The European Union and freedom of the press

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On January 1, Hungary took over the presidency of the European Union for six months.

On the same day, a new law came into force in Hungary placing the public and private media under the control of the government and virtually eliminating freedom of the press. The coincidence of these two events is significant. Freedom of expression and democracy in general are disintegrating throughout Europe.

The right-wing Hungarian government has lost no time in demonstrating its power over the media. No sooner had the law come into effect than the newly created Media Council launched proceedings against the small, left-liberal broadcaster Tilos Radio. It was charged with having aired a song by rapper Ice-T four months ago. Since very few Hungarians would understand the rapper's American slang, the Media Council simultaneously published a Hungarian translation of the disputed text in order to demonstrate its allegedly harmful effect on children.

The next to be targeted by the Media Council was the TV channel RTL Klub. This broadcaster is also regarded as relatively liberal and critical of the government. It has been accused of "sensationalism" in its reporting of the "brutal murder of one brother by another in a southern Hungarian village." The photo it published of a bloodstained mattress was said to be "damaging to young people and even adults."

Both cases demonstrate that the new law gives the government a blank check to silence media outlets on the basis of virtually any pretext. While the Media Council makes moral accusations such as "glorifying violence," "placing youth at risk" and "pornography" in order to take action against targeted media outlets, the pro-government broadcasters, which poison the social atmosphere daily with hateful tirades against Roma, Jews, homosexuals and "communists," need not fear sanctions.

Thus far, no penalties have been imposed on Tilos Radio or RTL Klub, but the Media Council has the power to revoke their licences or bankrupt them by levying draconian fines. The Council consists solely of members of the ruling party, Fidesz. At its head is Anna Maria Szalai, a long-standing confidante of Prime Minister Viktor Orban.

The European Commission, responsible for ensuring compliance with EU treaties, has so far reacted timidly to the trashing of press freedom in Hungary, although there have been disputes over the new media law for months, and even within the EU some isolated critical voices have been heard.

Just before Christmas, Telecommunications and Media Commissioner Neelie Kroes sent a letter to the Hungarian government expressing concern whether the composition of the Media Council was in line with existing EU directives. But up to now, she has refused to examine whether the law itself is compatible with the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, which guarantees the freedom of information and expression.

There are a numbers of reasons for the craven response of the EU Commission. First, it wants to avoid at all costs placing a question mark over Hungary's EU presidency. In view of the bitter conflicts raging within the EU over monetary and economic issues, a challenge to Hungary's presidency would have inevitably triggered a new crisis.

More fundamental, however, is the fact that Hungary is not a unique case. The austerity measures dictated by the EU in Hungary, Greece, Ireland, Portugal, Spain and many other countries cannot be reconciled with democratic rights.

In many European countries, press freedom is almost a dead letter. In Italy, Silvio Berlusconi owns and controls almost all of the private media outlets, and as head of government, controls the public broadcasters. In Spain too, Berlusconi's Mediaset has been the largest television broadcaster since the beginning of the year.

In France, Nicolas Sarkozy maintains close personal relations with influential newspaper publishers, and as president gags the public media. He has personally seen to it that critical journalists lost their jobs. Berlusconi and Sarkozy are regarded as political role models for Hungarian Prime Minister Orban.

In other countries, financially powerful media moguls dictate the policy of the government. In Britain, ever since Tony Blair, no prime minister has dared to contradict the will of the Murdoch empire.

In Hungary, German companies dominate the media landscape. The right-wing Axel Springer concern is the largest newspaper publisher in the country. Germany's WAZ group, which is close to the right wing of the Social Democratic Party, and the TV stations Pro Sieben, Sat 1 and RTL are strongly represented in Hungary. It is noticeable that they have all been remarkably restrained in their criticism of the new media law.

The EU Commission has responded to another measure taken by the Hungarian government far more sharply than it has to the abolition of press freedom. In autumn of last year, to alleviate the budget deficit, the Orban government introduced a so-called crisis tax, which applies mainly to large corporations in the areas of trade, finance, telecommunications and energy. This triggered a storm of indignation in German, French, Dutch and Austrian corporate headquarters, which have invested heavily in Hungary and benefited for years from tax breaks and subsidies.

In mid-December, the heads of 13 companies—including Deutsche Telekom, the insurance group Allianz, the energy companies E.oN, RWE and EnBW, and the retail group Rewe—sent a strongly worded letter to the EU Commission complaining about the attempt to balance the budget "on the backs of selected sectors and foreign companies." The Hungarian government, the letter declared, was destroying "any basis of trust for future investment."

The EU Commission reacted immediately. Already in October, two days after the announcement of the new tax, it had called on the Hungarian government to justify its position. In December, in response to the letter from the corporate executives, it initiated an official investigation.

The German government also sprang into action. Economics Minister Rainer Brüderle of the Free Democratic Party expressed "concern" and warned that costs primarily affecting foreign companies were "fundamentally problematic."

The Orban government, which came to power on the basis of a right-wing populist and nationalist campaign, is using the taxation of foreign corporations primarily to placate its own political base. It is under tremendous economic pressure. Over the course of the next month, the government must submit a plan to restructure the budget. If the international financial markets are not convinced, the rating agencies will downgrade the country's creditworthiness to "junk" status. The Budapest economist Gyorgy Barta summed up the situation by saying, "We are now just a step away from the abyss."

Despite its nationalist rhetoric, the Orban regime is completely dependent on the international financial markets. Some 80 percent of all investments in Hungary come from the EU, a quarter from Germany alone.

With the abolition of press freedom and other dictatorial measures, it is preparing to impose its austerity programme on the backs of the working class. The EU Commission and European governments know this, and tacitly support any and all measures to suppress popular opposition.

The social situation in Hungary is already catastrophic. A recent study found that more than 1 million of the country's 10 million inhabitants are no longer able to pay their electricity, gas and heating bills on time. If they fall three months into arrears, they face being cut off.

The defence of democratic rights such as the freedom of the press is indivisible from the defence of the social rights of the working class. This requires a common struggle by the European working class on the basis of a revolutionary socialist programme against the dictatorship of the corporations and banks.

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