# Romania and Mass. introduce street papers

## *In a high-poverty nation, a voice against corruption*

**BY LAURA SMITH**
STREET NEWS SERVICE

In November, tens of thousands of Romanians brandishing placards and megaphones marched through the streets of Bucharest. They were united in fierce protest against the widespread corruption that doesn't just eat away at their country's political and media institutions; it kills.

Simmering public frustration and tensions escalated after a fire that broke out in a nightclub claimed the lives of 63 people Oct. 15. Many believe the club passed fire safety regulations by paying off officials – that the true cause of death was corruption, a long-standing issue that continues to plague one of the poorest countries in the EU.

The protests, led mainly by a younger Romanian generation demanding political reform, held the incident up to international scrutiny. They were swiftly followed by the resignation of the prime minister, his government and the mayor of the local area. It was clear that Romania was a country desperate for change.

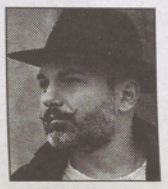
According to Aaron Israelson, this will soon come to Bucharest in the form of a street paper – birthed in one of the city's poorest districts.

The former editor of Faktum, a Swedish member of the International Network of Street Papers (INSP), plans to launch his new publication in Romania's capital this September. He believes the country is in dire need of an independent media voice.

"All countries have a poverty and homeless problem, but Romania is the second-poorest country of the EU, so I think the need for a modern way to combat poverty is stronger here than anywhere else," Israelson said.

PHOTO BY RADU SIGHETI/REUTERS

*A man holds a banner in Bucharest that reads: "I am looking for work I beg you to help me with something to eat or give me something to work I thank you from all my heart God bless you and protect you from all bad things." A new street paper launching in Bucharest will allow its vendors to earn an income.*



**Aaron Israelson**

The street paper's distribution base will be in Ferentari, a poverty-stricken area of the city where just 30 percent of the population is legally employed.

The project is partly inspired by the Romanian vendors Israelson worked with during his four-year tenure as Faktum's editor in chief. He says 50 percent of vendors at the Gothenburg street paper were from Romania.

In 2014, Romania had an estimated national GDP of just 7,500 euros (about $8,200 at the current exchange rate) per capita. The same year saw 37,000 Romanians and Bulgarians migrate to the U.K. to seek a better life. Many Romanian vendors selling street papers across Europe told INSP that low wages and few work opportunities make it impossible for them to remain in their home country.

But Israelson hopes the pressure to leave will change when Romania gets its own street paper, which provides an income opportunity for vendors.

Israelson's mother is Romanian, and he speaks the language. He has been visiting the country since he was a child, and he moved to Bucharest in September.

Since then, he has formed a partnership with local charity Project Ruth, which supports up to 170 families in Ferentari. The street paper's main distribution will be located in Project Ruth's school and adult education center.

In 2014, the average daily income per person in Ferentari was 4.35 RON ($1.07 at the current exchange rate). Out of 170 families supported by Project Ruth, 56 percent of parents were unemployed and 14 percent worked without legal documentation. Roughly one-third of parents have little or no education.

Mihai Ciopasiu, Project Ruth's executive director, hopes that a street paper here could help "break the cycle of poverty and give them better opportunities in life. ... Vendors will have self-esteem, more money to support their kids in school, and could start earning enough to qualify for social insurance and medical insurance."

Israelson and Ciopasiu have 17 prospective vendors. Having their children attend school will be a requirement for vendors, who will also have access to educational support programs delivered by the organization.

The project is initially being funded by backers in Sweden, but Aaron hopes to secure more local support.

Besides supporting homeless and socially vulnerable people in Bucharest, Israelson plans to call out corruption and campaign for political reform while also tapping into the pulse of Bucharest's vibrant and diverse social scene.

After four years at the helm of Faktum, Aaron Israelson knows a thing or two about running a successful street paper. But launching one in Romania's capital city comes with unique challenges.

Since the 1989 revolution brought an end to communism in the eastern European country, Romanian print media have been plagued by high levels of corruption. Israelson says his publication will be one of the few independent media outlets in Romania, where the majority of newspapers and TV and radio stations are controlled by powerful politicians or businessmen seeking to promote their own agendas.

*Stefan Candea, who co-founded the Romanian Centre for Investigative Journalism, said a new street paper, particularly one that aims to be a watchdog on corruption, could shake up Romania's stagnant print media landscape. But he also advised caution.*

Investigative journalists in Romania face a lack of resources and the absence of powerful amplifier for their voices, either in print or online, he said.

Despite the challenges, Israelson remains optimistic.

"It will be a rough ride," he said, "but I meet a lot of people who think it's a great idea and want to see this country change for the better."

*Courtesy of INSP.ngo*

PHOTO BY DAVID M MCCUIN

*Two thousand copies of the first edition of The Catalyst are available. Vendors buy each paper for 40 cents and sell it for a dollar.*

## *A catalyst for 'dignity and empowerment' in Lowell*

America's newest street paper, The Catalyst, began sales Feb. 23 on the steps of the Lowell, Mass., town hall.

"It's about dignity and empowerment. Vendors of The Catalyst can become micro-enterprises," said the man behind the new project, Ryan White, who added that he hopes to see vendor numbers rise quickly.

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"We want to be the change agent in people's lives and propel them forward. There's this quote that's often attributed to Gandhi: 'Be the change you (wish) to see in the world.' So there's also the opportunity for the customer to be part of the vendor's story – to be part of their catalyst story beyond poverty or marginalization."

White began working on The Catalyst almost a year ago, following a visit to a nearby homeless outreach center.

"Speaking with them touched me," he said. "One of the issues that kept coming up was that they wanted to work, but it wasn't possible to find a job for many reasons."

In common with many areas of the U.S., Lowell has recently been attempting to crack down on panhandling.

The American Civil Liberties Union of Massachusetts recently celebrated the decision of a federal judge to strike down Lowell's ban on panhandling in the Downtown Historic District, saying that the activity was protected under the First Amendment.

Lowell was hit with a bill of $736,466 in legal fees following the judgment.

White hopes The Catalyst will have strong support as an alternative to panhandling.

"People really love the idea of the street paper model," he said.

"Once people understand that vendors have to purchase the papers then sell them on, they really like that idea. The support cuts across the two-party system. Both Democrats and Republicans here support the idea of helping people help themselves."

*– Laura Kelly*

*Courtesy of INSP.ngo*