

The Metaphor of the “The Right to Know” versus “National Security” in the Law and in Institutional Practices

Raluca PETRE
Ovidius University of Constanța

Abstract: *Public interest information allows citizens in a democratic setting to take part in public life, form informed opinions, and take rational decisions. At the same time, there are polities, mostly authoritarian, where public information is the prerogative of power, hidden behind a veil of secrecy, with the regular citizens falling outside this privileged realm of knowledge. In this paper I approach Romania, a polity that has a solid legacy of authoritarianism, but has been attempting to turn into a democracy for more than three decades. I try to understand the relative power of ‘the right to know’ versus ‘national security’ as powerful metaphors legitimising information as public good, or as prerogative of power, respectively. In order to make sense of the issue, I contextualise the two ontological positions about information, then I study the current Romanian legislation about free access to information versus state secret information. Last but not least, I use an ethnographic approach, with first-hand information from an organisational setting where both principles are applied. I refer to a militarised organisation that is both obliged to provide information as a publicly funded institution, but that has as well a specialised division that deals with secret information. The result of the multi-layered analysis is that while the legislation puts on an equal footing the two principles, actual institutional practices place secrecy in the name of national security above the citizen’s right to know.*

Keywords: *the right to know; public interest information; democracy; national security; state secret information; authoritarianism;*