

Is Hungary Already Here?

Destruction of the Free Press in Israel from a Comparative Perspective

As part of the government's effort to weaken democracy in Israel, Communications Minister Shlomo Karhi has been trying for the past two years to promote a series of laws seeking to impose restrictions on the free media in order to turn it into a submissive and disciplined body on the one hand, and to re-regulate the media market and subordinate it to economic and political interests on the other.

Consequently, indicators have accumulated in recent years clearly pointing to a marked deterioration in our freedom of the press, including a drop of 24 ranks over the past four years in the World Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders (RSF),¹ placing Israel in the undignified 112th place, between Haiti and Madagascar. In addition, since the current Netanyahu government took office, Israel has dropped 6 points and seven ranks in the 2025 Global Expression Report published by Article 19.² Of course, Israel is not the only country where these processes are taking place. Preceding it are such countries as Hungary, Poland, and Turkey, which have become a clear example of the decline and erosion of democracy through the capture of the media sphere.

This document takes a comparative perspective of the harm to the free media under Netanyahu's government in relation to the democratic erosion in Hungary under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who successfully seized control of the media not with blatant repression but with indirect means.³ The current state of the media in Israel is examined according to the following criteria:

- **Delegitimization campaign against critical media**, portraying it as biased, mendacious, or illegitimate.⁴

* English-language reference. All other references in this document are in Hebrew.

¹ Oren Persico, [Israel Drops Another 11 Places in World Press Freedom Index](#), *The Seventh Eye*, 2 May 2025.

² *[Global Expression Report 2025: Middle East and North Africa](#), *Article 19*, June 2025.

³ Robert Nemeth, *[Media Capture Monitoring Report: Hungary](#), *International Press Institute and Media and Journalism Research Center*, 6 November 2024; *['I Can't Do My Job as a Journalist': The Systematic Undermining of Media Freedom in Hungary](#), *Human Rights Watch*, 13 February 2024.

⁴ Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die, *Crown Publishing Group*, p. 181, 2018.

- **Suppression and seizure of public broadcasting** through legislation to weaken it and a hostile takeover and politicization of regulatory bodies.⁵
- **Extensive use of economic and regulatory tools** to suppress opposition outlets and bolster sympathetic media, such as withholding government advertising, inflating existing debts and imposing new costs, attempting to steer private companies toward specific outlets where they should advertise,⁶ assisting cronies with the purchase or financing of outlets, and enacting restrictive legislation against opposition media.⁷
- **Legal and economic persecution** by means of libel and defamation lawsuits, and at times even physical threats.⁸
- **Removal or restriction** of foreign media.⁹

Delegitimization of the Media

Systematic delegitimization of critical media, aimed at undermining its credibility and portraying it as the enemy of the people, is clearly discernible in many countries undergoing democratic erosion. Throughout all his terms in power, and even more so in the current government, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu has sought to control the media market by increasingly using extreme rhetoric against prominent journalists and media outlets in public statements, speeches, and even in his court testimony in his trial on corruption charges. This delegitimization campaign is not limited to Netanyahu alone but has been enthusiastically embraced by members of his government. These anti-media messages trickle down through the operation of a network of people and bots across social media (dubbed the "poison machine") that results in incitement against journalists and even physical violence.

In many respects, Hungary under Viktor Orbán serves as the model for this modus operandi. Independent journalists are consistently portrayed in pro-government media as "left-wing," "political activists," "foreign agents," "traitors," and even "Hungary-haters" or

⁵ Christina Holtz-Bacha, [*The Kiss of Death: Public Service Media Under Right-Wing Populist Attack](#), *Sage Journals*, 1 February 2021.

⁶ Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, **How Democracies Die*, Crown Publishing Group, 2018.

⁷ Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, [*The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism](#), *Scholars at Harvard*, April 2002.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Gordon Paul Means, [*Soft Authoritarianism in Malaysia and Singapore](#), *Journal of Democracy*, October 1996.

