

Corruption and the Long Arm of Moscow in Central Europe

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By Anthony Robinson

Taking part in this year's AEJ annual conference in the ancient Saxon town of Sibiu, in the heart of Transylvania, revealed the value of an organisation which links journalists across the richest but arguably the most culturally and linguistically diverse of continents as it faces a series of internal and external crises.

For me it was a return to a part of the world with which I have been professionally linked since 1977 when first appointed East Europe Editor of the Financial Times – which at that time meant covering the entire Soviet Empire from the Elbe to the Pacific. Massive foreign investment, much of it German in origin, the switch to capitalist market principles and “bourgeois democracy” and the regained freedom to travel and work throughout Europe have improved many people's lives and transformed grim, run down cities, towns and villages in Romania and beyond since then.

But the Sibiu conference took place amidst an explosion of anger against corrupt politicians and officials held responsible for neglected safety laws and much else. Corruption allowed a well-connected Bucharest nightclub owner to stage a risky fireworks show in a crowded and unsafe downtown night club which erupted in flames. The fire cut short 50 young lives and left over a hundred badly burnt survivors.

The tragedy underscored the persistence of abuses of power throughout the former Soviet bloc, often by people linked to the old communist regimes and security forces. The majority of demonstrators in the streets however were from the younger post-Soviet generation demanding both justice and more openness.

Demonstrators, including young families, bearing candles and waving flags and banners successfully called for the resignation of Prime Minister Viktor Ponta and a change in the way the country is still fundamentally governed, 25 years after the fall of Nicolae Ceausescu's corrupt police state.

What struck me most listening to anti-corruption activists such as conference speaker Monica Macovei, a Romanian MEP, and above all to media colleagues from Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Ukraine, Bosnia-Herzegovina and elsewhere, was the sense of how vulnerable society in general and the media in particular feels about the prevalence of corruption, the lack of implementation of laws protecting journalists – and the way internal corruption facilitates the insidious return of Soviet-style agents of influence on many levels.

Having lived through this system for decades our colleagues in eastern Europe have been quick to recognise the long, corrupting hand of Moscow, as Putin's KGB methodology seeps back into the old familiar channels, often using the latest media and IT technology to confuse and disorientate public opinion and undermine faith in democratic values and civil society.

With millions of refugees from war and oppression in the middle east joined by economic migrants seeking a better life pouring over East and Southern Europe's

borders, returned exile Adrian Sturdza, managing partner of Bucharest-based Epoch Times, likened the current internally divided and externally threatened Europe to a scene from an early Fellini film.

Fellini portrayed a fractious orchestra, riven by internal jealousies, trying, like contemporary Europe, to make beautiful music in the aisle of a church while outside a ruthless developer was bulldozing the ancient building, shaking the walls and undermining the roof.

Adrian reminded the conference that by the time countries such as Bulgaria and Romania joined the European Union in 2007 the European political, social and economic structures, in which the former Soviet-controlled states had put so much faith for a more prosperous, freer and dignified life, were already creaking at the seams.

In retrospect the new EU members joined Europe just as it was about to enter the on-going Euro crisis and be humiliated by Putin's 2008 invasion of Georgia. Unable or unwilling to deliver the necessary tough response to Putin (two years later French President Sarkozy, the EU's pointman in the crisis, sold Moscow two aggressive Mistral class helicopter assault ships) Georgia was followed by similar invasions of Crimea and latterly Eastern Ukraine, further challenging the post-Cold War settlements and adding to older frozen conflicts around Moldova and Transdnistria.

Evgheni Demenok, the sole Ukrainian delegate from the Black Sea port city of Odessa, underscored the military nature of Russia's challenge to Europe and Nato in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine. With oil down to around \$50 a barrel a combination of subversion and crude military intervention was now Moscow's preferred option, he said. He called for the West to respond to Russian subversion by restoring the foreign language broadcasts of the BBC World Service, Deutsche Welle and Radio Free Europe and stepping up support for vulnerable and threatened colleagues.

Against this background, William Horsley's report on Media Freedom and his emphasis on the need for greater protection of journalists chimed in perfectly with the mood of the conference. The Council of Europe, he said, is the body charged with ensuring that EU member states actually fulfil their legal and moral obligations to protect journalists and media freedom.

The message from Sibiu is that putting pressure on governments and raising awareness amongst voters about the need for a free, brave and informed media is now a main stream task if Europe is to cope with both the insidious challenges of widespread corruption and the growing threat from Russia, and the immigrant and other crises knocking at Europe's door.