

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2011

INTERNET RIGHTS AND DEMOCRATISATION

Focus on freedom of expression and association online



This edition of Global Information Society Watch is dedicated to the people of the Arab revolutions whose courage in the face of violence and repression reminded the world that people working together for change have the power to claim the rights they are entitled to.

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ROMANIA

MOBILISING FOR AN OPEN eROMANIA



StrawberryNet Foundation

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Introduction

Information and communications technologies (ICTs) are key tools for economic and social inclusion, but the rural and elderly population have scarce access to advanced ICT infrastructure and few skills to use the technology in Romania.¹ The younger generation's digital skills² are also low, a study has shown.³ Under these circumstances, it is crucial that the government takes a lead role in reducing the digital divide. Does it meet such an expectation, given that a digital culture accessible to all is critical for promoting human rights? And to what extent is a digital culture critical for human rights? This report⁴ considers the case of the eRomania programme, aimed at bringing Romanian citizens online.

The recent economic crisis had a moderate impact on the ICT sector in Romania, with a 5% decrease in its turnover between 2009 and 2010. However, many ICT businesses – mostly small and medium sized – went bankrupt: 3,140 companies in 2009 and 4,870 in 2010.⁵ At the same time, the crisis had a strong impact on the population's quality of life: 38% of Romanians barely reached a minimal income level in 2009.⁶ Romania's 21.4 million inhab-

itants⁷ – nearly half of them living in rural areas – are struggling to survive the economic downturn. Public sector salaries were cut by 25% in June 2010.

An overall assessment of Romania's network readiness⁸ for 2010-2011 has shown *stagnation* compared to previous years' evaluations. The country ranked 65th out of 138 after aggregating the three criteria for measurement: environment,⁹ readiness¹⁰ and usage¹¹ of ICTs. While the *infrastructure* component scored higher (45th of 138), *readiness* – including quality of education and training, tariffs for ICT services, and governmental visions and attitudes concerning information technology – pulled Romania down to the lower half of the world ranking.¹² It is not a surprisingly poor score if we only look at the apologetic governmental statements on ICTs. With a 13.7% broadband penetration rate in 2010¹³ Romania ranked 27th of 27 among European Union (EU) countries and 41st of 138 countries in the world.¹⁴ Meanwhile, a media scandal broke out after USD 120 million (EUR 84 million) in EU funds were blocked by Brussels in June 2010 because Romanian authorities intended to divert them from broadband infrastructural development towards the controversial eRomania project.¹⁵ In 2010, the EU's ICT strategy¹⁶ restated the objective of bringing basic broadband to all Europeans by 2013.

1 Tufă, L. (2010) Diviziunea digitală. Accesul și utilizarea internetului în România, comparativ cu țările Uniunii Europene, *Calitatea vieții*, 21 (1-2), p. 71-86. www.revistacalitateavietii.ro/2010/CV-1-2-2010/05.pdf

2 In terms of media literacy and digital content creation.

3 Preoteasa, M., Comanescu, I., Avădani, I. and Vasilache, A. (2010) *Mapping Digital Media: Romania*, Open Society Foundations, p. 11. www.soros.org/initiatives/media/articles_publications/publications/mapping-digital-media-romania-20110501/mapping-digital-media-romania-20110501.pdf

4 Compiled through desk research, key informant interviews and participant observation at: www.eurodig.org/romania

5 Ghitulescu, R. (2011) Studiu IT&C: industria TI&C 2009-2010. Bilantul anilor de criza, *Marketwatch.ro*, 27 May. www.marketwatch.ro/articol/7717/STUDIU_ITC_Industria_TIC_2009-2010_Bilantul_anilor_de_criza

6 TNS CSOP Romania (2009) *Impactul crizei economice*, TNS Social și politic, August 2009, p. 21. www.csop.ro/fck_fisiere/file/Panelul_efectele_crizei_asupra_populatiei.pdf

7 According to official statistics: www.insse.ro/cms/files%5Cpublicatii%5CRomania%20in%20cifre%202010.pdf

8 World Economic Forum (WEF) (2011) *The Global Information Technology Report 2010-2011*, p. 267. www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GITR_Report_2011.pdf

