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Abstract

In an era marked by the global decline of liberal democracy and the concurrent rise of authoritarian regimes, the role of independent and impartial media has become increasingly pivotal.

This article investigates the role and influence of media institutions operating free from governmental or partisan control within authoritarian contexts, where regimes systematically curtail freedom of expression and monopolize the flow of information, and analyzes the capacity of the independent media to promote transparency, uphold accountability, reinforce the rule of law, and foster political engagement among citizens. Specific focus is given to the role and impact of investigative journalism in autocracies as a mechanism for exposing abuses of power and systemic corruption.

In addition to theoretical analysis, the article presents case studies from two authoritarian countries - Serbia and Hungary – where independent media outlets have played a critical role in revealing political manipulation, abuse of power, suppression of critical thought, human rights violations, and corrupt practices by ruling elites. Moreover, the paper explores the media's contribution to the emergence of civic resistance, the mobilization of anti-government protests, and the imposition of political accountability on those in power.

The article concludes that in environments characterized by institutional capture and democratic backsliding, independent media constitutes a vital safeguard against authoritarian consolidation and serves as a cornerstone of democratic resilience.

Introduction

Liberal democracy has become one of the least prevalent forms of governance in the contemporary world. As of 2025, there are 88 democracies - 29 classified as liberal democracies and 59 as electoral democracies, and 91 autocracies, including 35 closed and 56 electoral autocracies. The most recent occurrence in which only 29 liberal democracies were recorded dates back to 1990. Global trends reveal a stark asymmetry in political trajectories: only 19 countries, home to approximately 452 million people, are currently undergoing democratization, whereas 45 countries, encompassing around 3.1 billion individuals, are on the path to autocratization (V-Dem Institute, 2025).

This shift signifies a growing number of regimes that maintain power through the restriction of free expression, the suppression of independent media, and the weakening of civil society institutions.

The erosion of liberal democracy is particularly pronounced in regions such as Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and South Asia (V-Dem Institute, 2025).

As free and independent media are widely recognized as cornerstones of liberal democracy - ensuring transparency, accountability, the rule of law, and meaningful citizen participation (European Parliament, 2023) - they have increasingly become targets of authoritarian repression. Restricting

independent journalism is now a strategic objective for authoritarian regimes seeking to silence dissent and maintain control (Freedom House, 2022).

For this purpose, authoritarian governments deploy a variety of coercive mechanisms, including repressive legislation, restrictions on funding sources, digital surveillance, disinformation campaigns, targeted intimidation, and harassment. Notably, such regimes do not limit their actions to domestic contexts. On the contrary, they increasingly seek to exert global influence by investing in international media in efforts to disseminate “illiberal narratives” and legitimize their models of governance on the world stage. Therefore, In the twenty-first century, authoritarianism is no longer an isolated or national phenomenon but rather a transnational project. Autocratic regimes actively collaborate to reinforce their power and dismantle liberal democratic norms. In this context, media censorship has evolved into a transnational instrument, deliberately employed to erode democratic resilience across borders (Applebaum, 2024).

These dynamics not only undermine the institutional foundations of democracy but also deprive individuals of the capacity to defend their rights and freedoms, engage in political life, and influence decision-making processes. Thus, independent media assumes an ever more vital role in the defense of democratic resistance (Freedom House, 2022).

This article analyzes how independent and impartial media operate within authoritarian political systems characterized by restricted freedom of expression and state domination of information. It examines the capacity of media institutions functioning free from governmental or partisan control to promote transparency, enforce accountability, uphold the rule of law, and encourage political engagement under conditions of democratic backsliding.

Focusing specifically on investigative journalism, the article demonstrates how independent media expose abuses of power, systemic corruption, and human rights violations in autocratic regimes. Through a combined theoretical and empirical approach, it draws on comparative case studies from Serbia and Hungary to illustrate the mechanisms through which investigative reporting challenges political manipulation and non-transparent governance.

