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### Essay

## “We have switched.” – Uncertainty and loss of trust in the Hungarian media

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**Abstract:** This essay approaches the issue of trust in the Hungarian media from the perspective that the last decade or so has brought constant and unpredictable changes in the media system. We argue that these changes were motivated solely by party politics linked to the Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán and were not market-driven at all. In effect, the owners of some media outlets and their worldviews have been undergoing rapid and radical changes. The essay illustrates these changes with specific examples and shows how this leads to a severely negative self-evaluation of journalism and a total loss of trust on the part of the public.

**Keywords:** Hungary, media transformation, illiberal media policy, media ownership, trust

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## **Theoretical background: illiberalism, political parallelism, state and media capture**

Viktor Orbán, prime minister of Hungary since 2010, has described his way of exercising power as an “illiberal” democracy (Puddington, 2017). The main features of such a democracy are a strong focus on national sovereignty, coupled with a government in sync with Orbán’s policies and made up of his cronies as it is not ‘restrained’ by necessary democratic checks and balances such as an independent judiciary, a vibrant opposition, and the strong defence of human rights (Zakaria, 1997). It is rather a politically controlled economy with strong national players, and non-competitive elections with a weak opposition.

Illiberal democracy is a known model in restricted democracies. The concept of illiberal democracy was coined by Fareed Zakaria (1997), who distinguished “democracy” from “constitutional liberalism”. Democracy can be narrowly defined as no more than “competitive, multiparty elections” (Zakaria, 1997, p. 25); constitutional liberalism, however, was developed “as a defence of the individual's right to life and property, and freedom of religion and speech” (Zakaria, 1997, p. 26).

Illiberal democracies do not need the broad variety of competing opinions and well-informed voters (Veltmer, 2012). They are supported by indisputable political proclamations and a unified public opinion that, of course, limits the citizens’ political choices. The main function of the public sphere is to support the predominant party’s power. Nevertheless, the media policy in illiberal democracies does not need to restrict all critical opinions and independent media outlets. The existence of some critical media outlets is important for the maintenance of a democratic façade and there are other means to restrict the influence of independent and opposition media outlets as will be shown further down below.

In their comparative analysis, Hallin and Mancini (2004) identified political parallelism as a fundamental characteristic of media systems. Political parallelism describes relations between the political system and the media system, their intertwinements and the former's scope of influence over the latter. The extreme case of political parallelism is the phenomenon of media capture (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2012; Schiffrin, 2017; Schiffrin, 2021). Media capture is defined by Dragomir (2020) in a report for the UNESCO as “[a] form of media control achieved through a series of systematic and premeditated steps taken by governments and powerful interest groups”. It is not only about gaining control over the regulatory authority and the publicly funded public media and unidirectionally diverting the actions of these actors. In the process of media capture, an increasing number of media market actors become the servants of particular political or economic interests. In Hungary, the process of media capture has been going hand in hand with state capture (Hellmann et al., 2000), when Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz party won a two-thirds majority in parliamentary elections in 2010. It was effective by instituting a system of clientelism and

changing the country's constitutional law and the law for parliamentary elections and also included the introduction of new media laws.

State capture primarily concerns the structure of the media system and the economic room for manoeuvre of media market players, not directly the media content. Further forms of such interventions are the targeted placement of state (or municipal) advertisements – independent of market performance – added with pressure on commercial advertisers to follow the state's lead to also allocate their advertising orders accordingly, and to provide indirect payments to journalists. State capture is also not only about the acquisition of control over media companies. Effective forms of state intervention include the acquisition of media distribution networks (newspaper distributors, cable operators, internet service providers), the control of printing capacity, and political control of the media agency and sales house market. Examples of all these can be found in the Hungarian media system, but this paper focuses on direct political control over media companies.

