

By Jozsef Martin

Two **general** features are having a major impact on the Hungarian media landscape: the process of platform change, i. e. the switch from print to digital media, and the economic crisis. . But there are some **special** features – which have been strongly criticized – which have been present from the very beginning of the second Orbán cabinet governing in 2010. Even the then second man of the cabinet, Mr. Tibor Navracsics – now no longer a minister but a future European Commissioner, acknowledged during his hearing in the European Parliament that the cabinet didn't turn enough attention to the sensitive question of press freedom, and professional organizations should have been consulted much more closely by the Fidesz government. The situation four years ago and now have some similar characteristics: then and now the press policy of the cabinet is fitting to the general government ideas.

Authoritarian behavior in many respects, growing state interventions and centralizing tendencies are to be noticed elsewhere across the field of government policies, and the media landscape is fitting to this picture. The criticisms remain but their emphasis is changing. After the adoption of the Media Law the law itself, the Media Council as such and the moves to take the opposition-oriented Club Radio off air were fiercely criticized, but sometimes those criticisms were over-stated. . Looking back, we conclude that in spite of forecasts about media freedom immediately disappearing many strongly oppositional criticisms, reports and analysis have continued to be published, and Club radio survived. All this would have been unimaginable in a dictatorship, or even in the soft one-party system that existed during the second half of the Kádár era.

But the state of the Hungarian press is still bad, as is reflected in international surveys. In the evaluation of Reporters Without Borders among 180 countries Hungary two years ago was ranked 40th, now ranking 68th. Iceland, the Netherlands and Norway have the first three places. According to the much-quoted Freedom House organization, too, in terms of the legal, political and economic framework for freedom of the press the situation of Hungary has deteriorated: in 2009 Hungary was in 21<sup>st</sup> place – countries from 1 to 30 on the list being deemed to have a free press, but in the 2013 report Hungary slipped to 36th place. In this category – from 30 to 60 – are countries where the press is called „partly free”. And a Hungarian survey pinpoints the new emphasis of the critics in connection with the Hungarian media situation. A Hungarian media think tank, the Standard Media Analysis Institute, asked journalists about the situation: 48% of them had the opinion that press freedom is being negatively affected by political pressures, and 34% of them confessed that they had suppressed or falsified some political or economic facts in their reporting. According to the answers self-censorship has grown, items are often over politicized, media groups are too

often too close to party politics, and the public service engagement of journalists has been weakened.

Here are the main new features of the media situation at the beginning of the third Orbán cabinet: 1. the media market is dominated by firms which are **close** to the cabinet; 2. due to centralizing tendencies advertisements of state firms are mainly flowing to **firms close to the government**; the **taxation of advertisements** is a new financial burden, although for the „friendly” media as well; 3. **self-censorship** because of material needs of journalists; 4. public service sector (radio and TV) is very often **directly subordinated** to short term political aims of the government (or the Fidesz), the most important news programs are often openly supporting the government.

Independent media and civil organizations are viewed as especially dangerous in the eyes of some government officials -- and sometimes by important international business players as well. Origo, which was Hungary’s biggest news portal, lost its editor-in-chief and some 25 journalists because of growing political pressure from the government and from its owner, Hungarian Telecom, which is a Hungarian subsidiary company of Deutsche Telekom. The reason: an investigative report about alleged misbehavior during official visits by Mr. János Lázár (the second man in the government and would-be successor to prime minister Orbán) to London and some other capitals (he was alleged to have spent two million Forints in two days). Generally speaking the state of journalism is bad, a large number of colleagues have left journalism, and economic fears and political concerns are severe. The political elite sometimes behaves with brutal disdain towards journalists without any consequences: the leading Fidesz politician, Mr. László Kövér, Speaker of the House spoke about „scoundrel” and „nobody” journalists when -- due to an investigative report -- the head of State was forced to leave office two years ago. Some days ago Mr. Tibor Szanyi, leader of the Hungarian Socialists in the EP, denounced as “rats” the Brussels-based Hungarian journalists who reported about his very questionable meeting with a group of openly antisemitic motorists in Brussels.

Finally: we would like to stress the importance and high value attached by journalists in Hungary to the attention and interventions of international organizations concerning the media situation in Hungary, and the importance on maintaining a constant dialogue between them and Hungarian government officials.

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