The cases of Hungary and Serbia are examined because they represent contemporary authoritarian and hybrid regimes in which state institutions have been systematically captured by ruling elites, accompanied by extensive political control over the media environment. In both countries, governing authorities have actively sought to weaken, marginalize, or dismantle independent journalism through legal, economic, and political pressure. At the same time, Hungary and Serbia remain analytically significant precisely because independent and unbiased media continue to operate despite these constraints, exposing government abuses, corruption, human rights violations, and non-transparent governance practices. The persistence of investigative and independent media in these contexts demonstrates that, even under conditions of institutional capture and media repression, journalism remains a critical tool for enforcing accountability and enabling democratic resistance. By focusing on Hungary and Serbia, the article highlights how independent media function within autocratic regimes where formal checks and balances have eroded, illustrating both the vulnerabilities and the enduring capacity of journalism to challenge authoritarian consolidation.

The Role and Influence of Media in Autocratic Regimes

In autocracies, independent and impartial media play a critical role in upholding democratic principles by providing fact-based information in environments dominated by disinformation and state propaganda. While authoritarian leaders actively disseminate false narratives to manipulate public opinion and consolidate political power, media outlets operating free from state influence counter pro-government messaging and strengthen societal resilience against disinformation (V-Dem Institute, 2020; Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2024).

Independent media also perform a core watchdog function by monitoring policy-making and decision-making processes, uncovering corruption, human rights violations, and abuses of power. Through investigative reporting, journalists expose information deliberately concealed by authorities and often generate evidence used by international organizations, thereby increasing political pressure on authoritarian regimes and reinforcing public accountability (European Parliament, 2023; Sosa, 2022).

In contexts where state-controlled media marginalize opposition voices, independent outlets provide essential platforms for opposition politicians, civil society actors, and activists to engage in public discourse. By amplifying citizens' voices and collaborating with civil society, independent media foster political participation and support demands for democratic reform (Council of Europe, 2023; V-Dem Institute, 2020).

Independent media further play a decisive role during periods of social unrest. While pro-government outlets seek to delegitimize protest movements and suppress dissent, independent journalists document the causes, demands, and dynamics of anti-government demonstrations, as well as instances of state repression. Public exposure of abuses committed during protests enhances accountability and may constrain state violence, reinforcing the media's function as an informal oversight institution supporting the rule of law (Council of Europe, 2023).

Despite censorship and repression, independent media remain vital in authoritarian electoral contexts. They investigate electoral fraud, including vote-buying, voter intimidation, and the misuse of state resources, and provide citizens with fact-based coverage of candidates, parties, and electoral procedures. By challenging official narratives that portray elections as free and fair, independent media enable informed political choice and counter state propaganda (OSCE/ODIHR, 2012).

In increasingly digitalized illiberal environments, both traditional and online media contribute to civic mobilization. Social media platforms, which are more difficult for authoritarian regimes to fully control, facilitate rapid coordination of protest activities, dissemination of information, and collective political action (Freedom House, 2022).

Ultimately, independent and impartial media constitute a cornerstone of democratic resilience in authoritarian regimes. By ensuring transparency, promoting accountability, upholding the rule of law, and enabling citizen participation, they remain indispensable to democratic resistance even under highly restrictive conditions.

The Case of the Rio Tinto Lithium Mine

In September 2021, large-scale anti-government protests erupted in Serbia following the revelation of information about the government's agreement with the Anglo-Australian mining corporation Rio Tinto, which planned to invest \$2.4 billion in constructing a lithium mine in the Jadar Valley (BBC, 2022).

As negotiations between the Serbian government and Rio Tinto were held behind closed doors and the terms of the contract remained inaccessible to the public, independent media outlets initiated in-depth investigations and disseminated hidden information to the wider public.

Government officials framed the project as a "green investment" that, as they stated, does not include environmental risks but promises job creation and economic benefits. While pro-government media refrained from addressing the project's ecological implications, investigative journalists published expert assessments by geologists, hydrologists, and environmental scientists, many of which directly contradicted the official narrative. Furthermore, the media informed the public about Rio Tinto's controversial projects and corporate practices in other countries.