9 Including market environment, political and regulatory environment, and infrastructure environment.

10 Individual, business and governmental level of readiness.

11 Individual, business and governmental level of usage.

12 Ranked 76th of 138 countries. WEF (2011) Op. cit., p. 267.

13 Eurostat (2010) *Broadband penetration rate*. epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&pcode=tsiir150&plugin=1

14 WEF (2011) op. cit., p. 371.

15 Vasilache, A. (2011) Portalul eRomania și Programul național de reforma 2011-2013: Haos privind data finalizării și scopul acestui proiect. Domeniile de internet eromania.ro și e-romania.ro sunt în proprietatea unor firme, *Hotnews*, 3 May. economie.hotnews.ro/stiri-telecom-7437500-fonduri-europene-84-milioane-euro-pentru-internet-broadband-fix-vor-transferate-catre-proiectul-romania-ministerul-comunicatiilor-acuzat-deturnare-fonduri.htm

16 European Commission (2010) *A Digital Agenda for Europe*, Brussels, 19 May, p. 19.

Policy and political background

Digital inclusion has been a high priority on the Romanian ICT Ministry's agenda since 2004, and is still present in the authorities' official statements¹⁷ and actions. An important step in facilitating equal access to ICT infrastructure is the 200 Euro Programme, launched in 2004 and operational since 2005,¹⁸ in partnership with the Ministry of Education. The programme helps Romania's low-income families purchase computers for school-going children and for university students, assisted by governmental financial aid. A total of 198,248 pupils and students benefited¹⁹ from the 200 Euro Programme between 2005 and 2011.²⁰

Tangible results concerning digital inclusion in the country have also been achieved by the Knowledge Economy Project (2006-2010). Romanian authorities contracted a World Bank loan of USD 60 million and, adding USD 9.4 million²¹ to the budget, helped disconnected communities get internet access, and supported small business e-development and local content creation.²² This effort was awarded the European Commission's e-Inclusion medal in 2008 in the Geographical Inclusion section.²³ Other projects, such as Biblionet,²⁴ are also worth mentioning.

Romania's EU membership since 2007 has opened access to the so-called "structural funds", aimed at resolving structural imbalances between countries, regions and social groups across the EU. As highlighted in the 2008 Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch) country report,²⁵ the Romanian government has declared its commitment to ICT development by planning to allocate USD 550 million of EU funds to stimulating ICT use, electronic services and the e-economy. EU funding in general is a controversial issue in Romania due to the poor financial

management of the authorities, often attracting criticism from Brussels. As mentioned, in June 2010 the EU blocked the USD 120 million allocated initially for broadband infrastructural development in rural areas because the Romanian Ministry of Communications and Information Society intended to redirect the money towards the eRomania portal.²⁶

The eRomania case: A portal, a project or a strategy?

A media scandal around the eRomania programme²⁷ was sparked in March 2010 when Romanian authorities announced the intention to spend a total of USD 718 million (EUR 500 million) on the eRomania portal and its implementation strategy. The amount was considered too large for a poorly prepared and presented initiative, with little public consultation involved. Mainstream media and the blogosphere reacted instantly. Former chair of the Parliamentary Commission for ICTs, Varujan Pambuccian, declared his surprise that authorities were tendering a project before planning it properly. "What is eRomania? A site? A portal? A Romanian Wikipedia built from the taxpayers' money?" media representatives asked.²⁸ Public anger was expressed in articles and online videos entitled "More expensive than Avatar"²⁹ or "eRomania, a governmental site for 500 million Euro".³⁰ The key question journalists asked was: What do taxpayers get for such an amount of money? As one publication put it: "The short answer, according to the ICT Ministry's plan, is an IBM Blue Gene supercomputer, a unique database and 300 electronic services by the end of 2011."³¹ In June 2011 the eRomania portal was still not operational (the site has been "under construction" for two years)³² and media criticism is continuing.³³