"non-Hungarians" - labels that have also been used by the official government spokesperson.¹⁰ These smear campaigns, alongside anti-democratic disinformation in service of the regime, are disseminated to the wider public via a propaganda network of pro-government media organizations.¹¹

In Israel, there are numerous examples of Netanyahu's attacks on media outlets and journalists. Among other things, Netanyahu has claimed that the media collaborates with the "deep state"¹² and has equated some outlets to the Hamas terrorist organization.¹³ At a press conference on 2 December 2024, he lashed out at Channel 12 journalist Yolana Cohen, who covers the suffering of the families of the hostages and the struggle for their release: "There's no end to your lies."¹⁴ To Kan 11 journalist Michael Shemesh he said, "How much fake news can you fabricate? You're working overtime on that." On 21 February 2025, the Prime Minister's Office issued a scathing statement against journalists Barak Ravid and Uri Misgav (who works at Haaretz, a newspaper boycotted by the government), whereby "the fake-news instigators have lost all restraint in spreading their lies in a vile propaganda campaign. They echo Hamas propaganda and harm the State of Israel."¹⁵

As noted, government ministers follow Netanyahu's lead to attack the media too. For example, when a criminal investigation was opened against her after the exposure of the "traffic light system" in Channel 13's investigative program Hamakor,¹⁶ Transportation Minister Miri Regev said: "The media and the prosecution joined forces. The investigation against me was launched by the media." Asserting his opposition to legislation aimed at protecting journalists from threatening harassment, Justice Minister Yariv Levin said from

¹⁰ *[Conclusions of the Joint International Press Freedom Mission to Hungary](#), *European Center for Press and Media Freedom*, 3 December 2019.

¹¹ Patrik Szicherle and Péter Krekó, *[A Propaganda Machine at the Service of Viktor Orbán](#), *Voxeurop*, 18 November 2021.

¹² Lazar Berman, *[In Tirade Against 'Deep State' PM Claims Court-Led October 7 Probe Would Be Biased](#), *The Times of Israel*, 3 March 2025.

¹³ Bini Aschkenasy, [Netanyahu's Court Testimony: After Walla's Report I Understood Why It Was Dubbed 'Walla Hamas'](#), *Walla*, 27 January 2025. The report noted the uproar on social media following the inclusion of footage of a beheading in a Twitter campaign launched by the Prime Minister's Office in 2014 that equated Hamas with ISIS.

¹⁴ Shirit Avitan Cohen, [Netanyahu Clashes With Channel 12 Reporter: 'There's No End to Your Lies'](#), *Israel Hayom*, 9 December 2024; Ynet staff, [Netanyahu Lashes Out at Journalists: 'Spread Fake News'; Journalists Union 'Sharply Denounces Incitement'](#), *Ynet*, 9 December 2024.

¹⁵ News staff, [Netanyahu's Office Lashes Out at Barak Ravid: 'Echoes Hamas's Propaganda'](#), *Srugim*, 21 February 2025.

¹⁶ Michael Shemesh, [Regev in Cabinet Meeting on Ouster of Attorney General: Prosecution and Media Joined Forces Against Me](#), *Kan 11*, 23 March 2025. The "traffic light system," a color-coded scheme ranking local authorities based on how many votes or how much political support they gave Regev in Likud primaries, was reportedly used by the Transportation Ministry to make policy decisions.

the Knesset podium that the journalists of news channels were nothing more than "propagandists" and that "the situation is even worse than in totalitarian countries."¹⁷

Netanyahu's and the ministers' delegitimization campaign is transmitted to their supporters via social media influence operations. As in Hungary, the Israeli "poison machine" is not merely a political tool used during election campaigns but a broadly influential mechanism used by the regime in its fight against democratic gatekeepers, the free media foremost among them. It is a systematic apparatus for the dissemination of disinformation and alternative narratives, and for the delegitimization of the media by means of anonymous, semi-official, and official means alike. Using social media platforms, enlisted outlets, and even elected officials, the "poison machine" is to blame for wild and sometimes conspiratorial attacks, as well as for incitement against journalists, media organizations, and civil society groups deemed critical of the government, and consequently, for the erosion of public trust in the media.

For example, Channel 14's Yinon Magal lashed out at Channel 12 News journalist Amnon Abramovich, saying: "He is guilty of October 7th! And I'm not joking! He is guilty! The blood is on his hands!"¹⁸ Participants in his program The Patriots discussed nominees for the "panic engineering award": "Sinwar's apologist Guy Peleg, Raviv 'Al-Jazeera-Talent' Drucker, Yaron Avraham 'and the political source', 'commentator on depression issues' Nadav Eyal, and Guy 'Venom-Report' Rolnik."¹⁹

The delegitimization campaign does not remain confined to rhetoric but affects journalists' ability to carry out their work safely. There is documented evidence of on-the-job attacks on crews from Kan 11, Channel 12 News, and Channel 13 News, with assailants justifying their actions by claiming these journalists belonged to a "leftist channel."²⁰ According to the Journalists Under Attack Report published by the Union of Journalists in Israel, there were 61 cases of assaults on journalists in 2023, 25 of them by an incited mob.²¹

¹⁷ Editorial, [Levin Incites Against Journalists](#), *Haaretz*, 30 June 2023.

