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Misleading tropes and deceptive taboos

International public opinion does well to follow legislative developments in Hungary-- a country with a fragile political culture. It is particularly in the interest of states with well-established democratic political cultures to keep their eyes on what exactly transpires in a country with an incoherent—and all too often state-directed—public discourse.

The outbreak of both world wars had much to do with Hungary's weak political culture. The continued crises of identity, as well as the media's inability or unwillingness to fight censorship are in part responsible for the consequences of the twentieth century's major conflicts. Over the course of the past century, a clear link existed between Hungary's explosive foreign politics and the society's lack of self-awareness. There is reason to fear that this correlation may still exist today. It is in the interest of international organisations to determine whether constitutional democracy in Hungary remains under effective civil, non-partisan control, or if it has deteriorated into the fanciful internal affairs of the country's political parties. It is enough to simply call to mind the last days of the Weimar Republic and it is certainly well worth to explore UNESCO's 1995 statement on history and archives: "Every country has the right to know the truth about its past. Everyone has the right to academic and historical research. Victims of persecution have the right to restitution..."

Legislation that allows for the removal of historical knowledge and the manipulation of the media both lead to the same dangerous situation. In order to avert these dangers, the European Union, the European Parliament, as well as archivists, other academics in North America and organisations that defend press freedoms around the world must see that the current Hungarian legislature may force a form of collective amnesia on the institutions that make possible the scholarly exploration of the nation's past. It is in the interest of all European and overseas countries to ensure that legislation aimed at eliminating press freedoms and hindering archival research does not bury under its hefty weight the democratic system that took shape following the eras of fascism and communism.

In the past few months, when Wikileaks radically reduced the restrictions that were in place for many scholars of contemporary political history, Hungary made two official announcements. Claiming to act on issues of privacy and access to information, the government announced proposed legislation that would take a razor, scissors and a knife to Cold War secret police documents, allowing for their dismemberment, all in an effort to destroy irreplaceable historical data.