A large number of researchers argue for the significant role that East-European media played in dismantling the communist system and/or in buttressing and enforcing democracy (Goban-Klas, 1997; Kettle, 1997; Lánczi and O’Neil, 1997; Linz and Štepan, 1996; Mickiewicz, 2000; Nikolchev, 1997; Splichal, 1992; Školkay, 1997; Sükösd, 1997/98, 2000).

Also, several scholars interpret the process of democratization of media as inextricably intertwined to the dramatic social, economic and political changes experienced by the former communist societies (Coman, 2004a, 2004b; Dragomir, 2003; Mickiewicz, 1997; Lauk, 2008; Petcu, 2004).

As the role of media as the backbone of democracy cannot be disregarded, nor the reciprocal influences between media and society, the main purpose of this article is to offer a rigorous assessment of the relationship between media and democracy within the borders of Romania.

A former communist East-European dictatorship, Romania struggled for the last twenty years to earn its place on the international stage as a democratic country. However, its example is of particular importance for scholarship in the field of media, communication and democracy because it represents a rare case where media institutions didn’t play from the beginning their part in shaping, buttressing and deepening democracy, but they needed the support offered by government and politicians to internalize and assert their roles and they continuously do, as this article will argue.
There is a strong tradition among the mass communication scholars analysing the role played by East-European media in supporting the creation of new democratic political cultures and in enhancing civil societies, to first examine the status it held during the former communist regimes.

However, such perspective is particularly useful as it helps explaining most of the features displayed by mass media during the transition period, but it becomes insufficient when it ventures to evaluate its current performance and development.

If the Stalinist legacies inherited from the past kept their influence over the Romanian media system for another couple of years after the fall of communism (among others Gross, 1996) burdening the role mass communication institutions played during the transition process, the contemporary state of media reflects also the various Western influences that pervaded the Romanian space after the collapse of the communist regime.

Therefore, a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between media and democracy in Romania needs to examine not only the Soviet heritage, but also the other influences that might have affected them.

(The transition period is usually considered as comprising the years between the 1989 Revolution and the mid-2000s.)
The Communist Period (-1989)

A later development of the Authoritarian model which portrayed media as a servant of the state, the Soviet model added a “greater emphasis on the positive use of the mass media as part of the agitation for the accomplishment of a world revolution” (Siebert, Peterson and Schramm, 1963, p. 27), as well as on the state’s monopoly over mass media avenues. According to the Leninist perspective on the press, reporters and journalists were also expected to fulfil roles of propagandists and collective agitators, personifying “the sharpest weapon of the party” (Lendvai, 1981).
Several journalists achieved a tremendous evil power during the communist regime. For instance, Silviu Brucan, general secretary of Scînteia, the official newspaper of the communist Party, initiated multiple witch-hunts against dozens of brilliant anti-communist intellectuals, journalists and politicians, specifically asking for the death sentence for some of them.

He was supported in his endeavors by wife Alexandra Sidorovici, a public prosecutor eager to send to death the enemies of the Communist Party in her own turn.

Although with no academic qualifications whatsoever, he also served as a journalism professor and as head of the Romanian television channel (Tismăneanu, 2003, 2006).
The tragic pro-democratic manifestations that took place in Timișoara on 16 December and continued the following days were completely overlooked by press, radio and television. A strong rumour network that struggled to transmit basic information during the entire communist period (Lánczi and O’Neil, 1997) and several foreign radio stations were the Romanian citizens’ main sources of news regarding the massacre in their own country.

In a first bold act of disobedience, the national television offered an utterly fair and unbiased coverage of the mass rally ordered by the dictator on 21 December. The masses defeated their fear then, chanting anti-Ceaușescu slogans and booing him. The television impartially broadcasted the protests and their magnitude, revealing the dictator’s entire “stupefaction and confusion,” as well (Tismăneanu, 1997, p. 417).

The important role played by mass media during the 1989 Revolution was emphasized the following day, when the broadcasting station opened its gate for the revolutionaries. The national television became the ‘hot spot’ of the ’89 Revolution – physical centre of the manifestation, it represented one of the main targets of the shooting, and also the meeting and working space of the newly improvised government, the National Salvation Front.

According to Miklós Sükösd, this fact indicates that “in severe political crises in the late twentieth century, the media are widely seen as the real power centre, as the decisive mobilizing resource and major source of legitimacy” (Sükösd, 2000, p. 129).

The events of December 1989 found the Romanian mass media weak and unprepared to face the challenges of the complex transition from an authoritarian system to a democratic one. Unfortunately, the overthrow of Ceauşescu’s dictatorship was not followed by the dismantling of the communist old structures and hierarchies, including here the Securitate apparatus (ghastly relabeled as Serviciul Român de Informaţii – SRI –, Securitate’s former activities and membership were not revealed for the most part).

With few exceptions, the nomenklatura system has been well preserved. A large number of the representatives of the new ruling minority were former high-ranking members of the Communist Party, of Securitate, or benefitted in other ways from the old regime.

An intimate of Ceauşescu’s family, Ion Iliescu, the new leader, was a former elite member of the Communist Party and the Central Committee, and head of various institutions and governmental departments. Also, the main ideologist of the new ruling party was Silviu Brucan. Although in the second part of the 1980s, both Brucan and Iliescu dissented to some extent Ceauşescu’s policies, they have preserved a strong belief in the socialist credo and, consequently, in its methods.

Given these circumstances, it was hardly surprising that mass media still had a long way to cover until it could obtain its independence.
The main difficulties faced by the new East-European democracies in the foundation of an independent and free media system are summarized by Andrew K. Milton as follows: the preservation of old institutional structures that are assuring the subordination of media to the state, the ambiguous legal status of media, the lack of legal reforms focusing on the roles of mass media, and the ‘political expectations’ on media that various politicians and journalists held (Milton, 2000).

