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## **Sweeping new media law threatens freedom of expression in Hungary**

Hungary's newly adopted media law will impose potentially wide-ranging restrictions on freedom of expression, Amnesty International warned today.

In a move unprecedented within the European Union, the Law on Media and the Freedom of Press, coming into force on 1 January 2011, imposes the same restrictions on all media content, whether broadcast, print or web-based, whether public or privately owned. It also grants broad powers to a new media authority to enforce ill-defined standards.

“The breadth of the restrictions on media content, the lack of clear guidelines for journalists and editors, and the strong powers of the new regulatory body all risk having a chilling effect on the freedom of expression in Hungary,” said John Dalhuisen, Europe and Central Asia Deputy Programme Director.

A newly created National Media and Communications Authority (NMHH) will have the power to impose heavy fines, ranging from up to 35,000 Euros for periodicals to up to 730,000 Euros for broadcast media, for content it considers to run counter to the “public interest”, “common morality” and “national order”. Fines can also be imposed for “unbalanced” news reporting.

None of these terms are clearly defined in the law and their interpretation is left to the NMHH. The NMHH also has the power to shut down news outlets.

There are also concerns about the political independence of the National Media and Communications Authority, whose five board members were appointed by the ruling Fidesz party without broader consultation or any parliamentary scrutiny.

“As it currently stands, there is too much potential in this law for its arbitrary application and political interference in the editorial policies of media outlets,” said John Dalhuisen.

“There is a real concern that this new law will result in censorship and self-censorship.”

Only a couple of hours after the adoption of the Media law, a prominent radio journalist on the morning show of the public radio station MR1 remained silent for one minute in protest against the new law. He and his editor were subsequently suspended by the radio station.

A few weeks before the adoption of the law, a pre-recorded interview with the Director of the Hungarian Civil Liberties Union, Balázs Dénes, was pulled by MR1 on account of his strong criticism of the then draft media law.

The new media law has already been criticized by intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations for the imposition of restrictions on freedom of expression.

“Hungary will be taking over the EU presidency in Jan 2011 against a backdrop of widespread concern, both domestically and internationally, that this law is out of step with European and international human rights standards,” John Dalhuisen said.

“The Hungarian authorities need to provide assurances that this law will be refined and take steps to ensure that it is implemented with full respect for the freedom of expression.”