¹⁸ Shuki Tausig, [*Channel 12 Files Complaint Against Yinon Magal: 'Magal's Incitement Campaign Continues Without Any Restraints or Reins'](#), *The Seventh Eye*, 11 May 2025.

¹⁹ The Seventh Eye, [Channel 14 Incites Against Competitors](#), *YouTube*, 13 May 2024.

²⁰ Ran Boker, [News Companies: 'Our Reporters Were Attacked in Kiryat Ata'](#), *Ynet*, 11 November 2024.

²¹ Anat Saragusti, [Journalists Under Attack 2023](#), *Union of Journalists in Israel*, 2023.

Takeover of Public Broadcasting

The Israeli government is on the one hand trying to bolster sympathetic media outlets, chief among them Channel 14, while on the other hand trying to advance a series of legislative proposals and measures aimed at weakening the Israel Public Broadcasting Corporation (IPBC) and gaining control over its appointments, as well as to politicize the bodies overseeing the media.

In Orbán's Hungary, many journalists revealed that they had been subjected to pressures and even explicit instructions from their editors to reduce coverage of topics that harm the reputation of government ministers, sometimes even to the point of removing articles from news websites and being threatened with dismissal from their jobs.²² For example, journalists were instructed to portray refugees in a negative light, to avoid using the term "refugees," and to label opposition politicians as "former socialists." In a recording that leaked out, a senior editor at the Hungarian public broadcaster MTVA can be heard telling reporters: "I'm sure no one will be surprised to hear that it is not the opposition's list that enjoys the support of this institution.... Whoever is in charge must produce content according to the appropriate narrative, method, and direction, mostly about migrants and Brussels.... If anyone is not prepared to work under these conditions, he is free to file his resignation immediately."²³

The transformation of Hungary's public broadcaster into a mouthpiece for the government was the culmination of a long process of institutional takeover carried out through legislation and regulation. When Orbán came to power in 2010, one of his first moves was to establish the National Media and Infocommunications Authority (NMHH), responsible for overseeing the media market and approving acquisitions and mergers of media companies, and staff it with people close to Orbán's Fidesz party (Hungarian Civic Alliance).²⁴ At the same time, public media companies were merged into the MTVA, its chair was named by the newly created NMHH, and the board of trustees in charge of appointing senior executives was selected by a committee where Fidesz enjoyed a built-in political majority. From there, it was a short step to a massive restructuring, which included the firing of almost 1,000 employees and the adoption of a new pro-government editorial

²² Andras Petho, [*Lessons Learned From Witnessing Viktor Orban's Crackdown on the Free Press](#), *Global Investigative Journalism Network*, 14 June 2022.

²³ Akos Keller-Alant, [*Twisting the Truth? How Editors Manipulate News Coverage at Hungary's State Broadcaster](#), *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 13 November 2020.

²⁴ [*Freedom of the Press 2013 - Hungary](#), *RefWorld Global Law & Policy Database*, 24 July 2013.

line.²⁵ In the aftermath of these changes, the Joint International Press Freedom Mission to Hungary concluded that "the Hungarian government has systematically dismantled media independence, freedom and pluralism" and its public service media "have been deformed into state media."²⁶

Likewise, the current Netanyahu government has been pursuing a series of legislative measures aimed at weakening the IPBC, such as privatization,²⁷ closure of its news department,²⁸ and seizing control over its budget.²⁹ Furthermore, Minister Karhi sought to commandeer appointments in the IPBC by naming retired judge Moshe Drori (who himself called the Israeli media "panic channels") as chair of its search committee. Upon entering office, Drori tried to promote Likud activists as committee members. In response to a petition filed by Zulat,³⁰ the Supreme Court froze the process, and Drori himself tendered his resignation.³¹

Finally, the government is attempting in various ways to politicize oversight bodies. The draft of the Broadcast Media Law presented by Minister Karhi proposes to create a new regulatory authority for television broadcasting,³² which would answer to him and would be assembled by a search committee largely subordinate to the political echelon, with its budget subject to political control. The bill comes on the heels of a series of appointments to the Second Authority for Television and Radio (SATR) of cronies supportive of the regime revolution.³³

Use of Economic and Regulatory Tools

Regimes in the early stages of democratic erosion tend not to censor the media in a blatant manner, but rather to shape it in a way that serves the government while maintaining a

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ *[Conclusions of the Joint International Press Freedom Mission to Hungary](#), *European Center for Press and Media Freedom*, 3 December 2019.