The Center for Investigative Journalism of Serbia (CINS), through access to internal emails and official correspondence from the Institute for Nature Conservation of Serbia, revealed that the government had ignored expert warnings and environmental impact assessments entirely (CINS, 2025). In addition, it was discovered that agricultural lands were being reclassified as industrial zones without the consent of local landowners, leading to a loss of subsidies and increased tax burdens for them (CINS, 2021).

The Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) examined how the government used political manipulation to weaken legal mechanisms in favor of the project. Journalists found that in 2021, the government passed expedited laws regulating expropriation and referendum procedures, aiming to ease land acquisition, reduce regulatory barriers, and limit public participation in projects deemed of "national importance" (BIRN, 2021).

KRIK (Crime and Corruption Reporting Network) investigated financial and political ties between decision-makers and project backers. In cooperation with CINS and BIRN, they developed interactive land ownership maps that in the future served as a documentary basis for collective lawsuits by local residents (KRIK, 2022).

Independent media also played a vital role in combating government disinformation. Outlets such as "N1" and "Nova S" provided continuous live coverage of the protests. Without the efforts of independent media, the public would have remained uninformed about the confidential nature of the contracts, the fast-tracking of permits, the scope of corruption, environmental risks, violations of property rights, and the political machinations behind the project. While impartial platforms regularly featured voices of local communities, experts, and environmental activists, pro-government media tried to discredit the protest movement by portraying participants as "foreign-backed

saboteurs," "radical anti-development extremists," or "agents of destabilization" (European Western Balkans, 2024).

The continuous live reporting of civil resistance significantly contributed to public mobilization and maintained the momentum of the protest. Without independent journalists, the extent of systemic corruption would have likely remained hidden, and the protest movement would have been both localized and marginalized. As a result of mass demonstrations, civil resistance, and investigative reporting by independent media, the Serbian government suspended the Rio Tinto project in early 2022 (Reuters, 2022). However, in July 2024, the Constitutional Court of Serbia ruled that the government's decision to revoke Rio Tinto's permits in 2022 was unconstitutional (RFE/RL, 2024). This step was swiftly followed by the restoration of the project's legal status and spatial planning framework. Despite this decision, the project remains highly contested nowadays.

Investigative outlets such as "KRIK", "BIRN", "CINS", and "N1" continue to monitor developments and inform the public about the political and financial interests driving the project (CINS, 2025). The Rio Tinto case exemplifies how independent media, even under pressure and within a polarized information environment, can fulfill critical watchdog functions by uncovering systemic corruption, exposing opaque decision-making, and resisting erosion of democratic principles. The project's suspension in 2022 underscores the power of a mobilized public - armed with credible, verified information - to effect meaningful political change. Although the project has since regained its legal foundation, the persistent investigation by independent journalists and the continuous opposition by civil society continue to pose a formidable barrier to its realization (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2025).

The Case of Telekom Srbija's Media Takeover

"Telekom Srbija", a state-owned telecommunications operator, has systematically acquired private media outlets through opaque agreements and non-transparent contracts with the Serbian government, transforming them into pro-government platforms.

Independent investigative media organizations - "KRIK", "CINS", and "BIRN" - played a crucial role in exposing the details of these transactions. Their reporting provided the public with in-depth information on how the state-owned telecom company was used to reinforce pro-government narratives, eliminate media pluralism, and strengthen governmental control over the media landscape.

"KRIK" documented and verified a sharp shift in editorial policies following "Telekom Srbija's" acquisition of several outlets, highlighting a significant increase in pro-government narratives (International Press Institute, 2024). For example, media platforms such as "Kurir", "TV Prva", "B92", and "Mondo" began promoting the image of President Aleksandar Vučić and the ruling Serbian Progressive Party, praising their alleged achievements in ensuring "stability", "economic prosperity", and an "independent foreign policy" shortly after the acquisitions (BIRN, 2018).

