**Poll finds Central Europeans “very concerned about media freedom”**

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A new study suggests that about half the populations of the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland and Hungary are concerned about media freedom – and a majority in the Visegrad Four support national or EU legislation to safeguard it.

The Media Freedom Poll was conducted for the Committee for Editorial Independence in cooperation with the Czech National Committee of the International Press Institute.

It indicates that 63 percent of Poles are concerned about media independence, with the same going for almost half the populations of Slovakia, Hungary and the Czech Republic.

Among those presenting the findings on Tuesday was UK journalist and author Misha Glenny, chair of the Committee for Editorial Independence at Prague media group Economia.

“People in Central Europe are very concerned about media freedom.

“So this idea that you can just roll over their rights to access to independent media and it won’t have an impact or an effect politically just doesn’t stack up.

“The second thing, which is very interesting but more difficult to understand in a way, is that a majority of Central Europeans favour some sort of legislation in order to protect the independence of the media.”

One of the authors of the report is Václav Štětka from Loughborough University in the UK.

“People in Hungary and Poland are a bit less supportive of, for example, freedom of public service broadcasters, or the role of media owners in determining the content of news media.

“So what we see is a rather stark division, depending on political preferences, and partisanship.”

Nearly three-quarters of respondents back national legislation on media independence, the poll suggests.

In addition, 59 percent support giving the EU more powers in this regard. Václav Štětka continues:

“The majority of respondents across the four countries expressed their agreement that the state should strengthen legislation to protect media freedom.

“And not just the national state, but also the EU, which was perhaps one of the most surprising findings for us.

“More than half the populations in all the countries are in agreement that the EU should impose sanctions or penalties on countries which interfere with media freedom or independence.

“So that’s quite interesting, obviously ahead of the process of adoption of the media freedom act that the European Commission is preparing.”

Misha Glenny is looking forward keenly to European Commissioner Věra Jourová’s planned media freedom act, which should arrive in July. But how likely is it to effect change?

“Well, if we look at the rule of law issue with Hungary and Poland, my response would be don’t hold your breath, i.e., don’t expect anything happening any time soon [laughs].

“Because the European Commission and other European Union bodies are very slow and wary of moving against infringements of legislation by individual members states.

“So I don’t know, but I detect, particularly after Ukraine, that there is a recognition inside the European Union that we’re now in a big ideological fight and that we have to take our values seriously.

“So who knows? They may get tougher. I certainly hope so.”

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