²⁷ Ronen Reingold and Ori Bassat, *['Privatization' of IPBC: Termination of Public Broadcasting and Free Media in Israel](#), *Zulat*, 25 November 2024.

²⁸ Ronen Reingold and Ori Bassat, *[Bill To Shut Down Kan Corporation's News Broadcasts: Another Effort To Harm Public Broadcasting and Free Media](#), *Zulat*, 13 June 2025.

²⁹ Ronen Reingold and Ori Bassat, *[What's the Point of It If We Don't Control It? - Bill on Government Control Over IPBC Budget](#), *Zulat*, 19 January 2025.

³⁰ *[Supreme Court Petition: Retired Judge Moshe Drori's Appointment as Head of IPBC's Hiring Committee Must Be Overturned](#), *Zulat*, 15 August 2024.

³¹ Jasmin Gueta, [Setback for Karhi: Moshe Drori Resigns as Chairman of Kan Corporation's Search Committee](#), *TheMarker*, 27 November 2024.

³² A complementary bill addressing radio broadcasts is expected down the road.

³³ Jasmin Gueta, [Lobbyist and Former Transportation Minister Miri Regev's Spokesperson Chen Kedem-Maktubi To Oversee News Broadcasts](#), *TheMarker*, 23 July 2025.

semblance of pluralism. One of the main practices is to use economic tools and regulatory authorities to reward loyal media outlets and hurt critical ones. Netanyahu and his government act systematically to create a biased media structure that gives preference to sympathetic outlets under government control by means of budgetary prejudices, favorable regulation, and misuse of public resources.

This strategy for capturing the media is also drawn from the Orbán government's *modus operandi*, which used regulatory and economic pressures on the private media market to influence coverage and bolster bodies identified with the government. A prominent example is Magyar Telekom's sale of the independent news portal Origo to people close to Fidesz, which took place after a period of regulatory persecution during which the government levied a special tax that significantly cut into the company's profitability. According to reports, one of the conditions set by the government for extending Magyar Telekom's license and improving its financial situation was "to either rein in or sell its media outlets," a demand that led to the sale of the news portal to government loyalists. Shortly afterwards, in the wake of an investigative report critical of a senior government official, the editor-in-chief was fired.³⁴

In 2018, the Orbán government established KESMA (also known as the Central European Press and Media Foundation), an ostensibly "private" body that merged hundreds of newspapers, news sites, and radio and television stations. Oligarchs, most of them close to the government, sold or "donated" their media outlets to the foundation. Immediately after its establishment, the government pronounced KESMA an entity of "national strategic importance," thereby exempting it from regulatory review by the antitrust authority, in a move that enabled the massive merger of all these media outlets into a single entity. As expected, KESMA became the dominant player in the market and the only one with nationwide radio coverage, almost total control over the regional press, and a huge share of the government's advertising budget. In contrast, the independent media is almost completely absent from government advertising budgets: more than 90% of the total spending is transferred to pro-Fidesz bodies, with no correlation to their market share.³⁵ The media outlets under KESMA operate with a coordinated narrative, at times publishing identical content word-for-word, and serve as a full-fledged government propaganda

³⁴ [*Respected News Portal Shifts Focus After Mass Resignations](#), *Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project*, 28 January 2016.

