

The Népszabadság suspension: Media Coverage in other (European) Countries



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The unexpected closing down of Népszabadság in early October caused big media and public attention within Hungary and has ever since led to the publication of numerous articles, interviews and reports in (independent) Hungarian media and animated thousands of people protesting for press freedom. In addition, the sudden end of Hungary's major opposition news outlet also made headlines in a range of European media – something that can only partially be said about former anti-democratic developments under the Orbán government throughout the last years. This article aims to give an overview over media coverage of the Népszabadság suspension in English and German speaking as well as Dutch and Scandinavian online news outlets.

Via a simple Google News search in the different languages, 65 online news items published by non-Hungarian media and covering the Népszabadság issue could be found. The majority of them was in German language (42%, published by German, much less Austrian and Swiss media) a relatively small number in English, some of Dutch and two of Finnish origin. Interesting was the relatively big attention Swedish media paid to Népszabadság, with their media coverage making up for 21,5% of the total coverage detected. The articles were mainly published around the 8th- 10th October, the days just after the suspension of Népszabadság and due spontaneous solidarity protests and the 17th-19th of October, mainly dealing with the big solidarity protests that took place in Budapest on the 16th of October. The articles reach from short announcements over regular reports to interviews with journalists and in-depth reports, providing additional background facts on Hungary and recent political developments. The major conflict picked up in all articles is the allegation of the unexpected suspension being the next government “coup” against press and opinion freedom in Hungary, raised by opposition politicians and activists on the one and Mediawork's “official” economic reasoning for the suspension on the other hand. Some articles merely mention those two versions of the story staying neutral in terms of their respective credibility. In most articles however – and this applies especially to the Swedish ones - Népszabadság is explicitly presented as last oppositional newspaper being the last bastion of independent media under the Orbán government. Its suspension therefore is often framed as major government action against press freedom and a democratic Hungarian public sphere. Especially in the Swedish articles, the suspension is often brought in relation with Népszabadság attest investigative pieces in terms of corruption among high rank FIDESZ politicians with close tights to Orbán – we can assume that the media attention from Sweden can be explained by the long tradition, intrinsic role and high value press freedom has in Swedish political culture.

Most of the articles (in)directly quote the official Mediaworks statement on the suspension as well as of Népszabadság Journalists. Several articles moreover mentioned the EU's reaction, quoting the EP's president Martin Schultz's or a Commission spokesperson and sometimes implicitly criticize the EU's apathy and unwillingness to impose sanctions etc. on the Orbán government, thereby putting the suspension of Népszabadság in a trans-European context, where press freedom is understood as common European value. Though this trans-European coverage is not likely to raise a general public outcry, it is to be hoped that it contributes to some (trans-European) attention and awareness among interested audiences for the most recent and major antidemocratic development in Viktor Orbán's Hungary.