

Romania: Answers needed over surveillance of investigative journalist

The undersigned international media freedom organisations today raise concerns over recent revelations about the physical surveillance and wiretapping of an investigative journalist by a local branch of the Romanian National Anticorruption Directorate (DNA) and call for an investigation into this and previous cases of surveillance on journalists by the authority.

Our organizations stress that the surveillance operation against the journalist by the DNA's Iași office in 2023 appears to have been disproportionate and lacking in proper justification, posing a serious threat to source protection and press freedom in Romania which warrants scrutiny by both national and European authorities.

On 17 March 2025, journalist Victor Ilie revealed that he had been surveilled for two months in 2023 as part of an investigation launched by the DNA branch in Iași, northern Romania. According to documents, Ilie was first followed for two days by DNA operatives in the spring of 2023, while working in the RISE Project editorial office in Bucharest. Ilie was photographed in front of the office, and his phone was tapped for two months by the Technical Service of DNA. Ilie was physically surveilled and followed while with his partner, fellow journalist Luiza Vasiliu.

The surveillance, which was only revealed to the journalist after the DNA investigation was concluded, was linked to a story Ilie was working on at the time with RISE Project and the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project on the grain trade from Ukraine through Romania, which was later published. As part of his journalist work, Ilie had gone undercover in February 2023 to speak with the executive director of a local food safety directorate. After their meeting, the individual made a criminal complaint to the national anti-corruption body.

In a public statement, the DNA confirmed the investigation into Ilie was opened based on this complaint of incitement to abuse and bribery and that the surveillance was approved by a court. However, although the DNA quickly established Ilie was a journalist with a track record of investigative reporting, and no evidence was found regarding bribery, the surveillance warrant against him was extended for a second month. During this time, the DNA had access to Ilie's movements, work projects and conversations with confidential sources.

While our organisations recognise the obligation of the DNA to act upon a criminal complaint, as soon as Ilie's status as a journalist was identified authorities should have immediately taken into account international standards for journalistic source confidentiality and press freedom, which are outlined in the case law of the European Court of Human Rights and standards of the Council of Europe. The fact that the surveillance warrant was extended for another month, without identifiable justification, poses questions about the actions of the DNA Iași which require closer scrutiny.

Our organisations support the recent letter by Romanian journalists and civic groups sent to state and judicial authorities with a request to provide further clarification over the methods and

extension of the surveillance. We urge the National Anticorruption Directorate to respond in full to all inquiries in a prompt and transparent manner. These answers should address both the specific questions over the surveillance of Ilie, but also previous cases of surveillance by the DNA Iași office against journalists Rareș Neamțu, Tudor Leahu and Andrei Viliche in a period spanning back to 2018. Together, these cases present a pattern of questionable practices by the DNA Iași that seriously threaten journalistic freedoms.

The Ministry of Justice and relevant judicial bodies in Romania should urgently review the actions of the DNA Iași in these cases to assess the necessity and proportionality of the surveillance operations and investigations. Trainings should be carried out to ensure compliance of all prosecutors and judges with international freedom of expression standards regarding source protection. Moreover, the European Union should closely follow this case, including any further responses of the DNA or DNA Iași, and the European Commission should address questions to the Romanian authorities to seek clarifications on the issues raised above, and at the same time, emphasise the importance of rule of law and the protection of journalistic privacy and press freedom in Romania.

Hard-hitting investigative journalism of the kind carried out by Victor Ilie, his partner Luiza Vasiliu and RISE Project is vital for unearthing corruption and abuses of power. Journalists in Romania working against the odds to carry out this important work should be confident in the full protection of the legal system, not fearful of unjustified surveillance operations by the very law enforcement authorities supposed to defend them. Our organisations stand by the affected journalists in Romania will continue to follow this case closely in the coming months.

Signed:

International Press Institute (IPI)

Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)

European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF)

European Federation of Journalists (EFJ)

Free Press Unlimited (FPU)

Osservatorio Balcani Caucaso Transeuropa (OBCT)

Reporters Without Borders (RSF)