³⁵ Justin Spike, [*How Hungary's Orban Uses Control of the Media to Escape Scrutiny and Keep the Public in the Dark](#), *The Associated Press*, 31 July 2024.

apparatus. This is a model where the state assigns frequencies, budgets, and regulatory protections to entities aligned with it, thus creating a friendly, centralized, and non-competitive media sphere.³⁶

Although Netanyahu has not yet succeeded in establishing a media array on the scale of KESMA, he has worked tirelessly to consolidate and expand the "poison machine," which operates identically in terms of message coordination and dissemination.³⁷ In addition, the indictments against Netanyahu in Cases 1000-4000, which describe a complex web of corruption and abuse of governmental power by the prime minister and his associates to advance personal-political interests, particularly in the media field, strikingly resemble the Magyar Telekom affair in Hungary. In Case 2000, Netanyahu is accused of attempting to promote favorable coverage in Yedioth Ahronoth in exchange for harming the distribution of rival Israel Hayom, and in Case 4000 he is charged with promoting regulatory benefits worth some 1 billion shekels in exchange for favorable coverage on the Walla website. In his court testimony, **Netanyahu admitted to personally intervening in matters pertaining to the ownership of media outlets, their editorial line, and even the identity of their journalists.**³⁸ Both cases illustrate how Netanyahu acted throughout his premierships to bolster favorable media and weaken critical voices.

Today, too, the government is working intensively to strengthen sympathetic media outlets. Of course, the main gainer is Channel 14, which in addition to holding a de facto monopoly on interviews with Netanyahu, receives far-reaching legislative and regulatory benefits. To wit, Minister Karhi twice extended a temporary provision that was tailor-made for the channel,³⁹ which allows it to operate as a "small license holder" entitled to exemption from many regulatory obligations and free from restrictions on news and current affairs programs in contrast to other small channels, and despite the fact that its ratings often surpass those of Kan 11 and Channel 13 News.⁴⁰ In addition, Netanyahu's coalition is promoting legislation that would require commercial companies to advertise on Channel

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Refaella Goichman and Eytan Avriel, [Inside the Poison Machine: This Is How the Most Effective Propaganda Mechanism Ever Seen in Israel Works](#), *TheMarker*, 7 January 2024.

³⁸ Itamar Baz, [I Told Shaul Elovich: Replace the Journalists, Change Walla](#), *The Seventh Eye*, 12 December 2024.

³⁹ Tal Hilel, [Government Uses Regulatory Benefits to Establish Channel 14 as Propaganda Arm](#), *Zulat*, 1 October 2024.

⁴⁰ It should be noted that the directives and benefits apply to other entities as well, but circumstances indicate that they are primarily intended to benefit Channel 14.

14,⁴¹ following an extraordinary session called by the Knesset Economic Affairs Committee chaired by Likud MK David Bitan to discuss the decision of several commercial firms to refrain from advertising on the channel due to the inflammatory language used there.

The government has also imported the Hungarian modus operandi in the area of radio broadcasting. Since its establishment, Minister Karhi had been trying to secure regulatory benefits for cronies by expanding regional radio frequencies to national coverage. After several failed legislative attempts⁴² (so far) and under the cover of the war with Iran, he demanded that the SATR expand (even if temporarily) the license areas of the Kol Hai station owned by Yitzhak Mirilashvili (owner of Channel 14) and the Kol Barama station owned by Tzvi Amar (who is close to Karhi). The decision on an expansion was made in contravention of the position of legal counsels and without a tender.⁴³

Another example is the budgetary boycott of Haaretz, which prohibits government advertising in the newspaper. This economic sanction on a major critical media outlet is intended to harm the financial resilience amid the allocation of advertising budgets to friendly entities. Alongside the boycott of Haaretz, the Government Advertising Bureau's outlays on Channels 12 and 13, which are perceived as critical of the government, have dropped by tens of percent under the current government, while its allocation for Channel 14 has increased by 280%,⁴⁴ along with the promotion of the aforementioned legislation compelling private companies to advertise on it.⁴⁵

An additional benefit granted to Channel 14 was the exemption from payment for use of the Idan Plus digital distribution platform, with the expense rolled over to the IPBC.⁴⁶ An attempt to grant it yet another benefit by obligating the IPBC to make archival material accessible to commercial bodies at cost price ultimately did not succeed. These measures,

⁴¹ Ronen Reingold and Ori Bassat, [*Government Promotes Bill Aimed at Diverting Advertising Budgets to Channel 14](#), 12 June 2025.

⁴² Amit Schejter and Adi Shay, [*Karhi's Law To Expand Regional Radio Broadcasts: Unconstitutional and Harmful to Democracy](#), *Zulat*, 7 February 2024.

⁴³ Adiel Eithan Mustaki, [In Defiance of Legal Opinions: License of Ultra-Orthodox Radio Stations Extended Nationwide for 30 Days](#), *Calcalist*, 20 June 2025.

