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Hungary: Orban and the end of the freedom of speech

Media freedom and democracy in Hungary

During the past weeks, we have seen important breaches of democracy in Hungary: a convicted thief, the former prime minister of Macedonia was granted asylum, the Central European University was shut down and will have to move to Vienna, and government mouthpiece media came under the control of one foundation, headed by an ally of Viktor Orbán.

The Greens/EFA Group in the European Parliament call on the Council to react to protect democracy and freedom of speech before the situation deteriorates further.

Orbán's crusade against press freedom

During the last week of November, Viktor Orbán, the Hungarian Prime Minister, reached a crucial point in his fight against press freedom; several private Hungarian media were donated to the Central European Press and Media Foundation (CEPMF). Until this point, those pro government media were competing for advertisement incomes, but from now on they will crush the rest of the media in Hungary.

Since 2010, when Orbán returned to power, press freedom has been under pressure: nowadays, both the public and most of the private media are vectors of the pro government propaganda. In the case of private media, its control used to pass through people close to Orbán, such as Lőrinc Mészáros, who owned several local newspapers. Now, this control is direct and centralised because of the CEPMF.

The Central European Press and Media Foundation (CEPMF): who runs it?

Officially, the CEPMF is not owned or managed by Fidesz. Nevertheless, it is run by people such as:

- Head of management: Gábor Liszkay, used to be the head of a daily Magyar Nemzet (when it was pro-Orbán)
- Member of the board of trustees: István Varga, member of the National Parliament (Fidesz) until 2014
- Member of the board of trustees: István Bajkai, currently member of the National Parliament (Fidesz)
- Member of the board of trustees: Miklós Szánthó, director of the Centre for Fundamental Rights (Alapjogokért Központ), a pro-Fidesz think tank

Closure of CEU: a dark day for Hungary and Europe

More recently, on the 3rd December 2018, the Central European University (CEU) announced that they would leave Budapest after a long legal persecution on the part of the Hungarian government. Our MEP Judith Sargentini, responsible for a report and recommendations on the Rule of Law in Hungary, made a strong statement on the closure: *“Strong and independent academia is the cornerstone of a functioning democracy. Forcing the Central European University to close shatters the last illusions that Hungary is anything other than an autocracy. So long as the EPP continues to keep Fidesz within their ranks, they are endorsing and supporting Orbán's assault on the rule of law”*.

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