

New Hungarian citizenship law creates tensions with Slovakia

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2 June 2010

The Hungarian parliament passed a law last month conferring Hungarian citizenship on ethnic Hungarians who live in neighbouring countries. The new law is not only a provocative nationalist manoeuvre that will lead to significant conflicts with neighbouring countries, it also serves to distract workers' attention from forthcoming social attacks.

Following the landslide victory of the right-wing Citizens Association (Fidesz) in April, Prime Minister Victor Orban has a two-thirds majority in parliament, allowing him to push through legislation almost unilaterally. But in this case he did not even have to rely on his majority. Most of the Social Democrats and the ultra-right Jobbik party also voted for the new citizenship law, which was adopted by an overwhelming majority. Only three Social Democrat deputies voted against.

This has stoked up tensions in Slovakia, where some ten percent of the population belong to the Hungarian minority, which is concentrated along the Hungarian-Slovak border. During the Second World War, this area had been annexed by Hungary. Up to the end of World War I, all of what today constitutes Slovakia was part of Hungary.

The new law is also creating ethnic tensions in Serbia, Ukraine and Romania, where there are Hungarian minorities.

“If you add to this plans that have already been announced to create a united national space and facilitate the full participation of Hungarians living in neighbouring countries in the political and economic life of Hungary, then you get a highly explosive cocktail,” observed the daily *Lidove Noviny*, published in Prague. The newspaper added, “Not only is the Hungarian-Slovak area compromised, but the entire Carpathian Basin and even the European Union as a

whole.”

The government in Bratislava and EU representatives are concerned that secessionist tendencies could develop in the south of Slovakia. After a meeting with Slovak Foreign Minister Miroslav Lajčák on Tuesday last week, Knut Vollebaek, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) commissioner for minorities, voiced his concerns. He warned that “competing attempts by countries to exercise jurisdiction over their citizens independent of their residency” would lead to tensions.

The Slovak parliament responded immediately with a law that leads automatically to the loss of Slovak citizenship if an individual adopts another nationality. Interior Minister Robert Kalinak, who read out the text of the law, justified it by citing a “security risk” which could arise if “masses of citizens of the Slovak Republic were granted another nationality.”

The chairs of the two smaller coalition parties, Jan Slota (SNS) and Vladimir Meciar (S-HZDS), even warned of a possible war. Slota spoke of the “beginning of a military conflict” and appealed to the parliamentary deputies to prepare the country’s “defence capabilities” and expect the worst in the next four years.

The Slovak government formally ordered Prime Minister Robert Fico to convene the National Security Council, the body tasked with dealing with situations of imminent danger.

The response of the Slovak government is characterised by its own nationalism and considerations relating to the upcoming elections. Fico’s social democratic Smer-SD rules in coalition with the neo-fascist National Party SNS. Smer-SD has adopted numerous initiatives and laws that are directed against the minorities in the country. The latest example is a

law that makes Slovak the sole official language of the country.

The Hungarian government party Fidesz has long included influential right-wing circles calling for a return to the “Greater Hungarian Empire.” With the rise of the ultra-right Jobbik party, which was the third strongest force in the elections, this trend has increased significantly.

At the end of 2008, the state bankruptcy of Hungary was prevented only by a €20 billion aid package from the EU, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Since then, these institutions have put pressure on Hungary to reduce its budget deficit and push through cuts.

Although Orban tries to hide the true thrust of his policies from the public gaze, the composition of his cabinet shows the direction he is taking. He has slashed the number of ministries from fourteen to eight, concentrating power in his own hands.

In the new cabinet, the key positions are occupied mostly by politicians who were in the first Orban government (1989-2002), which was notorious for its radical privatization policy and a sharp rise in unemployment. Budgets were slashed and the welfare state smashed. The present government will now impose further cuts, reduce wages and raise taxes.

The new cabinet includes Sándor Pintér and János Martonyi as minister of the interior and foreign minister respectively. Both held these posts in the first Orban government. Pintér has already announced a massive increase in the size of the police and security forces. He wants to “ensure law, order and security in every corner of the country.”

The economist György Matolcsy, from 2000 to 2002 the minister of economic affairs, now heads the finance ministry. He initiated radical measures to pave the way for Hungary to join the EU.

Miklos Réthelyi will lead the newly created super-ministry of national resources. He is thus responsible for health, education, culture and youth, where many of the cuts will be carried out. The media entrepreneur Tamás Fellegi heads the ministry for the management of state assets. These figures send a clear sign that Orban is handing over the country’s finances directly to the private sector.

Csaba Hende, Orban’s right-hand man, is defence minister. Ex-finance minister Mihály Varga now heads

the Chancellery, and right-winger Péter Szíjjártó has risen from party to government spokesman.

The former parliamentary party leader, Tibor Navracsics, is minister for administration and justice, and also deputy prime minister. Second deputy premier, but without portfolio, is Semjén Zolt, leader of the small far-right party of Christian Democrats (KDNP), which contested the election in an alliance with Fidesz. Zolt, who is responsible for nationalities and minorities, is known for his nationalist outbursts, and is one of the initiators of the new citizenship law.



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