⁴⁴ Itamar Baz, [Exposure: Netanyahu's Government Enlarges Channel 14's Budget by 280%](#), *The Seventh Eye*, 9 January 2025.

⁴⁵ Zulat filed a petition to the Supreme Court about the boycotting of *Haaretz* and the diversion of advertising budgets to Channel 14 (as well as about Netanyahu exclusively granting interviews to Channel 14), demanding that the Attorney General set clear guidelines concerning the dealings of senior government officials and government ministries with media outlets. See [*Petition to the High Court of Justice: Improper Dealings Between the Government and Channel 14](#), *Zulat*, 11 February 2025.

⁴⁶ In this case too, benefits were grudgingly granted to other entities as well, but the primary objective was to assist Channel 14. Ronen Reingold and Ori Bassat, [*Government Bill on Digital Channels Law: Favoring Tycoons at Public's Expense](#), *Zulat*, 5 August 2024.

which as mentioned, joined the regulatory easements resulting from the extension of the legislation defining Channel 14 as a small license holder, amount to unfair competition in the media market. Likewise, the Ratings Law promoted in parallel tracks, both as a private bill and through the Government Broadcasting Law, opens the door to skewing the measurement of viewership to economically benefit channels identified with the government, even if this does not reflect actual viewing habits.⁴⁷

All these steps demonstrate how economic regulation becomes an effective tool in the hands of a government seeking to strip critical media of its independence, and at the same time grant structural and economic immunity to "friendly" media outlets. This constitutes a regulatory institutionalization of economic inequality in the media landscape, which harms the free media without openly violating the rules of the game.

Economic and Legal Persecution

Another recurring pattern in countries experiencing democratic erosion is the proliferation of defamation and libel lawsuits filed by officials in power against journalists, political rivals, and opposition activists. Indeed, government ministers and Netanyahu himself have filed a series of defamation suits, mainly against journalists and protest activists.

The use of defamation lawsuits in Hungary has become a systematic tool for deterring journalists and harming freedom of expression since the Orban government's amendment of the Citizenship Law in 2014. The amendment allows lawsuits for violations of personal rights, including reputation, without the need to prove actual damage, which has led to a sharp increase in suits by politicians against media outlets. These lawsuits are sometimes filed with the explicit aim of "put[ting] an end to political and societal controversies," and primarily target journalists covering political affairs.⁴⁸ According to reports, independent journalists are sued on average once every two years.⁴⁹ This has created a situation where journalists avoid critical coverage for fear of being sued, resulting in a chilling effect that weakens critical media even without having to resort to direct censorship. This illustrates how even "legitimate" legal tools can be used as a means to silence freedom of expression and freedom of the press.

⁴⁷ Ronen Reingold and Ori Bassat, [*Government Seeks Political Control Over Ratings Measurement](#), *Zulat*, 19 January 2025.

⁴⁸ Bea Bodrogi, [*Civil Defamation and Media Freedom in Hungary](#), *International Press Institute*, February 2017.

⁴⁹ [*A Chance To Set a Europe-Wide Precedent on Hyperlinking](#), *Media Defence*, 27 June 2016.

As noted, this is a common practice in the current government. For example, National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir has in recent years filed more than 13 lawsuits totaling millions of shekels against journalists, opposition activists, and political rivals, including Haaretz journalist Josh Breiner (after he revealed that far-right activist Bentzi Gopstein, accused of incitement to racism and terrorism, had advised Ben-Gvir on police and security matters), and against former Defense Minister and IDF Chief of Staff Moshe (Bogie) Ya'alon (after he said in an interview that Ben-Gvir and his supporters "speak in non-Jewish terms, in racist terms").⁵⁰

Netanyahu himself has also filed numerous defamation suits, such as in response to the Qatargate Affair (suspicions that aides in the Prime Minister's Office received money and other benefits from Qatar), against opposition activist Itay Leshem (for tweets on X);⁵¹ against Yair Golan, leader of the Democrats opposition party (over text messages sent on his behalf);⁵² against Bogie Ya'alon (over remarks he made in a radio interview);⁵³ against Eliad Shraga, chairman of the Movement for Quality Government in Israel, which has spearheaded the legal battle against corruption in Netanyahu's governments (over remarks in an interview about "The Submarine Affair," a case of suspected corruption and bribery pertaining to a \$2-billion procurement deal with a German shipbuilder);⁵⁴ and against prominent protest leader Attorney Gonen Ben-Yitzhak and journalists Uri Misgav and Ben Caspit (over their statements that Netanyahu was hiding the truth about his real medical condition from the public).⁵⁵

Furthermore, legal tools are also being misused by figures close to the government. Channel 14's Yinon Magal sued Haaretz, The Seventh Eye, and the Israeli Audience Research Board (IARB) for invasion of privacy after they exposed allegedly improper contacts between him and IARB members, which could attest to an attempt to influence ratings.⁵⁶

⁵⁰ Oren Persico, [Itamar Ben-Gvir's Campaign: Eight Defamation Lawsuits Within One Year, And Who Pays?](#), *Shakuf*, 19 June 2023.

