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Revenge as Driving Force in the Hungarian Media Law Scandal

The Hungarian government is under permanent crossfire in the international media. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has always been a big fighter and loves military analogies. This time, however, it is the European Commission itself which has started accelerated infringement procedures against the country accompanied with an unprecedented strong rhetoric. Rightly so: it is the ultimate moment, if not too late, to stop the construction of an illiberal political regime in a member state of the European Union in its central Eastern part.

None of the three legal reviews, introduced by the Commission, deal with the Hungarian regulations on media freedom and pluralism. Nevertheless, they are equally important: the political independence of the judiciary system, the central bank and the ombudsman for data protection from the government is at stake. But there is a “list of 30 breaches of the Treaty, fundamental questions, serious concerns”, as Guy Verhofstadt, leader of the liberal political group ALDE in the European Parliament stated during the debate on Hungary on 18 January 2012. The consequences of the media laws pushed smoothly through the Hungarian Parliament in 2010, where the ruling party, Fidesz, has a peculiar two-third majority; belong to the contagious wounds the Hungarian half-democracy has to live with. Even if four amendments were approved following the intervention of the European Commission exactly a year ago and in spite of a late decision of the arbitrarily weakened Hungarian Constitutional Court in December 2011, which annulled the most brutal parts of the laws regarding the written press, but without coping with the regulations related to the area of the electronic media.

But let us take our attention to a striking question: what are the hidden motivations of an originally democratic - and not so long ago liberal - political formation to turn against the fundamentals of the autonomy of the media sphere? The story goes back to the last decade of the twentieth century. Most leaders of the young oppositional youth organisation who actively participated in the break-down of communism during 1988-90 were not able to accept and tolerate critical opinions towards their own party published in and by the media now under new, democratic circumstances. Any negative views about the political performance of Fidesz have been seen step by step as simply as ongoing attacks from left-liberal forces. Since then, the media became the easy scape-goat in times of election failures for top politicians of the party. Meanwhile the theory of an assumed media power has spread over and developed to be a cornerstone in the political thinking on the right side of the party spectrum. Viktor Orbán proclaimed already in 1999, at the beginning of his first period as serving Prime Minister the program of a new media balance: masking his plan as a fight against the presumed media influence of socialists and liberals, a partisan and loyal right-wing media empire has grown out from the earth in the first decade of the new century, contributing to a really polarised media system that also reflected the similar rough logic of the party competition. Moreover, the only conclusion drawn from the defeat at the next elections in 2002 was once again the same simple lesson: Fidesz should have governed even tougher.

Next time, enjoying their super majority in the parliament, one of the first new regulations Orbán and the MP-s in the Fidesz faction introduced in 2010 was an extremely long media constitution, well prepared much before the victory of the party – actually in sharp contrast to the zigzags of a so-called unorthodox economic policy. The intention of the new bill and a profoundly detailed media law approved just half a year later was first of all to show who the master at home is. As the media regulations created an international scandal,

right wing ideologists and supporters of the government celebrated that the unelected media was finally under control. The most evident sign of the “law and order” attitude can be observed in the establishment of a new media authority. The president of the body has become an appointee of the Prime Minister, in this case a former member of parliament of his own party, who has always behaved as a party soldier in her position as member of the previous media institution. And do you know how many members have been elected by the parliament to the new Media Council from the ruling party and how many from parties of the opposition side to fulfil the further four positions? The correct answer is four to null. Since then, the whole public media system has been reorganised and citizens can watch a continuous pro-governmental flow of information in the public TV without being disturbed by too much controversial news.

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