The development of the Hungarian political, constitutional and media system after 2010 illustrates the above processes perfectly (Bajomi-Lázár, 2021; Mérték Media Monitor, 2021; Polyák, 2018). In this paper, we highlight the problem of politically motivated ownership of the Hungarian media system. This contributes significantly to the continuing uncertainty of journalists and to the confusion of the audience's ability to inform themselves.

### **Building a new Hungarian media system**

A fundamental feature of the post-2010 Hungarian media system is the continuous transformation and rapid changes in the ownership of media companies and related market players. These changes have never been driven by market considerations, but have been the result of political decisions, and are therefore typical examples of state capture. This continuous change can be maintained by the closure of media outlets on the one hand, and by a change of ownership of media outlets on the other, as a result of which the media in question take on a radically different image and outlook from the previous ones. The post-2010 Hungarian media system provides ample examples of both phenomena (Bátorfy & Urbán, 2020; Mérték Media Monitor, 2018a).

Such a media environment does not provide a predictable and reliable information environment for either the public or journalists. A part of the audience is completely vulnerable to such changes, as they lack the opportunities, interest and skills to constantly switch between news sources. The other, more news-conscious part of the public regularly finds that media it considers credible disappear or are completely transformed. Journalists, on the other hand, live in constant existential uncertainty and either have to take on the challenge of starting all over again several times in their careers or accept that they have to meet political expectations.

The constant change in the media environment is closely linked to another phenomenon that undermines trust in society as a whole: polarisation. The political intention behind the hectic movements in the media market is to create an extremely divided public, increasingly separated by an unbridgeable divide. The obvious consequence of this polarisation is a total distrust of the 'other side' and a total lack of capacity for dialogue. In public communication, it is no longer the content of the communication that is important, but merely who is communicating. The government side deliberately and conceptually stigmatises and discredits NGOs, journalists and politicians critical of it. This forces opinion formers critical of the government to constantly defend themselves against the accusers. Meanwhile, after many years of unsuccessful attempts, non-government journalists and newsrooms have largely given up their efforts to interview leading government representatives.

The most effective narrative of stigmatisation is the campaign focusing on the American-Hungarian philanthropist and billionaire George Soros (Plenta, 2020; Toth, 2020). According to this narrative it is Soros who would flood Hungary with refugees, who funds NGOs and media critical of the government, who is influencing the European Commission and the European Parliament dissatisfied with the Fidesz government, and who is even profiting from the war against Ukraine. That is why it is enough to label someone as a Soros agent and then ignore what the critic says, and simply point out who says it. This political communication strategy makes a conspiracy theory acceptable to a wide section of the electorate and at the same time makes meaningful dialogue completely impossible.

The media system that emerged after 1990, during the period of democratic transition, was largely characterised by media companies owned by Western European, and in particular German, professional investors. The background of ownership, media supply and consumption, technological development and business opportunities all pointed towards the emergence of a market-based media system for democracy, even if, of course, the process of media transformation was far from smooth (Bajomi-Lázár, 2014; Jakubowicz & Sükösd, 2008; Polyák, 2018).

The spectacular transformation of the Hungarian media system took place after 2010 - when the Fidesz-KDNP alliance won more than two-thirds of parliamentary seats, thus obtained a constitutional majority. The global financial crisis that started in 2008 is seen as one of the main reasons for this landslide victory. The crisis had a profound impact on media markets and the entire Eastern/Central European region lost a significant part of its attractiveness for investors, as it no longer promised similar returns as before (Stetka, 2012). At the same time, the withdrawal of Western European players in Hungary was partly due to the fact that Fidesz, the governing party with a constitutional majority since 2010, made it clear immediately after coming to power that it wanted to see a profound overhaul of the way the media and the public sector operate. A clear sign of this development was the adoption of two new media laws in 2010 (Polyák, 2015), which caused a major international outcry - and which are still in force with essentially the same content and intentions. And

it started even before with the ultimately failed attempt to buy out the minority owner of Magyar RTL Rt, the most widely watched commercial television station by Simicska Lajos, the then head of the Fidesz economic backbone.