⁵¹ Avraham Bloch, [*Netanyahu Files Lawsuit Against Left-Wing Activist Over 'Qatargate' Statements](#), *The Jerusalem Post*, 26 March 2025.

⁵² Sam Sokol, [*Netanyahu Files Defamation Lawsuit Against Democrats Party Chief](#), *The Times of Israel*, 4 April 2025.

⁵³ Bini Aschkenasy, [*Netanyahu Sues Former Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon for Defamation](#), *The Jerusalem Post*, 12 March 2025.

⁵⁴ Elinor Shirkani-Kofman, [Netanyahu Filed Defamation Lawsuit Against Eliad Shraga, Latter Responds: 'Pandora's Box Will Open'](#), *Israel Hayom*, 2 April 2025. "The Submarine Affair"

⁵⁵ JP staff, [*Netanyahu's Medical File Will Not Be Transferred to Defamation Lawsuit Defendants](#), *The Jerusalem Post*, 4 March 2024; Miri Weissman and ILH staff, [*Netanyahu Files Defamation Suit, Denies Cancer Rumors](#), *Israel Hayom*, 5 June 2024.

⁵⁶ [@avishagrinzag](#), *X* (formerly *Twitter*), 23 July 2025.

Meanwhile, the Israel Police (politicized and subordinate to Minister Ben-Gvir) launched an investigation against Channel 13 News journalist Aviad Glickman, claiming that he had shoved an employee of Sara Netanyahu who also works in Ben-Gvir's office.⁵⁷

Alongside the heavy use of defamation lawsuits, the government is also promoting legislation that would expand the already broad immunity enjoyed by MKs from criminal offenses and civil lawsuits, contrary to the Attorney General's legal opinion that the bill "turns the immunity of MKs into a de-facto safe haven from criminal investigation and prosecution."⁵⁸

Closure of Foreign Media

Under the cover of the ongoing state of war, a clear trend is evident in Israel of excluding foreign media from the public discourse, among other things through legislation allowing such severe sanctions as shutting down foreign broadcasters. This resembles the actions of Orbán's government in Hungary, which has persistently sought to weaken the international media through targeted regulation, portraying foreign channels as "foreign agents," and imposing tough economic restrictions.

Independent Hungarian media supported by foreign funding has been at the center of an intensifying regulatory assault by the government. The bill on Transparency of Public Life, submitted in May 2025, empowers the Sovereignty Protection Office to "label" media outlets and civil society organizations as threatening the state's sovereignty if they receive financial support from foreign entities. These entities would be included on a blacklist and prohibited from receiving grants, donations, or money transfers from bodies outside Hungary (including from the European Union, of which Hungary is a member). The law imposes heavy fines amounting to 25 times the sum of the donation, allows arbitrary closure in the event of a "repeat funding offence," and requires editors and executives to declare their assets to the tax authorities. In addition to the direct harm to funding sources, the law grants powers to conduct searches, monitor banking activity, and "retroactively assess" the purpose of the funding, thereby creating a systemic chilling effect.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ TOI staff, [*Police Grill Legal Reporter Over Allegation He 'Shoved' Employee of Sara Netanyahu](#), *The Times of Israel*, 9 July 2025.

⁵⁸ Yuval Karni, Tova Tzimuki, and Sivan Hilaie, [Minister Karhi: 'We Will Change the Regime'](#), *Ynet*, 25 November 2024.

⁵⁹ [*Hungary: Foreign Funding Bill Poses Most Serious Threat To Independent Media In Years](#), *International Press Institute*, 16 May 2025.