17 Ministerul Comunicațiilor și Societății Informaționale (2011) *Combaterea decalajului digital, alfabetizarea digitală și accesul la serviciile de e-Guvernare sunt prioritare pentru MCSI*, Comunicat de presă, 17 May. www.mcsi.ro/Minister/Comunicate-de-presa/Combaterea-decalajului-digital,-alfabetizarii-digi

18 euro200.edu.ro/

19 Case studies conducted in central Romania's rural regions show the importance of the 200 Euro Programme. Gagy, J. (2010) *Új média: egy erdélyi vizsgálat*, *Reconnect*, 2 (2), p. 95. reconnect.org/issue/nr-2-2010

20 Calculated from yearly reports available at: euro200.edu.ro

21 www.ecomunitate.ro/proiect

22 The Knowledge Economy Project was targeted at 255 disconnected rural and small town communities across Romania.

23 A total of 37 medals have been awarded for the best of 469 projects from 34 European countries. www.citizenonline.org.uk/e-inclusionawards/media/display?contentId=5238

24 www.biblionet.ro

25 Bakó, R. (2008) Romania, in Finlay, A. (ed) *Global Information Society Watch*, Association for Progressive Communications, p. 167. www.giswatch.org/country-report/2008/romania

26 economie.hotnews.ro/stiri-telecom-8301752-solutia-pentru-deblocarea-84-milioane-euro-pentru-internet-broadband-zonele-sarace-din-romania-prezentata-comisiei-europene-saptamana-viitoare.htm?cfadac=

27 The tag "programme" is given by this report. Media discourses call eRomania a "project" or a "portal", while government officials tag it a "strategy".

28 Raileanu, S. (2010) *Ce este eRomânia? Ce vom primi în schimbul a 500 de milioane de euro?*, *Money.ro*, 16 April. www.money.ro/ce-este-eromania-ce-vom-primi-in-schimbul-a-500-de-milioane-de-euro-1_551461.html

29 www.dstanca.ro/2010/atentie-la-eromania.html

30 www.zf.ro/business-hi-tech/eromania-un-site-al-statului-de-500-mil-euro-cred-ca-mai-mult-va-costa-coordonarea-lui-ce-spun-cei-care-fac-site-uri-cu-1-milion-de-euro-5754271

31 www.money.ro/ce-este-eromania-ce-vom-primi-in-schimbul-a-500-de-milioane-de-euro-1_551461.html

32 Screenshotted in a blog (www.tashy.ro), available at: i34.tinypic.com/24vp4k9.jpg

33 economie.hotnews.ro/stiri-telecom-8581597-portalul-eromania-programul-national-reforma-2011-2013-haos-privind-data-finalizarii-scopul-acestui-proiect.htm

On 14 April 2010, the Association for Technology and Internet initiated an online petition³⁴ calling for an open eRomania project – a protest broadly publicised by Romanian open source forums,³⁵ mainstream media³⁶ and blogs.³⁷ The Manifesto for an Open eRomania Project was signed by 200 NGOs, open source activists, bloggers and ICT business leaders. The petition – an open letter addressed to Minister of Communications and Information Society Gabriel Sandu – pleaded for an open and transparent eRomania project based on open access, open standards and technological neutrality:

Manifesto for an Open eRomania Project³⁸

An initiative supporting seven principles of an open eRomania:

1. Open access to all the content created through the project, and making it available on the internet.
2. Publishing all the public data from activities financed with public money in an open content format.
3. Reusing content already existing on the internet (including the content created by public institutions).
4. Use of open formats and open standards for the eRomania project.
5. Publishing all the computer programs created through the project using public money on a specialised website and under free licences.
6. Compliance with accessibility standards.
7. Implementing projects needed for public services and ensuring that they do not compete with the private sector.

Meanwhile, a public meeting was held on 30 April 2010 by the Association for Technology and Internet and the Council of Europe Office in Romania, in partnership with StrawberryNet Foundation, to address the topic of open e-government.³⁹ State Secretary of the Ministry of Communications and Information Society Andrei Săvulescu was invited to answer questions addressed by ICT stakeholders⁴⁰ related to the

controversial eRomania initiative. Multiple issues were raised by ICT experts concerning the governmental vision, aims, action plan and technical solutions involved in such a costly programme. The government representative was not prepared to address the wide palette of concrete and targeted questions, but rather tried to temper the discontent and criticism of workshop participants related to the level of transparency and feasibility of the eRomania strategy.

