

Coronavirus Contaminating European Unity

Orban's Hungary Puts a new Muzzle on Free Press

The European Union will be a different one after the coronavirus crisis. This is already very much certain, only the extent of the damage is yet to be estimated. Instead of Europe-wide coordination, we are witnessing political solo efforts, mutual recriminations and border closures.

The development in Hungary is extremely worrying. Viktor Orban is shamelessly using the pandemic there to disempower Parliament, repress freedom of expression and muzzle a critical press. The duration of these coercive measures is completely uncertain. He creates - with the support of a two-thirds majority of his loyal party - an emergency regime, although Hungary is far less affected by the coronavirus than most other EU countries. At the beginning of the year, no one thought it possible that such comprehensive concentration of powers would ever be decided in Europe again.

The European Journalists Association -The Communication Network (EJ) expresses deep concern about this unprecedented decision.

Having in mind that the Hungarian Government identifies with its Prime Minister Viktor Orban, in reality the extraordinary powers are concentrated in the hands of one person. All this under the pretext of allowing the government to act as quickly as possible to fight the coronavirus.

The criminal rules introduced against journalists in the event of dissemination of news that does not correspond to the reality, are extremely worrying. The possibility of rectification, permitted in every democracy, is disallowed and instead imprisonment of up to 3 years, and even up to 5 years in the case of uncomfortable news concerning the coronavirus is envisaged. And who decides if a piece of news is right or false? Incredibly, the decision is up to the government, namely President Viktor Orban.

All parliamentary democracies in the world have introduced understandable emergency regulations to fight coronavirus, but without depriving their Parliaments of control.

EJ calls on the European Commission, the European Council and the European Parliament to take urgent action to remedy such flagrant violation of press freedom in a country of the European Union, which defies principles, values and fundamental rights enshrined in its Treaties.

These violations should also to be considered incompatible with the presence in the European Union of a state which violates freedom of information in such an insolent way.

EJ feels close to all Hungarian colleagues facing such a difficult situation in standing up for freedom.

A tough rule of law trial has been underway against Hungary for two years now, and one can be curious to see how resolutely Brussels responds to this recurrent provocation. The corona crisis is a frightening illustration of how quickly common solutions are thrown overboard in favor of national reflexes.

Nor does the speed of the virus spread justify the inability of the EU to counteract with common strategy. Here borders are arbitrarily closed instead of consistently delimiting regional risk areas. Blame is placed on European neighbours in order to divert attention from own responsibility for an inadequate health care system. A virus is poisoning the political climate, instead of seeing it as a stress test for common European action and drawing the right lessons from fighting the infection. And fundamental democratic rights are being eroded - under the pretext of fighting a global pandemic and in the hope that no one will look too closely at such violations now.

Once the last virus has been eradicated, we will need enormous efforts to wrench the European Union out of its contaminated state.

Paolo Magagnotti

EJ President

Rotger H: Kindermann -- Vassil Sotirov

EJ Vice-presidents