In Israel, under the pretext that this is necessitated by the ongoing war, the government has renewed three times a temporary provision ordering the closure of foreign broadcasters,⁶⁰ while simultaneously promoting permanent legislation⁶¹ that would allow the Ministers of Defense and of Communications not only to seal off the offices of foreign broadcasters and confiscate equipment, but also to shut down websites, including social media platforms. The temporary order was primarily applied against Al Jazeera and Al Mayadeen, whose transmissions were halted in Israel, and reportedly also against the American news agency AP, from which Israel confiscated equipment claiming that its live feed was being used by Al Jazeera.⁶²

The measures against AP ended with the equipment being returned following international criticism, but the move marked the new boundaries that Israel is setting for foreign broadcasting entities. During the war with Iran in June 2025, Ministers Karhi and Ben-Gvir issued a directive requiring foreign correspondents to obtain prior approval from the military censor for any broadcast from areas hit by missiles, including approval of the location.⁶³ Based on a newly issued emergency order, the directive prompted a request for clarification from the Attorney General, who argued that it constituted illegal in-advance censorship and a severe infringement on freedom of the press.⁶⁴ Junior police officers in the field were instructed to use their own discretion to prevent filming by journalists and were authorized to confiscate equipment and even carry out arrests. An incident caught on camera showed far-right activist Yoav "The Shadow" Eliasi, embedded in a police standby unit, selecting between Israeli and foreign journalists and even detaining Arab reporters and demanding from them to produce their press cards.⁶⁵ Indeed, the escalation did not bypass Arab Israeli journalists: for example, Ali Mughrabi, a Channel 13 News reporter, was expelled from a scene while reporting live.⁶⁶

⁶⁰ Ronen Reingold and Ori Bassat, [*Bill To Shut Down Foreign Broadcaster Harms Democracy, Must Not Be Extended](#), *Zulat*, 21 May 2025.

⁶¹ Ronen Reingold and Ori Bassat, [*Bill To Shut Down Foreign Broadcaster Harms Democracy, Must Not Be Extended](#), *Zulat*, 8 July 2024.

⁶² AP and TOI staff, [*Israel Seizes AP Equipment, Accuses News Organization of Providing Services to Banned Al Jazeera](#), *The Times of Israel*, 21 May 2024.

⁶³ Yoav Etiel and JP staff, [*Ben-Gvir and Karhi Crack Down on Foreign Press Coverage of War Damage in Israel](#), *The Jerusalem Post*, 20 June 2025.

⁶⁴ Tamar Almog, [Attorney General to Ben-Gvir and Karhi: Explain Grounds for Guidelines Restricting Work of Foreign Journalists](#), *Kan*, 20 June 2025.

⁶⁵ Uri Sela, [Following Walla's Report: 'The Shadow' Selects Between Journalists at Scene of Missile Landing in Tel Aviv](#), *Walla*, 22 June 2025.

⁶⁶ Naama Barkan, [Channel 13 Reporter Expelled from Scene of UAV Crash in Bet She'an: 'Campaign of Division by Ben-Gvir's Government'](#), *Ynet*, 21 June 2025.

Alongside the direct legislation against foreign media, the government has also promoted the NGO Law,⁶⁷ a piece of legislation very similar to the Hungarian version that primarily focuses on civil society organizations but could also be used to target independent media outlets registered as non-profits.

Conclusion

A systematic examination of the five main practices used to harm free media in democracies undergoing erosion reveals a clear and alarming picture. In Hungary, each of them has been implemented in full, creating media mobilized to support the regime and to suppress pluralism and criticism. In Israel, although some of the practices are still in the process of being promoted and legislated, in each of the areas there are evident attempts to emulate the Hungarian model. Consequently, this review draws an unequivocal picture: Israel is following in Hungary's footsteps, and the government's modus operandi follows a consistent and systematic pattern seeking to eliminate the free press.

The so-called "reform" of the media, like the "judicial reform," is not an isolated correction but part of a broader process of regime change aimed at collapsing the foundations of Israeli democracy. Just as civil society and the political establishment mobilized all their forces against Justice Minister Yariv Levin's judicial coup, so too is a determined struggle required against the government and Communications Minister Shlomo Karhi's complementary moves. The threat is not theoretical but immediate and real, and is accelerating without generating a major public outcry. The people and their elected officials must understand that, similar to an independent judicial system, independent journalism is also a necessary condition for the subsistence of Israeli democracy.

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⁶⁷ Eitay Mack, *[Amendment to Associations Law: Spells Elimination of Civil Society Organizations](#), *Zulat*, 19 February 2025.