Both the workshop and media inquiries have shown the poor level of communicating⁴¹ this initiative to stakeholders and to the public at large. eRomania's six components have not been clearly presented and explained, but rather simply listed for the benefit of journalists:⁴²

eRomania 1: information portal and access point to eRomania platform

eRomania 2: information and local services for 3,300 localities

eRomania 3: standardisation of documents

eRomania 4: ensuring information flow

eRomania 5: Ghiseul.ro tax e-payment system

eRomania 6: search engine in a unique database.

By June 2011, the eRomania 5 online payment service Ghiseul.ro had been implemented, as a pilot project that had started up in March 2011 – but with major security breaches. Detected and popularised by bloggers, the security issues were then hyped by the mainstream media⁴³ and corrected soon after. As for the initial eRomania web page launched in June 2009, it can only be found in the web archive, in three versions: the first one⁴⁴ was changed very quickly due to criticism⁴⁵ of its dysfunctionality; the second⁴⁶ and the third⁴⁷ versions – explaining that the website features serve only to show the portal concept – have also been withdrawn by the Ministry of Communications and Information Society. As mentioned, the web page www.romania.gov.ro is “under construction”, and has been so since June 2009 and up to the time of writing.⁴⁸ However, the data centre of the eRomania 2 component was

34 www.apti.ro/proiect-deschis-eRomania

35 forum.ubuntu.softwareliber.ro/viewtopic.php?id=8761

36 economie.hotnews.ro/stiri-telecom-7087154-manifest-pentru-utilizare-deschisa-resurselor-din-proiectul-eromania-estimat-circa-500-milioane-euro.htm

37 www.manafu.ro/2010/03/manifest-pentru-un-proiect-deschis-eromania

38 English translation from: nicubunu.blogspot.com/2010/03/manifest-pentru-un-proiect-deschis.html

39 Organised as a workshop, part of the Eurodig 2010 Programme. www.eurodig.org/romania

40 Civil society organisation representatives, open source community members, programmers, ICT business players.

41 observator.a1.ro/eveniment/Interviu-incendiar-cu-Andrei-Savulescu-director-iT_6903.html

42 www.money.ro/ce-este-eromania-ce-vom-primi-in-schimbul-a-500-de-milioane-de-euro-1_551461.html

43 stirileprotv.ro/stiri/social/ghiseul-ro-fara-secrete-pentru-bloggerii-romani-au-depistat-cateva-erori.html

44 web.archive.org/web/20090617080900/http://www.romania.gov.ro

45 www.jurnalul.ro/jurnalul-national/jurnalul-national/guvernul-face-economii-sa-bage-romania-pe-net-536575.html

46 web.archive.org/web/20090620065946/http://www.romania.gov.ro

47 web.archive.org/web/20090626232532/http://www.romania.gov.ro

48 Screenshoted by a blogger on 6 June 2010, in June 2011 it looks the same: i34.tinypic.com/24vp4k9.jpg

already functional in June 2011 – the work of a large Romanian ICT company.⁴⁹

Under media and civil society pressure, authorities still send unclear messages concerning an initiative meant to bring citizens online. Are the high expenses justified? Is it a properly designed programme and will it impact significantly on the digital divide in the country, with only 36.82% of households⁵⁰ connected to broadband internet in December 2010? Analysing the eRomania strategy might help to give an answer.

The government's Decision No. 195 on 9 March 2010 concerning the eRomania strategy⁵¹ established the key principles, objectives and steps of the programme.⁵² The strategy, aimed at developing a fair and efficient e-government⁵³ and planned to be implemented during 2010-2013, highlights three main components: firstly, e-government services, aimed at increasing the quality of interaction between citizens and government; secondly, integration with the broader concept of "Digital Romania" related to enhancing citizen participation and trust; and thirdly, a continuous alignment to innovative technologies. The main services to be implemented are those monitored by the EU, relating to income tax payment, job searches, social security, the renewal of personal documents, car registration, e-health and e-environment.

