

Media Pluralism and the European Citizens' Initiative

Presentation of the Hungarian case at the House of Lords, London, 21 March 2013

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my real honour to be here and to speak in front of you in this historic building.

Since we currently face an international scandal, you probably all know that the state of democracy has been dramatically deteriorated in Hungary in the last years. Latest development, first of all constitutional changes have been strongly criticised by the European institutions as well as in the Helsinki Commission of the United States, which held a hearing on Hungary in Washington DC on Tuesday, 19 March 2013. Our Hungarian Europe Society also protested against the antidemocratic and illiberal steps of the government which have weakened checks and balances inside the Hungarian political system.

This is the general political context in Hungary. The efforts for more pluralism in the field of the media and the fight for press freedom cannot be separated from these broader tendencies. The media laws, which also fired the overall protest against the Orbán government one-two years ago, had to be finally modified under the pressure of the European Commission and the European Parliament, and the Council of Europe, as well as following the decisions taken by the Hungarian Constitutional Court, which fully rescued on-line and printed media out of the effects of the restrictions. Still, one of the most serious parts of the regulations remained valid: the electronic media, including the famous opposition radio, Klubrádió, is under the control of the mighty supervisory media authority, the Media Council. The current procedure that functions for the selection of its members, and was approved exclusively by the parliament's two-third majority of the ruling party, made it possible to elect only delegates from Fidesz, the party of the Prime Minister, to the Media Council, which has strong competences regarding both licences and fines.

That is why the Hungarian campaign of a coalition made by four non-governmental organisations: the Hungarian Europe Society, the association One Million for the Freedom of Press in Hungary (Milla), the Standard Media Monitor, and the South East European Network for Professionalization of Media focuses on the malfunctioning of the Hungarian Media Council particularly. As part of the European Citizens' Initiative for Media Pluralism, we urge for European-wide legal guarantees to make it impossible for any member state government to create supervisory media authorities based on partisan loyalty.

It is clear that the British context and especially the debate on Europe are very different from the perceptions about the EU in Central and Eastern Europe. But pro-Europeans believe in all member states that European institutions and common rules should work as the guardians of our shared democratic values. As for some post-communist countries, even more than twenty years after the transition from dictatorship to democracy, just like in the case of Hungary, the European Union is still supposed to behave as a civilising, normative power.

We and many other member states, not only in Central and Eastern Europe, have serious troubles with the emergence of populist movements, parties and politicians. We still need competent European institutions with political will and strong self-consciousness as well as with legal instruments in order to give impetus to the ongoing struggle for media freedom in Europe and to stop anti-democratic, negative tendencies on the national level of European integration. Our common grass-root European Citizens' Initiative has significant supporters inside the European elites. We are not allowed to fail: we have to gather one million signatures just in time.

Thank you for your kind attention.