

PRESENTATION BY CRISTIAN UNTEANU

Transparency and Media Relations as a Means of Fighting Fraud and Corruption Affecting the EU Financial Interests

6th Training seminar of the OLAF Anti -Fraud Communicators' Network

Investigative journalism, information, disinformation and lobbying

How many times did you find yourself in the position to consider an investigation journalist, if not your personal enemy, at least the enemy of the law enforcing body you represent?

The question is hardly rhetorical and discovering the right answer may represent an interesting challenge for us all; interesting as well as useful, for it may help to the disappearance of some major blockages.

Why does it seem to you a journalist is being hostile? Many times, simply because you know he or she will try to get more out of you than you are authorized to share. And you also know that, if a satisfactory answer is not provided, or is replaced by the standard „no comment” reply, my fellow journalist will immediately call upon parallel information sources, which most times are to be found in your close entourage, and which will surely provide the awaited news. And these sources will provide the news for various reasons, which are very rarely of financial nature. On most occasions, they are of personal nature, caused by certain internal games played by the respective institution, by personal resentment or even by equally personal legal issues.

It is certain that, technically speaking, this is the moment when we enter the vicious circle we are very much familiar with: you have the all too familiar restrictions to discuss ongoing investigations, for the officials desire as a matter of principle nothing but a perfect, shiny, problem-free image of their institution. On the side, there is the investigation journalist which tries, single-handedly, to turn the tables in his or her favor. There is no harm in that, for these are the rules of the game we have accepted ever since we started working in this field.

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However, what I can not accept is the continuous attempt to restrict the free access to sources, to the public administration officials, and the development of more and more sophisticated and polite bureaucratic barriers whose scope is to isolate and bring forward a single communication channel, that is, the officially accepted one, that of the spokesperson. Of course OLAF has accomplished more, significantly more, through the activity of **OLAF's Communicators Network**. An excellent idea whose merits have been greatly debated and I don't assume we met here today simply to hear positive remarks about what does work.

What I don't believe runs sufficiently smoother is what in my opinion represents a crucial aspect - the cooperation of law enforcing bodies with journalists and with their representative national, European and international institutions in the scope of providing highly specialized specific training for the investigation journalists, especially for the junior ones and for those located in Central and Eastern Europe.

You want to talk to professionals whose abilities you can trust and who are at least partially familiar with the mechanism of some of the most complex and delicate types of investigations – those regarding the fraud against European funds. But have you wondered where could the journalists from those countries have gained the proper training to talk to you and to correctly interpret the information? When you complain a certain remark or information has been misinterpreted, taken out of context or published in a press article which, in your opinion, includes poor technical arguments, then please remember that in my own country, Romania, the press union, MEDIASIND, has organized, together with IFJ and OLAF, the first session of European training for junior investigation journalists. This is, in my opinion, an event organized inadmissibly and inexplicably late, especially that, in several successive country reports, Romania was informed one of its main issues is the level of corruption level and severe question marks were raised on a great number of times regarding the adequate use of community funding.

This situation occurs now, when OLAF and the Communicators Network both state they wish to communicate with professionals in the field of journalism. Plus, they state they take the messages sent by the press very seriously. Somewhere there is a non sense or a deficient functioning of the system and surely something must change. Otherwise, this

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entire discussion we are having today about information, disinformation and lobby shall carry only a theoretical meaning and only the value of a pleasant time spent in good company. All the terms above do not carry value or do not carry the same value but for a group of professionals which share a fairly similar training ground, which allows them to use information based on the same evaluation criteria, similar to those employed by the investigators. If the situation does not change, there will be more complaints in the future about the increase in the number of „sensational” press articles and of those elaborated without any proper documentation.

After the discussions I have had with MEDIASIND representatives, the most important union in the Romanian press, my colleagues from ZIUA and REALITATEA MEDIA press trusts and I have decided to kindly request OLAF and, implicitly, the Communicators Network, to start organizing training courses for our investigation journalists. We would like this event to be further expanded to the level of the entire Romanian media. For now, our hope is to send junior journalists to be briefed by some of the professionals who work for OLAF. But I would like to ask your opinion about the possibility of continuing these training courses – we speak of groups of 7 – 8 people – in the member countries of the Communicators Network, having direct contact with sometimes very different national realities and practices in the fight against fraud. Perhaps this ought to occur mostly in countries with a long time tradition in the field or in others where there has been proof of involvement of Romanian nationals in the investigated cases or, finally, in countries where complex operations have taken place which could be relevant for the Romanian public opinion.

My kind request is for you to consider a change of attitude in the strategy of the Communicators Network: to outgrow from the current reactive phase to a proactive one, with a much more visible formative dimension. This may represent a guarantee for the success of a future phase, in which dialogue is less difficult and not limited to the eternal press releases.

I am convinced this may turn out to be a highly useful professional experience for both parties and a new type of opening of the Communicators Network, observing the so often recollected principle of the need of transparency and professionalism.

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Finally, when we speak of the information – disinformation ratio, but also of lobby in a larger sense, we, as journalists, face another significant problem. This is related to our own professional standards. It is highly important to be able to present a business card which is, in itself, a professional recommendation and a moral guarantee for our interlocutors, in this case the European investigation services. In this context, I believe the adherence of a journalist to the International Federation of Journalists represents, through the international press card, such a guarantee of professional identity.

This is the context in which I would like to give a brief presentation of the common initiative of my Romanian and Bulgarian colleagues, named „Clean Voices”. This initiative has been developed, in Romania, by my colleague Victor RONCEA from ZIUA newspaper, the coordinator of „Civic Media” organization. It has been rightfully said that considering the future accession of our two countries to the EU on January 1st 2007, it is highly necessary not only to clear out several aspects related to the possible collaboration of some of our colleagues and the structures of the former security bodies, but also to confirm whether there are undercover information officers infiltrated in the media and working as journalists. This is not a witch hunt, but a moral step taken to clear the air once and for all from all, for nothing good can come out of keeping skeletons in the closet. Actually, should suspicion be imprecise and generally reflected upon us all, both the entire journalist community and the quality of information would suffer. This will mostly affect investigations made on sensitive issues, which would then be easily questioned, in a somehow antagonistic reverse of the information- disinformation and lobby ratio.

Furthermore, MEDIASIND has recently decided to request IFJ the renewal of international press cards only after each of the organization members will prove he or she is a professional journalist and will give a statement on its own behalf regarding the collaboration with the former Security bodies, which will make that journalist legally responsible should perjury be committed.

I have mentioned these matters in order to announce the Romanian journalist community – and I am convinced it is the same situation in Bulgaria - is going through a transformation and professional development process, which raises the level of accepted standards of our work. I thus call upon you to assist us, to give direct and massive support

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of my junior investigation journalists colleagues so that , in these new conditions, they are able to fully benefit from the unique theoretical and professional experience you may provide them. And may this be as soon as possible, so that this moment important to us all is not missed out.

Thank you.

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