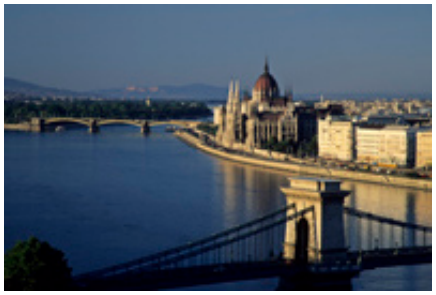
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News | 12.01.2012

Hungary

Democracy on the edge



International pressure continues to grow on Hungary as the political situation in Budapest deteriorates. The new Hungarian Constitution, which came into effect on the 1st January, has added to concerns from the US and EU over the erosion of freedom and democracy that had already grown from the restrictive new Hungarian media law of a year ago. The European spirit has been eroding in Hungary, and these concerns have increased as IMF support is put in doubt due to infringements of European law relating to the independence of the Hungarian Central Bank.

As calls of "Viktator" echo on the streets of Budapest and opposition MPs chain themselves to the gates of the Parliament, the current Hungarian government seems at pains to go against the very values it supported in the Lisbon Treaty: "*respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities." Values that should be common to all Member States "in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail." (*Art 2 TEU*)*

These are the values which were eroded by last year's media law and which are threatened now by the new constitution. If Viktor Orban's government does not stop and repair immediately the damage done to these values, it will jeopardise Hungary's position in Europe as Article 7 procedures commence (1).

Democracy cannot thrive without a free and independent press and elections cannot be trusted when boundaries are altered to favour one party. Tolerance for dissenting opinion is a litmus test for an open, free and healthy media and for democracy as a whole. The media should be a gadfly to politicians. And if it is not, it is failing in its responsibilities as the fourth estate. The assaults by Viktor Orban's Government on the freedom of press, the independence of the judiciary, the independence of the national bank and the severe restrictions of opposition rights are a serious and persistent breach of these European rights and place immense strain on the fabric of democracy in Hungary.

The reputation of Hungary internationally has already been sullied and now the standoff over bailout talks is escalating due to threats to the independence of the Central Bank. As before with all of these issues, the quickest way out of this impasse lies in the actions of Viktor Orban's government. Reports that the government is ready to negotiate are a welcome development but the issues of freedom and democracy must not be allowed to slide under the carpet once the immediate economic threat has been dealt it. These events are not just a challenge for Hungary but for the EU as a whole.

The European Parliament, with its democratically elected members, must use the powers it now has to hold Hungary to account. The European Council must not sit back and ignore this slide into authoritarianism just because it is one of its own members. And the Commission, the guardian of the treaties, must step up and fully take on its role to protect the fundamental values of the European Union. There must not be one set of rules for accession countries and another for member states. If our institutions fail in their duty, then we will face a greater crisis. Europe will loose credibility abroad when it challenges breaches of rights and democratic principles. But more importantly, our institutions and the European project will loose credibility at home with public opinion across Europe. This is something they can ill afford. The EU must act now. It must not allow a member state to slip into authoritarianism.

(1)
Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union allows for the determination of breaches of the values referred to in Article 2 (above) and for the suspension of certain rights deriving from the application of the Treaties to the Member State in question.

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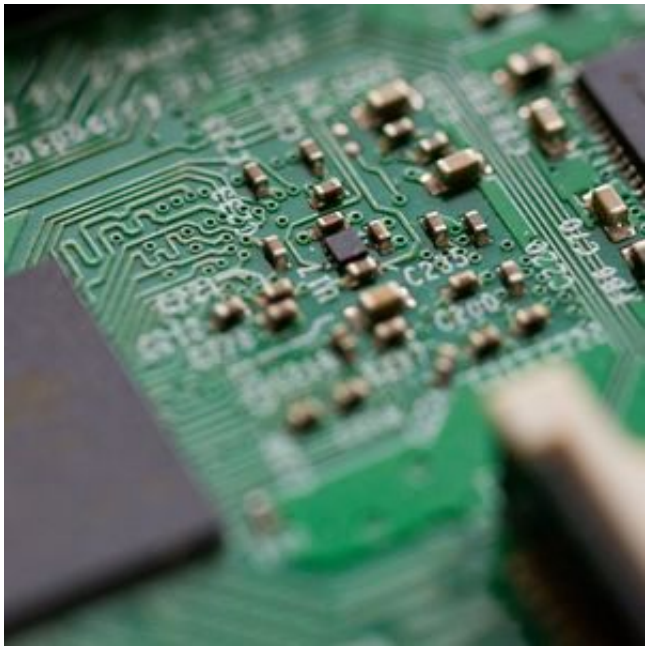


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