In what concerns Romania’s specific case, several other barriers can be added, as the lack of a strong ethics code among journalists, the lack of a legislation able to protect mass media from the interference of government, and the state exclusive ownership and rigid control over the television channels.

Also, the ‘political expectations’ Milton is referring to can be interpreted as either the high influence of Romanian politicians over the final editorial decisions, either as the journalists’ intentions of obtaining political functions, as a result of their propagandistic activities.

Unfortunately, most of these characteristics transcended the transition period and became common features of the Romanian media system.
The end of the Iliescu era had a crucial importance in the processes of development and liberalization of media. In the aftermath of the demise of his administration, the number of non-governmental television stations, both local and national, highly increased. Several new radio stations were launched. Both radio and TV signal coverage expanded, and new media technologies were imported. Also, the print media diversified itself and improved its distribution networks. The governmental control and pressures over the media outlets significantly diminished. Also, it used its economic influence over the national media channels in a considerably lesser extent. However, as the monetary subsidies granted were reduced or entirely ceased, media outlets were forced into entering the competition of a much more liberalized market. Although journalists expanded their liberties and rights to some extent, a powerful media law which could truly protect their freedom of speech was never promulgated. As Romania completed its transition period with its adhesion to NATO and EU in mid-2000s, the media legislation reform and development have not represented a priority anymore.
The Post-Transition Period (2004 – present)

For instance, it is not at all an uncommon custom for the Romanian journalists to develop private business relations with state institutions (compromising their journalistic independence and objectivity) or to write and publish articles that would support their own very personal financial interests. For example, Bogdan Chirieac, and, later, his mother, owns a third of a radio communication company that was providing electronic equipment to the Service of Special Telecommunications (a Romanian intelligence service specialized in electronic surveillance and telecommunication) for dozens of millions of dollars. Also, Chirieac used his position as Gândul journalist in order to disseminate defamatory articles against the competitors of his company (among others, HotNews.ro, 12 November 2007).
Italianization tendencies:

1. Media owners started to use the outlets not only for business purposes, but also for political ones. Therefore, the commercialization of Romanian media developed in parallel with a strong politicization tendency (Örnebring, 2010). Most of the media owners were either politicians on their very own, either strong supporters of various political circles. For instance, Dan Voiculescu, owner of the *Intact Media Group*, including six television channels, two radio stations, eight newspapers and magazines and other outlets, is the founding president of the Conservative Party and the current Vice-President of the Romanian Senate. Also, Sorin Ovidiu Vântu, one of the richest Romanian businessmen, eventually funded the trust *Realitatea-Cațavencu*, which included, in its most extended form, six television channels, four radio stations, ten newspapers and magazines and one news agency. Although the political options and interests of Mr. Vântu were never unambiguously declared, the mogul used his media outlets to support one political party or other. In this respect, a highly significant episode was the manipulation of *Academia Cațavencu* reporters to catch the main contra-candidate of Traian Băsescu in an unethical hypostasis few days before the presidential elections (*Academia Cațavencu*, 4 December 2009). The use of the newspaper as a political tool became evident after the election, when Mr. Vântu reduced his monetary subsidies and ultimately let it to go bankrupt.
2. The Italianization tendency pervaded the Romanian media at the general level of reporting as well. The print media coverage began to display an increasingly common inclination for a strongly interpretative style. A large number of Romanian publications currently overlook factual reporting in favour of an opinion writing that is less informing, but more entertaining. Therefore, within the Romanian media culture, fact-centred journalism became secondary to interpretative and opinionated comments advancing moral judgments. As its Italian counterpart, the Romanian journalism prove itself “more inclined to comment and evaluation, to interpretation and judgment and pays more attention to ‘literary’ writing than to simple and terse telling of the facts” (Mancini, 2005, p. 83). However, in most of the cases it’s the political reporting which tends to be highly opinionated and polemical rather than factual.
3. The most compelling explanation for the highly opinionated political reporting is linked to the strong mobility between the political elites and the journalistic elites. Italian-rooted at its turn (Mancini, 1991), this connection is transcribed in the political advantages that influential journalists and editorialists enjoy, as a consequence of their journalistic activities. If Andrei Pleșu, editor-in-chief at *Dilema/Dilema Veche* obtained high-ranked position within all the administrations that alternated in power since the ’89 Revolution, the Băsescu administration is by far the one who favoured most the journalists. Also, it seems that the publications *Dilema/Dilema Veche* and *Revista 22* are particularly good strategic spots for obtaining appointments as foreign affairs ministers, as in the cases of Teodor Baconsky, Adrian Mihai Cioroianu, or Sever Voinescu, all former columnists for these two weekly magazines.
Despite the difficulties and pressures encountered, there are also situations when media trusts support the independent and objective reporting of their journalists, as well as their efforts in fighting the Băsescu administration’s acts of corruption. For instance, due to the strong campaign initiated and led by Cătălin Tolontan, journalist at a sportsdaily, Gazeta Sporturilor, part of the Intact Media Group, Băsescu’s minister of youth and sports, Monica Iacob-Ridzi was forced to resign, as the journalist disclosed her embezzlement and abuse in office (Gazeta Sporturilor, 16 June 2009).
Therefore, the development of media and its role in furthering the democratization process were hindered by the slow economic and legislative reforms, the financial issues and the Italianization phenomenon. Although there are few good signs for the development of a mass media able to support the democratic values and accomplish its role as a guardian of the public interest, as Tolontan’s example, Romanian media still heavily relies on politicians’ help to play its part in buttressing and enforcing democracy.

Thank you!