"CINS" and "KRIK" also investigated targeted advertising contracts that disproportionately favored ruling party interests and uncovered state-subsidized propaganda networks. Meanwhile, "BIRN"

revealed covert financial relationships between "Telekom Srbija" and specific private media companies, exposing how legal and structural mechanisms were employed to facilitate the telecom operator's de facto takeover of these outlets (BIRN, 2018).

Through coordinated investigations, "KRIK", "CINS", and "BIRN" succeeded in raising public awareness about the scale of the scandal and the nature of the financial operations behind it. Their findings demonstrated how state-controlled media were used to discredit independent journalists, civil society organizations, activists, and opposition politicians. These media outlets amplified the government's voice, glorified the achievements of the ruling party, and produced counter-narratives in response to stories revealed by independent investigations.

The exposés also attracted international attention, as they revealed the Serbian government's use of public resources and taxpayers' money to suppress impartial media and entrench political power. Notably, the findings were cited in reports and resolutions by the European Parliament and referenced in monitoring assessments by various NGOs. Organizations such as Freedom House, the International Press Institute (IPI), and Reporters Without Borders (RSF) incorporated these revelations into their assessments, contributing to Serbia's declining press freedom rankings (Freedom House, 2024). Through these revelations, Serbia's democratic backsliding became more visible to the international community.

Although institutions of the European Union and media watchdogs such as "IPI", "Media Ownership Monitor", "Freedom House", and the European Parliament categorized "Telekom Srbija's" actions as a systematic media capture, Serbia's domestic regulatory body, the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM), failed to intervene. Moreover, the Serbian government and "Telekom Srbija's" leadership rejected all accusations and instead accused independent media outlets - "KRIK", "CINS", and "BIRN" - of undermining national interests.

On one hand, the exposure of the close relationship between the Serbian government and "Telekom Srbija" resulted in increased political pressure on "KRIK", "CINS", and "BIRN". On the other hand, it significantly strengthened their reputations as credible watchdog institutions in the international arena.

Demolition in Savamala

On the night of April 24-25, 2016, in the Savamala district of Belgrade, several dozen masked men demolished buildings using bulldozers. Independent media outlets such as "KRIK", "Insajder", "BIRN", "N1", and "Danas" were the first to inform the public about the illegal demolition.

Investigative journalists discovered that the demolition was carried out within the framework of the "Belgrade Waterfront" project, which was financed by the United Arab Emirates and supported by the Serbian government. The project included the construction of residential buildings, schools, kindergartens, hotels, and shopping centers in the suburbs of Belgrade.

The demolition took place without official state permits, consent for eviction, or the payment of compensation to residents. The masked men, using heavy machinery, blocked the streets, confiscated

mobile phones from local residents, and detained citizens, including passersby, without any legal authority. In addition to the illegal demolition, media platforms also exposed the inaction of state structures - despite numerous calls from local residents, the police failed to respond. According to investigative journalists, the police had received orders from high-ranking officials not to act (N1, 2021).

The media's continuous coverage of the Savamala case and its investigative reporting contributed to broad public mobilization and the emergence of protest. Demonstrators demanded the resignation of those responsible for the illegal demolition - Mayor of Belgrade Siniša Mali, Minister of Internal Affairs Nebojša Stefanović, President of the Belgrade City Assembly Nikola Nikodijević, and Chief of the Belgrade Police Vladimir Rebić (BIRN, 2016).

It is noteworthy that the majority of pro-government media did not report on the Savamala case, and those that did referred to the protest participants as "opponents of development." High-ranking officials denied the accusations; however, as a result of the detailed investigations conducted by media outlets and the resulting pressure on the government, in June 2017, President Aleksandar Vučić admitted that "the highest city officials" were behind the operation in Savamala and stated that it was "a complete mistake," thereby acknowledging state involvement (BIRN, 2016).

Without the investigation conducted by independent media, the information regarding the illegal demolition in Savamala would have remained unknown to Serbian citizens. There would have been no interviews in which the victims described the demolition process and violent incidents perpetrated by the masked men; the inaction of state institutions would have remained undisclosed, and there would have been no broad public mobilization or massive protest.

