

Laudatory speech for Szabolcs Dull

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Journalism is about choosing the right side. When you work in this field, you choose to take the side of those who seek out and tell the truth. You choose to think and act with independence, freedom and objectivity. You choose to serve the public good. This is part of the appeal of journalism, attracting so many young people who dream of exposing injustices and corruption, holding to account those in power and hoping to change society for the better.

I think this sort of concrete idealism can be found in the work of Szabolcs Dull. Over the past decade, you have remained loyal to the ideals and values of a form of independent journalism which delivers public service. This is all the more honourable because it happened in a country where the majority of news outlets have lost their independence. Despite yourself, Szabolcs, you have become a symbol of the struggle for media freedom in Hungary.

You were an intern at Manager Magazine when the editorial staff left after a change in the editorial line in 2007. You continued at Kossuth Radio until the team was suddenly disbanded when the editorial line changed. At 30, you experienced editorial pressure for the third time when in 2014, you left Origo – a well reputed news outlet, which was placed under government control. And now you have been dismissed from Index, after you wrote an article in June warning that the staff and the independence of the news site were in “grave danger”.

It is therefore a great pleasure for me to give this laudatory speech in your honour, Szabolcs, as the 2020 recipient of the M100 Media Award.

Your dismissal and the subsequent resignation by more than 70 of your colleagues at Index represent a huge blow to media freedom and deprive the Hungarian public of yet another reliable and independent source of information. Indeed, under your guidance, Index managed to remain independent even in troubling times. Millions of readers you reached daily would agree that you placed the interest of the Hungarian public for serious and reliable journalism first.

Unfortunately, the situation in the media is not Hungary's only problem. In fact, what has been happening to the press in Hungary has also been happening to other key sectors of the country. In the past weeks, hundreds of students, professors, actors and film directors have occupied the Academy of Drama and Film in Budapest to protest against the privatisation of this respected institution. This is just the latest episode in a decade-long drama in which democratic institutions have been dismantled, judges have been removed, journalists silenced, academic freedom almost eliminated and NGOs harassed.

In Hungary, we do not see the spectacular forms of repression or intimidation that we see in some other European countries. The repression is subtler than that. It comes from unilateral and obscure board decisions like the one through which you were dismissed. It comes from legislation making it almost impossible to carry out independent work. It comes from decisions that selectively assign advertising revenues so that those who displease the authorities are forced to reduce or cease activities. The recent

decision of the Hungarian Media Council not to renew the license of Klub Radio is a good illustration of the types of pressure independent media face in the country.

That the media in Hungary is in danger is no news, unfortunately. Already in 2010, one of my first visits as newly elected OSCE Representative for Media Freedom was to Hungary. The legal analysis I presented to the government showed that the media package that was due to be adopted would seriously restrict media pluralism, curb the independence of the press, eradicate the autonomy of the public-service media and have a chilling effect on freedom of expression and public debate, all of which are essential for democracy.

The year after it was Thomas Hammarberg, who held the position I hold now at the Council of Europe, who raised similar concerns. More recently, a report by the European Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom showed an acute risk of political interference in media independence in Hungary through state regulation of resources.

The government has so far denied that there is any repression of media freedom. On 31 July, a few days after your dismissal from Index, an alert concerning your case was created on the Council of Europe platform dedicated to the protection of journalists. The Government of Hungary replied two weeks later with a few lines, stating that your dismissal was just an issue of labour law and that Hungarian legislation fully ensures journalistic and editorial freedom, in line with international standards.

I disagree. What we see in Hungary is continuous interference by economic forces close to the government, which is strangling media freedom through a combination of the concentration of media assets and advertising revenues.

Despite this grim situation, the battle for a free media and for democracy in Hungary is far from over. Hungarian society is showing strong resilience, which I welcome and support.

You are part of that resilience, Szabolcs. You have defended the values of a form of journalism that does not follow the changing tastes of political and economic forces. A journalism in which professional news teams, not external operators choose the content. You made the choice to stand up for a newsroom able to expose injustices, misbehaviour and political responsibilities fearlessly, for the public good.

In your farewell speech to your colleagues at Index soon after your dismissal you said that it was clear that Index was a strong fortress that someone wanted to destroy. You said you were offered a deal - including monetary compensation - if you did not speak about your dismissal and the reasons behind it. You took a stand and refused. You insisted on the need to inform the Hungarians of what had happened to you and to Index over the years, when the staff had felt under increasing pressure.

"Ne hallgassunk!". Let's not be silent, you said. I could not agree more. None of us should be silent. We must all speak out.

You see, every time journalists' independence is undermined, it is democracy that is eroded. The level of freedom and pluralism enjoyed by journalists represents a litmus test for the state of a democracy. And unfortunately, Hungary is failing this test.

This is why we too must choose our side. We must stand up to protect journalists like you, Szabolcs, from undue interference with their work. We must choose to persist, and help those in Hungary who are trying to strengthen democracy and accountability. We must step up our efforts to re-establish media diversity and pluralism.

Events like today's ceremony are a good opportunity to honour brave people like Szabolcs Dull. However, they should not be just one-off happenings. We must use such events to keep the spotlight on Hungary and any other country where media freedom is endangered, and persist in defending and promoting human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

Through your work, Szabolcs, you chose the side of those who defend these values. Someone felt that you stood in the way of private interests. They chose to dismiss you, hoping to silence you. But they chose the wrong side of history.

The award you are receiving today is a sign of the respect and support that you enjoy among so many. We are all here today to reassure you and your colleagues that we will not give up, that we will not be silent. "Ne hallgassunk!"