show that we did things well and we'll continue to do them well.

This is the job we love and we'll continue doing it.

Interview by Delia Marinescu, 2023

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