The "Krušik Scandal"

In 2018, the weekly publication "NIN" reported that the company "United BG," linked to Branko Stefanović, father of then Minister of Internal Affairs Nebojša Stefanović, received a license for arms trading from the Ministry of Trade, with prior consent from the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Shortly thereafter, "BIRN" obtained documents confirming that Branko Stefanović was actively involved in arms trading - not through his own company "United BG," but rather through Goran Todorović's company "GIM" (BIRN, 2018).

Investigations conducted in 2019 by "NIN", "BIRN", and "Arms Watch" revealed that the company "GIM," connected to Branko Stefanović, was purchasing weapons from the state-owned Serbian arms manufacturer "Krušik" at prices below market value. Not only did "Krušik" enter into these disadvantageous deals with Branko Stefanović's company, but also with other private traders - resulting in financial damage to both the company itself and the Serbian state. In addition to acting as an intermediary between "Krušik" and private Saudi Arabian companies in arms deals, "GIM" was also actively involved in exporting weapons that eventually ended up in the hands of Islamic State fighters in Yemen (BIRN, 2018).

In September 2019, special police units entered the premises of the “Krušik” factory and arrested Aleksandar Obradović, a production dispatcher. Instead of launching an investigation into corruption, Serbian authorities charged Obradović with disclosing professional secrets and passing on export-related files to journalists. His arrest triggered large-scale anti-government protests across Serbia. Due to continued media coverage of the “Krušik” case and the scale of the protests, Obradović was released in December (BIRN, 2019).

Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and then Minister of Internal Affairs Nebojša Stefanović denied the allegations. No investigation was launched by the Serbian authorities regarding the loss-making deals allegedly concluded for personal gain, nor were charges brought against any high-ranking officials. On the contrary, in an attempt to discredit the independent investigation, pro-government media portrayed the investigative journalists and Aleksandar Obradović as “traitors” and “threats to national interests” (DW, 2019).

Despite attempts to discredit the investigations through threats, defamation, intimidation, and smear campaigns, "NIN", "BIRN", and "Arms Watch" conducted a thorough investigation of the “Krušik” case and published detailed reports. Without the work of investigative journalists, fraudulent schemes in the arms trade and the misuse of state resources by the ruling elite for personal gain would have remained unknown to the wider public. Moreover, the “Krušik scandal” demonstrated that despite constant political pressure from the state, independent media play a critical role in combating systemic corruption and in safeguarding democratic principles, transparency, accountability, and the rule of law.

The Katalin Novák Pardon Scandal

In 2018, János Vasárhelyi, director of the Kossuth Zsuzsa Children's Home in Bicske, Hungary, was sentenced to eight years in prison for the sexual abuse of minors committed between 2004 and 2016. His deputy, Endre Konya, was sentenced to three years and four months for attempting to cover up the crimes (Index, 2018).

In February 2024, the Hungarian investigative media platform "444.hu" published an official document from the compendium of court rulings confirming that in April 2023, Hungarian President Katalin Novák had secretly pardoned Endre Konya, who had been convicted of attempting to hide the acts of sexual violence against minors (Balázs, 2024). Within days, this information was independently verified by "Telex.hu" and "Direkt36.hu".

Journalists from independent Hungarian media platforms meticulously examined the official records related to the pardon case and disclosed the full extent of the crime and the identities of the individuals involved to the wider public. Despite efforts by the Hungarian authorities to downplay the significance of the case and suppress its details, the findings of the investigation quickly spread through social media, contributing to heightened public awareness and civic mobilization.

Notably, following the extensive media coverage and the exposure of high-ranking officials, mass protests erupted in Budapest demanding President Novák's resignation. The investigative reports

conducted by independent media led to unprecedented political consequences in Hungary - both President Katalin Novák and Minister of Justice Judit Varga resigned from their positions (BBC, 2024).

Without the independent journalistic investigation, the unlawful pardon of Endre Konya would likely have remained unknown to most Hungarian citizens, and the issue of political accountability would not have been placed on the public agenda.

