

## Responses from Veronika Munk, Hungarian journalist, Denník N news

### 1. What remains of a free press in Hungary? What are the challenges as a journalist?

A free press still exists in Hungary — but it exists in a highly uneven and distorted environment.

There are strong independent newsrooms, with large audiences and real impact. Outlets like Telex, 444, HVG, or Direkt36 continue to produce high-quality journalism. But they operate without the institutional and economic conditions that would normally sustain a free press.

The main challenge is not direct censorship — it is structural pressure. The media market has been reshaped by explicit political intent, through state advertising, ownership concentration, and regulatory influence.

This creates an uneven playing field where independent outlets must compete without access to public resources, while pro-government media benefit from them.

So the challenge for journalists is not only to report — but to survive economically, maintain audience trust in a polarised environment, and operate without access to information that should, in principle, be public.

What went wrong in Hungary did not happen overnight.

The key lesson is that media freedom is rarely destroyed through one dramatic move. It is eroded step by step, through a combination of political pressure, economic capture, and regulatory changes that, taken individually, may seem technical or even harmless.

In Hungary, one of the earliest warning signs was not censorship in the classical sense — journalists were not immediately banned or jailed. Instead, the system was reshaped around them. Public media was turned into a propaganda tool. Private media was gradually captured by oligarchs aligned with political power. Advertising markets were distorted using state money. And critical voices were pushed into increasingly fragile economic positions.

So the first warning sign is market distortion — when governments start using economic tools to reward loyal media and punish independent ones.

The second is centralisation of ownership. When suddenly many outlets end up in the same hands, even if formally legal, pluralism disappears in practice.

And the third is delegitimation of journalism itself — when political actors consistently frame independent media as enemies, foreign agents, or illegitimate actors. This erodes public trust and makes further restrictions easier.

What people globally should learn is that by the time we recognise this as a “media freedom crisis,” it is often already too late.

So we need to shift from reacting to crises to identifying patterns early — and acting when the first structural distortions appear, not when the system is already captured.

## **2. How hopeful are you about improvements under Magyar?**

There is certainly a moment of hope — but also a need for realism.

The political signal is very important. Saying that state-funded propaganda should end and public service media should be restructured and there should be a new media law are strong and necessary first steps. It reflects something we have also seen in public demand: people want a fairer media environment.

However, restoring media freedom is not something that can be achieved quickly or symbolically. It requires rebuilding institutions, a different approach, not just changing rhetoric.

So I would say: this is an opportunity, but not yet a solution. The real question is whether this political will can translate into long-term structural changes.

## **3. How hard will it be to restore a free press?**

It will be extremely difficult — because the system that was built over the past decade and a half is deeply entrenched.

Media ownership is concentrated, regulatory bodies lack independence, and the public media system has been fundamentally transformed.

These are not changes that can simply be reversed. Even if the political will exists, rebuilding pluralism and trust will take years.

And perhaps most importantly, media ecosystems cannot just be “reset” by political decisions. They need to be rebuilt in a way that is sustainable and independent of future political cycles.

## **4. What specific challenges does Magyar face?**

The biggest challenge is that many of the problems are structural, not political in the narrow sense.

He would need to address regulatory frameworks, ensure the independence of institutions like the media council, and rethink how public service media operates — all

while maintaining democratic legitimacy and avoiding the perception of political interference.

Another challenge is economic: how to create fair market conditions without replacing one form of political influence with another.

And finally, there is the issue of trust. After years of polarisation, rebuilding trust in institutions and in journalism itself will be a major task.

### **5. Do you expect oligarchs like Lőrinc Mészáros to give up media interests?**

I think it would be unrealistic to expect that economic actors will voluntarily give up assets that are both financially and politically valuable.

Media ownership in Hungary is not only about business — it has been closely tied to political influence.

So any change in ownership structures would likely require broader systemic changes, not individual decisions.

### **6. How was Magyar able to succeed despite the media environment?**

This is perhaps the most striking aspect of the result.

Despite a heavily skewed media landscape, he was able to reach voters through alternative channels — social media, direct communication, and physical presence through campaigning.

This shows that even in a captured media environment, audiences are not completely closed off. There is still demand for alternative narratives.

At the same time, it highlights the limits of media control. Influence is powerful, but not absolute.

So yes, the result is remarkable — and it is also a reminder that media dominance does not automatically translate into total political control.