

Independent Journalism Finds a Way

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BUDAPEST – There is now a distinct possibility that Hungary’s main opposition party, Tisza, will defeat Viktor Orbán’s ruling Fidesz party in the country’s parliamentary elections on April 12. This has prompted Tisza’s leader, Péter Magyar, to promise that if his party wins, one of its first acts in government will be to suspend the license of the Media Services and Support Trust Fund (MTVA), the state body that finances and oversees public-media assets. Pulling the plug on the pro-Orbán MTVA is long overdue.

For more than 15 years, Orbán’s government has steadily erected barriers to objective reporting and tightened its grip on the media ecosystem. Through a combination of hostile takeovers, pressure campaigns, and interference with regulators like the National Media and Infocommunications Authority, it has fundamentally altered public discourse.

As a result, 80% of the country’s news outlets – including formerly independent publications such as *Origo* and *Index* – have become pro-government mouthpieces. Media capture on this scale, extensively documented in a major new study, is unprecedented in the European Union and demonstrates how quickly pluralism can be destroyed through legal engineering.

My own experience underscores the calculated nature of Orbán’s efforts to control the media that Hungarians consume. In 2016, I was the deputy editor-in-chief of *Népszabadság*, once the highest-circulation daily broadsheet in Hungary, when it was closed overnight. Within days, our website and massive digital archive spanning decades were inaccessible. The takeover was orchestrated and executed by Mediaworks, a conglomerate owned by the oligarch Lőrinc Mészáros, Orbán’s childhood friend. Mészáros, whose fortune was built on state contracts, now effectively controls the entire print media landscape and numerous online platforms.

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By now, it is clear that the MTVA’s official commitment to impartiality is a fiction. The Budapest-based Republikon Institute recently monitored state media’s evening news broadcasts and found that Fidesz and its coalition partner received 15 hours of positive coverage per week. By contrast, Tisza and Magyar were subjected to more than five hours of overtly critical or defamatory reporting.

With this propaganda machine at its disposal, Fidesz can steer the national conversation as it sees fit. During this campaign, character assassination and geopolitical fearmongering have featured prominently. In a desperate bid to shore up support for Orbán, Hungarian public media are currently portraying him as the sole guarantor of peace in “times of war.” Another of the state’s main narratives is that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has supposedly hatched a “master plan” with the European Commission to “dethrone” Orbán and install Magyar as a puppet. Moreover, domestic “scandals” are manufactured to support the regime’s central claim: that the opposition is out of touch with Hungarians and funded by foreign interests. Last August, *Index* published a document that it claimed was a Tisza plan proposing a 33% tax rate. Even though Tisza promptly denied the veracity of the report, the story dominated the political agenda for months. *Index* later published the party’s alleged proposals for a “dog and cat tax,” leading the government to warn pensioners that Magyar would force them to euthanize their pets. While the Metropolitan Court eventually ruled that Tisza had nothing to do with the text, the damage was done.

These domestic smears are intended to sow doubt among the electorate and are subsequently linked to broader geopolitical grievances. For example, the regime recently stopped two cash-in-transit vehicles during a routine transfer from Austria’s Raiffeisen Bank to the State Savings Bank of Ukraine. Within minutes, pro-government outlets framed the incident as evidence of “dirty money” flowing through the country to support a foreign-controlled political opposition. By invoking national security in its partisan propaganda, the government reinforces the idea that dissent is synonymous with treason.

The Hungarian media’s financial foundation is also fundamentally lopsided. Since 2015, the government and state-owned companies have reportedly spent in excess of €1.1 billion (\$1.3 billion) on advertising, funneling taxpayer money almost exclusively into Fidesz-aligned outlets.

There are, however, signs that the regime’s information monopoly is beginning to fracture. A small number of independent newsrooms have managed to pierce the government’s propaganda shield, despite being under constant political pressure and largely starved of advertising revenue.

Investigative outlets like *Direkt36*, *Telex*, and *444.hu*, which have survived for years on the doggedness of their staff and the support of their readers, have chipped away at the wall of misinformation with their persistent reporting on corruption and the regime’s ties to the Kremlin. This has provided the public with a shared set of facts that the state’s coordinated megaphone has failed to suppress, creating the conditions for Tisza to emerge as a viable challenger. After 16 years, reality is proving more resilient than manufactured narratives.

This spells trouble for Orbán in April’s elections. Ultimately, the independent journalism that Orbán has sought to tame – but never fully muzzled – could be his government’s undoing.

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