Viktor Orbán has been prime minister of Hungary since 2010 (holding this position previously also between 1998 and 2002). He has become internationally known for his divisive right-wing and undisguised pro-Russian politics. Post-election periods have been full of news twists and turns throughout Orbán's reign as he tries to exert ever more executive and legislative control to cement his hold on power for a very long time. In 2015, two major changes of media ownership were completed: that of TV2, the second largest commercial broadcaster, and that of Origo.hu, the largest-reach news portal. In both cases, the sellers were large German media companies and the buyers were confidants of the Orbán regime. TV2 was sold by the Pro7Sat.1 Gruppe - after some peculiar legal twists and turns (Mérték Media Monitor, 2016) - to Andrew Vajna, the Orbán government's film commissioner and one of its economic minions. Origo.hu was sold by Deutsche Telekom to the cousin of the central bank governor György Matolcsy, who then sold it to the son of the central bank governor. Public reporting in both media has been radically transformed. TV2's news service has been analysed as completely biased towards the government side (Szávai, 2018), while Origo.hu has been transformed from a leading news portal for quality journalism into a tool of raw propaganda.

### **Origo.hu: From German-owned investigative portal to national political mouthpiece**

The political influence of Origo.hu started even before the change of ownership. At its inception in 1998 Origo.hu was published by Magyar Telekom Zrt., which was solely owned by Deutsche Telekom. In 2014, the portal published an investigative article about a minister's conspicuously expensive trip abroad. Shortly afterwards, the portal's editor-in-chief, Gergő Sálings, was dismissed by the management. The official reason for the termination was "a change in media consumption habits" (Origo, 2014), but the editorial team clearly saw the events as a political pressure exercise. Most of the editorial staff stopped working at Origo by resigning voluntarily. András Pethő, deputy editor-in-chief and the author of the article that triggered the conflict, had earlier complained to Magyar Telekom's compliance department about the strong political pressure the editorial staff of Origo.hu was under. The results of the investigation were not published by Deutsche Telekom, but in November 2014 the portal announced in a short statement the departure of three Magyar Telekom executives, including the CEO of Origo.hu, Miklós Vaszi. According to investigative articles analysing the case, the main tool of political pressure was the extension of Deutsche Telekom's mobile frequencies in Hungary. The day after the editor-in-chief's sacking, the government announced major infrastructure improvements, which it said it planned to implement jointly with Deutsche Telekom (Kovács, 2015; Erdélyi et al., 2014).

Origo was taken over by the Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA) in 2018. KESMA is the largest player in the post-2018 Fidesz media empire, operating nearly 500 media outlets, including all county daily newspapers in monopoly position, Retró Rádió, the only national commercial radio, Origo.hu, the Hír TV news channel, the Magyar Nemzet daily newspaper, as well as huge printing capacities and the only national newspaper distribution network. The very creation of KESMA is completely outside the vocabulary of market economy and democracy: each of the former Fidesz-affiliated owners donated their media company to the foundation overnight, free of charge, without any compensation (Mérték Media Monitor, 2019).

The evidence for Origo's biased reporting is not only based on daily experience, but was also found as a result of research conducted by, for example, OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) election observers (OSCE ODIHR, 2022). According to a report on the 2022 parliamentary elections, the news portal "displayed a clear bias in favour of the government and against the main opposition coalition" (OSCE ODIHR, 2022, p. 30). The bias was not only reflected in the fact that the government and the governing parties received almost twice as much coverage as the opposition, but above all in the fact that while the government and the governing party were presented in an exclusively positive and neutral light, the vast majority of the coverage of the opposition was negative.