The Katalin Novák scandal underscores the critical role of a free and impartial press in ensuring democratic accountability and transparency - especially in contexts where the state exerts near-total control over the information space.

The Pegasus Spyware Scandal

The Hungarian investigative platform "Direkt36", which investigates cases of abuse of power and systemic corruption by government officials, reported in 2021 that Hungary's ruling party was surveilling its political opponents using "Pegasus", a spyware program developed by the Israeli company "NSO Group" (Direkt36, 2021).

"Pegasus" enables the extraction of extensive data from mobile phones, including incoming and outgoing calls, messages (even those sent via encrypted apps), photos, videos, audio files, downloaded documents, browser history, contact lists, and real-time geolocation. Furthermore, the software allows remote activation of the device's camera and microphone without the owner's consent (Cox, 2020).

Although "NSO Group" claimed the program was developed to combat international crime and terrorism, in practice, governments around the world have employed "Pegasus" to persecute opponents and consolidate political power.

According to "Direkt36", the spyware's targets in Hungary included lawyers, attorneys, opposition party members, and former members of the ruling "Fidesz party". senior national security officers, and even members of President János Áder's security detail (Direkt36, 2021).

Initially, the Hungarian government vehemently denied having acquired "Pegasus" (Telex, 2021). However, a member of the ruling "Fidesz party" later admitted that the Ministry of Interior had purchased the software, asserting that surveillance was conducted within legal boundaries. In fact, Pegasus was procured by the "Special Service for National Security", which operates under the ministry's oversight (Associated Press News, 2021).

Following the publication of "Direkt36's" investigative findings, the Budapest "Regional Investigative Prosecutor's Office" launched an inquiry into the alleged unauthorized collection of classified information. However, in June 2022, the investigation was dropped on the grounds of "lack of a crime" (Panyi, 2022).

To address the illegal use of spyware in EU countries, the European Parliament established the PEGA Committee, which began investigating Hungary's case. In June 2023, the committee published a

report and adopted a resolution. Notably, the PEGA Committee called on Hungary to investigate instances of unlawful surveillance and amend relevant legislation (The European Parliament, 2023).

Under current Hungarian law, surveillance operations concerning national security require authorization from the Minister of Justice. The PEGA Committee urged the Hungarian authorities to transfer this responsibility to an independent court to ensure proper oversight. Fidesz representatives boycotted the European Parliament debates regarding the PEGA report, and then-Minister of Justice Judit Varga refused to meet with the committee. The Hungarian government argued that investigations into surveillance technologies fall under national security and are therefore beyond Brussels' jurisdiction (Direkt36, 2023).

Although the PEGA report and the European Parliament's resolution are not legally binding for Hungary, the investigation disseminated crucial information to the public about the ruling party's illegal surveillance practices. Moreover, it stimulated widespread public debate on human rights, the legality of surveillance, and the regulation of spy technologies.

Embezzlement of European Union Funds

Independent Hungarian media platforms - "Direkt36", "OCCRP", "Átlátszó", and "Telex" - conducted investigations into the embezzlement and misuse of European Union funds in Hungary. Their findings revealed that the EU funds allocated to Hungary were largely exploited by individuals within Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's inner circle, including family members, political allies, business partners, and ideological supporters. "Direkt36" documented that the technical requirements of public tenders were frequently tailored to serve the interests of companies affiliated with Orbán's network (Direkt36, 2016).

The investigation revealed the following: between 2010 and 2014, the company "Közgép", owned by Orbán's college friend Lajos Simicska, won state tenders worth billions of forints for major infrastructure projects, the majority of which were financed by EU funds (Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 2015); In January 2016, Gamma Analcont Kft., partially owned by Viktor Orbán's younger brother Gábor Orbán, received HUF 57 million in EU funding to expand production, followed by an additional HUF 291 million (approx. USD 1.05 million) in August of the same year (OCCRP, 2016); Between 2011 and 2015, Elios Zrt., a company owned by Orbán's son-in-law István Tiborcz, received EUR 40 million from EU funds for the modernization of street lighting (Átlátszó, 2018); From 2010 to 2017, companies owned by Orbán's childhood friend Lőrinc Mészáros and his family won public tenders amounting to EUR 1.56 billion, approximately EUR 1.3 billion (83%) of which was funded by the EU. As a result of these corrupt dealings, Mészáros became the richest person in Hungary in 2018 (Átlátszó, 2018).

