

January 07, 2011

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### Recommended Citation

Shemin, Kara, "2011-01-07: A government steps back into darkness" (2011). *News@Northeastern*. Paper 780. <http://hdl.handle.net/2047/d20002023>

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## A government steps back into darkness



Nicholas Daniloff explains what the new law means for the future of Hungarian media. Photo by Mary Knox Merrill

**January 7, 2011**

Hungary's ruling party, Fidesz, has passed a law empowering the government to regulate private media through the newly appointed Media Council. The council will be authorized to investigate and issue fines to any news medium for such coverage it deems unbalanced or offensive to the public; the council will also directly control most of Hungary's media outlets.

Opponents, including the international news media and other political parties, say the law, which took effect Jan. 1, threatens free speech and democratic principles.

**Journalism professor** Nicholas Daniloff, a former correspondent for United Press International and U.S. News & World Report in London, Paris, Moscow and Washington, D.C., sheds light on what the law means for the future of Hungarian media.

### How might the new law affect media content and quality? What obstacles could journalists confront as they are forced to obey?

Hungary has adopted a massive media law amounting to nearly 200 pages, 230 articles and several annexes. The law seeks to limit what authorities view as unacceptable excesses, such as assaults on human dignity, caricaturing of national symbols and sensational or violent portrayals that might affect minor children. Under this law, for example, the president of Hungary could not be written about the way President Clinton was portrayed during the Monika Lewinsky affair. The law also seeks to dictate how much broadcasting must be in Hungarian and how much may be in other European languages.

### With the Hungarian government regulating the majority of media outlets, how can its citizens access unbiased national news?

Provisions of the law would be overseen and enforced by a Media Council with the power to issue fines and even suspend publication or broadcasting. From an American First Amendment perspective, this is clearly an attack on freedom of the media, freedom of expression, and possibly even of religion and free assembly to redress grievances. It is a law that promotes authoritarianism, not democracy.

### Is there anything positive that can come from this kind of media control?

The only positive element that I can foresee is a robust discussion everywhere that broad freedom of expression is valued. Such a discussion might lead to revisions in the law. However, such revisions would probably not be great, as pressure for media restrictions in Hungary has been building over the last decade.

### Is there precedent for this sort of law in a democratic country? Does it portend a trend or do you see it as a fluke?

Democratic countries impose some restrictions on media. In the United States, individual laws handle sensitive areas such as disclosure of identities of secret agents, defamation of individuals and espionage matters. France has provisions that make it a crime to denigrate governing officials, governing authority and its symbols.

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Britain has an Official Secrets Act, which makes it a crime for a journalist to publish government defense secrets.

**With Hungarian and international constituencies protesting the law, do you think it can stand?**

The Hungarian Press Law looks like lawyers and politicians drafted it without input from journalists, editors or publishers. It reflects a deep sense of insecurity among those who govern. While it may be adjusted as the result of vigorous discussion and protests, many of its restrictive provisions will likely remain.

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