At the same time, an important lesson is that even a major professional and ideological shift does not immediately alarm the public. An analysis of news consumption habits (Mérték Media Monitor, 2018b) shows that although the proportion of those who consumed news from Origo.hu at least weekly had fallen by a third from 2014 by 2018, from 28 to 19 percent. Yet Origo was still the second most popular news portal in 2018, and by 2020 it had reached 28 percent again. Presumably because of the Covid pandemic, the readership of all news portals increased significantly in 2020, and Origo was the third most popular news portal that year.

The research also showed that in 2020, 37 percent of the audience identified Origo as pro-government, while 9 percent of respondents saw the portal as explicitly critical of the government and 15 percent as balanced. One could even conclude that the audience's ability to detect and interpret ideological bias is limited. However, it can be argued more strongly that the more or less unbroken popularity of Origo.hu is due to the fact in large part that, in addition to public content, tabloid, sports and other content, even other services (email, software downloads) are available, which are becoming less and less structurally separated from it. A significant part of the traffic is primarily related to non-political content, but at the same time the audience inevitably encounters content of relevance to the public sphere.



## **Kidnapping of Index.hu**

This mixed content offer is provided by two other news portals, Index.hu and 24.hu. It is no coincidence that these three portals are the top players in the readership race. Just as it is no coincidence that in 2020 it was the Fidesz-linked players who gained full control of Index.hu. The takeover of Index.hu has provoked a huge response across Europe. The process (Pethő, 2022) was similar to the acquisition of Origo.hu, and the journalists involved were partly the same - some former Origo.hu staff members had switched to working at Index after 2014. Index.hu has had a complex ownership structure since 2014 but this had ensured the independence and stability of the news portal. After the 2018 parliamentary elections - which resulted in another constitutional majority for Fidesz - businessmen close to Fidesz bought up the companies behind Index.hu, a process that led to the complete takeover of Index.hu in 2020. The editorial board, sensing the risk of political interference, informed the public that the portal's independence was no longer guaranteed. In response, the management dismissed the editor-in-chief, Szabolcs Dull, in July 2020, followed by the dismissal of the entire editorial team within a few days.

From summer 2020, Index.hu therefore continued with a completely new editorial team, and since then it has undergone several changes of management and its content has increasingly openly served the interests of the governing party. Despite this, Index remains in constant competition with 24.hu, one of the most popular news portals, for the largest reach. According to a survey (Hann et al., 2020), 72 percent of the population have heard about the replacement of Index's editorial staff. However, while 90 percent of opposition voters thought that the reason for the replacement was due to political influence, 68 percent of government voters thought that the reason for the termination was based on other reasons. 19 percent of respondents said they used to read the Index but stopped reading it after the change of ownership. 25 percent said they used to read the Index and still do, despite the change of ownership.

## **Journalists starting over**

There is a very similar positive thread in the history of Origo.hu and Index.hu. Both are also examples of how standing up for the values of free journalism provides significant trust capital for the journalists concerned. The editor-in-chief who was fired from Origo.hu together with other journalists who left the editorial team founded the investigative team and portal Direkt36 in 2016, which was primarily based on donations from the public. Direkt36 is still one of the most prominent investigative teams, which has uncovered many abuses of power and has been a constant participant in cross-border journalism projects, such as its involvement in the publication of the Pandora Papers. On a similar vein, the former editor-in-chief of Index and the journalists who left with him launched the Telex.hu news portal in 2020, which is



also successfully run on private donations and grants. Telex.hu is the fourth most visited news portal.

This had not been the first crisis in the history of Index.hu (Tófalvy, 2021). Some journalists left the portal already in the early 2010s because in 2012 Index was acquired by a businessman who was very strongly linked to Fidesz. Despite the fact that Index.hu was able to maintain its independence in its outreach activities, several journalists and the former editor-in-chief felt that this ownership was incompatible with their professional principles. In 2012, Tamás Bodoky, one of the journalists who left, launched the investigative portal Atlatszo.hu, which was the first crowdfunding-based media on the Hungarian market and is still a key player in public information. Former editor-in-chief of Index, Péter Uj, together with other former Index journalists, launched the news portal 444.hu in 2013, which is also an important player in the independent Hungarian media scene and now also operates a successful paywall system.