Following the exposure of these systemic corruption cases, in December 2022, the Council of the European Union decided to suspend approximately EUR 6.3 billion in funding to Hungary under the EU's Rule of Law Conditionality Mechanism (Council of EU, 2022).

Independent and investigative journalism platforms - particularly "Direkt36", "Átlátszó", "Telex", and "OCCRP" - played a critical role in uncovering the misuse of EU financial resources by the Hungarian government. In a context where state institutions are fully politicized, oversight bodies are dysfunctional, and law enforcement agencies fail to investigate corruption effectively, impartial media has assumed the role of watchdog and overseer.

These journalistic investigations not only informed the wider public about systemic corruption schemes, conflicts of interest, and manipulations related to public tenders but also produced tangible institutional consequences. Following the publication of findings by "Direkt36", "Átlátszó", "Telex", and "OCCRP", the European Union launched an official investigation, ultimately resulting in the suspension of billions of euros in funding to Hungary.

The Gruevski Asylum Scandal

On 20 November 2018, the Hungarian pro-government outlet "Magyar Idők" reported that Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's government had granted political asylum to Nikola Gruevski, the former Prime Minister of North Macedonia (Magyar Idők, 2018).

Gruevski, who served as prime minister between 2006 and 2016, had been sentenced to two years in prison for corruption in 2018. Despite his criminal conviction, the Hungarian authorities assisted in his escape - transporting him through Albania, Montenegro, and Serbia to Hungary, where he was granted asylum, thereby openly disregarding the rule of law (Atlatszo, 2018).

Independent media outlets, particularly "Index.hu" and "444.hu", conducted investigations that revealed Hungarian diplomats and intelligence agents had aided Gruevski in illegally crossing borders. Later, Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó confirmed that Hungarian diplomats assisted the former North Macedonian prime minister in crossing the borders, though he declined to disclose who had authorized this assistance (Meta, 2018).

Hungary's Immigration and Asylum Office claimed that Gruevski's life was at risk in North Macedonia and that refugee status had been granted based on lawful requirements (Magyar Idők, 2018).

Media platforms in Hungary that are independent of state control played a pivotal role in revealing the details of the granting political asylum process and confirming the involvement of Hungarian diplomats. Without their engagement and persistence, this secret operation would likely have remained concealed from the public. These independent media actors created significant public pressure on the government, ultimately forcing the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to confirm the involvement of Hungarian diplomats in the case.

In a political environment where oversight institutions and the judiciary are deeply politicized, the role of free and independent media as watchdogs becomes outstanding. The Gruevski asylum scandal further underscores the critical importance of independent journalism in ensuring government transparency, accountability, and adherence to the rule of law in regimes where such principles are systemically undermined.

Conclusion

In the context of the global proliferation and consolidation of authoritarian regimes, independent and impartial media constitute a fundamental pillar of democratic resilience. Media outlets that operate free from external influence perform an essential role not only in disseminating information grounded in facts but also in ensuring accountability, transparency, the rule of law, and the meaningful participation of citizens in political processes.

Within authoritarian contexts, where state institutions are subsumed under the control of ruling elites, independent media emerge as the primary actor countering the abuse of power. The empirical examples of Serbia and Hungary illustrate that despite concerted efforts by governing elites to monopolize information channels and tailor them to their interests, independent media - often operating under considerable pressure, censorship, and repression - serve as crucial watchdogs exposing systemic corruption, non-transparent governance, and violations of human rights.

Consequently, the protection and empowerment of free and impartial media not only safeguard the fundamental right to freedom of expression but also bolster democratic resistance and erode the authority of autocratic leadership.

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