

Hungary: the conflict over the Index.hu news website

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On 22 July Szabolcs Dull was dismissed as editor-in-chief of the Index.hu news website which is one of the largest with approximately a million views daily and which is critical of the Hungarian government. Two days later nearly all the staff members of the website's editorial team resigned out of solidarity with Dull, deeming that their independence as journalists was at threat. The event came in the aftermath of the reorganisation plan of the website, which is being developed by the management board and is formally motivated by financial losses due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The dispute between the owner of the website and its journalists has been brewing since March this year when Miklós Vaszily, a businessman close to the government of Viktor Orbán, purchased 50% of shares in Indamedia, the company that controls the foundation which manages the website and sells its advertising space.

The main opposition parties expressed their solidarity with the Index.hu editorial team and called upon Hungarian citizens to protest against Fidesz appropriating another public sphere, a practice which has been underway for years. Politicians of the opposition organised a demonstration in defence of the freedom of the media in Budapest which was attended by several thousand participants. The government has deemed the situation an internal problem between journalists and a private company. Fidesz sent a letter to the European People's Party, stating that the Hungarian opposition had been involved in disinformation activities and that the government rejects the possibility of interfering with decisions made by private owners.

Commentary

- Following the resignation of Index.hu's most important journalists, it is likely to increasingly represent the political agenda of the ruling party. In the case of Index.hu a similar practice was used as was applied to the popular news website Origo. Origo's editor-in-chief was dismissed and a majority of its journalists left with him. Vaszily was then the general manager of the company which controlled Origo and after the editor-in-chief and other journalists left, the editorial line shifted from being critical of the government to supporting it. Since January 2019 Vaszily has been the chairman of the company which controls one of the largest commercial television stations TV2, which has a clear pro-government agenda.
- Index.hu was considered to be one of the last news websites which were critical of the government. At present, the ruling party controls almost all the regional dailies, the largest radio stations and three out of the five most important television stations. In 2018 the share of the nationwide pro-government media (public and private) in revenues generated by the

entire media market was 78%. The internet remains the most independent segment of the Hungarian media. In 2018, among the news website with the highest revenues, Origo was the only one owned by the KESMA foundation. This foundation was established in 2018 and groups together nearly 500 media outlets from different segments. It is controlled by people closely affiliated to Fidesz. The remaining three news websites which are independent of the government (24.hu, Index.hu, 444.hu) yielded in total almost 60% of the market's revenues.

- While governing the country, Fidesz has developed instruments which made it possible for the party to dominate the narrative on the domestic media market. To this end, the party has been employing soft pressure measures, particularly financial pressure. The government, which is the country's largest advertiser, makes placing advertisements conditional on the media's editorial line, and it has been effectively scaring away foreign companies and private advertisers by threatening to impose higher taxes on them. Fidesz has been using private businessmen loyal to the party, such as Lajos Simicska and (after 2015) Andy Vajna, Lőrinc Mészáros and Árpád Habony, to take control of the private media.