What is wrong with the eRomania initiative? Bogdan Manolea, an ICT policy expert, explains:

Although at first sight the programme looks all right, it has two main problems. On the one hand, it reinvents the wheel by paying for services that are already developed; on the other hand, it creates a closed project that seems to be competing with the business sector. For the objective "access to legislative information", there are already four databases created with public funding.⁵⁴

As for the portal aimed at providing information about Romanian localities (eRomania 2), why pay for a second Wikipedia-like site from the taxpayers' money? Why "a pharaonic digitalisation project that doesn't even work"?⁵⁵ Last, but not least, the programme has been developed and launched with little public consultation involved, and communicated unprofessionally.

Conclusions

Romania is committed to closing the digital gap and the eRomania programme is an ambitious initiative with the intention of bringing citizens online. Its core service provision is in line with the EU's Digital Agenda, and with international e-government standards concerning the transition from an online presence to transactional and connected governance.

However, when it comes to content and financial matters, the eRomania strategy shows that the authorities' approach to designing and implementing ICT policy lacks clarity, fairness and stakeholders' involvement. The result is a largely contested *patchwork* of overbudgeted projects, poorly managed and communicated.

The Manifesto for an Open e-Romania Project was the first civil society public protest on ICT policy matters. It mobilised 200 NGO leaders, bloggers and open source activists. Even if the governmental machinery is moving on in promoting its own initiatives and interest groups, mainstream media and civil society actors are more and more vocal in advocating for proper information and consultation in public ICT matters.

Action steps

Lessons learned by ICT activists from the eRomania case are manifold:

- Mobilising small groups in a larger stream makes a protest more visible to the media and to the public at large.
- Civil society actors should be more proactive in participating in ICT policy making and advocating for digital rights.
- A connected, fair and inclusive information society for all should be the common goal of government, business and civil society actors. As Tim Berners-Lee put it, "competitive disclosure"⁵⁶ is necessary for an open internet: the public's right to know overwrites the authorities' reflex for secrecy. ■

49 economie.hotnews.ro/stiri-telecom-8985407-video-cheltuieli-publice-ministerul-comunicatiilor-sute-mii-euro-intr-centru-date-care-gazduiasca-sisteme-eromania-eacademie.htm

50 ANCOM (2010) *Piata de comunicatii electronice din România*, Autoritatea Natională pentru Administrare și Reglementare în Comunicatii, Raport de date statistice 1 iulie-31 decembrie 2010, p.57.

51 www.avocatnet.ro/UserFiles/articleFiles/strategia_nationala_04281549.html

52 There is no link from the Ministry of Communications and Information Society to the eRomania strategy on 23 June 2011.

53 According to a United Nations 2010 survey, Romania ranks 47th of 183 countries for e-government services. United Nations (2010) *E-Government Survey 2010: Leveraging e-government at a time of financial and economic crisis*, p.114. unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/UN-DPADM/UNPAN038853.pdf

54 Manolea, B. (2010) E-governmentul meu! Sau unde se duce 1/2 miliard de euro?, *Drept și internet – noutati & opinii*, 16 March. legi-internet.ro/blogs/index.php/2010/03/16/egovernment-romania-eromania1-lipsa-continut-deschis#c14959%29

55 Radescu, A. (2010) Guvernul face economii să bage România pe net!, *Jurnalul National*, 22 February. www.jurnalul.ro/jurnalul-national/jurnalul-national/guvernul-face-economii-sa-bage-romania-pe-net-536575.html

56 www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/news/7052785/Data.gov.uk-Sir-Tim-Berners-Lee-QandA.html

In the year of the Arab uprisings **GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2011** investigates how governments and internet and mobile phone companies are trying to restrict freedom online – and how citizens are responding to this using the very same technologies.

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GISWATCH is a joint initiative of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) and the Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries (Hivos).

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2011 Report

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