As is visible with the above-mentioned examples, several journalists have left their former media houses because of political/editorial disagreements after politically-motivated takeovers and they found temporary refuge in new media projects. These journalists starting over is therefore a peculiar phenomenon in the Hungarian media system when a journalist no longer can accept editorial policies and leaves his/her job for ethical reasons.

In the above examples, the journalists starting over have ended up with new career opportunities, but all such cases involve ongoing uncertainties. None of these newsrooms can plan for more than two years. A stable business model can hardly be built on crowdfunding, tendering and paywall funding. This is true even if, according to the Reuters Digital News Report 2022, 11% of the audience already pay for online content (Newman et al., 2022). A 2020 analysis found a much lower figure of 5 per cent, although even in that survey 10 per cent of opposition voters said they supported some media (Hann et al., 2020). Crowdfunding is just as important as a means of expressing and building trust between media and audiences as it is of securing revenue.

### **Collapses close to Fidesz**

The risk of a sudden collapse does not spare those news outlets that have previously enjoyed a very friendly relationship with the Fidesz government. In 2015, Fidesz's main economic backer, Lajos Simicska, fell out with Viktor Orbán. At the time, most of the pro-Fidesz media was in Simicska's hands. Pro-government media such as the daily Magyar Nemzet, the weekly Heti Válasz and the Hír TV television channel quickly became bastions of conservative coverage critical of the government. While a minority of journalists left these media outlets as a result of the change of direction, the vast majority of journalists continued to work and experienced the new

situation as a freer environment than before. One journalist involved however is critical about the driving force of the newly gained freedom: “One could say that ideal conditions were provided for free media work, but still the ‘free press’ as a basic concept of personal revenge remained a pure fantasy” (Kardos, 2018).

Consumers of these media have reacted more strongly than average to the change. Mérték Media Monitor’s research looked at the people who used to consume the media but no longer do (Mérték Media Monitor, 2018b). A quarter of those who used to read Magyar Nemzet but no longer do so, reported that they did not like the paper’s changed orientation. Based on the Mérték research (2018b), the proportion was 5 percent for Hír TV and even lower for the other media. This shows that the audience of Magyar Nemzet in particular is an informed voter who not only knows which media reflect their political views, but also notices when there is a change. As a result of the research, in contrast to the audience of Origo.hu, Index.hu or even TV2, the audience of media dedicated almost exclusively to political news is more sensitive to changes in the political nature of media content. This is actually understandable, as Index.hu and Origo.hu consumers are not looking for the narratives of a particular party or worldview in the news, or even necessarily interested in political news, but readers of the more overtly partisan papers are explicitly drawn to the narratives of the particular political side. Therefore, politically engaged readers are also likely to notice when a newspaper changes political direction.

The government critical period of Magyar Nemzet and Heti Válasz did not last long. After the 2018 parliamentary elections, which brought another two-thirds victory for Fidesz, Lajos Simicska liquidated all his media and other economic interests or sold them to businessmen close to Fidesz. This has, of course, removed all doubt as to whether the Simicska media, which has been critical of the government and, to this end, has indeed given journalists greater freedom, has fulfilled a political mission. However, journalists used to independent, quality journalism were no longer willing to give up their freedom. The journalists of Magyar Nemzet founded the weekly Magyar Hang, and the team of Heti Válasz continued with Válasz Online, a portal that publishes longer analyses following the concept of long-form journalism. Both media are successful in their respective fields, and subscriptions and donations have provided them with a stable operation over the past period. However, their advertising revenues are practically non-existent and journalists from Magyar Hang are not allowed to attend any pro-government events or press conferences. Fidesz regards these media and their journalists as traitors.

