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The Opinion Pages | OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

# Hungary's Crackdown on the Press

By PHILIP N. HOWARD SEPT. 8, 2014

Photo



BUDAPEST — The European Union faces a challenging conundrum. While [Hungary](#) has embarked on building Europe's most controlled media system, the [European Commission](#) just agreed in August to provide the country with nearly 22 billion euros of economic assistance.

Hungary has become a disturbing example of how a political elite can roll back democracy, even in the heart of Europe. Leveraging an electorally successful right-wing

populism, Prime Minister [Viktor Orban](#) has staged an autocratic crackdown on the nation's press, which the independent watchdog Freedom House now ranks as only "partly free."

Mr. Orban's media strategy has several components. First, de facto control of the nation's Media Authority has permitted him to make political appointments to even minor positions within it. Second, the agency not only regulates media competition and broadcast licenses but has also been given authority over content. While the news media is required to respect the constitutional order, Mr. Orban's appointees get to decide what that means.

Media organizations must surrender data about their employees and contracts, as well as editorial and advertising content, at a level of granular detail that no media outlet in any other part of Europe has to provide to their governments. And the Media Authority has been given unusual enforcement powers: This single agency of doubtful independence has at its disposal a full suite of fines, suspensions, license revocations and business closures.

The restrictions on media freedom have had an enormous political impact. By the last general election, in April, the government had effectively reined in all of the country's broadcast media outlets. The major newspapers covered Mr. Orban's ruling Fidesz party favorably. Talk radio and television news stations gave disproportionate time to government representatives, and their coverage of opposition parties focused chiefly on corruption and infighting. As I walked around Budapest as Election Day approached, I saw smiling government leaders on billboards everywhere, yet I could go all day without seeing a poster for the opposition.

The media controls that made government voices the dominant ones dampened public enthusiasm for the election. The opposition failed to mobilize voters, and so did the ruling party — barely 60 percent of eligible voters actually voted, a record low. The far-right Jobbik party was the biggest gainer, winning more than 20 percent of the vote. A report from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe specifically criticized the "biased media coverage."

Around the time I came to Budapest last year, the government started a new policy of favoring friendly media companies with advertising buys and withdrawing support from critical media outlets. When independent media outlets, especially radio broadcasters, found their income dropping, friends of the government stepped in to buy up their broadcast licenses. Now, a new advertisement revenue tax will oblige media companies to pass on a significant portion of their pretax profits to the government. In effect, this is a partial nationalization of the industry.

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The re-elected Fidesz government has also now extended its media strategy to Internet publications, which had become the last resort for the country's more courageous

investigative journalists. The new taxes will be a further crushing blow to many publications, and some, like the weekly HVG, Hungary's most important independent news magazine, may be forced to fold.

“If there is a paper of record in Hungary, it's HVG magazine,” said Amy Brouillette, a media analyst and a colleague of mine at the Central European University. “It survived communism, but may not survive Orban.”

In 2012, the European Commission threatened Hungary with legal action over its authoritarian measures. The Fidesz government responded with minor alterations, and the secretary general of the Council of Europe, Thorbjorn Jagland, blessed the adjustments as “significant” and left it at that. Mr. Orban insists that he is in compliance with European Union standards, but legal scholars at the Center for Media and Communication Studies, where I am the director, have demonstrated how far Hungary really is from European norms. The Hungarian human rights advocate and former O.S.C.E. press freedom expert Miklos Haraszti estimates that the government has practically 100 percent control of the media outside urban areas.

With diversity of ownership and affiliation gone from radio, television and print media, the climate of control has not only introduced a significant trend of self-censorship in Hungarian journalism, but is also having a chilling effect on foreign-owned media interests. An online editor working for a media subsidiary of the German giant Deutsche Telekom was recently ousted after publishing a report about the expenses of one of Mr. Orban's ministers. Responding to the ad tax, the Bertelsmann-owned RTL media group scolded Mr. Orban's government for its “aggressive attempt” to undermine its political independence.

How is this all possible in the European Union? The commission's reticence about measures like the new ad tax law means that Mr. Orban has received few signals of disapproval for what a veteran American journalist in Budapest, Erik D'Amato, in a recent interview with HVG called the “Putinizing” of Hungary. Indeed, the European funding will flow directly through the prime minister's office, reinforcing and rewarding Mr. Orban's autocratic tendencies — even as government-friendly media outlets paint the European Union as a meddling foreign power.

If the money is withheld, Mr. Orban might portray the European Union as a bully. But dispensing the funds will definitely make Mr. Orban a worse bully than he already is. Delivery of the structural aid package must be pegged to restoring the policies that created the healthy media pluralism that existed in Hungary before the Fidesz party and Mr. Orban came to power.

Media, information and telecommunications policies have an impact on all other policies. Media pluralism keeps democracies working. That's something any European policy maker will say and every journalist will print. But a regime as tough on the media as this one should not receive such generous and unconditional support. Europe should not be financing a government that is undermining one of the cornerstones of democracy.

*Philip N. Howard, a professor at the Central European University and at the University of Washington, is the author of the forthcoming book “Pax Technica: How the Internet of Things May Set Us Free or Lock Us Up.”*

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