The Magyar Nemzet name has been used by Fidesz’s media foundation KESMA since 2019. The name is backed by a completely different editorial team than before, and the paper is once again completely biased in favour of the governing party. Since 2014, Magyar Nemzet, which has existed since 1938, has undergone a complete ideological and professional change of direction, a closure and a relaunch with a complete ideological change. Such hectic movements are a serious symptom of the crisis in the media market and media freedom.

## **Consequence: Insecure and distrustful audience**

In such an unreliable, constantly moving media system, the level of trust is necessarily low. According to the Ipsos Global Trustworthiness Index 2022, journalists in Hungary are the 3<sup>rd</sup> most untrustworthy profession after politicians and ministers. Among the countries surveyed, Hungary has by far the lowest trust in journalists: only 9 percent of the population consider journalists trustworthy (compared to an average of 25 percent in the countries surveyed), and 58 percent are particularly distrustful of them (compared to an average of 38 percent in the countries surveyed).

Similar results are shown in the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2022 (Newman et al., 2022). Of the 46 countries surveyed, trust in the media is lower only in the United States and Slovakia than in Hungary, with the Hungarian trust index in a tie with Taiwan and Greece. The perception of press freedom is also very low: only 15% of the population think that the news is independent of political pressure.

The processes described in this study are important foundations of mistrust. The recent news about the political occupation of certain media, the evidence of state capture, certainly sends the message that the media is a “capturable”, not an autonomous and stable sector. There are no safe havens in the media system, no news media that have proven their reliability even after many decades of history. The Hungarian media system is in a constant state of flux, keeping its audience in a state of uncertainty. As we have shown, the media public is also highly polarised. This leads to a total rejection of the media and journalists of the ‘other side’. In addition, the Hungarian public is very distrustful of the political elite and politicians, and this distrust is also reflected in the media dominated by politicians.

The loss of confidence is felt by journalists themselves. In a 2021 survey, opinions about their own social perception were expressed, such as

H1 - Our prestige has fallen to immeasurable lows. The reason is the degrading tone adopted by governmental actors towards journalism and their refusal to share information, which ends up serving as a model for all of society even as it renders acceptable the notion that the representatives of state institutions have no obligation to inform the public and that they cannot be held to account. That is why media products cannot excel, and that is how “partisan work” is created.

H2- [The prestige of journalism] has declined continuously over the past 30 years since I have been in this profession. The reason is that a segment of the professionals serve economic and political interests, they have no interest in their profession.” (Mérték Media Monitor, 2021, p. 304).

As a reason for the loss of trust, the journalists interviewed unanimously cited the fact that

[i]t is increasingly difficult to tell information stemming from credible and professional journalistic sources apart from deliberately misleading contents or opinions disseminated by ordinary laypersons who argue vehemently for their position. This public sphere, inundated with and diluted by all sorts of information, does not serve to improve the general view in society of journalists. (Mérték Media Monitor, 2021, p. 304)

The close correlation between trust in the media and social polarisation is shown by the 2020 research (Hann et al., 2020), which shows that while the most trusted media for pro-government voters are the public media channels Hír TV and Origo.hu, the same media are the least trusted for opposition voters. And vice versa, the media that opposition voters find trustworthy are those that government voters do not trust.

### Is the future coming?

The title phrase, “We have switched”, was uttered by a Hír TV-correspondent in December 2018 at a Christmas fair when responding to one of this article’s authors about how he is and how his work at a media organisation is going after changed ownership. Continuous obfuscation, continuous redesign, and in the meantime the impossibility of social dialogue – Hungarian journalists and the Hungarian public can only hope for a more predictable and freer future, but by no means a near future. Hungarian illiberal democracy has used a wide range of soft, albeit increasingly hard, censorship tools since 2010 to almost completely capture the media. This has led to a loss of vision for journalists and a decline in the public’s ability to inform themselves and their confidence in the reliability of journalistic work.

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